

HANSARD

NOVA SCOTIA HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE

ON

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

Wednesday, October 8, 2014

LEGISLATIVE CHAMBER

Communications Nova Scotia

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Public Accounts Committee

Mr. Allan MacMaster, Chairman

Mr. Iain Rankin, Vice-Chairman

Ms. Margaret Miller

Ms. Suzanne Lohnes-Croft

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Mr. Joachim Stroink

Mr. Tim Houston

Hon. Maureen MacDonald

Hon. David Wilson

In Attendance:

Mrs. Darlene Henry
Legislative Committee Clerk

Mr. Gordon Hebb
Chief Legislative Counsel

Mr. Michael Pickup
Auditor General

Ms. Evangeline Colman-Sadd
Assistant Auditor General

WITNESSES

Communications Nova Scotia

Ms. Tracey Taweel, Associate Deputy Minister

Ms. Angela Campbell, Acting Director, Policy and Corporate Services

Ms. Hilary White, Financial Planning Analyst



House of Assembly
Nova Scotia

HALIFAX, WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 8, 2014

STANDING COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

9:00 A.M.

CHAIRMAN

Mr. Allan MacMaster

VICE-CHAIRMAN

Mr. Iain Rankin

MR. CHAIRMAN: Good morning, everyone. I would like to call this meeting to order. Before we begin, I would like to remind everyone to put their phones on silent so we don't have any interruptions during the meeting.

I'd like to begin with each member of the committee introducing themselves, beginning with Mr. Maguire.

[The committee members introduced themselves.]

MR. CHAIRMAN: Today we have Communications Nova Scotia with us. The topic for today is advertising, procurement and performance. I'd like our witnesses to introduce themselves, beginning with Ms. Taweel. You can roll right in with your introductory comments.

MS. TRACEY TAWHEEL: Thank you very much. It's our pleasure to be here this morning. With me to my left I have Angela Campbell, Director of Policy and Corporate Services, and to my right, Hilary White, who is a financial planning analyst.

To begin, I'd like to thank the Auditor General's Office and their team for their work over the past year that they conducted in terms of their audit of Communications Nova Scotia. In summer 2011, Communications Nova Scotia began its own internal review, looking at several of the areas the Auditor General's Office ultimately ended up reviewing. We outlined that work alongside the audit, and both have led to improved processes and efficiencies, and most importantly, to government being able to provide better information and services to Nova Scotians. We accept all the recommendations in this chapter, and in fact, we have completed several and have begun work immediately on many others.

As you know, part of the audit scope was to determine whether CNS's activities were non-partisan. The AG confirmed that the work of CNS is non-partisan. In Fall 2013, the legislation guiding CNS was updated, which will ensure this will remain the case.

The audit scope covered an 18-month period, during which approximately 16,000 projects were managed through CNS. The AG examined 31 of those projects. This is a large workload for a small number of staff who are currently spread throughout the agency. We have recognized the need for a centralized approach to project management and procurement at CNS. This approach will lead to greater consistency in monitoring projects and in how we apply procurement procedures. We very much respect and adhere to all government policies, including the procurement policy.

The AG's Office has also raised what they believe may be an issue under the CRA definition. We take that seriously, and are consulting the PSC and Finance and Treasury Board, and if necessary will seek a legal opinion. This is a complicated and technical issue. We will follow the AG's recommendations, and we will also consult more broadly to ensure it is appropriately addressed.

Research and evaluation, both topics the Auditor General looked at, have been key priorities for us at CNS. We've created a centralized role for communications research and evaluation using one existing FTE. Sharing resources and knowledge across departments has resulted in better use of resources, a standard approach to evaluating campaigns and communications, and sharing of results more widely.

In terms of measurement, we have adopted Google Analytics as the corporate standard, and CNS is leading efforts to track web traffic and conduct web analysis on behalf of government. We also use the Heartbeat tool to regularly evaluate social media work. Social media has, in fact, been a key focus for us this year. We've updated our policy and guidelines and have developed the first coordinated corporate social media plan for government.

You may also notice that we've been doing less traditional advertising - for example, billboards and signs. In some cases, it may make sense to stick to traditional advertising; in other cases, we've moved toward more targeted campaigns. The online

campaign around the education review is a great example of a small investment going a long way. It was easily measurable and effective.

Our departments are hearing from Nova Scotians directly through social media now, in addition to the emails, letters, and phone calls they receive. Transportation and Infrastructure Renewal is one department that does a great job of engaging with Nova Scotians, sharing public safety messages and traffic advisories, and hosting discussions on topics like back-to-school safety. We will be doing more of this kind of work across departments in the year ahead.

CNS, like all government departments, supports the province's goal of achieving fiscal sustainability. To that end, we reduced our government advertising budget and have implemented two subsequent 1 per cent budget reductions. Furthermore, the amendments to our legislation will lead to better value for taxpayers' money. Previous to the legislation there was no legislative requirement to have departments use CNS services. They would sometimes procure advertising or other communication services outside of CNS, creating inconsistencies in the information available and often spending more money than necessary.

In the future we will have greater coordination across departments and offices, consistency of standards in products and services, and ultimately better value for money. The work we do with regard to these recommendations, combined with our updated legislation, policy, and guidelines, put CNS in a much improved position to focus on our mandate to help Nova Scotians understand what their government is doing and why. And with that I would be happy to take your questions.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Thank you. We'll begin with the PC caucus and Mr. Houston for 20 minutes.

MR. TIM HOUSTON: Thank you Mr. Chairman. Thank you for appearing today. Is it your first time appearing before the Public Accounts Committee?

MS. TAWHEEL: Second time.

MR. HOUSTON: Well, we're glad to have you today. In kind of 10 or 20 words or less, could you tell me what your goal is in the department? What is the department really trying to do?

MS. TAWHEEL: Ultimately the department is trying to help Nova Scotians understand what their government is doing and why. That is our mission and we achieve that through a variety of communications means.

MR. HOUSTON: The department has had a lot of fluctuations over the years. I know a little over 10 years ago this was a \$3 million department that had 89 staff and here

we are, I guess 12 years later, and it's a \$7.5 million department that has 90 staff and in between it has been much higher. I'm just wondering, how has that fluctuation of budget and staffing impacted the department's ability to deliver on that goal? Would you say the department is more effective at delivering on that goal now?

MS. TAWHEEL: Maybe I'll go back the 10 years where you started. When CNS was created, at that point in time it was recognized by the government of the day that there was a need to bring together communications resources that at that point in time existed in pockets right across the system and so there was a recognition that a more centralized, coordinated approach to communications might help government, ultimately, be able to fulfill that mandate that I just articulated for you.

Fluctuations in staffing and budget have occurred to some extent, as a result of initially bringing together all of those resources over periods of time. The agency initially started fairly small and then has grown, as other resources were brought in. Over the past three years, as you've noted, our FTE numbers have reduced; we've reduced by approximately 25 FTEs and our budget has reduced by approximately \$1.9 million as well.

I would say I'm very proud of the work that the folks who work at CNS do and sometimes it is challenging, with the number of resources that we have, to fulfill, for example, all of those 16,000 projects that I referenced over an 18-month period.

However, using other tools, such as social media, availing ourselves of research and evaluation, we are able to be much more targeted and ensure that we are achieving the objectives that we set for ourselves.

MR. HOUSTON: Okay, I was curious for that little bit of background. I want to start with the numbers from the budget. I don't know if you have that, it's in the government budget document, its Page 20.6, I guess. It is Communications Nova Scotia and it talks about departmental expenses by object and in that the estimate for the year that we're in right now has Gross Expenses, Salary and Benefits, \$9.2 million; Operating Costs, \$8.1 million, for total Gross Expenses of \$17.4 million. I guess that's all the money going out of the department. Then it says Less: Chargeable to Other Departments, \$9.9 million for net and that the \$7.5 million, is the net cost to taxpayers of just this department.

I'm interested in that Chargeable to Other Departments of \$9.9 million. Can you tell me what that is? How that works? I know it's obviously charge-back to other departments, but is it charged back on a fixed basis, every department gets a certain amount? Is it variable depending on how much they call you, or - how does that number happen?

MS. TAWHEEL: That number is variable. We charge back on a project-by-project basis, so it really does depend on the cost of the project that we've initiated on behalf of a particular government department, and those costs vary depending on the nature of the

project and the objectives we are trying to achieve. CNS has quite a small budget in its own right to pay for government communications efforts across all of the departments, which is why we have a model of cost recovery where we recover from those departments.

MR. HOUSTON: I know various departments have their own communications staff. Are those staff in your FTE number of 98 and you've allocated them out to different departments, or are they somewhere else?

MS. TAWHEEL: They are included in that number. Each year we reach out to departments to inquire in terms of the number of communications staff that they feel they will require for the fiscal year ahead. Those decisions are made in consultation with the deputy minister of those departments based on their statement of mandate and their goals and objectives for the year ahead.

MR. HOUSTON: So how many of the 98 people would be people that are out in those departments on a full-time basis?

MS. TAWHEEL: I think I have the exact number here.

MR. HOUSTON: When those people are, let's say, a communications person in the Finance and Treasury Board Department, when they're preparing a press release or some other kind of media event, do they come back to your department and say "Approve this release"? You know, they're out in the departments full time, but what's their interaction with your staff?

