

HANSARD

NOVA SCOTIA HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE

ON

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

Wednesday, June 7, 2023

COMMITTEE ROOM

**2023 Report of the Auditor General – Follow-up of 2018, 2019 and 2020
Performance Audit Recommendations Re 2019 Report of the Auditor General:
Chapter 1: Public Service Commission, Departments of Agriculture, Community
Services and Justice: Diversity and Inclusion in the Public Service**

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Public Accounts Committee

Hon. Kelly Regan (Chair)
Nolan Young (Vice Chair)
John A. MacDonald
Melissa Sheehy-Richard
Tom Taggart
Kent Smith (Acting Chair)
Hon. Brendan Maguire
Susan Leblanc
Kendra Coombes

[Kelly Regan was replaced by Hon. Tony Ince.]
[Nolan Young was replaced by Chris Palmer.]
[Tom Taggart was replaced by John White.]
[Susan Leblanc was replaced by Lisa Lachance.]

In Attendance:

Kim Leadley
Acting Committee Clerk

Gordon Hebb
Chief Legislative Counsel

WITNESSES

Public Service Commission

Andrea Anderson – Public Service Commissioner
Tracey Thomas – Executive Director People and Culture
Sarah Bradfield – Executive Director, Strategic Advisory & Support Services

Department of Agriculture

Loretta Robichaud – Deputy Minister
Heather Hughes - Executive Director, Corporate and Policy Services

Department of Community Services

Tracey Taweel – Deputy Minister
Sandy Graves – Associate Deputy Minister
Sonia Murphy – Director, Inclusion, Diversity and Community Relations

Department of Justice

Candace Thomas – Deputy Minister

William Trask – Executive Director, Policy and Information Management

Dawn Stegen - Executive Director, Accessibility Directorate

Emmanuel Itiveh – Senior Advisor, Diversity and Inclusion



HALIFAX, WEDNESDAY, JUNE 7, 2023

STANDING COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

9:00 A.M.

CHAIR

Hon. Kelly Regan

VICE CHAIR

Nolan Young

THE CLERK: Order. Good morning, everybody. I'm Kim Leadley, the acting clerk for the meeting today. In the absence of a Chair and a vice chair, the committee needs to elect an acting Chair from among the members present for the purpose of this meeting today only. The floor is now open for nominations.

MLA Maguire.

HON. BRENDAN MAGUIRE: Thank you, acting committee clerk. I would like to nominate Lisa Lachance. Out of everyone here, they have the most experience currently as deputy speaker, so I think they would do a fantastic job in the role.

THE CLERK: MLA Sheehy-Richard.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: Thank you, acting Chair. I would nominate MLA Kent Smith to take the Chair today.

THE CLERK: Legislative Counsel says we don't need a recorded vote because it's technically not a motion.

All in favour of MLA Lachance, please raise your hand.

All in favour of MLA Smith.

MLA Smith will be taking the Chair today. Thank you.

[MLA Kent Smith takes the Chair.]

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much, everyone. I'm going to call a two-minute recess, please - just so I can consult with the clerk on the agenda for today's meeting.

[9:02 a.m. The committee recessed.]

[9:04 a.m. The committee reconvened.]

THE CHAIR: Order, please. I call this meeting to order. This is the Standing Committee on Public Accounts. The topic today is the 2023 Report of the Auditor General, Follow-up to the 2018, 2019, and 2020 Performance Audit Recommendations.

My name is Kent Smith, and I am the acting Chair for today's meeting. I would like to remind everyone to please put their phones on silent.

We're going to start the meeting with introductions. I'll start to my left and ask MLA Palmer to begin.

[The committee members introduced themselves.]

THE CHAIR: Thank you, everyone. To make it official, I'd like to make a note that we have representatives here from the Auditor General's Office. We have Chief Legislative Counsel Mr. Gordon Hebb, and Acting Clerk Kim Leadley from the Legislative Committees Office as well.

At this point in time, I'm going to invite the witnesses to introduce themselves, but not go into your opening remarks just yet. We'll get to that part in just a moment.

We'll start to my farthest left with Ms. Anderson.

[The witnesses introduced themselves.]

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much. MLA Coombes.

KENDRA COOMBES: I move that we add the five minutes to the meeting that it took for us to get sorted today.

THE CHAIR: There is a motion on the floor to extend the meeting by five minutes. Any discussion on the motion?

All those in favour? There has been a request for a recorded vote.

The motion on the floor is to extend the meeting by five minutes. I will ask the clerk to take over the recorded vote.

[The clerk calls the roll.]

[9:07 a.m.]

