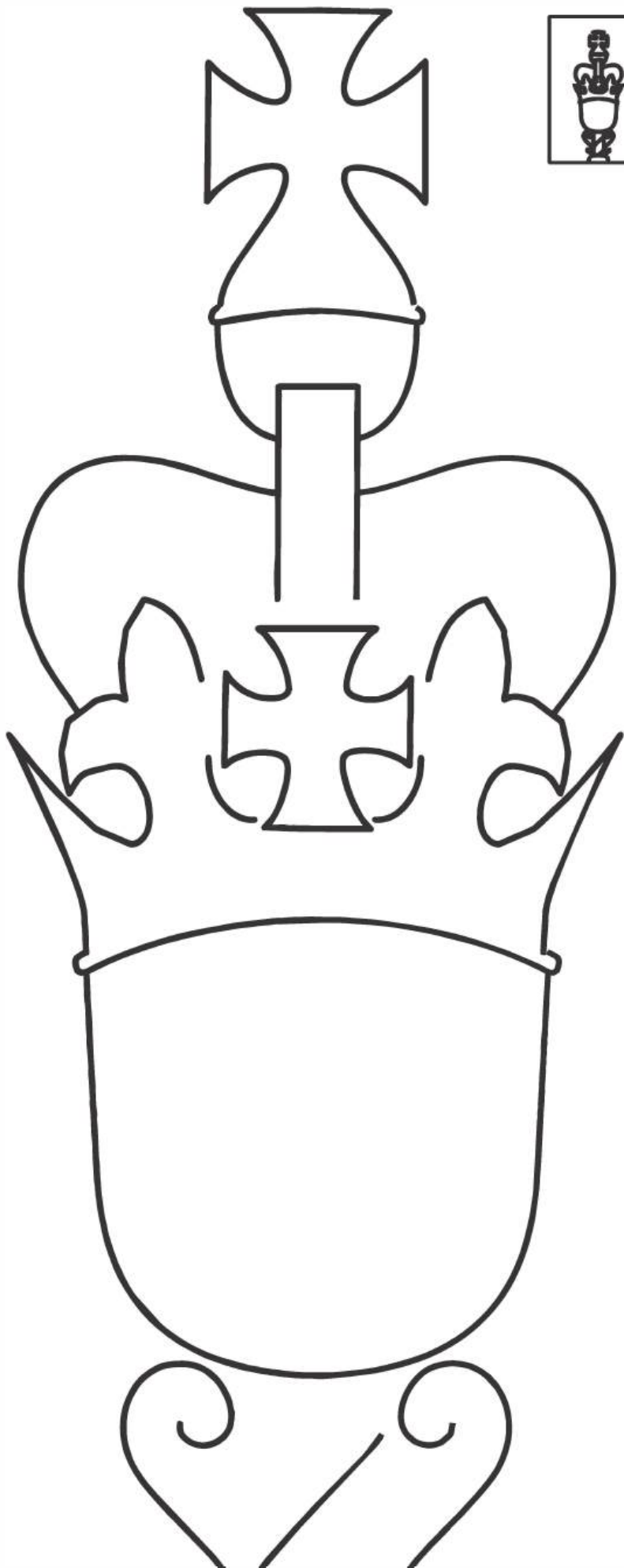


NATIONAL ASSEMBLY OF BELIZE

**ADMINISTRATIVE
REVIEW**



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Printed May 2023

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INTRODUCTION

The following report has been commissioned by the National Assembly of Belize to review the current governance and administrative arrangements of the Legislature.

This report utilises the outcomes from the CPA Recommended Benchmarks for Democratic Legislatures Report of 2019. The report was written in collaboration with the senior management of the National Assembly, and key stakeholders were consulted throughout including Members, Senators, staff of the Assembly, the former Speaker and President of the House and Senate as well as members of civil society. Between 17 and 24 November 2021, the CPA Headquarters Secretariat deployed two technical advisors, Lydia Buchanan and Aqsa Latif. This project forms part of a Technical Assistance Programme that the CPA Headquarters Secretariat is undertaking with the National Assembly and is part of a long-standing commitment of collaboration with Belize.

Acknowledgements

The CPA Headquarters Secretariat express its thanks to Hon. Valerie Woods, Speaker of the House, Hon. Carolyn Trench-Sandiford, President of the Senate, Mr Eddie Webster, Clerk of the National Assembly and his team for their time and dedication in supporting the development of this report. Gratitude is also extended to all those who took the time to meet with the technicians and provide information which aided enormously in the production of this report.

Executive Summary

The National Assembly of Belize has a long-standing commitment for reform. Since the Benchmarks Assessment conducted in 2019, they have made several steps to improve procedures in the Legislature. There does however remain some concerns about the effectiveness of the National Assembly and some stakeholders noted that the ‘Legislature is merely an extension of the Executive’. It is clear that the National Assembly needs to work hard to change the perception of the Institution with the general public and key stakeholders. Identified in the Benchmarks Assessment, the Legislature is not achieving true separation from the Executive and this needs to be addressed going forward. There are concerns that the Parliament is not meeting its obligation to effectively hold the Government to account, this is especially evident in the lack of scrutiny that is currently being achieved in areas such as committee work.

This report is designed to highlight where key organisational changes can make positive transformation for the National Assembly and for the people of Belize. It will outline the steps taken by the Assembly so far and will highlight where more needs to be done. This report considers the current situation and is aware of the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had

on the country as a whole, especially its economy. Where suggestions for additional spending have been made, these are seen as vital to improve the National Assembly's functioning as a key institution and should be considered as a priority.

An implementation plan produced by the National Assembly should follow this report and any commitments from CPA are contingent on this plan being produced and followed.

LIST OF RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1: There should be a representative in the Cabinet who is allocated the responsibility of representing the interests of the National Assembly in cabinet meetings.

Recommendation 2: The National Assembly should ensure that the relevant structural mechanisms are in place to ensure the smooth operation of a well-functioning Parliament.

Recommendation 3: A separate Appropriations Act for the National Assembly of Belize should be presented alongside the main budget and should be made accessible for public consumption.

Recommendation 4: The Ombudsman, the Contractor General and the Integrity Commission should be removed from the Assembly's budget line, as they are independent bodies.

Recommendation 5: The existing funds in the Assembly's budget that have been allocated to the Ombudsman, the Contractor General and the Integrity Commission should be reallocated to the Assembly, for use by the Assembly.

Recommendation 6: The Assembly's Budget should be ringfenced.

Recommendation 7: The National Assembly should work with the Ministry of Finance to take the relevant steps to become financially autonomous.

Recommendation 8: The National Assembly of Belize should look to set up an independent body or mechanism to determine the level of pay and remuneration for Members and Senators.

Recommendation 9 – The National Assembly should undertake a cost-benefit analysis of generating additional income and should proactively engage with potential partners to secure funding.

Recommendation 10 – The National Assembly should have its own bank account.

Recommendation 11: The Government should take steps to ensure that the National Assembly receives a legislative agenda that is regularly updated. This should also be shared with the general public with information on how they can involve themselves in the parliamentary process.

Recommendation 12: The National Assembly should work with the Attorney General's Office to source and fill the role of Parliamentary Counsel. This role will be in charge of legislative drafting and will provide legal advice for the Assembly and will be employed by the House.

Recommendation 13: The Standing Orders should include provision for Opposition Business.

Recommendation 14: The National Assembly should be responsible for approving the application of funds for Committees.

Recommendation 15: Where possible, committee meetings need to be conducted in public. The changes should be made to the Standing Orders review to reflect this.

Recommendation 16: The JPAC should seek training from the Supreme Audit Institution of Belize on how to effectively scrutinise financial information.

Recommendation 17: The National Assembly should seek in depth training on the committee system, including how to scrutinise information, how to conduct an enquiry and how to follow up on recommendations following a report. The CPA can commit to delivering this training in partnership with the Assembly.

Recommendation 18: The National Assembly should employ a Clerk of Committees. The role holder should be supported in the first few weeks with an expert seconded to the Assembly from another jurisdiction. CPA can assist with this secondment.

Recommendation 19: Review and consolidate the number of House Standing Committees, as per the recommendation from the Benchmarks report. This should be incorporated into the Standing Orders review. Create a targeted campaign to highlight the changes to the committee system and the importance of them for members of the public and key stakeholders.