MS. TAWHEEL: Communicators who are assigned to departments remain part of Communications Nova Scotia, assigned to a particular line department. Those assignments can change every couple of years, but they do remain employees, if you will, of Communications Nova Scotia.

The way we're structured is that we have communications officers, advisors, and directors located in departments. Sometimes there will only be one of those individuals; sometimes there is a team approach required to manage the communications of that department. The communications directors in line departments report in to a managing director in Communications Nova Scotia. That managing director has responsibility for a block of departments, so they can keep their eye on issues that maybe cross over departments and support a team of communications directors.

MR. HOUSTON: So how many people are out in the departments? I don't know if you were able to get that number or not.

MS. TAWHEEL: Somewhere between 58 and 59 staff are out in departments.

MR. HOUSTON: So the majority of your staff really are . . .

MS. TAWHEEL: I wouldn't say the majority. I'd say about 60 per cent are out in departments. The rest would be people like photographers, videographers, graphic designers, marketers, and the managing directors that I mentioned.

MR. HOUSTON: And they're in your numbers, I guess - in your \$7.5 million net is the cost of them? They're not in the charge back?

MS. TAWHEEL: Right. We don't charge back for . . .

MR. HOUSTON: So in terms of the charge back, the \$9.9 million that's budgeted for this year, who are your best customers?

MS. TAWHEEL: We're very popular with all departments. So you're talking in terms of the size of teams in departments?

MR. HOUSTON: Well, no, because it's variable, so that amount is going to change based on how much work the various departments ask you to do. Which departments are asking you to do the most work?

MS. TAWHEEL: That varies on an annual basis. It really does depend on what the issues of the day are. We consistently do work for every department every year. It depends on the priorities of those departments, and on how much their need and demand are on an annual basis.

It does vary; it fluctuates from year to year. Back to my earlier point about setting the number of staff in departments, that is why that number can change sometimes on an annual basis, because it really is tied to the departmental business plan, their statement of mandate, and what they intend to accomplish in the year ahead.

MR. HOUSTON: Okay, so in terms of the \$7.5 million, the net number, I see how that's made up. Like, Office of the Assistant Deputy Minister, \$2 million; Client Services, \$500,000. Do you have those numbers on a gross basis too, because the gross would be like \$17 million? I'm just wondering how you do your costing for your charge-outs. Maybe we can look for that and get that later.

In the \$7.5 million net, I'm just looking down - Client Services, \$500,000; Communications Planning, \$500,000. Client Services, what does that mean to you? What would your department be doing in Client Services? Most of your clients would be other departments.

MS. TAWHEEL: Absolutely.

MR. HOUSTON: So do you have staff out in those departments?

MS. TAWHEEL: Within CNS corporately, we have a unit called Policy and Corporate Services. Angela Campbell is the director of that unit. That unit coordinates client services and project management for all of those 16,000 requests that come through. So like any private sector communications agency, we have a central client services hub to triage.

MR. HOUSTON: I appreciate that. Then we have Communication Services, \$1.3 million; and we have Marketing, \$3 million. Just quickly, like Communication Services, is that with your customers, the other departments, or is that with Nova Scotians?

MS. TAWHEEL: That would be work that is done in terms of creative services like graphic design, photography, videography, things like that.

MR. HOUSTON: But you can't charge that back to a department?

MS. TAWHEEL: Some things are charged back, yes.

MR. HOUSTON: But that's the net number - so this is the amount that's left over that you can't charge back. I'm just wondering how that . . .

MS. TAWHEEL: CNS is a central agency like many other central agencies and we provide service out to departments. We recover where appropriate, but in areas where a government priority, for example, may rest, those are the areas where CNS - we carve up our budget and make sure that we are supporting those areas.

MR. HOUSTON: Now the \$3 million in marketing, who are you marketing to?

MS. TAWHEEL: Nova Scotians.

MR. HOUSTON: On behalf of various departments?

MS. TAWHEEL: On behalf of various departments. We undertake different marketing activities such as . . .

MR. HOUSTON: But you can't charge it back? I'm just trying to get my head around - like how, if the idea is that you are charging the costs back to the department, so you are always doing work on behalf of departments, and you are doing it on a recovery basis - if the net number is \$3 million, I'm assuming the gross number is \$7 million, but some you can't charge back so you are marketing and that's marketing to Nova Scotians on behalf of departments?

MS. TAWHEEL: There are some aspects of our budget that we earmark to support government corporate priorities. For example, some of that money would be earmarked to work in collaboration with the Department of Agriculture on the Select Nova Scotia

campaign, as an example, to extend that with a more buy local focus. So we do set aside some of our own corporate marketing funds in order to market more broadly, in partnership with some departments.

MR. HOUSTON: How would that be decided? That's an agricultural thing, I guess. That would be under the Department of Agriculture, for the most part. They would have come to you and said, help us with this buy local campaign.

MS. TAWHEEL: We worked together with them to identify - the Select Nova Scotia program brand had been around for quite some time - and we worked with them to identify how we could grow that brand. It made sense to support more of a buy local focus to support our local businesses. The Department of Agriculture would have money earmarked in their budget that is primarily focused more on the agricultural sector.

We came to the table with money that could help expand that campaign, to expand our reach, and to grow the equity that brand has developed over the years since that program was created.

MR. HOUSTON: I don't want to focus too much on that example but I'm wondering where that kind of directive or decision comes from. Is that from your department looking at the various campaigns that different departments are running and then saying, you know what? we really like that one, let's put some of our own money towards that one - is that coming from inside the department or external to the department?

MS. TAWHEEL: It can come from a variety of places; it can come from our review - we annually review the statements of mandates coming out of departments. I also talk regularly with deputy ministers of departments who are identifying areas that their stakeholders have spoken to them about where we need an additional focus. It can come from what we're hearing in the marketplace - it's no secret to anyone, if we stay with the Select Nova Scotia example, that there has been a push internationally to move more toward buy local and supporting local industry in terms of a means to try to grow our economy and support those local businesses that are contributing greatly.

So it comes from a variety of areas. As professional marketers and communicators we're always on the lookout for those things that make sense, and also every government sets priorities in terms of where their focus is going to be. So, understandably, as a corporate central agency we too need to make sure that we're paying attention to those corporate priorities.

MR. HOUSTON: I want to talk a bit about opinion research and kind of focus group research that's done. I don't know, is "polling" a word you would use or do you have a better term for how that happens? I want to use the right word though, polling seems to have a negative connotation now, and there is probably a different word you would use?

MS. TAWHEEL: Research and evaluation.

MR. HOUSTON: So for research and evaluation, would it be fair to say that there are a few subcategories in there, one would be kind of opinion . . .

MS. TAWHEEL: Public opinion polling.

MR. HOUSTON: . . . public opinion polling in advance of a decision or a policy being made, and then there would be kind of research done maybe afterwards to see if a program is working?

MS. TAWHEEL: Yes, absolutely.

MR. HOUSTON: In terms of - and just a general question without really getting down in numbers and terms of the work that you do in research and evaluation - how would you split that between the percentage that is kind of opinion polling on what should be done as opposed to research on what has been done? Is that an easy question or . . .

MS. TAWHEEL: I would say it would be hard for me to sort of split it on a percentage basis, and certainly you've reviewed the Auditor General's chapter on research and evaluation as it pertains to Communications Nova Scotia, so you would be aware that that's an area the Auditor General flagged that we need to pay closer attention to make sure we're setting measurable objectives, that Communications Nova Scotia is involved in all of those types of projects and that we are regularly evaluating along the way. I would say that we have some growing to do in that area which is why we have dedicated in the last two years a resource to focusing on research and evaluation.

MR. HOUSTON: That's helpful, I appreciate that. So there was some research done recently on the whole Northern Pulp situation - was it your department that did that?

MS. TAWHEEL: It was, yes.

MR. HOUSTON: So a request like would have come from where?

MS. TAWHEEL: The request for that came from the communications teams, the various departments that were involved working together to say we probably should do some polling on this particular issue to get a sense of the level of awareness around particular actions that have been taken by the Department of Environment to address some of the concerns in that area.

MR. HOUSTON: That was all very helpful. I appreciate that - it just took up more time than I thought.

I just want to talk about - let's use that as a good example - the decision was made to do some polling, they come to you and talk to your department about that. How do you decide who to hire, who to engage to do that actual polling?

MS. TAWHEEL: When we conduct polling we prepare a statement of work and we seek three quotes from researchers that work in this market that are on the Communications standing offers. We then evaluate the product that they are offering to return to us . . .

MR. HOUSTON: And then who would decide the actual kind of questions that would be asked in that poll? Would it be the people you hire?

MS. TAWHEEL: They would provide expertise, given their experience and the fact that they specialize in research and evaluation. We would work with them to land on those questions. That would be the communications teams in the particular departments that are involved, as well as individuals within Communications Nova Scotia.

MR. HOUSTON: And if the third party comes up with some questions, who would determine whether or not those questions are too political, too partisan in nature?

MS. TAWHEEL: I would.

MR. HOUSTON: You would, okay, and then you would go back to the firm and say "change these"?

MS. TAWHEEL: Yes.

MR. HOUSTON: And then after that it would go back to the department for them to weigh in on?