YEAS

Lisa Lachance
Kendra Coombes
Hon. Brendan Maguire
Hon. Tony Ince

NAYS

Chris Palmer
John White
John A. MacDonald
Melissa Sheehy-Richard
Kent Smith

THE CLERK: For, 4. Against, 5.

The motion is defeated.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much to the clerk.

Back to the meeting at hand. Thank you, everyone, for introducing themselves. I believe that there are some opening remarks from our honoured guests here today. I will turn to Ms. Anderson to start with her opening remarks.

ANDREA ANDERSON: Good morning, Mr. Chair and committee members. Thank you for the opportunity this morning to provide you with an update on the Office of the Auditor General's May 2019 Diversity and Inclusion in the Public Service audit recommendations to the Public Service Commission.

With me from the Public Service Commission today is Tracey Thomas, Executive Director of People and Culture, along with leadership staff responsible for specific PSC programs and initiatives.

In May 2019, the Office of the Auditor General provided eight recommendations relating to diversity and inclusion in the Public Service. Of the eight recommendations, the PSC is accountable for completing seven, which I will update today. My colleagues from the Department of Agriculture, the Department of Community Services, and the Department of Justice join me today. They also share a role in three of the recommendations.

Recommendation 1.1: Develop and use a plan for EDIA strategies. Our *All Together: An Action Plan for Diversity and Inclusion in the Public Service*, was released

in 2020. We support all departments in implementing this plan at a departmental level through consultation, workforce assessment, and goal setting.

Recommendation 1.2: Develop and use evaluation plans in progress reporting. The annual Moving Towards Equity has moved online to better capture departmental progress. PSC is also using the Global Diversity, Equity & Inclusion Benchmarks' tiered evaluation standards to measure the progress of *All Together* action plan and employment equity plans.

Recommendation 1.5: PSC, Agriculture, Community Services, and Justice staff must complete and track mandatory training. Mandatory training includes several EDIA and respectful workplace offerings that are assigned to all employees through the Learning Management System. I invite my deputy colleagues from these departments to speak to these recommendations with the conclusion of my remarks.

Work on the four remaining recommendations continues and will be completed in the December 2023 reporting period. These include Recommendation 1.3: Establish a process to identify, collect, and analyze data for EDIA programs. The PSC has adopted the Global Diversity, Equity & Inclusion Benchmarks standards to measure progress on the *All Together* action plan and to evaluate and assess departmental EDIA work. The 2022 How's Work Going? survey has concluded, and includes valuable information provided by equity-seeking employees.

Recommendation 1.4: Develop a process to assess employment equity and respectful workplace policies. To date, we have completed the employment systems review to identify barriers faced by equity-seeking groups and embedded respectful workplace policies in our leadership development program.

Recommendation 1.6: Evaluate how accessible our training is for staff and develop a process to ensure training is retaken. We have converted many in-classroom EDIA training courses to online options to make it more accessible to employees and also have developed and are finalizing training guidelines. These courses include microaggressions, unconscious bias, understanding privilege, and we will soon add the sexual orientation and gender identity course also.

Recommendation 1.7: PSC will work with the Departments of Agriculture, Community Services, and Justice to develop, implement, and review HR practices to identify and remove barriers to employment, retention, and advancement for members of equity groups. We have partnered with two pilot sites - the Departments of Public Works and Communities, Culture, Tourism and Heritage - to implement their employment systems reviews.

Mr. Chair, I am proud - very proud - of the work that my deputy colleagues and my teams in these departments have done to support this important work, and they will speak

to their initiatives. I am happy to answer any questions the committee may have in relation to diversity and inclusion in the Public Service Commission.

THE CHAIR: Deputy Minister Robichaud.

LORETTA ROBICHAUD: I'm pleased to be here on behalf of the Department of Agriculture to talk about the work to support diversity and inclusion in the public service. I am joined today by Heather Hughes, Executive Director for Policy and Corporate Services.

We believe Nova Scotians should see themselves reflected in their government. We also need people with diverse backgrounds, perspectives, and experiences at the table, informing policy development and helping build programming from the ground up. That is why our department has undertaken a number of positive actions to promote diversity and inclusion.

I'm happy to say since 2021, our Regional Services division established a diversity and inclusion team consisting of a senior diversity programming specialist and an African Nova Scotian coordinator. The team focuses on providing agricultural programming and services to diverse communities. In September, we hired a director of engagement, equity and belonging to bring further leadership to our diversity and inclusion efforts. We continue to support the growth of our employee diversity committees by encouraging staff members to participate both on internal committees and inter-departmental employee networks.