Recommendation 20: The National Assembly should employ a Research Officer whose role will be to provide Members and Senators with authoritative information, including briefing papers for upcoming legislation. The role holder will need to be given enough notice in advance of sittings in order to effectively fulfil their role.

Recommendation 21: The National Assembly should upgrade the library space for Parliamentarians. This space should house computers for research, books, documents and could be a place to store copies of Hansard. The library could be housed in the current Government Communications office.

Recommendation 22: Transcription services should be explored by the National Assembly to ensure that Hansards are produced in a timelier manner and the backlog is addressed.

Recommendation 23: The National Assembly should have a clear implementation plan for the digitalisation of all records.

Recommendation 24: The National Assembly should run all filming and streaming services without the use of a contractor. They should also make greater use of their YouTube page, to share short explainer videos and other engagement items.

Recommendation 25: The National Assembly should reactivate their social media platforms. The Outreach and Engagement Officer should monitor and regularly update them and upload educational content.

Recommendation 26: The House must have a clear strategy to conduct outreach, engagement, and educational activities with the public. CPA can assist with this work in conjunction with the Assembly.

Recommendation 27: The National Assembly should employ an Outreach and Engagement Officer, who will be in charge of monitoring all social media accounts, updating the Assembly website and conducting all outreach activities with adults and children.

Recommendation 28: There needs to be a greater emphasis on learning and development and as such the National Assembly budget should reflect this.

Recommendation 29: The Assembly should ensure that the Code of Conduct is implemented as soon as possible, they should liaise with the Attorney-General's Office for further updates on the status of the Code of Conduct and the next steps for implementation.

Recommendation 30: The Government Press Office should be relocated to another building, securing additional space for the National Assembly.

Recommendation 31: A security review should be conducted by the Police to ascertain the safety levels at the Assembly. A fire review should also be conducted to ensure that fire safety equipment such as extinguishers are still fit for purpose.

Recommendation 32: Equipment should be updated at the National Assembly; this should include technology to help with digitalisation of record

PART 1 – GOVERNANCE OF THE ASSEMBLY

Governance of the National Assembly of Belize, for the purpose of this report, is defined as the system in which the Assembly operates and the various structural mechanisms that have been put in place to ensure that the function the Assembly is carried out in accordance with its constitutional mandate. Governance is the broader umbrella term that encompasses the institutional framework of the National Assembly and the framework of authority with regards to the behaviours and influence of the key role holders.

The summary of the 2019 CPA Benchmarks Assessment of the National Assembly of Belize makes reference to the overarching operational reforms to be considered with regards to the outdated Standing Orders of the House of Representatives and Senate, as well as various financial, administrative and legislative parliamentary practices¹. This section on governance focuses on the independence of the Assembly and its ability to determine and control its finances and administration.

Framework of Authority

In order to determine the independence of the National Assembly of Belize, the separation of powers enjoyed by the executive, judiciary and legislature must be carefully assessed in accordance with the Latimer House Principles². In theory, an independent Assembly would ensure a separation of powers so that each branch is distinct from another, interact in an equitable and balanced way, and can hold one another to account. We will consider each element of authority within the structure of the National Assembly and assess where possible changes need to be made.

Presiding Officers

The framework of authority in a Parliament is determined by the role holders that govern it. In the case of the National Assembly of Belize, as mandated in the Constitution, the Speaker of the House of Representatives, and the President of the Senate “shall preside at each Sitting”³ and are subsequently referred to as the Presiding Officers of the National Assembly. The Standing Orders stipulate that the Presiding Officers are responsible for the “management and general administration of the Chamber.”⁴ The existing Presiding Officers do undertake various administrative duties in their capacity as representatives of the House/Senate in order to ensure the appropriate parliamentary procedures are effectively carried out.

¹ Belize, CPA Benchmarks for Democratic Legislatures, Report of Belize Self-Assessment, page 2.

² Latimer House Principle on the Separation of Powers.

³ Belize Constitution Act, Chapter 4, (Revised Edition 2011), Section 72 (1) and (2), Page 87.

⁴ Standing Order of the House of Representatives, 91(3) page 71.

Standing Orders of the Senate, 84(3), page 55.

It is very apparent that under the current tenure, the Presiding Officers have been successful in championing change including increasing the number of sitting days and pursuing improvements for the Assembly. The Speaker of the House and the President of the Senate have even worked with engineers and architects on architectural drawings for consideration of a new Assembly building and their vision should be commended. The Presiding Officers have been instrumental in achieving progress on the CPA Memorandum of Understanding with the Assembly and they have been the major driving force in the commitment to the work of the activities is fulfilled, including Activity 5 of the Technical Assistance Programme⁵, the review of the Standing Orders, as recommended in the 2019 Benchmarks Assessment Report⁶.

The purpose of this review is to update the Standing Orders to ensure that they are reflective of the actual practice and operation of Parliament to bring them in line with best international practice. This activity is ongoing and should be completed in this parliamentary term. Information on this can be found in the later section on the Legislative Function of the Assembly. It is positive to note that Belize currently has two strong leaders in the Presiding Officer roles, and it is hoped that they will be able to drive the recommendations of this report forward.

Cabinet

With regards to the framework of authority in the Executive, in many Westminster-System jurisdictions a position exists in Cabinet that represents the Legislature. In the National Assembly of Belize, no such role currently exists and therefore the needs of the Assembly are not directly articulated to the Executive. Despite the Presiding Officers and the Clerk being able to convey the matters to the Executive informally, we would recommend that a formal role be adopted. The portfolio of the Prime Minister effectively comprises of parliamentary matters, but the Prime Minister does not act in Cabinet in his capacity as the Parliamentary Business Manager or Leader of the House, but simply as the Leader of Government Business. Oversight of parliamentary business should not be under the remit of such a heavily politicised government position and to ensure a successful separation of powers, there should be an allocated position in the Cabinet. This ensures that there is a voice for the Assembly in all cabinet meetings and that the Assembly can be prioritised.

Recommendation 1: There should be a representative in the Cabinet who is allocated the responsibility of representing the interests of the National Assembly in cabinet meetings.

⁵ Memorandum of Understanding between the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association Headquarters Secretariat and the National Assembly of Belize, page 7.

⁶ Belize, CPA Benchmarks for Democratic Legislatures, Report of Belize Self-Assessment, page 9.

National Assembly Staff

In section 67 (1) of the Belize Constitution, it states that: ***“There shall be a Clerk to the National Assembly (who shall be the Clerk to both Houses) and a Deputy Clerk and such other assistants as may be necessary.”***⁷

The Clerk is responsible for working in consultation with the Presiding Officers to ensure the smooth administrative operation of Sittings by preparing all relevant documents in advance of and succeeding the Sessions. Alongside this, the Clerk is responsible under the Speaker/President “for the administrations of the office and the control and discipline”⁸ of the House/Senate subordinate to him.

In the National Assembly of Belize, the “administrators” instead refer to the eight supporting parliamentary staff working alongside the Clerk and Deputy Clerk; Finance Officer, Senior Clerk Assistant, Parliamentary Officers, First Class Clerk, Auxiliary Accounting Assistant, Records and Research Officer and Office Assistant/Security Officer as well as two unestablished staff, the Sergeant-At-Arms and the Flagman. The Clerk is also responsible for four additional temporary staff (including two cleaners, a Senior Secretary and an IT consultant). The Constitution states that the National Assembly by law may regulate the recruitment and conditions of role holders and they are protected under the law from outside interference.⁹ The Clerk is indeed employed by the Parliament, as the appointment and removal of this role is determined by the Governor-General with close consultation from a responsible Committee (see section below on the National Assembly Staff Committee). The Clerk manages and oversees the workings of the parliamentary staff, but any disciplinary matters are deferred to the National Assembly Staff Committee. Should a member of staff wish to appeal a decision made by the Committee on a given disciplinary issue, they would put this forward to the Belize Advisory Council.⁹ The Clerk and their Office are therefore quite evidently dissimilar to public/civil servants, and they are administered by the Parliament, independent of the Executive, demonstrating a successful separation of powers.