MS. TAWHEEL: Well, the communicators, the CNS employees who are assigned to departments, are involved in this work all the way along. It's very much an iterative process, so they would be having conversations with their program area experts, as well as their deputy ministers, to make sure that they were fully apprised of the work that was being undertaken.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Order. Mr. Houston, your time has expired.

We'll now move to Mr. Wilson and the NDP caucus for 20 minutes.

HON. DAVID WILSON: Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you for coming in today. I'll try not to go over some of the questions my colleague has asked, but I do have some follow-up questions in some of the areas.

You mentioned that the overall budget is about \$7.5 million for your department. Knowing that other departments have money set aside for advertising and that, can you tell me what the actual advertising budget was for - I don't know if you can tell me this - the overall government? So government advertising, how much did we spend last year? Do you have that figure in front of you?

MS. TAWHEEL: I don't, and the reason I don't have that in front of me is because prior to the introduction of our legislation, advertising was not centralized and run through Communications Nova Scotia, so it was very difficult for us to put a finite number on what was spent globally on advertising.

Now, by virtue of the elements that have been added in through the CNS legislation, the Minister of Communications Nova Scotia will have to table an advertising report on an annual basis that will show exactly what advertising has been done. If a department were to inadvertently forget that they need to come through Communications Nova Scotia to procure their advertising, those ministers will need to explain why that has happened.

To close this response off, we'll be in a much better position by the end of this fiscal year to have a better handle on exactly what government is spending on advertising.

MR. DAVID WILSON: So is that information going to be attached to the budget? Is there a timeline? Often it could be within the year, and then often we see it's toward the end of the year, so is there a timeline?

MS. TAWHEEL: The first accountability report will be tabled in April. Once we've been able to tally all the numbers, we'll absolutely be providing information on the advertising that we conducted, both from a financial perspective, but for significant campaigns we'll also include in that report the objectives that were set, how we set those objectives, and what we achieved at the end of the campaign.

MR. DAVID WILSON: I know my colleague mentioned a figure around \$17 million, so I assume it's quite a significant amount of money. Are you aware - I know the government, when in Opposition - actually, it was in the platform they announced that they would reduce government advertising by \$5 million. That's a significant undertaking, especially - even if the budget is, let's say, \$17 million.

Have you been given any instructions so far on - I know you mentioned the reduction of 1 per cent in your department, but I see the \$5 million as something separate. Have you had any discussion with the Premier or with the minister who oversees your department about achieving that \$5 million reduction in government advertising?

MS. TAWHEEL: We have reduced our CNS corporate advertising budget by \$600,000 this fiscal year. Once we have a good handle on what government is spending overall on advertising, I would fully expect to see further reductions in that area.

MR. DAVID WILSON: I mean, with the three years remaining, you're looking at about a \$1.6 million reduction each year, so it is significant. It's something we will continue to keep track of.

You had mentioned there was a reduction in staff, and I know speaking with the former minister who oversaw your department in preparation for this, there was a lot of work done to try to reduce the number of CNS employees within the government. You said you are down about 25, I think. There were 130, I believe, at the peak, from my understanding, in the previous administration. What number are you at now with CNS employees?

MS. TAWHEEL: Our published estimate is 97.7 FTEs.

MR. DAVID WILSON: Over the past year have you reduced any - within the last year, I know we're not fully finished the fiscal year - but over the last year have you continued to reduce numbers within the department?

MS. TAWHEEL: Yes, we absolutely have and we are also abiding by the government's directive on one-for-two hirings, so for every two vacancies we can only staff one position. But above and beyond that, back to my earlier comments in terms of where the needs are when we speak about communicators that are assigned, for example, out in departments, we continually assess what those needs are and if the need isn't there, we will either move staff to where the greater need is, or we will look to reduce positions where appropriate.

MR. DAVID WILSON: How many vacancies do you have now? Do you know what the number is?

MS. TAWHEEL: Just one second, I can give that to you.

MR. DAVID WILSON: You can give that to me later. Your answer kind of leads me into my next line of questioning. Coming from a department that I oversaw, there was a lot of need, I think. There was more than one communications individual in the Department of Health and Wellness. I think, of all the departments, that department - especially over the last number of years with a number of things and initiatives - it was important to make sure that Nova Scotians knew what to do and how to access care.

I mean, just in the last four or five years we had the 811 program where nurses are on the line trying to help people; ensuring Nova Scotians know about the competencies of our paramedics, for example, to call 911; the H1N1 crisis; immunization programs; the

new model in CECs. There was a lot of information and changes in the Department of Health and Wellness.

I would think the Department of Health and Wellness would definitely be one of your leading customers within your department. We know in 2010, after Dr. John Ross did his report, that one of the major themes in his report was to ensure that government had effective communications with Nova Scotians, to ensure that they knew what was going on in emergency care in Nova Scotia.

Through that campaign, what kind of advertising would have - I mentioned a few I guess - what kind of relationship do you have with the Department of Health and Wellness and what work is going on now with the communications needs for that department?

MS. TAWHEEL: Well you have very accurately articulated some of the many challenges that department faces and I guess the great communications opportunities as well. There are few things that matter more to Nova Scotians than the health system - 811, 911, those areas remain an area of focus for the Department of Health and Wellness.

As you are all very well aware, we are also working through the amalgamation of the district health authorities, which also presents a communications opportunity to talk with Nova Scotians about the changes to a system that they very much value. We have been working collaboratively with the Department of Health and Wellness to determine the most effective communications means to reach Nova Scotians, to ensure that they understand what those changes will mean to them. In many of the areas that you referenced, work continues. It's ongoing because the need is ongoing.

We also have targeted specific groups within the populations like seniors, for example, to ensure that they do understand where and how they can access services. It's an ongoing challenge and priority and opportunity, I think, for us to connect directly with Nova Scotians.

MR. DAVID WILSON: I know my colleague mentioned this - the research and evaluation or the polling and focus group. I think I asked the minister this question earlier last week, or earlier this week, or later last week, around some of the focus groups and polling going on around the amalgamation of the district health authorities. Do you have a total number of what has been spent so far on those research and evaluations or polling and focus groups specifically for the amalgamation of the district health authorities?

MS. TAWHEEL: I have that number here; I can pull that for you. If I could just say, we felt it was necessary to do a bit of research on this particular issue because it is significant and there is the potential to be a lot of misinformation out there, or misunderstanding about what the change will mean to people on the front line in terms of how I, as a consumer of the health system, how I access the health services that I have always accessed. So, going out there and doing a bit of research to ensure people are aware

of the changes coming and to look for the areas where maybe we need to communicate a little bit more - or maybe we've over-communicated, as an example, in a particular area. That is why that research was undertaken and, in collaboration with the department, we'll make decisions on how much more research we need to do.

We have questions that are running regularly through Omnibus polling so that we can gauge the level of understanding out there about this particular issue - and we may look to do targeted communication, to speak directly to seniors, for example, to ensure that they know the health care they need will still be there when they need it and how to properly access this vital service.

MR. DAVID WILSON: So, during my questioning to the minister, I know in the past he has mentioned that he has taken a tour around the province but one of the areas that I haven't seen any advertising on, or happening, was public meetings. We know that there has been some polling and focus groups going on, so was there any recommendation from your department, or your staff to the Department of Health and Wellness, that community public meetings need to happen so that you can engage community members on another level other than the polling you're doing through the telephone or Internet or however you're doing it? Was there recommendation to do public open meetings, especially in the rural areas, around the amalgamation?

MS. TAWHEEL: We work with the Department of Health and Wellness, which is ultimately responsible for implementing the policy direction of government. We do take direction from them in terms of the areas where they feel they need to consult, where they want to do some research and evaluation. I couldn't say specifically if the Communications team I have assigned to the Department of Health and Wellness made that recommendation or not. I will say that work is ongoing and it is a priority of the transition team that is working on the project within the department to make sure that the public is engaged throughout the process and is made aware of the changes as they occur, but also that others who work within the system, within the department, are also aware of the changes that are coming.

MR. DAVID WILSON: So if I hear you correctly, as the associate deputy minister, you haven't heard of that recommendation, but that might not mean it hasn't happened?

MS. TAWHEEL: Exactly. There is a lot going on in all of the departments, so I try to keep abreast of everything, but I might have missed a conversation that occurred.

MR. DAVID WILSON: So with the information and the data you get from the polling, from the focus groups, what do you do with that? You evaluate it, I know you just mentioned, do we need to do more communications on a certain aspect of the amalgamation - for example, do you provide all that information to the government or the department? Is that information available to the public? Is it posted somewhere - is it

online? - is that what you do with the information once you find the results and the information that you compile from doing that polling?

MS. TAWHEEL: We do a variety of things with the information we gather. We use it to develop strategic communications plans; we use it to develop marketing campaigns to go out to market. As one example, it's not necessarily a health example per se, related to the district health authorities, but we have worked collaboratively with the Department of Health and Wellness on road safety, for example, and risky behaviours that our youth engage in in terms of driving - speeding, driving while under the influence, et cetera. When that research comes in, we take a look at it and really evaluate what makes sense to try to get at some of these behaviours that we have identified as being a problem in society.

I think it is also important to note that we, as an agency, have been conducting research and evaluation since at least as far back as 2006. So from a best practice perspective, any communicator worth their salt is going to push for research and evaluation to frame up a campaign before you go out there and to evaluate its success once you are out there. If you can do it, you should be evaluating throughout as well.