To know where we want to go, we need to have a good assessment of where we are now. That is why we have worked with the Public Service Commission to participate in a review called the Global Diversity, Equity & Inclusion Benchmarks. We're also about to start an employee systems review looking at hiring policies and practices and the work environment, with a focus on equity. That work will help us develop diversity and inclusion plan alignment with the Public Service Commission's *All Together* action plan and employment equity policies. We aim to have this work completed by the end of the calendar year.

I would like to note that we already have a number of designated positions to help the workplace be more representative of our province's population. We've expanded our Black youth program to the Truro area to create more opportunities for students to come work with us, to promote careers in agriculture and other departments in government.

Another piece of work focuses specifically on accessibility. In February, we started working on an accessibility implementation plan. We aim to remove barriers in our programs, our services, and our workplaces, and line up this work with the Government of Nova Scotia Accessibility Plan. While our focus today is diversity and inclusion in the public service, I want to quickly note that the Department of Agriculture also supports these

priorities in the industry. We have scholarship programs, Summer internships in place, specialized lending programs, and a list of programs for underrepresented populations in the agricultural sector.

[9:15 a.m.]

Our department is proud of its ongoing efforts to advance diversity and inclusion. I look forward to sharing more and answering your questions today.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much, Deputy Minister Robichaud.

Deputy Minister Taweel.

TRACEY TAWHEEL: Thank you for the opportunity to be here this morning. The Auditor General's Report and action plan is an important reminder that each of us has a role to play, as leaders and as individuals, to consider both the common and the unique experiences of the people we serve.

I'm very pleased to have joining me here today Associate Deputy Minister Sandy Graves, and Sonia Murphy, Director of the Inclusion, Diversity and Community Relations division at DCS.

Since June 2020, our department has been focused on advancing work on a comprehensive strategy on anti-Black racism. Additionally, we are currently onboarding a team of centralized hiring specialists who will work within DCS and in partnership with the Public Service Commission to ensure fair and equitable hiring practices that eliminate inherent bias in our process.

We have an active inclusion and diversity committee that is implementing its strategic plan. We have recently changed our hiring practices to ensure that more members of the designated groups, including Black and African Nova Scotians, Indigenous persons, and members of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community, are provided opportunities within the department.

Our strategy includes a focus on personal accountability, restorative approaches, and system accountability. This includes applying an Africentric lens to all of our programs, services, policies, and procedures to identify and address bias and barriers.

We have also established an Africentric Child Welfare Team within Child and Family well-being. This team is a critical and necessary step to ensure that families and children are supported in culturally responsive ways.

Change of this magnitude is not easy and our commitment is long-term. I am grateful to our team and the dedication they have shown to building a province where people can feel safe, respected, and supported.

I'm happy to be here and take your questions.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, deputy minister.

Deputy Minister Thomas.

CANDACE THOMAS: Mr. Chair and committee members, thank you. I appreciate the opportunity as well to be here joining you today with my colleagues from the Public Service Commission, the Department of Agriculture and the Department of Community Services.

Before I begin, I want to acknowledge the province-wide, multigovernmental, jurisdictional, and sectoral response to the wildfires, and your important roles as MLAs, especially in supporting your constituents during this time.

I want to also introduce my Department of Justice colleagues who are in attendance with me today: Bill Trask, Executive Director of Policy and Information Management; Emmanuel Itiveh, Senior Advisor, Equity, Diversity and Inclusion; and Dawn Stegen, Executive Director of the Accessibility Directorate.

Increasing diversity within the Department of Justice in a meaningful way and working to advance equity and inclusion throughout the justice system is a priority for Minister Johns, for me, and for my entire senior executive team. We are striving to ensure that these values permeate throughout the department at every level, leading by example with more than 35 per cent of our senior leadership team representing diverse groups.

Our work is guided by the department's 2019-2023 diversity and inclusion action plan. It contains five focus areas: recruitment, retention, advancement, commitment to a culturally competent and inclusive work environment, and a commitment to deliver culturally responsive programming and services to the populations that we serve.

In 2021, we launched an EDI achievement and efforts tracking tool that allows all divisions to set and track goals, efforts, progress, and achievements related to the action plan. Emmanuel is leading the development of our next four-year equity, diversity, and inclusion action plan. This work is well under way.

In her April update to the 2019 performance audit, the Auditor General identified one Department of Justice recommendation as incomplete - namely the requirement to work with the PSC to develop and implement formal processes to review human resource

practices, to identify and remove barriers to employment, retention, and advancement for members of the designated groups.

The department's equity employment system review has recently begun. We anticipate completing the first review by the end of the calendar year. I am confident the findings of the review will reflect the significant work the Department of Justice is doing to identify and remove barriers to employment, as well as improve and advance retention for members of the designated groups described by the Public Service Commission.