In smaller jurisdictions, the number of people with specialist expertise and institutional knowledge of parliamentary practice can often be limited, so staff can often undertake several different roles. It is important for the independence of the Parliament that there is a representative at the Executive level. It is also vital that the staff in place receive sufficient training to conduct their role, more information on learning and development can be found later in this report.

⁷ Belize Constitution, page 84.

⁸ Standing Orders of the House of Representatives, 7(10), page 11. Standing Orders of the Senate, 6(10), page 4.

⁹ <https://www.nationalassembly.gov.bz/staff-national-assembly/>

National Assembly Staff Committee

The National Assembly Staff Committee was established under the National Assembly Staff Act,¹⁰ to enable an independent parliamentary service for Belize, administered by the Committee to ensure that the Parliament has powers of its own to regulate some internal matters as constitutionally mandated.¹¹ The National Assembly Staff Committee comprises of; the Speaker, three members of the House of Representatives nominated by the House, the President of the Senate, one Senator nominated by the Senate, and one member of the staff of the National Assembly nominated by the staff or a nominated non-staff member. Currently a non-staff member sits on the Committee as this was the choice of the Parliamentary staff to do so.

The Committee meets regularly and reviews all HR matters relating to Assembly staff. The Speaker is the Chair of the committee. Some of the key powers of the Committee include (as referenced earlier) advising the Governor-General of the appointment or the removal from office of the Clerk and the Deputy Clerk, determining the age over 65 years that a Clerk or Deputy Clerk retires and appointing staff of the National Assembly and exercise disciplinary control over them. In addition to this, the Committee also has regulation-making powers, and they have since formed a subcommittee to revise the existing set of regulations so that they do not continue the practice of deferring to public service regulations. The Committee does, however, instruct the National Assembly to keep the salaries and allowances of its staff broadly in line with the public service. Salaries and remuneration will be covered in more depth later in this report. In due course, the National Assembly should consider strengthening the powers of the Committee, using CPA's Model Law as a basis for this. The Committee should look to introduce powers for the listed mechanisms below. Ensuring that the following items are under the control of the National Assembly Staff Committee means that the Parliament is self-governing.

Planning – As it stands, the Assembly is working to produce a Strategic Plan to determine its goals and objectives. Having a strategic plan is now considered good practice universally, in corporate and parliamentary settings. The plan should incorporate the necessary elements of this report and it should be ambitious but achievable. The Strategic Plan should be broken down into annual business plans (an implementation plan) which give specific outcomes, outputs, indicators and the required resources needed by the Assembly. As it stands, the Ministries and Attorney General do not produce a legislative agenda (see later section on *Legislation*) to assist the Assembly with its planning and resource allocations and this is also something that should be shared and disseminated. A legislative agenda is discussed in further detail later in this report.

Risk Management – The Assembly should have a clear Risk Management Framework in place to identify likely and impactful risks and outline who is responsible for mitigating the risks. This should ensure the safety of all parliamentarians, parliamentary staff and

¹⁰ National Assembly Staff Act, Chapter 14, Revised Edition 2011.

¹¹ <https://www.nationalassembly.gov.bz/staff-national-assembly/>

members of the general public in the case of an emergency (i.e. fire, natural disaster, cyber attack etc). As it stands, there is no such framework.

Budget Management – The Assembly does have an annual budget with costings, associated key performance indicators (KPIs) and accurate financial tolerances, but the Assembly’s budget does not exist as a stand-alone, independent document (see later section on *Budget*). To improve financial autonomy, greater steps need to be taken to ensure that the Assembly alone manages the Assembly’s budget, and this budget should be ringfenced within the Consolidated Fund of the nation’s finances and be reviewed by the National Assembly Staff Committee before final submission.

Accountability and Reporting mechanisms including Monitoring and Evaluation – The Assembly must have impact evaluation assessments in place to evaluate its performance, seek feedback from Members and Senators, engaged stakeholders, civil society and the public on its performance against key indicators. The Presiding Officers are currently working on producing an Annual Report for their respective Houses, which should hopefully include reporting on the successes and shortcomings of the Assembly over the last year.

Human Resource management – The Assembly must have clear policies in place for the management of staff and safeguarding practices. As stated earlier, the Assembly has been working with the CPA on the development of a Code of Conduct for the Assembly, which is a positive step that the Assembly should be commended for. Information on other employee specific HR policies can be found in the later section on *Human Resources*.

Learning and Development – As it stands, a budget has been allocated for the training and development of parliamentarians and staff (more information on the details of the training opportunities can be found in the later section on *Human Resources*). Based on feedback from parliamentarians and staff, learning and development should be made a greater priority.

Corporate Communication – The Senate is currently in the process of developing a Communications Strategy, under the guidance of the President, for both internal communication and external communications. The National Assembly should have a coordinated approach to communications, see later section on *Outreach* for further detail.

International Relations – The Assembly should continue to have an international presence, of which the CPA will be a key element, but it is important that there is a strong level of engagement at a regional level. The Speaker is currently the regional CWP representative, and the President of the Senate has been elected to the Board of Directors for ParlAmericas. Both of these appointments should lead to further positive engagement with the region.

Recommendation 2: The National Assembly should ensure that the relevant structural mechanisms are in place to ensure the smooth operation of a well-functioning Parliament.

Public Perception and Governance

Members, Senators and Ministers

The public’s perception of a Parliament, the key role holders and whether or not they are able to distinguish between the three branches of government is a good indication of how successful the supposed separation of powers has been. In the case of the National Assembly of Belize, the public are not always made aware by the Parliament of its function, agenda, or framework. Out of 31 Members of the House, 17 are Ministers and 5 are Ministers of State. Ministers are the most high-profile type of parliamentarian in Belize and the public are not as aware of the role and functions of backbenchers, the opposition, or Senators. The public’s perception, or lack thereof, can be detrimental to social accountability and in turn, to the democratic functioning of Parliament.

The upper chamber of a bicameral legislature serves a very important oversight function in Parliament and exists to scrutinise the actions and decisions of the lower House, and by doing so hold the Executive to account. In the National Assembly of Belize, there is the Government and Opposition sides, but it also provides a different type of interest representation, the Social Partners. The function of the Senate and the representatives of the Senate are often not understood and are instead viewed as an “appendage” of the House as opposed to a self-standing upper Chamber and a crucial feature of Parliament. The lack of education on the importance and function of the Senate does lead to a lack of public recognition for the hard work of the Senators and can be demotivating for them individually. There is a risk that Senators will view this role as merely a “pit-stop” in their political careers and will consequently not fulfil their democratic duties to the best of their ability. Not only this, if the public are not aware of the role of a Senator, they are not able to hold them to account and the democratic function of the Senate cannot be effectively upheld. It is vital that the Assembly does more to promote its work and role to the public.

PART 2 – FINANCE OF THE HOUSE AND REMUNERATION

Financial Independence and Autonomy

Establishing the appropriate levels of financial independence is one of the biggest ways in which the Legislature can enjoy a separation of power. The National Assembly of Belize have taken steps to ensure that there is some level of financial independence, however, there are further steps that can be taken. The below outlines the various ways in which they can further the developments for greater autonomy. The Ministry of Finance has indicated that many of the existing practices are cultural paradigms that have been assumed over the years and that the

Executive would be willing to support the Legislature in achieving greater financial autonomy where possible, by accommodating any steps taken to further this agenda. The onus is therefore on the Assembly to liaise with the Ministry of Finance to establish greater financial independence.

Budget

The 2020/2021 budget estimate of the “Ministry: Legislature,” is approximately \$3,052,677 (BZD). In comparison with other similar neighbouring jurisdictions, the Assembly sits towards the bottom of the table, see table below:

	No. of Parliamentarians	Budget Est. 2020/(21) (USD)	Budget per Parliamentarian (USD)
Trinidad and Tobago	72	22,200,926	308,346.194
Guyana	69	8,620,418.42	124,933.60
Jamaica	84	7,606,000	90,547.619
Belize	44	1,526,338.50	34,689.51

As you can see from the figures above, the National Assembly of Belize spends far less per parliamentarian compared with their neighbouring counterparts. This figure lessens when areas outside the Assembly are removed from the total figure, such as the Integrity Commission’s amounts. It is imperative that the Executive analyses these figures and if Belize wants to ensure they are seen as a leader in the region more finances need to be given to the Assembly.