These are challenges, financially, sometimes, because research can be costly, which is why we are looking at other means to reach people and gauge their opinions as well.

MR. DAVID WILSON: I know my question was a little more open so I'll be more direct, is that research available to the public? If the public is concerned about amalgamation, for example - let's use that - can they get access to this information? Will you make that public through some means within your department?

MS. TAWHEEL: At this point the research we conduct is not available publicly, other than through a routine access request or a FOIPOP request. However, I will say that we have been having a conversation of late around should we be making some of this information available through our website. This could take me on a whole other track but the government website, I think, needs to be a place where people can go to get information that is relevant to them, that really tells them what government is working on and so information like this, some level of it, might be useful to be made available a little more broadly, so we are having those discussions now.

MR. DAVID WILSON: I know it has been the practice not to make that available but would it be as easy as the minister indicating that yes, that should be made public? Is it that easy? Is it that simple - the minister says to you yes, make this information public, is that something that could be done relatively quickly?

MS. TAWHEEL: That would be one element of it but the other element I would say is that we don't conduct research ourselves, we engage with private sector partners to conduct research so we would also have to collaborate with them and ensure that the

contracts and the statement of work that we have in place with them would allow us to share some element of the research that we have conducted. It is not as simple as one conversation.

The other piece we would have to look at is sometimes putting out raw data, for example, without any context around it, can be problematic so we'd need to look at exactly what we would share. I'm saying that it's a conversation we're having. There are a few things we'd have to look at, though, before we could sort of flip the switch on that.

MR. DAVID WILSON: I know in other departments - I don't know if it was under Environment or Natural Resources - they did some polling on the mill in Pictou County. Can you tell us the percentage of, for example, how much the Department of Health and Wellness is spending on polling and focus groups, compared to the overall number of departments that are doing that work? Are there a lot of departments doing focus groups and polling now or is it just a few? And is it just when there is an issue that comes up that seems to get the attention of the public?

MS. TAWHEEL: It varies. Again - and I don't mean to sound like I'm being vague or anything - but it really does vary because it depends on issues, as you've just articulated, issues that sort of pop up in the public domain where we are suddenly called to provide some level of communication support.

Sometimes it is on issues that the department has planned for, so within their business planning process for the year ahead, they know. To go back to the road safety example, the Department of Health and Wellness and Department of Transportation and Infrastructure Renewal knew that road safety would be a priority for them this year so conducting some research in that area to really get a sense of how to most appropriately tackle that issue makes sense.

There are a variety of departments that engage in research. Now that we have centralized that function as well, and there's an element of our legislation that speaks directly to CNS having responsibility for communications research and evaluation, we should also, like advertising, have a much better sense of the level of research and evaluation that is going on across government.

MR. DAVID WILSON: I know we have put some FOIPOP's in around the focus groups and polling. I know if you don't cover everything you only get very specific information. Can you tell us the amount of money spent so far in the Department of Health and Wellness on focus groups and polling?

MS. TAWHEEL: Just one second here. I just want to make sure I give you the correct number. I'll have to give that to you in a second - it's just not broken out in a way that I can provide to you easily.

MR. DAVID WILSON: Okay, thank you.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Thank you, Mr. Wilson. Your time is just about to expire, so if you're okay, we'll move along to the Liberal caucus and Mr. Rankin.

MR. IAIN RANKIN: Thank you for coming in this morning. I guess I'll continue on with the same theme there. I understand you don't have the exact figures on polling. Has there been any effort on diminishing that cost on polling since the new legislation? I understand advertising has gone down by \$600,000, you said, so would it be fair to say that the polling has continued the same? Has it grown in cost, or has that gone down?

MS. TAWHEEL: Right now, where we are sitting in terms of cost spent around research and evaluating, or polling, we're down over last year. However, I would throw in a caveat there. Prior to the introduction of our legislation, we were not tasked with handling communications research and evaluation across all departments. So I would fully expect that that number will grow over the course of this fiscal year, because we centralized it.

Now, through that centralization, we will certainly see more effective research and evaluation and less duplication of effort. Our research and evaluation advisor provides advice in terms of advising departments. You don't really need a full poll, for example, on this particular issue, when a running question through regular Omnibus research is much less expensive and can achieve the same objective.

Over time, I think we will see a much more consistent trend, but at this point, again, it would be very challenging for me to put a figure on what government historically has spent overall on communications research and evaluation.

MR. RANKIN: It sounds like the long-term goal is to become more efficient by centralizing it.

MS. TAWHEEL: Absolutely.

MR. RANKIN: With that legislation, which ties to the first accountability report that you mentioned, would this be the first type of reporting to the Legislature in history for this department?

MS. TAWHEEL: Yes, it would.

MR. RANKIN: Are you able to give some palpable examples on how this would affect the average Nova Scotian?

MS. TAWHEEL: What I would say is, our legislation first and foremost - if I could just start within government - really clarified the role of Communications Nova Scotia, and

now compels departments to use our service offerings. Our goal in doing that is to reduce overall government expense in the area of all things communications.

From a public perspective, what I would say the public will see over time is increased accountability and transparency in terms of what is being spent on advertising. We've published government's advertising guidelines. They are available on the government website, so Nova Scotians can certainly take a look at that.

By virtue of our legislation, we also have more authority around government's social media or presence. I would expect that Nova Scotians, over time, will see government more present where they are in various forums and venues - Facebook, Twitter, et cetera - where we have maybe not been as visible as we should be and we've maybe not been connecting with Nova Scotians the way we should be.

The last point I would make, I guess, is that CNS also has responsibility for the overall brand of Nova Scotia. Prior to the introduction of this, or the amendments to our legislation, efforts were made to try to gain a bit of control over all of the unique identifiers. We have had thousands upon thousands of unique identifiers out there across government. What those unique identifiers have done effectively is to confuse the average Nova Scotian who doesn't necessarily know that this particular program or service is something that their tax dollars have paid for, and that might be available to them, and that they should take advantage of.

By streamlining our government branding, by virtually eliminating unique identifiers, we will, first of all, save money because we won't be spending money designing something unique for every single program and service that is created or offered by government, and hopefully over time we will also see an increase in the level of awareness for those programs and services, and ultimately that is our goal.

MR. RANKIN: Okay. So this sounds like some pretty good key performance indicators with advertising. I'm wondering what the effectiveness is of your IT system in terms of tracking and monitoring the external business tracking that you have.

MS. TAWHEEL: We have recently implemented Google Analytics as the government standard for tracking our online activity, if you will. That platform allows us to evaluate who is going where on our website, what areas they're visiting, and how long they spend there. Working with our partners in Service Nova Scotia, we've also conducted some research in terms of Nova Scotians' comfort with conducting transactions online, which will be helpful in terms of what other services we may ultimately move to an online platform. From a social media perspective, we use a tool called Heartbeat to monitor what is happening in that other world that has been foreign, in large measure, to a lot of government departments.

So we've tried to put a number of measures in place, updated government social media policy and, for the first time, have a government social media plan as well.

MR. RANKIN: Okay. That's all I have for now.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Thank you, Mr. Rankin.

Ms. Miller.

MS. MARGARET MILLER: Thank you very much for coming in. It is very interesting listening to you, and I can see how passionate you are about the work that you do. It is really great.

In talking about social media a little bit, and I can see you are really moving in that direction, and predominantly, although a lot of us older people are getting into that as well, it's a young person's market - have you had any targeted campaigns toward young people?

MS. TAWHEEL: We absolutely have, and I can talk about a couple. To go back to an earlier example: road safety. I'll talk about that one for just a moment. We recognize that risky behaviour while driving is an ongoing and very pervasive issue, but I can remember what it was like to be 16 - but really only vaguely, to be honest. So it was really necessary for us to go out and have some very focused conversations with young people to ensure that we understand exactly why they partake in some of the risky behaviour that they do, and how we might be able to reach them and try to effect a level of change.

You've asked me specifically about targeting young people. We've embarked on a campaign that, in fact, first uses more traditional means to reach them. We've started a motorcycle safety campaign that speaks directly to some of the issues that came out through our research around risky driving - excessive speed, not wearing seat belts, things like that, and how they affect those who drive motorcycles. So we went with a traditional approach in that way because the research directed us in that direction.

From a social media perspective, we will also be starting more online campaigns to target youth and to help them realize that some of the behaviours that they are partaking in - driving while under the influence of drugs or alcohol - how risky they are. Texting while driving - how risky that is.

So we've certainly moved much more of our focus as well to an online forum, where it's appropriate. Certainly, speaking to young people, most times it is very appropriate to be online and to be where they are, and to speak a language that will resonate with them.

The other example I would give would be a campaign that we conducted around student assistance. We wanted to make sure that students were aware of the student loan

program and how they could avail themselves of that program. Research told us that some students weren't aware, their parents weren't aware, of how to access that program to their best advantage so we targeted them through online sources. So using some of our other research that we have available to us, from a media buying perspective that tells us who is where and what they are looking at and why they are there, we were able to develop a campaign to try to reach those students, to ensure that they could have access to a program that would benefit them.