THE CHAIR: I would like to say thank you to all of the supporting team members who are here with us today and advise that if any questions are directed toward the team members who are seated in the back rows, to please come up to the microphone that is open on my right to answer the questions.

At this point we'll open the floor for questioning. This committee works in a 20-minute breakdown. Each caucus gets 20 minutes. We begin with the Liberal caucus at 9:21 a.m. MLA Maguire.

HON. BRENDAN MAGUIRE: The Office of Equity and Anti-Racism Initiatives was something that was put up by the previous government. It actually received not just provincial but national recognition for the work it was doing. One of the first things this government did when it got into power was dismantle that department.

The importance of that department to oversee and implement equity and inclusion throughout all the departments was extremely important. We know what happens when departments self-regulate. We get into situations like we've seen in the past. I'm going to tell you something from personal experience.

When I was younger, I was a foster child. This does not reflect on the Department of Community Services now, Ms. Taweel - but when I was young, I was a foster child. Back then there were a lot of different group homes. As Ms. Taweel would know, and some would know, once you hit a certain age, it's very hard to be placed with a family. Nobody wants a kid who's already set in his ways. Everybody wants the young, cute, cuddly, you know.

I remember my social worker at the time, who has long since retired, said to me - I was acting up particularly badly at one foster home. A good friend of mine, Fabian, who just happened to be a foster child also, was sent to the Nova Scotia Home for Colored Children. At the time, my social worker had a sit-down meeting with me and said, "You need to get your blank together or we're going to put you in the Home for Colored Children. Do you know what they do to children there?"

That's what happens when people self-regulate. That's what happens when departments self-regulate. They're told that they have to implement these things, they have

to be just, they have to be inclusive, and they have to protect people. What ends up happening is, instead of protecting the people who the departments are made to protect, a lot of times they protect internally. I was floored, and I say this knowing that I'm a white man, so life's been pretty darn easy for the most part for me, compared to a lot of other people, but I was stunned when this was one of the first things the government did.

This was progress. We know that there was no consultation on this, that it just happened. I want to know what the reasoning behind dismantling that department was and going back to a history of trusting departments to self-regulate. We know that the justice system, when it comes to Indigenous, when it comes to African Nova Scotians and people of different cultures, we know the history of the justice system. We know that there are more African Nova Scotians per capita in the justice system than out in the general public. We know that now that this is under the Department of Justice, it causes issues.

A good friend of mine, Kirk Johnson. I've known Kirk my whole life. If you had to ask Kirk to go to the Department of Justice to deal with the issues that he had to deal with, or ask if he trusts the Department of Justice, I can guarantee what his answer is. I don't understand why this department was dismantled, and on top of it, put in a department that - no offense to you, Deputy Minister - historically, a lot of the populations in this province do not trust. I know part of the answer is going to be, "Well, we need to build trust, we need to build this," but we've had generations to do this. The reason for a stand-alone department was to say that this was free of the Department of Justice. It was free of the Department of Community Services. It was free of the Department of Health and Wellness.

What was the reasoning behind doing this? What was the reason behind putting it in a department that African Nova Scotians and the Indigenous community historically do not trust?

THE CHAIR: Deputy Minister Taweel.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: No, it's not Community Services, obviously. It's the Department of Justice.

THE CHAIR: Deputy Minister Thomas.

CANDACE THOMAS: The first thing I will say is that the Office of Equity and Anti-Racism Initiatives has not been dismantled. It is now under the Department of Justice, but it is fully under the Department of Justice with its full mandate that it was set up with. Very proudly, we can say that there is a great degree of alignment with the mandate and the work of the Department of Justice and the Office of Equity and Anti-Racism Initiatives.

We are continuing that work. I should have noted at the outset that I am also the deputy minister, obviously, of the Office of Equity and Anti-Racism Initiatives. It has only

been since May 23rd that this change has occurred, so we will all have to get accustomed to that. But the Office of Equity and Anti-Racism Initiatives, the legislation that the all-party committee worked on, and the strategy that has to be implemented this year under that legislation are all moving forward. All that great work is happening. All the people, the team who were part of that work, are still there. They're simply now working in concert with Justice, and I think it might give them, actually, a higher profile to be attached to a department that already does work across and throughout government, and whose mandate does touch upon a lot of the work that has to happen within our society to keep us safe as we are all working towards a more just society.

I hope that answers the question.

[9:30 a.m.]

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: What was the need to take that, dismantle it as a stand-alone department, and put it in the Department of Justice? Whether it's true or not, the perception could be that there's influence from a department that, historically, a lot of people don't have faith in.