The formulation of the budget is done by the Assembly and the Clerk is the Accounting Officer. The budget is submitted to the Ministry of Finance alongside budgets from government ministries and departments. The budget of the Assembly is tabled once a year in March as part of the national budget process, and Parliament is given not less than ten days to review, debate and approve the complete national budget. Parliamentarians input into the National Assembly’s budget at the time that it is being officially reviewed during the budget debate. Members need to have greater input into the budget before it is finalised.

The Assembly submits Key Performance Indicators (KPI) as a quantifiable measure of performance along with the budget which is considered good practice as it allows the Assembly to gauge progress. These KPIs are monitored and reported on for public consumption and as it stands, the KPIs are reviewed by the Ministry of Finance, but it has been expressed that this review is incredibly light touch. The Parliament should monitor its own budget and any KPIs should be reviewed by the Parliament and not the Ministry of Finance. The budget should be

reviewed by the National Assembly Staff Committee, and they should input into the budget ahead of it being sent to the Ministry of Finance.

The Assembly's budget process should be done in tandem with the wider public sector budget submission timeline, but they should not have to submit justifications or business cases in the same way as other departments/ministries. This should be done internally. In the current budget cycle, the National Assembly is treated as if they are another Government Department. This needs to change if the Assembly is to become financially independent of the Executive. The Assembly's Budget is listed as a "*Ministry: Legislature*" in its official documentation, which is wrong. This encourages the perception that the Parliament is just another Ministry under the executive, and this should be addressed immediately. The Assembly should go even further than just renaming the budget line that the Parliament comes under. For the Assembly to be successful in achieving some autonomy, a separate Appropriations Act should be presented alongside the main budget, and like the main budget, should be accessible for public consultation. Having an Appropriations Act for the Assembly's budget would also support the idea that the Parliament is its own body and will encourage the public to better distinguish between the Parliament and Government. Supplementary estimates for the House should also be possible, but in extraordinary circumstances.

Recommendation 3: A separate Appropriations Act for the National Assembly of Belize should be presented alongside the main budget and should be made accessible for public consumption.

Furthermore, in the breakdown of the Programme Expenditure Summary, it demonstrates that the total budget allocated does not exclusively account for Assembly costs, but includes costs for the Ombudsman, the Integrity Commission and the Contractor-General. The Contractor-General is essentially the person who monitors Government contracts and the award and implementation of licences and permits. This role is like that of a Head of Procurement. The budget for the Contractor General falls under the Assembly's budget as they monitor and investigate on behalf of the Parliament and their report also goes to the House for approval. The Integrity Commission, however, exists as a separate entity to combat corruption through the development and implementation of Anti-Corruption initiatives and should be seen as an independent body with an independent budget not under the Assembly. Similarly, the role of the Ombudsman exists to "receive and investigate injustice, injury or abuse or other wrong-doing by an authority" and subsequently "forwards in writing his/her findings and recommendations to the Principal Officer at the Ministry, department, agency of government, local authorities, public corporation as applicable."¹² This should not be covered by the Assembly budget, rather, the existing funds in this budget should be reallocated for use by the Assembly and these bodies should have their own budget. It should also be noted that the roles for Ombudsman and Integrity Commission are not filled, but there is a secretarial support staff. These roles should be filled and financially supported by the Government at the earliest opportunity.

¹² <https://ombudsman.gov.bz/>

Recommendation 4: The Ombudsman and the Integrity Commission should be removed from the Assembly’s budget line, as they are independent bodies.

The practice in Belize is that any underspend from the Assembly’s budget is not retained by the Assembly, unless they formally make a request to carry it over to the following year. In a financially autonomous Parliament, the default would be that the Assembly retains underspend at no detriment to the appropriated sum and this should be the case in Belize. With underspends, there is also the risk that cuts can be made to the Assembly’s budget which could damage the Assembly’s financial capacity to fulfil its duties and action any recommendations that come from reports such as this. There should, however, be some protection to the Assembly’s budget so it is recommended that a sum within the consolidated fund should be ringfenced for the Assembly in order to protect the budget from excessive cuts.

Recommendation 5: The existing funds in the Assembly’s budget that have been allocated to the Ombudsman and the Integrity Commission should be reallocated to the Assembly, for use by the Assembly.

Recommendation 6: The Assembly’s Budget should be ringfenced.

Accounting Officer

The Clerk is the Accounting Officer for the Assembly, Ombudsman, Integrity Commission and Contractor-General. The Ombudsman and Integrity Commission should be self-sufficient and not solely rely on any resource or staff members from the Assembly. All the Assembly’s accounts should be internally and externally audited annually, as it stands, the accounts auditing is behind, and the accounts have only been audited twice in the last 12 years. It is evident that there are no internal controls put on the Assembly due to the lack of auditing, this needs to be rectified.

Recommendation 7: The National Assembly should work with the Ministry of Finance to take the relevant steps to become financially autonomous.

Pay and Remuneration

The average basic salary for a backbench or opposition Member in Belize is BZ\$37, 800. The average basic salary of a Cabinet Minister in Belize (BZ\$81,000.00) is much more than that of a backbench or opposition member, which is understandably one of the reasons as to why many in office aspire to be Ministers. The average salary of a Senator in Belize is BZ\$16,380.00. There are also allowances and expenses given to Members and Senators. The lack of financial incentive for the role of a backbench/opposition member and senator means that parliamentarians are prioritising their work outside of the parliament. This is hindering the parliament in its ability to function effectively.

At the moment, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the revenue of the country has collapsed by 22-23% in the last year. This has meant that all wages and salaries of public sector workers, and those of parliamentarians and parliamentary staff, have been temporarily cut by 10%. Although this is temporary and previous salaries will be reinstated once they have recovered financially from the pandemic, there is no set time for this to happen.

As it stands, in the National Assembly of Belize, there is no independent body or mechanism for setting and administering Members' and Senators' pay, allowances and pensions. and the National Assembly Staff Committee instructs the National Assembly to keep the salaries and allowances of its staff broadly in line with the public service. However, best practices in accordance with the CPA Benchmark 1.5.2 stipulates “*[that] an independent body or mechanism should determine the remuneration, benefits and other statutory entitlements of legislators.*”¹³ Independent bodies such as IPSA (Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority) in the United Kingdom, can make impartial decisions that set, administer, and regulate pay and business costs. An independent body would typically be required to be transparent in their workings and publish all relevant claims, spending and other information.

Determining Member's and Senator's pay is a controversial topic across every jurisdiction and Belize is no different. It is recommended that an independent body is set up to address this issue in the long term. In the short term, the Assembly should consider having a group of independent members of the public to undertake a review of the pay of Members and Senators through a committee set up for this purpose. The subcommittee will be made up of independent lay members, such as civil society leaders and members of the media. Incorporating lay members, as independent and external voices can ensure that parliamentarians are not determining their own salary, and it would be a good way to ensure the confidence of the public in parliamentary procedure. This would mean that Belize would be meeting the CPA Benchmark 1.5.2 mentioned above.

The National Assembly's budget accounts for the salaries of Backbenchers, Opposition Members and Senators and parliamentary staff. Ministers' salaries are accounted for in the respective Ministry budgets.

The Assembly also covers life insurance for certain persons. This Insurance in the Assembly's budget accounts for all Members, Senators, Clerk, Deputy Clerk and the Finance Officer but not the remaining parliamentary staff. There should be regularity in whom the National Assembly budget should cover, so the National Assembly should take full responsibility over remuneration and benefits administered to all parliamentarians and parliamentary staff.

¹³ CPA Recommended Benchmarks for Democratic Legislatures, page 4.

<https://www.cpahq.org/media/10jkk2nh/recommended-benchmarks-for-democratic-legislatures-updated2018-final-online-version-single.pdf>

Recommendation 8: The National Assembly of Belize should look to set up an independent body or mechanism to determine the level of pay and remuneration for Members and Senators.