We had a click-through rate on that online media that far exceeded industry standards. An industry standard, in terms of a successful kind of ad, a click-through rate, would be .01 per cent click-through rate and we achieved around a 2.6 per cent click-through rate, which tells us a couple of things: one, that the campaign was successful but two, on the other hand, it tells us that we have a lot of work to do. So if we had that high a click-through rate, it probably indicates that maybe people weren't aware that the program was available to them.

It is an ongoing opportunity, I guess, for us to continually communicate to students, to seniors, to all Nova Scotians, to make sure that they are aware of those programs and services available to them and that we reach them where they are.

MS. MILLER: Thank you, I'll pass it on to my colleague.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Ms. Lohnes-Croft.

MS. SUZANNE LOHNES-CROFT: Thank you for being here today. When you are planning for a special promotional item, say an event being carried on by the province, does the department sit in on your planning? Is there a member of the department who sits in on your planning and communicating what messages they want sent in the promotion?

MS. TAWHEEL: Absolutely. That is part of the reason why I think the Communications Nova Scotia model works. The communicators who are assigned to line departments develop relationships and expertise with the subject matter of that particular department, so when it comes time to develop any sort of event or any sort of marketing campaign or promotion, those communications staff, along with their program and policy colleagues in the department, are integral parts of the development of any campaign or promotional effort.

MS. LOHNES-CROFT: Is any of the scripting done by the department itself or is that done completely by CNS people?

MS. TAWHEEL: Program experts will provide guidance in terms of the very specific and technical aspects of a particular issue, or event, or challenge, or opportunity that we may be trying to manage. The communicators will then take that information and ensure

that it is understandable, that it is factual, and that it will speak to the audience that that department is trying to communicate directly with.

MS. LOHNES-CROFT: Who gives the approval for the final message and the final product?

MS. TAWHEEL: It is really a collaborative effort. In the instance of, say, a news release that we might be issuing, that is an iterative process that begins first at the department level, with a communicator working with a program expert to develop a news release. So we have identified that we are increasing funding, let's say, to a particular program and we need to publicly announce that; we've decided we'll do it through a news release conference. That communicator will work with the program, the subject matter expert, to determine what the salient points are that need to be included in that news release.

They will draft that news release, seek full approval throughout that department. It is then sent to the managing director whom I referred to earlier. That managing director will review it, as well, for everything, from grammar to - and even question some of the content to make sure that it is factual and it is achieving the objective that has been set.

From that point the release is then edited by a team of professional editors and then final approval. It is sent back to the department and final approval is sought from the department.

MS. LOHNES-CROFT: And the managing director works for CNS?

MS. TAWHEEL: CNS, yes.

MS. LOHNES-CROFT: Does it ever happen that an item goes to the department and they say no, go back and do it again, or we would like you to put this in the message?

MS. TAWHEEL: Sometimes, after the release has been edited, sometimes there will be a back and forth because sometimes an editor or the managing director will look at it and decide - I think this line would make more sense if we rewrote it in this way. Sometimes doing that will compromise the meaning or the intent that the department wanted to try to get out there. So it very much is an iterative process to make sure that at the end of day the release that goes out on the wire is factually accurate and has been approved by the department. We make sure that that approval is documented, and that hopefully we've been able to communicate exactly what our objectives were in putting out that release.

MS. LOHNES-CROFT: So it would be quite common for a department to come and say, I would like a message on this topic?

MS. TAWHEEL: Absolutely, yes. CNS is a central service provider. We exist to serve government and the line departments within government, so the ideas in terms of the vast majority of news releases that we issue absolutely come from the work of departments in serving Nova Scotians.

MS. LOHNES-CROFT: Okay, thank you very much.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Mr. Maguire.

MR. BRENDAN MAGUIRE: Thank you for coming today. I'll just jump right into it. I was taking some notes as you were answering some of the questions here. You said that the department is down 25 full-time employees over the last couple of years. Has there been an increase or decrease in part-time or contract employees within the department?

MS. TAWHEEL: CNS regularly uses our Communications standing offer when the volume of projects exceeds the number of staff that we have available to fulfill that work. We consistently follow the same process whenever a project comes in. We first look inside the agency to determine if we have the available resources to fulfill that project. When we do that, we're looking at a number of factors, not just if we have the staff available to do it. We also need to make sure that we can meet the clients' deadline, that we can deliver that project on time and on budget.

MR. MAGUIRE: So is that a yes or a no?

MS. TAWHEEL: It varies greatly.

MR. MAGUIRE: So over a 12-month period, if we're down 25 full-time employees, how many contract and part-time employees, on average, are we seeing coming into this department?

MS. TAWHEEL: It really does vary. We hire contractors on a project-by-project basis.

MR. MAGUIRE: So once the project is over?

MS. TAWHEEL: They're gone.

MR. MAGUIRE: They're gone. They don't stay for an extra six months or a year?

MS. TAWHEEL: They're gone. It's a project-by-project basis. I know that one of the issues the Auditor General flagged that we need to take a look at is, those contractors coming in and doing work, should they be considered more of an employee versus a contractor? We take their observation very seriously and are taking steps to look into that with our colleagues in the Public Service Commission and Treasury Board. I would say

that when we hire a contractor from our standing offer, when we bring someone in to perform a function, we are establishing a business relationship. We follow the terms and conditions of our standing offer, the tender contracts, et cetera, to make that happen. Clearly the Auditor General has flagged that we need to take a closer look at that, so that's what we intend to do.

MR. MAGUIRE: You brought up the Auditor General. I think there were 10 recommendations. Is it 10? How many of those do you feel you've adequately fulfilled?

MS. TAWHEEL: We've accepted all of the recommendations.

MR. MAGUIRE: How many have you implemented?

MS. TAWHEEL: I'd have to count how many we've actually implemented, but I would say we've probably implemented half and put a process in place.

MR. MAGUIRE: So five out of 10? And working toward the other five?

MS. TAWHEEL: Yes. By next year.

MR. MAGUIRE: So all 10 recommendations by the Auditor General will be in place by next year.

MS. TAWHEEL: Absolutely.

MR. MAGUIRE: So there are a few things. I have about a minute and half. So there's a push, I guess, from what I've gathered from you, away from traditional media and into the social media side. The social media - the Twitter, the Facebook - is that as expensive, or does it cost as much to advertise on social media compared to traditional media?

MS. TAWHEEL: It's much less expensive to advertise using that medium.

MR. MAGUIRE: It's a potential cost savings.

MS. TAWHEEL: Absolutely. We will use that medium as much as we possibly can. The caveat would be that we will use it where it makes sense to use it. Sometimes it's not going to make sense to use that medium to reach the audience that we need to speak with.

MR. MAGUIRE: So is the medium that you are using traditional Facebook, the Twitter, and everything else?

MS. TAWHEEL: We use everything that is available to use, absolutely.

MR. MAGUIRE: I have more questions but I guess I have run out of time so I will wait till the next round.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Okay. Mr. Houston for 14 minutes.

MR. HOUSTON: We started off with talking about the goal of the department and I think that you said that the goal of the department was to tell Nova Scotians what the government is doing and why.

MS. TAWHEEL: Yes, help Nova Scotians.

MR. HOUSTON: Then when we came into the polling on Northern Pulp you mentioned that was a poll that came up because you wanted to understand - or let's say the department wanted to understand - what Nova Scotians knew about what the department was doing, that was kind of the purpose of the poll?

MS. TAWHEEL: Yes.

MR. HOUSTON: And that was the Department of Environment that would have come to you and said, hey, we want to do a poll on this to see what people know about what our position is? Do you remember specifically what their goal was on that poll?

MS. TAWHEEL: It was a collaborative effort of not just the Department of Environment, CNS, we were involved in terms of also flagging that this is probably something we need to do a little bit of research on and there are a variety of other departments that are working to ensure that that issue is properly addressed.

MR. HOUSTON: Which other departments?

MS. TAWHEEL: Department of Natural Resources, Communications Nova Scotia, Environment.

MR. HOUSTON: The Premier's Office?

MS. TAWHEEL: The Premier's Office is aware of the work of Communications Nova Scotia and the elements that we engage in, like they are with all departments.

MR. HOUSTON: So a bunch of people got together and said we better do a poll to find out - what was the short goal of that poll?

MS. TAWHEEL: The short goal of that poll was to determine if residents in that area were aware of the ministerial order that had been issued and if not should we - it was to prompt us to think a little bit. Should we be communicating more about the elements of that ministerial order? It is clear that there was concern in that community and so we wanted to

make sure that if we could allay those concerns, even a tiny bit, by communicating more about that ministerial order then we wanted to make sure that we did the responsible thing and did that.

MR. HOUSTON: In a way the concerns would be if the polling suggested that the ministerial order was known but that it wasn't alleviating the concerns of the community, then presumably the department takes that and figures out if they should do more.

MS. TAWHEEL: Right, we would have to think about - are there other things that we should be doing, other . . .

MR. HOUSTON: And I think some of the questions of that poll were exactly of that nature as to what else would you like to see your government do. Do you remember specifically?

MS. TAWHEEL: I don't remember all of the specific questions.

MR. HOUSTON: In a situation like that where you have - let's call that a sensitive polling, that could ultimately lead to policy decisions - there would be back and forth. Would you remember, was there a lot of back and forth on the construction of the questions of that poll?