You are the Deputy Minister of Justice. You're also the Deputy Minister of Equity and Anti-Racism Initiatives. I just want to know what the thought pattern was. This department only existed for a quick moment of time, and then the government came in and said, "You know what? This is not working on its own, and now we need to put it into a department where there have been issues."

What transpired there to make this happen?

CANDACE THOMAS: Thank you for the question. However, it would be more appropriate to ask that question of government. As deputy minister, I would not have been party to the rationale and the reasoning for making the organizational change in a government department.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: As deputy minister, who first approached you about this merger? Somebody must have approached you and said, "You know what? This is happening." Someone within government. So who first approached you as deputy minister and said, "You are now the deputy minister of both and we're merging"?

CANDACE THOMAS: I would have first been told this by the Secretary to Cabinet, so Deputy Minister - I'm losing my train of thought... (Interruption)

Langley. Deputy Minister Laura Lee Langley.

THE CHAIR: The honourable member for Cole Harbour.

HON. TONY INCE: Welcome, everyone. My first question will go to the commissioner of the Public Service Commission. Could the Public Service Commissioner please comment on whether the PSC was consulted with the decision regarding the Office of Equity and Anti-Racism Initiatives moving to the Department of Justice? If yes, what was your opinion or recommendation in regard to this choice?

THE CHAIR: Ms. Anderson.

ANDREA ANDERSON: No, I was not consulted.

TONY INCE: Can the government please explain - or any members, because you're working for the government now - let me take a breath, because this is a very sensitive issue for me. It's one that many of you I've worked with in the past on. I'm a little moved by the fact that, as my colleague had mentioned, the department had been moved to the Department of Justice. The Office of Equity was created with a lens to look at all departments, to align with all departments.

There was a deputy ministers table that was to help with that. Can anyone, Deputy Minister Thomas, Commissioner, tell me whether or not that table still exists and again, was the community consulted?

THE CHAIR: Deputy Minister Thomas.

CANDACE THOMAS: The best that I can answer is that, as far as the community being consulted, I don't think it would be the norm to consult with community on organizational governmental changes, so I suspect not, but again, a question for clarity and confirmation should be put to government for that. The alignment of deputies - all deputies are constantly working together. We work together on a regular basis. All of our work crosscuts each other's departments. There are no silos in the work that's being done in government. Those days are long gone. I can say that we work across government very closely.

It's wonderful that I get to sit here this morning with three of my colleagues. I can say that as required, yes, all of the departments - we call ourselves social departments - that have direct impacts with African Nova Scotian, Indigenous, and other communities, we do come together to have conversations around the work and the mandates that impact those communities.

TONY INCE: As was mentioned earlier, the justice system and the Department of Justice both have racism ingrained within the institution and the structures. I know everyone is working very hard and diligently on trying to correct that and lessen the influence of that. However, the office, even when it was created, did extensive consultations and research with all communities that are affected by diversity and inclusion.

Again, not even whether they were consulted on whether it should be changed - there should have been some communication, involvement with community. This is something that is integral to our community and the Indigenous community, LGBTQIA+, all of those communities, and not to - you've already answered that.

Let me ask: What is happening now in terms of consultations and working with those communities?

THE CHAIR: MLA Ince? To Deputy Thomas?

TONY INCE: Deputy Minister Thomas, Ms. Anderson, Deputy Minister Taweel, anyone.

THE CHAIR: We'll start with Deputy Minister Thomas.

CANDACE THOMAS: Engagement with communities is also ongoing. It should be seamless and will be seamless with community, that there has been any structural organizational change with the Office of Equity and Anti-Racism. The work of the office continues. Right now, we have been in community, engaging with respect to the strategy, and we are also engaging across government for input on what that strategy under the Dismantling Racism and Hate Act will look like.

I would suggest that we do it. Government, Department of Justice, all departments are engaging on all of the key priority areas that we're all working on, and we make sure that we are in community on a regular basis and helping to build the trust as well amongst community. I agree with you: Systemic racism, anti-Black racism, anti-Indigenous racism, homophobia, all of those things are real in all of our structures in society. We're all working diligently and with every effort and together to help dismantle all of those problems that we do have in society.

THE CHAIR: Would you prefer answers from other witnesses, MLA Ince?

HON. TONY INCE: Yes.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Anderson.

ANDREA ANDERSON: In response to your question and follow-up with Deputy Minister Thomas, the Public Service Commission does work in tandem with the Office of Equity and Anti-Racism. We meet monthly with that office, and they took part in the consultations for the employment equity policy. We do work together on a regular basis. We have members of our equity team at the Public Service Commission that meet - a committee that gets together and consults on projects and initiatives at the Public Service Commission. There is a connection across government on this work from the Office of Equity and Anti-Racism that does continue.