Constituency Development Fund

The Parliament should also consider taking full responsibility over other entitlements administered to legislators such as the Constituency Development Fund. The Government have recently introduced the Constituency Development Fund, which is a sum of money set aside for representatives to put towards projects tailored for the needs of their constituency. The fund is distributed to all elected officials who are area representatives for the 31 constituencies and the budget allocated to each area representative is directly in relation to the number of votes represented in their constituency. When executed and accounted for correctly, an initiative like this is great in that it provides both Government and Opposition Members the equal opportunity to support their constituencies and fulfil their democratic duties as elected officials. The funds are also a great opportunity for Members to engage directly with their constituents and to enhance the local community. It is important that this fund is a success to ensure that Members are not paying out of pocket for matters within their constituency, given time it is hoped that this new initiative will be a success for Belize.

Income and Revenue generation

As the Benchmark Report and this report have highlighted, there is a need to implement change, which does have a significant financial impact. In order to afford these changes, and to improve the functioning of the Parliament, the Assembly will need to explore other avenues for generating income.

The Assembly is strongly encouraged to get in touch with Trusts and Foundations that could offer grants to support their workstreams and initiatives, which could cut costs on their Budget for reallocation, as well as to explore other monetary support streams with departments whose strategic priorities align with their own.

The Speaker and the President of the Senate have had initial designs drafted for a new Assembly building. This long-term aspiration envisions a larger and more modern Parliament building with greater space to accommodate income generation in the form of coffee shops, on-site restaurants, and gift/souvenir shops for parliamentarians and visitors. The Parliament could use the new and larger space to hire-out rooms to external partners or civil society organisations for a fee and invite members of the public to go on tours of the new and modern Parliament building.

However, in order for the Assembly to be able to retain the money that they generate, consideration should be given to the Assembly having their own bank account.

Recommendation 9 – The National Assembly should undertake a cost-benefit analysis of generating additional income and should proactively engage with potential partners to secure funding.

Recommendation 10 – The National Assembly should have its own bank account.

Administration of the National Assembly Legislative Function

The National Assembly of Belize is bi-cameral. It comprises of two Houses: The Senate (Upper House) and the House of Representatives (Lower House). Both Houses have a clear role in the legislative process and Members and Senators understand their role in the process to an extent. There is some lack of understanding in the levels of scrutiny that Members and Senators should be undertaking. In addition to this, Bills tend to be added to the Order Paper with limited notice, at present Members are given 3-5 days' notice, with some stakeholders stating that sometimes it can even be less than this, further reducing the level of scrutiny that can be undertaken. This is putting undue pressure on the administration, and it is having a detrimental impact on the amount of research that a Member can access ahead of debates. It is also having an unfair, negative impact on the reputation of the Assembly as it appears to be unorganised. To overcome this issue, it is advised that the Assembly has earlier notification of legislation coming to them, both at the beginning of the parliamentary session and then on a rolling monthly and weekly basis. According to stakeholders, some Ministries provide the Attorney General's (AG) office with information on what legislation they are intending to produce for the year. This is not done by all Ministries. The Government needs to ensure that a coordinated legislative agenda is produced and regularly updated for consumption by the AG's Office and the National Assembly. The legislative agenda should also be made available to the public, this allows for greater engagement as the public are made aware of matters of importance in advance. It provides them with adequate time to speak to their elected representative, it gives civil society an opportunity to share evidence with Members and Committees, and it ensures that any impacted persons can input into the parliamentary process. More information on outreach and engagement can be found in subsequent sections of this report.

Recommendation 11: The Government should take steps to ensure that the National Assembly receives a legislative agenda that is regularly updated. This should also be shared with the general public with information on how they can involve themselves in the parliamentary process.

As well as a legislative agenda, further steps should be taken to enhance the legislative function of the Assembly. At present, when a Ministry intends to bring forward legislation, they need to send notice to the Legislative Drafting Unit at the Attorney General's Office or make use of a private legal consultant. The Legislative Drafting Unit currently has five members of staff with varying degrees of experience. Stakeholders expressed that the capacity of the unit is currently overstretched and when little notice is provided this only enhances the capacity issues. When amendments are made to draft Bills at the committee stage, the unit takes on the responsibility of

amending the legislation. Once Bills are laid in the House, the responsibility of amending legislation should sit with the Assembly alone.

It was also noted that the Parliament, including Opposition Members, currently have no avenue for legal advice, bar using their own funds to source outside legal services. This is prohibiting the opposition from effectively conducting their duties. A way to address both the issue of capacity in the Legislative Drafting Unit and the lack of legal advice for the Parliament is the introduction of a Parliamentary Counsel.

The role of Parliamentary Counsel already exists, but is not taken up and stakeholders expressed the need for the role to be filled. A Parliamentary Counsel would be housed in the National Assembly building and would come under the rules of the National Assembly Staff Act, and their role would be purely to assist the Assembly with all legal and legislative drafting matters. Having this role in place at the Assembly would increase capacity in the Legislative Drafting Unit, namely by removing the responsibility of amending legislation once it has been laid in the House and by removing any unnecessary administrative burdens. The role will also be able to provide legal advice to the Institution, could assist Presiding Officers with queries relating to procedure in the Assembly and could help members of the opposition with questions on legislation and drafting. The AG's office was positively in favour of such a move; however, they raised their concerns over the lack of qualified persons in Belize for the role. The Assembly should work with the AG's office to find a solution and should consider some virtual support in the short term should this be necessary.

Recommendation 12: The National Assembly should work with the Attorney General's Office to source and fill the role of Parliamentary Counsel. This role will be in charge of legislative drafting and will provide legal advice for the Assembly and will be employed by the House.

The Assembly should be praised for their continued work to review and modernise the Standing Orders with support from the CPA. This work is ongoing and will be a large step towards making the Parliament a modern workplace with procedures in place that are followed by all. Currently, Standing Orders are not fully adhered to, and Members and Senators are not fully versed in their use. Once the review has been conducted, the Assembly should ensure that the public are aware of the positive changes that have occurred. The CPA can commit to helping the Assembly with producing more bitesize and accessible versions of the Standing Orders once the review is completed. These can be used to help inform the public on what the Standing Orders are and their use.

It is recommended that in the Standing Order review, rules should be put in place for opposition business. It is good to note that the Standing Order working groups are committed to this inclusion and it is hoped that the currently drafted section remains in the final version. This addition is to ensure that the opposition are able to play a larger role in the legislative process than they are currently playing. It should be noted that including opposition business in parliament does not weaken the power of the government.

Recommendation 13: The Standing Orders should include provision for Opposition Business.

PART 3 – SCRUTINY FUNCTION

Committees

Committees have several functions. Their role involves scrutinising government bills in detail, conducting inquiries on important issues, and increasing public participation in the parliamentary process. Presently, the committee system in Belize is not functioning as well as it could be and this needs to be addressed as a priority. There are currently 13 Standing House Committees and five Standing Senate Committees. 12 of the House Standing Committee consist of six Members, four from the ruling party and two from the Opposition party, with the exception of the Joint Public Accounts Committee which consist of four members from the ruling party, two from the Opposition party and three from the social partners. The composition is determined by the proportion of Members represented in each political party in the House. With only five Members of the opposition, it means that each Opposition Member is having to serve on several committees, arguably spreading them too thinly. As there is little to no administrative support for each committee, individual members are tasked with research further adding to their capacity issues. There is also a concern that Backbench members must work on several committees, despite the perception that they are part-time.

Belize is currently not meeting Benchmark 3.2.7 which states that “*Committees hear evidence in public unless there is a good reason to hear particular submissions in closed session.*”¹⁴ It is unfortunate that committee hearings are still not being held in public, something that was highlighted in the 2019 Benchmarks Assessment. This needs to change immediately. The committees also do not seem to be meeting regularly and when they do meet it is only to scrutinise relevant Bills. This is not providing adequate scrutiny levels for the public of Belize. There is also a concern that currently no public consultation is taking place. If the executive is not conducting public consultations, then it is even more important that the committees are doing this engagement. The public currently have very limited avenues for parliamentary engagement and this needs to drastically change.

Recommendation 14: Where possible, committee meetings need to be conducted in public. The changes should be made to the Standing Orders in the review to reflect this.

With further consideration to committees, the budget for committee work is made on application to the Ministry of Finance and not the Clerk. The Parliament should be responsible for approving and administering funds for all parliamentary committees, who are subordinates of the Assembly and whose work falls under the remit of the Assembly.

Recommendation 15: The Assembly should be responsible for approving the application of funds for Committees.