MS. TAWHEEL: I would characterize it as you have, absolutely, as a sensitive issue, but I would suggest that any time we talk to the public about anything, it is a sensitive issue and it's one that we take very seriously. The level of back and forth really varies; it varies greatly so I couldn't . . .

MR. HOUSTON: So would the minister be the person who signs off on that? Like in this case, I would say the Department of Environment would have been the lead, presumably, because you were talking about the ministerial order issued by that department. Would the minister sign off on that and say okay, yes, now I'm happy with these questions?

MS. TAWHEEL: This was corporate polling and it was signed off at a communications and a program level.

MR. HOUSTON: The back and forth between departments and Communications, that probably happens every single time, right? I would say that is pretty common. Is it pretty common for a minister to get directly involved in that?

MS. TAWHEEL: It would vary but I would say, no, it would not necessarily be the norm, no, for ministers to be involved.

MR. HOUSTON: Not that they would be talking directly to you but probably they would be signing off.

MS. TAWHEEL: I can't speak to what happens in a line department, but we would never proceed with polling on behalf of a department without knowing that department had approved that poll.

MR. HOUSTON: That's a written approval of a sign-off on those polling questions?

MS. TAWHEEL: It's sometimes written; it's sometimes verbal. The Auditor General has certainly flagged that approvals generally need to be written. That's a recommendation, again, that we are taking seriously and we'll make sure we have documentation that denotes approval. They specifically focused on news releases, I believe, or anything going out to the public in their report, but we are putting processes in place to ensure we have that documentation across the board.

MR. HOUSTON: Over the past year would you say that you are finding your department doing more opinion polling, or less, or the same?

MS. TAWHEEL: Again, back to my earlier points, prior to this year we did not have overall responsibility for research and evaluation, so it's very hard to do. It's kind of an apples and oranges comparison.

MR. HOUSTON: So it's a big thing you've taken on.

MS. TAWHEEL: Yes, I would suggest yes. It's something that the Auditor General has also flagged as something that's really important and warrants consideration and a focus.

MR. HOUSTON: There is so much potential for partisanship in what you are doing that I really want to kind of focus on that. I know at one point I read somewhere, shortly after the election last year, where the Premier was talking about trying to return the department to its original intent, which at the time he described as providing access and information to Nova Scotians about the government services that are available to them. That's a very specific thing because people only care about what impacts them.

I'll be honest, I'm having a hard time articulating - there is a big difference, in my mind, and I'm having trouble articulating between telling people what the government is doing and showing them how it impacts them. In other words, if you put a press release out that there is a program that is \$10 million for whatever, but really individuals can get access to \$500 of that, those people who are going to access that \$500 are never going to read that press release. So that press release is pandering to a certain audience that's not the

audience of the program. I'm just wondering, how do you - you can understand what's troubling me?

MS. TAWHEEL: I think I know what you are asking, absolutely, but please stop me if I'm not responding to the question that you articulated.

MR. HOUSTON: Which I did not articulate. Thank you for being kind though.

MS. TAWHEEL: First I would say the findings of the Auditor General's Report - the period that they looked at - they clearly said that the work of CNS is non-partisan. The legislation brought forward last Fall will ensure that our agency does remain non-partisan. I think some of what you are articulating actually builds the case for why we can't simply communicate using one tool. So a news release, for example, absolutely there is an intended audience for a news release and that is our colleagues and partners in the media.

The media play a vital role in terms of taking that information, distilling it, asking questions, and communicating directly with Nova Scotians, through the means that they have available to them, but that's only one tool. That is why we need to embark on things like marketing campaigns. That is why we need communications strategies that bring in a bunch of other elements. That is why we need to be seen online, directing potential students to the student assistance website. That is why it's vital that we don't just necessarily rely on one tool to get those messages out there.

In terms of helping Nova Scotians understand how something will impact them, we do the best we can to provide that information and we are working to try to be better at that each and every day. At the end of the day, however, it is a very individualized perspective. So what a particular program means to you and what it means to me could be two very different things. Our job is not to tell Nova Scotians what to think about something, but rather make sure that we are making the information available so they can draw those conclusions themselves. We need to do that through a variety of channels.

MR. HOUSTON: That's helpful, I appreciate that. The minister has a communications background. I think that's what he did before he was in politics. Is he pretty involved in the operations of your area, like looking at releases? How do you keep him abreast on things you are trying to do?

MS. TAWHEEL: I talk with the minister on a very regular basis, over the phone, through email, and we meet on a very regular basis about the business of Communications Nova Scotia. Yes, you are correct, he does have a communications background.

MR. HOUSTON: How do you keep him abreast on your progress in implementing the changes to fix the issues that the Auditor General found?

MS. TAWHEEL: We meet every two weeks and talk through all of that and a variety of other issues that the department would be working on and tackling.

MR. HOUSTON: Do you talk to him about the procurement processes? Does he weigh-in on like, wow, it surprises me that tender was that much, is there another way to do it? Does he get involved in looking the procurement side of things?

MS. TAWHEEL: No, he does not. He has been very clear in saying he expects the agency to operate efficiently, effectively, to save money where appropriate, and to fulfill our mandate.

MR. HOUSTON: So the results of the Auditor General's Report around the procurement, how would you describe your reaction to seeing his findings? What was your first emotion?

MS. TAWHEEL: My first emotion was, this is an area that we need to take a look at. Clearly, if the Auditor General has flagged that were even minor issues with any of those procurement activities, we need to take a look at it. From a contextual perspective, 32 projects were looked at out of 16,000 projects that ran through the agency during that particular period of time.

MR. HOUSTON: But the art of sampling is such that you can extrapolate that and it was pretty dreadful, the results, I think, would you say that is a fair word?

MS. TAWHEEL: I would not use that word, no. What I would say is that it's an area for improvement and it's an area that we are absolutely focusing on and we're working with our colleagues in procurement to make sure that everything we do, every service we procure, is beyond reproach.

MR. HOUSTON: Eighty four per cent of the samples had problems.

MS. TAWHEEL: Of 32 samples of 16,000 projects, yes.

MR. HOUSTON: So of 16,000, probably 84 per cent, if they are represented. I don't want to dwell on that. I'm glad to hear that. I hope it is being taken very seriously.

MS. TAWHEEL: It absolutely is.

MR. HOUSTON: It sounds like it might be. Particularly around the staffing issue, you have less staff now, probably as many or more projects as you ever had, so you are going to have to use more contractors and more third parties to get the work done, that's kind of a fact of life. There were a lot of troubling things around the use of contractors, particularly with the Revenue Canada concerns - stuff like that.

How many people are in that core group of contractors that tend to get the same projects over and over?

MS. TAWHEEL: We don't really have a core group, I wouldn't call it that. We have a number of vendors on the Communications standing offer, which would be the first place we would look when we need to procure services outside of our core complement.

If I could just go back for a second, at the beginning of your question you said it is inevitable, I guess - to summarize what you are saying - that we will need to use more contractors to get the work done. I wouldn't necessarily draw that conclusion. The conclusion I would draw is that we have to start looking at doing things differently so we maybe can't use all of the same traditional media, for example, that we have always used. We can't approach things the way we always have.

I would suggest it's a combination of using the standing offer, when we determine that we absolutely need to, when we've exhausted our internal capacity to fulfill a project, but also taking a step back and saying do we need to do this, first of all, do we need to do it this way, and are there other ways that we could achieve these objectives in a more cost-effective manner that is less staff-intensive but ultimately still achieves those objectives and is an efficient use of taxpayers' dollars?

MR. CHAIRMAN: Order, the time has expired. We'll now move to the NDP caucus and Mr. Wilson.

MR. DAVID WILSON: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I know I talked a little bit about some of the campaigns, especially in Health and Wellness. Most of my career in this place has been dealing with health and I know, this time of year for example, I've always taken one for the team where I roll up my sleeve and get a needle for the flu shot. So are you aware of your staff working on a campaign for the flu shot and immunization of Nova Scotians, to encourage them to get the flu shot, because I know it's usually around October that that happens - are they working on that now?

MS. TAWHEEL: They are, absolutely, and we will be rolling out a campaign similar to others that we've done to encourage Nova Scotians to get their flu shot.

MR. DAVID WILSON: Are you encouraging the Minister of Health and Wellness to have a camera on him as he gets a shot in the arm?

MS. TAWHEEL: As previous Health and Wellness Ministers have done - absolutely.

MR. DAVID WILSON: I want to go back to something you said earlier in the line of questioning about possibly making public some of the information on polling, and thinking back on what you said, you mentioned that you would have to put context to what you receive from that polling. I'm a bit concerned on why you would have to do that if

what you're polling is what Nova Scotians are telling you on what they think or what is wrong. Why couldn't you easily put, if you have a question to Nova Scotians - what do you think about amalgamation of the district health authorities - why wouldn't you just put their response on what areas they're concerned with?

MS. TAWHEEL: That's what I meant when I said "context." We'd have to provide enough information that people could make sense of what they see, so we couldn't just put a result, for example. We'd need to include what the actual question was that was asked, and what the objectives were in conducting this research, if that helps to clarify.

MR. DAVID WILSON: All right, thank you. I guess it might be a line of questioning we'll be going after the minister on, because I think it's important that Nova Scotians see what concerns them. Especially if they are being asked on a certain topic, then there is an onus on the government to make sure that information is public, and you shouldn't have to go through FOIPOP to find it out.