THE CHAIR: I believe Deputy Minister Robichaud would like to respond as well, and Deputy Minister Taweel.

Deputy Minister Robichaud.

LORETTA ROBICHAUD: Your question really touched on the elements of community outreach. I'd like to speak to that for a moment, and just emphasize this is a collaboration that's taking place across government with regard to this very important agenda item.

In collaboration with African Nova Scotian Affairs, L'nu Affairs, the Office of Equity and Anti-Racism, the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, the African Canadian Services Branch, the Mi'kmaw Services Branch, and the Student Services Branch, we have engaged in diversity initiatives and funding, both federally and provincially, in collaboration to advance this agenda item in a significant way. We also reached out to Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada's Indigenous Science Liaison Officer and the FPT Indigenous agricultural working group, and we are continuing to pursue and advance the agenda items on this subject in terms of community outreach and partnership.

It demonstrates all of those departments are at the table, both provincially and federally. I also wanted to speak to the opportunity that was presented at the recent ministers conference, where we had an organized panel for discussion on perspectives equity-deserving communities. It was highly engaged and participated in with some very positive outcomes in terms of movement forward.

In terms of partnership demonstration on outreach, I also wanted to mention the collaborative effort between African Nova Scotian Affairs, the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, and our Crown corporation Perennia, where we jointly supported and developed an application to the Legacy Academy and Heritage Canada for an investment of half a million dollars in funding to develop agriculture and food-focused after-school programming for African Nova Scotian junior high school students. This program has been stood up and it is under way, and I think it speaks to the relationship across all the departments in helping to address the issues and open up the barriers that currently exist.

We are also very pleased to indicate that we developed a Bridge Into Agriculture. It is in its second year. This was a horticulture training program, for African Nova Scotian adults, in partnership with African Nova Scotian Affairs, Dalhousie Agriculture Campus Extended Learning, and the Nova Scotia Federation of Agriculture. They have had their first class of graduates - 17 - and they are into their second class now, again demonstrating that collaboration across government.

THE CHAIR: I believe the member would prefer to move on to another question. The honourable member for Cole Harbour.

TONY INCE: I have heard from community on numerous occasions about large staffing turnovers in several of the offices. My question will be to the Deputy Minister of Justice. I've heard that there were a lot of staffing turnovers in your department as well with regard to those in the last two years from our community. Is that correct? If it is, can you explain why?

THE CHAIR: Deputy Minister Thomas.

CANDACE THOMAS: I'm not familiar with that. It has not been brought to my attention that there is any particular amount of turnover in staff of African Nova Scotians. Is that what you're speaking of?

TONY INCE: Yes.

CANDACE THOMAS: I'm not aware of that.

TONY INCE: I just returned from a week in New York at the United Nations for the International Decade for People of African Descent. We had a great number of contingents from social society - civil society - and people right across Canada of African descent. I was there, and I thank the government for covering that cost.

However, there was no one from the government there. So when you speak about doing all these things . . .

THE CHAIR: Order, please. The time for this round of Liberal questioning has elapsed. Please stop the timer. Make it go away. Thank you.

We will turn to the NDP caucus and begin with MLA Coombes.

KENDRA COOMBES: Sure. I think my colleague had a question, so if the deputy minister wants to take a minute to answer it, that would be great.

THE CHAIR: Deputy Minister Thomas. MLA Coombes.

KENDRA COOMBES: I think it was regarding government's show at the UN and participation for DPAD.

THE CHAIR: The Deputy Minister of Justice.

CANDACE THOMAS: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I can only speak for the Department of Justice, of course, but we did not receive an invitation to attend. I would have loved to have participated in that, had I the opportunity.

KENDRA COOMBES: I want to continue on this topic. The office's community network, according to the legislation, has to be created by July 31st. That was a deadline that was set in the legislation. Has it been created, or will it be created by July 31st?

CANDACE THOMAS: That work is on track. I fully expect that there will be an announcement for that committee prior to the deadline of July 31st.

[9:45 a.m.]

KENDRA COOMBES: The Dismantling Racism and Hate Act strategy implementation, from my memory of the budget, was not provided any money. My question is: How is government expected to implement this strategy without any money allocated?

CANDACE THOMAS: The strategy is in development at this time. To the extent that there will be budget requirements in the strategy, it would be presented to government at that time, either through the Treasury and Policy Board process or at the time of budget, the next time that the budget is developed.

That's the best I can do. Thank you.

KENDRA COOMBES: What's the timeline for its development and its finality, and when we will get to see it?

CANDACE THOMAS: The strategy date timeline within the legislation is July 31st.