The Joint Public Accounts Committee (JPAC) is yet to conduct an inquiry in this parliamentary term. This is not acceptable. Effort needs to be made to ensure that the JPAC meet regularly and

¹⁴ CPA Recommended Benchmarks for Democratic Legislatures, page 9.

begins an inquiry. They should produce a plan of what they would like to achieve in the next calendar year and begin to make progress on this plan. The Joint PAC is currently undertaking training from CPA UK. This is a positive step towards increasing the effectiveness of the committee and should be commended. It is vital that all Members of the JPAC attend future training sessions and commit to improving the scrutiny level of this vital committee. Further training and assistance should be given to the JPAC, to ensure they are able to adequately scrutinise financial documents. The Assembly should consider seeking support and training from the Supreme Audit Institution of Belize on how to effectively scrutinise financial information. Undertaking financial scrutiny training should also further enhance the relationship between the JPAC and the Supreme Audit Institution.

Recommendation 16: The JPAC should seek training from the Supreme Audit Institution of Belize on how to effectively scrutinise financial information.

As well as this, training should be delivered to all Members and Senators on the role and importance of committees. Members highlighted that committees are only meeting to consider legislation and make amendments in the committee stage, and this is not acceptable. Committees in Belize need to be doing a lot more work and Members need to be made aware of the importance of their role. There seems to be a lack of understanding as to the role of committees and this should be addressed through training. There have been no inquiries so far, this parliamentary term, and this again is unacceptable. There needs to be political will to ensure that committees are performing their duties effectively.

Recommendation 17: The National Assembly should seek in depth training on the committee system, including how to scrutinise information, how to conduct an enquiry and how to follow up on recommendations following a report. The CPA can commit to delivering this training in partnership with the Assembly.

It is not just the JPAC that is lacking adequate administrative support and training. In every committee in the Assembly, there is currently little to no research available for their disposal. This dramatically reduces the scrutiny capacity of the Assembly and is contributing to the ineffectiveness of the committees. With such a high number of committees and no dedicated staff for them, the committees will continue to be ineffective without additional support put in place. Therefore, it is urgently recommended that a Clerk of Committees be appointed to oversee and assist Committees in becoming effective parliamentary tools.

The Clerk of Committees would be responsible for assisting the committee with research alongside the Research Officer (see Research below), assisting Committee Chairs with administrative tasks such as organising meetings, will be responsible for finding committee witnesses and collating evidence and conducting outreach and media engagement. Committees in Belize need to meet more frequently, and the role holder will be vital in ensuring this happens.

Recommendation 18: The National Assembly should employ a Clerk of Committees. The role holder should be supported in the first few weeks with an expert seconded to the Assembly from another jurisdiction. CPA can assist with this secondment.

Committees are not currently given the rightful status and attention that they require and deserve. It is vital that the committee system in Belize is given more prominence and the political will needs to be there to make the positive change. Accountability is vital and committees play a large role in delivering this for citizens. It will be the task of the outreach officer to ensure that members of the public understand the role of committees and their significant importance. A targeted campaign should take place to highlight the vital work of committees and it should highlight how members of the public can attend and take part in the committee process.

With the high number of House Select committees currently operating, the House should look to reducing or consolidating them. This can be achieved through the Standing Orders review currently underway. The review should be undertaken by the House with the participation of all Members and involvement of the public. The review should also consider the quorum needed for committees.

Recommendation 19: Review and consolidate the number of House Standing Committees, as per the recommendation from the Benchmarks report. This should be incorporated into the Standing Orders review. Create a targeted campaign to highlight the changes to the committee system and the importance of them for members of the public and key stakeholders.

Research Function

The National Assembly is currently unable to provide adequate research for Members and Senators. The current Research/Records Officer is mainly in charge of records management and for manually sourcing pieces of information from previous Hansard for Parliamentarians. This is limiting the effectiveness of the Assembly and diminishing its role in society. With limited research support being given to Backbench and Opposition Members, they are unable to effectively discharge their duty of holding the Government to account. This is to the detriment of the people of Belize.

Members, Senators and Presiding Officers expressed that the staff of the Assembly are always available to support parliamentarians with requests for information, however their capacity is currently being stretched. Members stated that when they have a research request for a Bill, they will need to conduct their own research on the topic. When a Minister presents a Bill, they are provided with information by their Ministry. However, this information is not being delivered to other members, including Government Backbench Members. Members on both sides of the House have stated that if they requested information from a Ministry they would be provided with material. This is a courtesy from the Ministry, but it means that the only access to information that Members are receiving are from a government perspective. Members on all sides should have access to authoritative and unbiased information.

No briefing papers are produced by the Parliament, and this is stifling debate. The Assembly should be able to produce comprehensive and independent briefing papers for Members and Senators. These briefings would be an authoritative, unbiased resource that could be disseminated

to the public and media. This would not only increase the reputation of the Assembly but more importantly, would increase the public's understanding of important topics and would be a positive step toward increasing the Assembly's public engagement.

In order to address the lack of research available at the Assembly, a Research Officer should be employed. Having a dedicated research officer will increase the ability of the Assembly to better perform its functions. If given enough time and notice, the role holder will be able to provide Members and Senators with authoritative, nonpartisan research. They will be able to collate statistics for the Assembly, undertake comparative analysis, collate media clippings, identify committee witnesses and evidence and pull in information from other legislatures. The current staff member who is the research officer should focus on digitalising and preserving the records that the Assembly currently has alongside providing information to Members on previous sittings. The two officers will then be able to provide vital historical information alongside actual research and briefing papers.

Recommendation 20: The National Assembly should employ a Research Officer whose role will be to provide Members and Senators with authoritative information, including briefing papers for upcoming legislation. The role holder will need to be given enough notice in advance of sittings in order to effectively fulfil their role.

At present, there is no library space for parliamentarians. There are no computers for Members/Senators to use. If the Assembly wants to become more effective as an institution, this needs to change. If the Assembly is going to pursue the introduction of a library space, the CPA can commit to providing some parliamentary literature at no cost to the Assembly. If the physical space cannot be found in the Assembly building, consideration should be given to a virtual library. There are also numerous online resources that are available, and the Assembly should encourage their use more widely.

There are other avenues of research that are available to the Assembly that should be explored. The CPA's Commonwealth Parliamentary Research Service (CPRS) offers parliaments and parliamentarians a research service on a range of specialist subjects. The CPRS will conduct or commission research from across Commonwealth Branches, which will seek to compile comparative information about parliamentary practices. The service is offered to all Branches, and we invite input from all Branches. Where regional or global examples and case studies are needed, the CPRS is a valuable tool in gathering this information.

The House should investigate online research subscriptions, which will add to the amount of research available to staff and Members. Sites like [Europa World](#) are valuable options to consider at a small fee. For peer reviewed journals, [Taylor and Francis Online](#) is another option to consider. If there is not the financial backing available for this, there are a number of free online resources available, such as [Google Scholar](#).

Recommendation 21: The National Assembly should create a library space for Parliamentarians. This space should house computers for research, books, documents and could be a place to store copies of Hansard. The library could be housed in the current Government Communications office.

Parliamentary Records

Currently the National Assembly have records of all parliamentary sittings on paper. However, there is a year's backlog on Hansard. This backlog needs to be addressed. Transcription services should be modernised. Consideration should be given to improve the timely manner of producing verbatim records through the use of technology. There are a number of platforms that currently provide transcribing services free of charge, such as Zoom, Otter, Google Drive and YouTube. The Assembly should trial the use of these services before considering more costly alternatives. These services could reduce the amount of time that it takes to create Hansard.

The current storage system in place is already over capacity, cupboards and filing cabinets are already full and papers are now being stored in corridors and any available office space. There is a huge risk that the current practice of record storing at the Assembly is putting important documents at risk of perishing. Efforts need to be made to digitalise the records that the Assembly have, although this is a difficult task that requires funding, the Assembly should address this as a priority.

When a Member or Senator requests information from a previous sitting, the research officer has to look through the records manually. This can be time consuming for the staff member, but also for the Member/Senator, causing delays to their parliamentary work. With digital copies of documents, the time it takes to search through vast amounts of information can dramatically be reduced.