Polling - was there any polling done or focus groups done on Bill No.1 that recently passed in this House - are you aware of any polling that took place?

MS. TAWHEEL: No. No, I'm not. No.

MR. DAVID WILSON: So I would think, since you are the associate deputy minister, there was no polling done prior, during, or after, they passed the bill.

MS. TAWHEEL: CNS did not conduct polling on that topic, no.

MR. DAVID WILSON: Okay. Was there any recommendation from your department, or are you aware of whether they were thinking of doing polling?

MS. TAWHEEL: No. I'm not aware of any recommendation in that regard. But again, back to my earlier point, there may have been conversations that occurred at the department levels that I wouldn't necessarily be aware of.

MR. DAVID WILSON: Would they be able to do polling without you being aware of it, or would you definitely be involved?

MS. TAWHEEL: No. The polling now moves through by virtue of our legislation. Communications polling moves through research and evaluation, moves through Communications Nova Scotia, so we would be aware.

MR. DAVID WILSON: So you would be aware. So you're confident to say there was no polling going on?

MS. TAWHEEL: Yes.

MR. DAVID WILSON: Okay. One of the areas that I know many people are concerned around is ensuring that the government understands where they are. So with the opportunity to ensure that people hear about this polling, and I'm going to stay on this for a few minutes, wouldn't you feel it's beneficial to have that information available to Nova Scotians other than the route of FOIPOP, so the results of focus groups and polling - I know if I'm asked, or I take part in a group session, I would want to know information. If you're not making it public, through online, are you providing people in the focus group a synopsis of what happened and the results of their being involved in that focus group?

MS. TAWHEEL: That's not typically the way a focus group works. People participate in focus groups on the condition of anonymity, typically, so when a report is written about a focus group there is no one identified in that report, as an example.

The earlier part of your question was - I believe you asked me do I think it's of value for people to be aware? I think, like advertising, and publishing our advertising guidelines, and producing an annual advertising report, I think all of that lends itself to increased accountability and transparency. So if there is something that we can do, in terms of sharing information, in an era of more open government, then I think it does make sense to do that.

MR. DAVID WILSON: So with the process of improving messaging and that, I think you talked a little bit about it, if a department wants to do some polling or do advertising for a certain project or initiative they're doing, I know that you would have CNS employees in that department, so they come up with a plan. How does that messaging get approved? Is it the department, to the communications staff, to you and then back? Is that how simply it works?

MS. TAWHEEL: The messages usually do originate at the department level, from the program staff working with the communications specialists in their department. It then works its way through the managing directors that I've referenced earlier and those messages are then shared with other departments that might also be involved in that particular issue, to ensure that we are not inadvertently contradicting ourselves, that the communicators haven't written messages that are contradictory.

We do that cross-reference and then the department ultimately approves that message and then uses the message if the opportunity presents itself.

MR. DAVID WILSON: I think it was asked already but I'll ask again, is there one department that utilizes your services more? I know the Department of Health and Wellness have a number of health communications staff there but is there one department that actually uses more? Can you tell me? Are you able to look at whatever you call getting the money back from the departments, which department has utilized Communications Nova Scotia more over the last 12 months or so?

MS. TAWHEEL: I would have to go back and look at that to see if I could draw a conclusion from that. I would say you have talked very articulately about Health and Wellness, with which you have a lot of familiarity. We routinely do a lot of work with Health and Wellness because of things like 811 and 911 and the need to be constantly communicating about health.

It really does vary. To use my road safety example, in the past, maybe Transportation and Infrastructure Renewal wouldn't have been a heavy user of communications services but because we are focused on road safety, perhaps they'll be using more of our services this year. It really does vary.

Service Nova Scotia also uses our service, all departments use our services. It really does depend on what their objectives are for any given sort of project and within any given fiscal year.

MR. DAVID WILSON: You mentioned that coming up you will be able to tell more about what the budgets are, because of legislation that was passed. I think it was charge-back that I was trying to think of earlier, you charge-back the department if they come up with an initiative. Would it be worthwhile that your department hold the entire budget for advertising? I mean it's all taxpayers' money, right? I would think it would make more sense that if a department has an initiative - and sometimes it's out of their hands, H1N1 for example, you can't foresee that. I'm sure the Department of Health and Wellness at the time - I wasn't there - they didn't budget for what was entailed in getting messaging out to the public.

Wouldn't it be worthwhile to have the entire budget under your department? Then you wouldn't have to charge-back departments. I'm not an accountant but I think in the accounting way, it would be more beneficial to have it all under one roof. Is that something you are entertaining or looking at trying to do?

MS. TAWHEEL: The legislation has given us authority over government advertising at large, which I think was probably the biggest stumbling block to us gaining control over the monies that were expended around advertising. The challenge with trying to move all "advertising dollars" I guess, over to CNS would be that it does vary from year to year, it really does, so it depends on the work of that department and what they plan to undertake in the year ahead.

Sometimes something pops up. H1N1 maybe wouldn't be the best example but sometimes something of a smaller magnitude may pop up and a department might not actually have the advertising dollars to conduct a campaign on that particular issue. That's where we need to look to see if we can find some flexibility in order to help them achieve their objectives. I'm not certain it would make sense, necessarily.

MR. DAVID WILSON: I know there has been success in some of the campaigns and one of the ones that comes to light is the 811, and whenever - I know the data that I've seen in the past - whenever an advertising commercial comes on about 811, there is an increase in the utilization of 811. I haven't seen too much of that over the last little while. Has there been a request to stop airing certain videos or certain commercials to try to contain cost? For me that service is important, especially when you see closures of ERs in rural communities; 811 can be a resource that people can use to try to get more of an understanding of what is going on health-wise and what their next step would be: go to the emergency department, call 911. I haven't seen too many commercials or advertising supporting 811. Is there a reason for that?

MS. TAWHEEL: If my memory serves me correctly, we ran a campaign back in the Spring and we are working with the department now to figure out exactly what other campaign will run through the winter season. Our challenge is to make sure that we don't have too many things going on in market at the same time. You very accurately reminded us all that flu season is approaching so we will be in market with a flu campaign within the next couple of weeks to encourage people to get their flu shot.

We need to make sure that we are using the limited dollars that we have to achieve our objectives most effectively and that means we can't be in market with everything all at the same time.

MR. DAVID WILSON: I know I only have a minute or so left. The last one is to go back to a question I said I would wait for the answer, the number of vacancies. Were you able to find out the number of vacancies you have in your department?

MS. TAWHEEL: Right now we have four vacancies.

MR. DAVID WILSON: Four, okay. I'm good, thank you.

MR. CHAIRMAN: With that we'll move back to the Liberal caucus and Mr. Rankin.

MR. RANKIN: Just going back to where we started at the beginning with the reduction in staff members, I think you mentioned that this was decided with the deputy minister on an annual basis. I'm just wondering - and I could be wrong but that's what I wrote down - does the minister get involved in that process and is there an opportunity to do it more frequently? I am just thinking of certain projects that take on consultation and it lasts a number of months but then I wonder what that CNS agent staff is doing in that department, if they could be logistically used in another department more efficiently.

Why is it done annually? Is there an opportunity to have it more fluid and more iterative, just seeking out more efficiency gains, or is it rigid and every specific year there is a specific date where it is revised?

MS. TAWHEEL: It is absolutely not rigid but for the purposes of - at the start of each fiscal year - determining the size of the complement that any team anticipates they'll need, a request goes out, usually February-ish, towards the end of the fiscal year, to ask deputy ministers what they anticipate their needs will be. The deputies confer with their ministers to make sure that everyone is comfortable, that yes, we're going to need three resources for the year ahead. Where the flexibility comes in is in exactly the way you articulated. Sometimes things don't go exactly as planned and we end up in a situation like your colleague referenced, the H1N1, for example. We might end up in a situation where we have an emergency on our hands and we need to deploy more resources to a particular department to fulfill a need.

The CNS model is such that those CNS employees can be picked up and moved, as the need warrants. If Transportation and Infrastructure Renewal feel they need four resources this year, and halfway through the year it turns out they maybe only feel they need three and Community Services needs an extra communications advisor, we will move that resource, mid-year, even a third of the way through the year, over to that new department, either for the balance of the fiscal or until that particular peak in need subsides, at which point that resource would then return to Transportation and Infrastructure Renewal, as an example.

It is absolutely not rigid, it's very flexible, which is why it tends to work fairly well, and departments are very collaborative and understanding of the need to send their communicators where the greatest need is.

MR. RANKIN: Just one more comment and question. You said that the legislation helped clarify the role. Do you feel that the department is effectively fulfilling its original purpose?

MS. TAWHEEL: Yes, I do. Absolutely. The legislation gives us the ability to make sure that we are absolutely fulfilling that mandate in all areas, from strategic communications planning, marketing, research and evaluation, media relations, graphic design - all aspects of the work that the agency has been involved in to this point, the legislation very clearly puts that in black and white, if you will, and ensures that departments now know there is one spot to go to avail themselves of all of those services, which in turn allows us to meet our mandate.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Mr. Stroink.