KENDRA COOMBES: My colleagues were talking about the fact that the office was a stand-alone department and has now been absorbed into the Department of Justice. Does its budget remain the same as it did when it was stand-alone?

CANDACE THOMAS: The budget remains the same, with the exception that the Land Titles Initiative work that was under the Office of Equity and Anti-Racism Initiatives is now back at home with ANSA - African Nova Scotian Affairs. That is something that government heard very loudly, and community wanted - that the LTI initiative should stay with or return to ANSA. So that part of the budget has also been transferred to ANSA.

KENDRA COOMBES: Turning to the Public Service Commission, the Auditor General found that this department has failed to implement Recommendation 1.3 - "to implement a process to identify, collect, and analyze data needed to assess diversity and inclusion programs and initiatives." However, the department's most recent response did not include any target dates or actions, and seemed to suggest that the department believes this recommendation was being met. Can you help clarify this?

THE CHAIR: Ms. Anderson.

ANDREA ANDERSON: Previously, the Public Service Commission did not collect consistent, robust data to measure the effectiveness of our diversity and inclusion strategies, and we did not monitor the progress. We primarily relied upon the How's Work Going? survey and the information we got from that. We are focused on that area now. We now have the ability to collect additional data through tools that will monitor, support, and advance equity, diversity, inclusion, and accessibility programs and services.

I'm excited to share with you today some of those tools. The first one is the Global Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Benchmarks tool. This is a globally affirmed and accepted framework to measure progress on EDI work. Currently, 20 departments have participated in this assessment.

THE CHAIR: Apologies, Ms. Anderson. The member would like to ask a different question, I believe. MLA Coombes.

KENDRA COOMBES: We only have 20 minutes to ask these questions, so I'm going to ask a few, and maybe that answer will come through in the questions I'm going to ask next. How are the current practices meeting or not meeting the recommendations and the plans to meet this goal?

ANDREA ANDERSON: I apologize. It's my first time being here, so I get excited to respond - probably like most people, I'm a little bit nervous.

In response to that question, we do have tools that we have in place that are in the process. Some of them are already in place. I won't go into detail about the Global Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Benchmarks, but also this June - actually during Public Service Week - we will launch an additional tool called Self-Identification Tool, which speaks to creating a culture of belonging. The theme and the marketing of that is: See Yourself, Be Yourself. These are some of the things that we are doing in response to that recommendation from the Office of the Auditor General.

KENDRA COOMBES: Sometimes when you give a little bit too much detail, that stuff gets lost. It helps to just break it down a little bit. Since the audit, the department has released the 2022 employee engagement survey results. How has this data been assessed, and what work is under way to improve upon areas of concern?

ANDREA ANDERSON: With regard to the How's Work Going? survey, it is complete. We've received all the results and so we have shared all the results of that with departments. I don't know how much you want to hear from the results of that. If you would permit me to flip to it just a little bit, I can perhaps share a little bit with you if you like, to see specifically what you might be speaking to or looking for.

I would say with regard to the How's Work Going? survey, we've had a little decline in the number of individuals who have participated in that, I will say, but only 1 per cent. Some of the positives of the How's Work Going? survey are that 3,556 jobs were offered. We were excited about that. Of those jobs offered, I'm pleased to say that 1,150 were individuals who represented equity. That was a good-news story for us.

Also for the How's Work Going? survey, 61 per cent of the employees indicated they are engaged - 60 per cent is a success for us - so 61 per cent were engaged. It's also interesting, if you look at the dynamics, we can also get a sense of who our demographics are. I can share with you very quickly the demographics: 6 per cent represent Indigenous, 12 per cent represent racialized persons, 8 per cent persons who are Black, 18 per cent persons with a disability, 5 per cent newcomers, 13 per cent born outside of Canada, 10 per cent identified as 2SLGBTQ+ community.

We've seen that the individuals who normally in the past may not be so apt to participate in the How's Work Going? survey are now participating. That speaks volumes to us as a Public Service Commission - to say that the culture is shifting, and that people feel they have a voice and want to be able to respond to the questions that are asked. I'm happy to share that with you. Do you have further questions for me?

KENDRA COOMBES: First, I would love for you to table that with the committee. I think it's a great thing to have on record. The department's response to Recommendation 1.4 seems only to relate to the hiring process. How are employment equity respectful workplace policies supporting existing employees, and how is this being evaluated?

ANDREA ANDERSON: The Respectful Workplace Program is, of course, very important for us at the Public Service Commission. We want all employees to be able to come to the workplace and feel like they are respected and that they can be themselves - and we are endeavouring to foster that type of environment. I do have with me today Executive Director Sarah Bradfield, who has oversight for the Respectful Workplace Policy. If the Chair will permit, I would like to pass that to Executive Director Sarah Bradfield.