For the paper copies that exist, work should be done in conjunction with the National Archives to look into securely storing the important records that the Assembly currently has. Records date back to the 1800s and these need to be cared for properly. It is important for Belize's history and national identity that these records are kept securely and are not allowed to perish. A data retention policy should also be put in place to ensure that proper management of these records is being adhered to.

Recommendation 22: Transcription services should be explored by the National Assembly to ensure that Hansards are produced in a timelier manner and the backlog is addressed.

Recommendation 23: The National Assembly should have a clear implementation plan for the digitalisation of all records.

Outreach Function

The National Assembly needs to increase the amount of engagement it has with the public. The public should be encouraged and welcomed into the National Assembly and their path to the engagement should be as smooth as possible. Currently, members of the public are not invested in the Assembly and do not feel actively engaged in the parliamentary process. This is having a negative effect of the reputation of the Assembly and its parliamentarians. In recent history, no

stakeholder can remember a public petition being brought to the Assembly for consideration. This shows that there is some level of apathy towards the Assembly and its work. This needs to be rectified and a clear strategy needs to be developed to address this.

Positive steps have been taken by the Assembly to address the lack of public understanding; this includes a recent 40th Anniversary video shared with the public on the 1981 independence and the parliament's role in the debates of the constitution of Belize. The video was produced by the Government Communications Office and these kinds of activities need to be brought in house to ensure that the Legislature is being heard and not just the Executive.

The National Committee for Families and Children (NCFC), working in collaboration with the Ministry of Education, with funding from UNICEF hosted their annual Children's Youth Parliament. The programme that took place on 20 November was a commendable outreach initiative educating children on parliamentary procedure by inviting them to the Parliament building to engage in mock Parliament Sittings. The National Assembly of Belize supported the programme in assisting with replica Standing Orders. Although this is a great initiative by the Government of Belize, there is concern that the opposition and Senate were originally going to be left out of the plans until intervention from the Speaker and the President. This highlights the need for the National Assembly to take control of the organisation of such outreach activities to ensure that the Parliament is fully represented. It is important that the National Assembly work independently from the Executive, to organise their own outreach and engagement activities to ensure that they take independent ownership of the activity and can involve both government and non-government role holders to better educate the public on the legislative branch of government.

For the separation of powers to succeed, it is important that the National Assembly should not wholly rely on Government services to support their functioning and fulfil their outreach targets. The National Assembly has not executed many outreach activities to engage with, educate and inform the public and due to the lack of in-house communications expertise, is often reliant on the Executive for this service. In order for the Legislature to be able to properly hold the Executive to account, it must be self-sufficient as stipulated in the CPA's recent publication, Model Law for Independent Parliaments: Establishing Parliamentary Service Commissions for Commonwealth Legislatures.¹⁵

The Assembly Chamber has a dedicated public gallery, and prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, this space was being utilised by members of the public and school groups. Since the pandemic, there have understandably been restrictions on allowing members of the public into the chamber, hopefully with the easing of national restrictions this can soon also be lifted. The Assembly also has a dedicated space for members of the media to watch proceedings. Since COVID-19, this has remained in place but with fewer people allowed in and they must remain at physical distance levels with masks on. For members of the media and for members of the public who wish to watch proceedings, a YouTube link is provided via the Government Press Office, and it is shared by the

¹⁵ CPA, Model Law for Independent Parliaments. https://www.cpahq.org/media/usdnwcpq/model-law-for-independent-parliaments_final.pdf

different media houses on Facebook. This is a positive step, and the Assembly should be commended for taking this approach to engage further with the public, but the link should be housed on an Assembly website. The Assembly should ensure that they are recording and monitoring views so that they can ascertain how many people are engaging with the Assembly online.

Members felt that engagement with the media could be improved, and that training should be provided on how to engage with them properly. In order to ensure that Members are comfortable talking to the media about the work of the Legislature, a suitable communications strategy should be developed by the Assembly. This strategy would include, how and when to engage with the media, lines to take as well as press briefings. This would be a clear step towards greater independence of the Assembly, as they would not be relying on the Government Communications Office to circulate their information. It would also go some way towards making Members and staff feel more comfortable talking to the media. The Assembly currently provides information to members of the public when they are requested to do so. However, the Assembly needs to take a more proactive approach and not wait for requests to come to them. Accessible information needs to be disseminated to the public. Through conversations with stakeholders, it was stated that a proportion of Belizean citizens are not literate and this needs to be taken into consideration when information is being distributed. It was further stated, that there is also a large percentage of the population that has Spanish as a first language, some measures need to be taken by the Assembly to ensure that key pieces of information are available in Spanish alongside English. The Deputy Clerk is fluent in Spanish and is willing to work on outreach material. This does not mean that all pieces of information need to be translated, but the Assembly should consider translating key issues that will impact Belizean citizens as a whole. Other formats should also be considered, including leaflets, videos, infographics and television and radio broadcasting. Any videos produced should include closed captions as a standard. The Deputy Clerk has experience of radio broadcasting, and this knowledge and skill should be used.

Positively, the Assembly records all sittings, and these recordings are readily available on YouTube, via the National Assembly's YouTube page. This means there is an online record of all their material that can be easily linked to their website, and closed captions are automatically created. By having an online record of meetings, parliamentarians, media, and members of the public can easily search for and access previous recordings. It is also a positive step towards increasing the inclusion of minority groups in Belize in the parliamentary process if YouTube's free closed captions service is used. The Assembly should utilise the CPA CPwD Inclusion guidelines¹⁶ for further information. However, the streaming service that currently works for the Assembly is run by an external contractor. This service needs to be brought in house and it is hoped that the new IT Technician post will be able to cover this work.

Recommendation 24: The National Assembly should run all filming and streaming services without the use of a contractor. They should also make greater use of their YouTube page, to share short explainer videos and other engagement items.

¹⁶ https://www.cpahq.org/media/u2rgjzem/disability_communication_guidelines_facilities-1.pdf

Website

The Website is currently hosted by an outside IT consultant, which comes out of the National Assembly budget (reference line in budget). However, the Parliament currently has a gov.bz domain name, which insinuates that it is a part of the government. The Assembly should change this. The National Assembly have access to the website and are able to upload information in their own time. This means that up to date records can be uploaded in a timely manner for the public, as they are not beholden to the consultant.

The National Assembly is planning to revamp its website and they have budgeted for this in the next financial year. The aim of the overhaul is to make the website more user-friendly, and the Assembly should be praised for this endeavour. The Assembly should ensure that new methods of communicating, like those mentioned in the previous section, are included in its design. This will make the website more visual and accessible. The website currently lists some information on Members and Senators, but the Assembly should consider including contact details and biographies alongside their existing information.

Social Media

The National Assembly has a Facebook and Twitter page, but they are currently inactive. The Assembly should look to getting these pages up and running again to ensure they are reaching as many members of the public as possible, including a younger audience. Targeted campaigns can be delivered through social media, and this can be used to increase outreach and its effectiveness can be easily monitored, through analytics. The Assembly should consider creating short explainer videos, which can be delivered by Presiding Officers, on a range of parliamentary topics. These are a quick and easy way to deliver information to the public and are a popular tool now being adopted by many legislatures, both large and small, a good example of this is the Legislative Assembly of Alberta and their twitter account can be found here: https://twitter.com/LegAssemblyofAB?ref_src=twsrc%5Egoogle%7Ctwcamp%5Eserp%7Ctwgr%5Eauthor

Recommendation 25: The National Assembly should reactivate their social media platforms. The Outreach and Engagement Officer should monitor and regularly update them and upload educational content.