MR. JOACHIM STROINK: Thank you very much for coming in. I see research and evaluation is a very crucial part of Communications Nova Scotia, so before you're spending hundreds of thousands of dollars on a campaign to do this research and make sure you're doing the right thing - my question is, do you see that as an agreement to that statement, or do you feel that you guys need to go another way?

MS. TAWHEEL: Absolutely. Research at the start of a significant campaign is fundamental, and the Auditor General flagged that. Perhaps even more important is the evaluation when it's over and done with to make sure that we have, in fact, achieved our objectives, and if we haven't, to try to put a finger on why we haven't, so that we don't repeat that same sort of error, if you will, in the future - so that we're more effective.

MR. STROINK: Thank you. Can you give me some examples of future communication that you based on research that you have done?

MS. TAWHEEL: I spoke already about the road safety campaign. I'll just maybe elaborate on that one a little bit more. We did intensive research around the road safety campaign - before we developed that campaign, I should say, because we really did feel it was important for us to understand where the minds of youth, in particular, were.

That research pointed to some key insights in that youth - young people, young males in particular - have a tendency to embark or engage in risky behaviour, particularly when they're behind the wheel. That behaviour is sometimes moderated by whoever is sitting beside them in the car. So my son, if I had one, might not speed if I were sitting beside him, but if his buddy is sitting beside him, the odds of him speeding increase exponentially, and the odds of him driving while under the influence increase exponentially. There is inherent in that age group risky behaviour, in particular with males, and that is something that our research pointed to.

That research also shed light on a bunch of other aspects, and in the months and years ahead, we will use that research to try to create social marketing campaigns that can get at some of that risky behaviour, because we know they're not just risking themselves - they're risking the lives of many others.

The anti-smoking movement is a great example of how research informed an international push toward modifying a very risky behaviour, but it took a long time to get at that behaviour. So with some of these behaviour-change campaigns that we're embarking on, research is critical to tell us how deep and wide the problem is, and to help moderate our expectations in terms of how quickly we can get at that behaviour. This is very much a long game in terms of behaviour change, and we can't expect to flip the switch overnight.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Ms. Miller.

MS. MILLER: When you talk about road safety, you're speaking my language, obviously. I really appreciate that, and all your efforts with that kind of research, because it's something I'm very passionate about. That said, we've been talking a lot about what you do for departments as CNS. Do you also do work for individual MLA offices, or is it strictly departmental work?

MS. TAWHEEL: Just departments.

MS. MILLER: I have no pressing questions, so I'll pass it on.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Ms. Lohnes-Croft.

MS. LOHNES-CROFT: In your opening remarks, you mentioned that the campaign for the educational review was done differently. Could you explain how it was done differently, as opposed to how you would have addressed a campaign like that previously?

MS. TAWHEEL: In the past we might have tackled a challenge like that by running an ad in a newspaper, for example, and encouraging people to complete an education survey. In this instance we took a different approach. As you would all be aware, earlier this year a review of the entire education system was announced and a six-member panel was put in place.

At that time the department recognized the need to ensure that we engaged a lot of Nova Scotians in a very full discussion about where our education system currently is and where they would like to see it go. We, CNS, worked with that department to figure out how to best create awareness for the review and specifically to target participation in the education survey. That was seen as being a very good way to see what people were thinking about this particular issue.

Initially we set an objective of collecting 10,000 responses to that survey. The strategy we put in place, to ensure that survey reaches as many people as possible, was that we e-mailed the link out to stakeholders; we placed the link using online advertising; we used a completely online electronic means to reach people and to encourage people to tell two friends, and so on, and so on, and so on, to try to increase participation in the survey.

Without using a high level of paid media, we implemented this marketing and communications plan that leveraged that network that existed around this particular issue, engaged school principals, parents, students, teachers and all Nova Scotians in this very important conversation.

Our results were excellent. We surpassed our goal with almost 19,000 responses to the survey, which I think forms a nice basis for the panel to take and then consider. I think, as an important comparator, our relatively small jurisdiction of Nova Scotia out-performed other provinces that have undertaken similar education surveys: B.C. with a population of five million had only 5,000 completed surveys when they approached the same topic and Alberta, with a population of four million, had 12,000 completed surveys. I think it's a good example of - you don't need to spend a lot of money, sometimes, if you know what your objective are and they are clear.

MS. LOHNES-CROFT: I was one of those people who did a lot of Facebook postings of the review and I found there were key people in my constituency who we sent

the link to through e-mail. Where did this idea come from? Was it a collaborative approach by the department and you to get more participation?

MS. TAWHEEL: It absolutely was. It was a collaborative approach with the communications team in the department, our marketing team, as well as other program area experts within the department, to say okay, what's our goal here? We need to approach this frugally and as cost-effectively as possible. That was one of the considerations.

The principal consideration was - what are our objectives here? The objective boiled down to, quite simply, we need to get this survey easily in the hands of people who we need to hear from. So when you strip it back down to basics, the best way to achieve that objective was a very simple one: using networks that already exist and capitalizing on the incredible passion and interest that Nova Scotians have in the education of our children and our overall education system.

MS. LOHNES-CROFT: So from a management perspective, would you consider this less labour intensive or average labouring?

MS. TAWHEEL: Probably less labour intensive because we did some initial work and we kept track of where things were at. It really was about - you just provided an example of you using your Facebook page - it really was about average Nova Scotians continuing to spread that message. I would say less labour intensive because we capitalized on the interest and the goodwill of others.

MS. LOHNES-CROFT: Thank you. I'll pass the microphone over to my colleague.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Mr. Maguire, you have three minutes.

MR. BRENDAN MAGUIRE: Three minutes, okay, thank you. I'll be quick with this. One of the things that kind of annoyed me, and I kept hearing over and over from people, was these giant billboard signs that we would see on the side of the road, and I'll give you an example, down in my riding in West Pennant there was a sign that said: this road has been paved by so and so and so. I think average Nova Scotians understand that government paves roads and government do these projects.

I think the practice started two governments ago with these signs. We see them federally, but we started seeing them provincially, and I'm guessing, as someone who worked in communications for over 10 years, these were strategically placed. There would be maybe a little bit of orange or blue in the background of these signs. What was the rationale for these signs? We talk about partisanship. To me it seemed like a giant waste of taxpayers' dollars. I don't think people need to be reminded who paved their roads, and I'm using that as an example, so what was the rationale behind it and what was the reasoning for doing these signs in the middle of the community?

MS. TAWHEEL: Well, to start, I would say it's important to reference the Auditor General's findings that signage was considered, through their lens, as being non-partisan in nature. Having said that, our current legislation, and in particular the published advertising guidelines that we have, would prohibit signs like that, billboards, from being erected in any part of the province, from this point forward. The rationale in using some of those signs was in an effort to communicate with citizens in those particular areas about the work that their government was doing to pave roads or to construct a school.

MR. MAGUIRE: But I guess, in your opinion, do we need a sign to tell a community that the road has been paved and who it has been paved by?

MS. TAWHEEL: We use a variety of means to communicate. Sometimes in the past that may have involved signs such as the one you are referencing. As I said, our guidelines would prohibit signs like that from being used in the future. Every government has its own particular style in terms of how it chooses to communicate and share messages. Prior to the introduction of our advertising guidelines, signage such as the signage we used for a decade prior to now, was permissible.

MR. MAGUIRE: So these signs going forward will not be used?

MS. TAWHEEL: No, they will not.

MR. MAGUIRE: In your opinion they weren't partisan signs, they were just information signs letting people know who paved their roads.

MS. TAWHEEL: In the opinion of the Auditor General the signs were non-partisan and as an agency they were a tool that was available to us to communicate a particular initiative of government and were entirely permissible under our practices at the time.

MR. MAGUIRE: Who decided the wording on these signs? We would see the Premier's name and sometimes an MLA's name or a Cabinet Minister's name on these, who decided the wording on these signs?

MS. TAWHEEL: The wording on signs was decided, as lots of other things are, in collaboration with the department that would have been involved in whatever the initiative was and the Communications staff, in terms of making those decisions.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Order. I'm sorry time has expired. Ms. Taweel, I would like to give you an opportunity to provide some closing remarks.

MS. TAWHEEL: Thank you, I'll be brief. I would like to close by first of all thanking all of you for questions this morning and also by thanking my team at Communications Nova Scotia who are passionate about their work, the province and the Nova Scotians they serve. They are true professionals and they have certainly embraced a

great deal of change over the past couple of years and I know received with open arms the findings of the Auditor General's Report and have played an instrumental role in ensuring we fulfill all of those recommendations. Those audit findings will certainly help our agency continue to improve and as an agency of communications professionals our mantra is to always be looking at new and better ways to communicate and to ultimately fulfill our mandate. Thank you.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Thank you, Ms. Taweel and thank you Ms. White and Ms. Campbell for being with us today.

Our next meeting will be on October 15th. It will be with the Department of Finance and Treasury Board. It is a training session on the Public Accounts of the province and there's a lot of information and I think it serves us all, and serves Nova Scotians better, if we are trained as best we can be on the Public Accounts and what they mean and how they are structured. That is going to take place October 15th. It is going to take place in the Johnston Building, so be aware of that.

Following this meeting we're having an in camera briefing with the Auditor General on the Department of Health and Wellness physician alternative funding arrangements. That will begin perhaps a little bit before 11 a.m., if we can.

With that, we now stand adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 10:50 a.m.]