While noting all of the sections above, it is important to highlight the capacity issue within the Assembly to deliver all its outreach functions. Removing the communications responsibilities from the current staff's workload would increase their capacity for more parliamentary matters. Therefore, it is recommended that a dedicated Outreach and Engagement Officer is employed so that the Assembly can ensure they are delivering information to and engaging with the Belizean public. All stakeholders that we met with noted the need for further outreach and this role will address this deficiency. This Outreach and Engagement Officer would be responsible for all

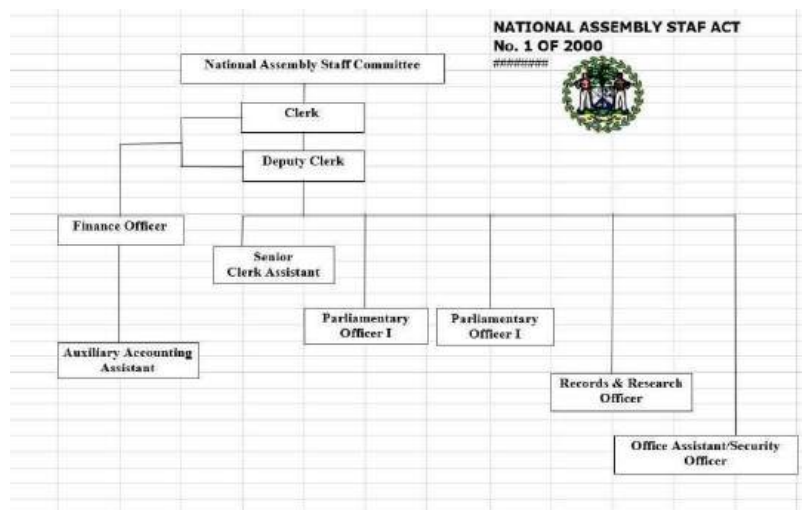
elements of engagement, including updating and monitoring the website and all social media platforms, liaising with the media, and designing and distributing information for public consumption. The role holder will also be responsible for supporting Members, Senators and Presiding Officers in conducting outreach activities, such as school visits and public forums. The role holder will be responsible for ensuring that all of the recommendations within the outreach section of this report are completed. If the Parliament wants to be given the status that it deserves in Belizean society, they need to make sure that engagement is higher on their agenda.

Recommendation 26: The House must have a clear strategy to conduct outreach, engagement, and educational activities with the public. CPA can assist with this work in conjunction with the Assembly.

Recommendation 27: The National Assembly should employ an Outreach and Engagement Officer, who will be in charge of monitoring all social media accounts, updating the Assembly website and conducting all outreach activities with adults and children.

Human Resources

The Office of the Clerk currently comprises of a Clerk to the House of Representatives and the Senate, a Deputy Clerk to the House of Representatives and the Senate and seven support staff, see organogram below. The Assembly is a diverse workplace, with gender equality in mind.



Learning & Development

Staff, Members and Senators feel that there are not enough opportunities for learning and development, and this should be addressed. There are a number of options available to the Assembly in terms of external training, like through the CPA, and it is good to know that these options are being taken up by some within the institution. The Assembly should consider increasing the budget line for learning and development opportunities for staff and

parliamentarians. If the Assembly wants to see continuous improvement in this area, the budget currently allocated (Bz\$9,166 20/21 Budget estimate) to this output is not sufficient. Increasing the amount would ensure that all at the institution have access to up to date and continuous training opportunities.

Recommendation 28: There needs to be a greater emphasis on learning and development and as such the National Assembly budget should reflect this.

Policies and Procedures

There is a lack of policies in place at the National Assembly. There is no reference to harassment policies, whistleblowing policies or other key staff documents. This should be addressed. Policies such as grievance procedures for the Assembly need to be produced and the Assembly should not simply rely on the information coming from the public sector, especially if it is to be seen as independent.

Activity 2 of the MOU with CPA relates to the development of a Code of Conduct for parliamentarians and staff of the Assembly. The draft Code of Conduct has been completed and is currently awaiting one further revision to incorporate the terms of the committee before the Attorney General's Office can complete final review. The National Assembly should endeavour to have the code of conduct put through the parliamentary process as soon as possible, as there has been a significant delay in doing so. The code of conduct is a vital improvement that the Assembly needs, notably it will improve public perception and trust in the work of the Assembly.

Recommendation 29: The Assembly should ensure that the Code of Conduct is implemented as soon as possible, they should liaise with the Attorney-General's Office for further updates on the status of the Code of Conduct and the next steps for implementation.

PART 4 – INFRASTRUCTURE

Building Space

The National Assembly is located in a prominent position in Belmopan. The building is of a moderate size, and the Chamber is not adequately sized for the number of Members and Senators that currently sit. The Speaker has a dedicated office that she actively uses for parliamentary work. Stakeholders have raised that the building is not currently fit for purpose. The building was originally designed to fit 18 Members, as the House now sits 31 and the Senate has 13 members. The space now does not work for the size of the Assembly and with the restrictions of COVID-19, this was further demonstrated.

The office space for the current level of staff is also inadequate, and if the Assembly is hoping to expand its workforce, they will need to expand available space. There is also insufficient space for records to be kept securely and safely and moving forward with this needs to be addressed. Documents, records and equipment are not properly stored and there is currently insufficient storage space, further information can be found in an earlier section.

Stakeholder have highlighted the fact that facilities for women are inadequate. Although there has been some improvement in toilet space, the current level of space isn't welcoming and does not foster an encouraging environment for female parliamentarians and staff.

The Assembly building is not currently accessible for those with disabilities. The gallery for members of the public to view parliamentary proceedings are only accessible by stairs. This is a clear barrier for people with disabilities from engaging with the parliamentary process in person. It is also a barrier for those with disabilities from running for election. The Assembly needs to address its inaccessibility as a matter of urgency.

If the Parliaments wants to pursue a greater level of independence from the Executive, consideration needs to be given to moving the Government Communications Office from the building. Having a government agency within the same building does not show that there is a clear separation between the executive and legislature, and it should be a stand-alone parliamentary building. By removing the government ministry from the building, it would also free up needed space for additional members of staff, a library and even needed storage space. This additional space would be vital for an expanding Assembly.

Recommendation 30: The Government Communications office should be relocated to another building, securing additional space for the National Assembly.

There are ongoing conversations about the total redesign of the National Assembly, and this should be commended. The Speaker has outlined a visionary plan for the building to be expanded and completely renovated. This would give the National Assembly the status that it deserves. It would allow for greater office space, greater research facilities and can even create greater income generation through tours, a coffee shop and the selling of souvenirs. Most importantly, by creating an aspirational building design, it would give the children of Belize a symbol and hopefully inspire them to one day seek election.

Security

Stakeholders have highlighted security of the Assembly as an area of concern. Currently there are limited security measures in place and there is a great amount of trust placed in the public not to cause any security issues. However, the Assembly has been burgled on multiple occasions. This highlights the need for additional security measures to be put in place. There is a Macebearer/Sergeant at Arms who acts more as a ceremonial figure than as any form of security.

There is currently a police officer on site for all House and Senate sittings, but staff expressed the need for a police officer to be on site during all working hours.

There is concern that the fire safety equipment on site is not fit for purpose and the fire department should conduct a review immediately.

Recommendation 31: A security review should be conducted by the Police to ascertain the safety levels at the Assembly. A fire review should also be conducted to ensure that fire safety equipment such as extinguishers are still fit for purpose.

Technology

The recent employment of a part time IT consultant is a vast improvement for the Assembly. It is hoped that this role will help the Assembly improve their technology infrastructure. The Assembly needs to look to improving the equipment they currently have, with lots of pieces seemingly out of date and out of scope. The Assembly has a budget line for equipment and for the next financial year, the Assembly should seek to increase this budget line to supply the Assembly with better equipment. The improvements should include equipment that can help with the digitalisation of records, a better printer and scanner and all outdated computers currently used by staff should be replaced. If there the financial circumstances are such that this would not be possible, the Assembly should seek assistance from other organisations, as they recently have done with their Chamber recording equipment.

Recommendation 32: Equipment should be updated at the National Assembly; this should include technology to help with digitalisation of records.



Photo by Frantz Smith



"The Mace of the National Assembly of Belize is made out of a mahogany, which flourished for many years at the grounds of the Government House in Belize City and was blown down in the hurricane of 1931. It was presented to the Legislative Council on 13 January 1952 by Sir Ronald Garvey. On the Head of the Mace are carved the arms of the Colony and the three principal events of its history: the first Settlement 1638; the Battle of St. George's Caye 1798 and the formation of the Crown Colony 1871. On the shaft are the names of the 6 districts: Corozal, Orange Walk, Belize, Cayo, Stann Creek and Toledo. The date of the manufacture of the Mace was June 1951, and the names of the craftsmen are: R. N. Downes, Superintendent; L. R. Perera, Carver; and G. P. Gough Turner."



House and Senate Committee Room

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