THE CHAIR: Welcome, Ms. Bradfield.

SARAH BRADFIELD: Specifically, my part is the Respectful Workplace Policy and consistent application across departments. I would say that we've been doing that in the daily work of many partners across the PSC and how we engage with departments. But ultimately, it is departments that are responsible for setting the culture that is the foundation of the policy.

We provide them with many tools and resources, with consistent advice and support, which includes coaching, mediation, facilitated conversations. Unfortunately, it's a little bit difficult to track and report on in terms of reporting to the Auditor General, so I

would say that our dedicated, excellent staff have done a great job of ensuring the Respectful Workplace Policy is understood and that it's applied.

We have work to do in terms of understanding what the Auditor General needs to be assured that we are in fact evaluating that consistent application. We've recently had some dialogue . . . (Interruption)

THE CHAIR: MLA Coombes, eight minutes, 16 seconds.

KENDRA COOMBES: Yes, I know. That's why I'm cutting people off. I'm just going to skip over to the Department of Community Services now, because time is moving on. The Minister of Community Services recently indicated that the issue of food at the DoubleTree Hotel would be solved in the coming weeks. I'm just wondering: Can the minister provide an update?

THE CHAIR: Deputy Minister Taweel.

TRACEY TAWHEEL: Yes, I'm happy to provide an update to that question. We are working with the service providers who are operating that facility, now called The Bridge. I'm happy to say there is food on-site, and we're working to secure a longer-term solution. There's an interim solution in place, and we're working on a longer-term solution that will involve local producers and businesses in the area.

KENDRA COOMBES: Can the minister provide an update and timeline on the Child and Youth Commission very briefly, please?

TRACEY TAWHEEL: As the member would be aware, we released a What We Heard report with regard to the consultations that were conducted on the Child and Youth Commission. When we spoke with some particular populations, particular community groups - that they wanted to have a deeper conversation. Those conversations will be occurring in the weeks and months ahead. Once we have concluded that level of consultation, we will then be in a position to bring forward recommendations with regard to the Child and Youth Commission.

KENDRA COOMBES: Lisa Lachance, please.

THE CHAIR: MLA Lachance.

LISA LACHANCE: I'm going to quickly give some background that will inform my questioning. When we moved back from Ottawa to Nova Scotia in 2008, I started working at the Public Service Commission and then moved on to the Department of Finance and Treasury Board. At that time, I was really involved also in founding the queer employees network. I was the founding co-Chair. I worked with the Public Service Commission to establish that. We did a lot of work around training, so as co-Chairs we

regularly appeared at the deputies' table. Obviously, it was a different group of deputies at the time, but we did serve SOGI 101 sessions at the deputies' table.

We had managers in place who were responsible for looking at issues pertaining to both 2SLGBTQIA+ employees - so there was a manager position at the PSC - and there was a manager position at DHW and CCH. We've also had a training course. We've had a training course since 2013 called SOGI 101.

One of the things that I think I get concerned about when thinking about these issues coming back, to be blunt, is that I feel like there's been a backsliding. I don't think there's any manager position.

Correct me if I'm wrong. These are my questions for you. Do you have someone in your department who is responsible for looking at policy issues regarding 2SLGBTQIA+ communities and people? The course on sexual orientation and gender identity and expression, I'm curious: Has there not been a course for awhile? What happened to the course that was developed, and honestly would stand well 10 years later? What happened to it?

THE CHAIR: Ms. Anderson.

ANDREA ANDERSON: I am pleased to say that at the Public Service Commission, we don't have a manager position - we have a team now in our People and Culture Division. In our team, we do have a member of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community who does provide that lens to all the work that we do at the Public Service Commission.

I recognize that one voice does not represent the whole community - particularly myself. I know that as a member of the equity community I can't speak for the whole community, but it certainly does provide an opportunity to have that lens. We do have a member on our team.

Regarding the training for sexual orientation, that training is still ongoing. As a matter of fact, I'm happy to announce that, so we can allow others to participate more broadly, it will be an online module. Folks will be able to acquire that training and do it at their own pace. Some folks might like to go on and do it a couple times. They'll be able to do just that.

The other thing that we are also doing is we are updating our guidelines for transgender and gender-variant employees. That is also in the process of taking place. The work is still ongoing. It is still important to the Public Service Commission.

We are also in the final stages - we have a draft of our pronoun guidelines. Some of the tools and things that are in those guidelines we'll be able to share with the other

government departments, which will also be instrumental in creating an environment that is inclusive for all people.

LISA LACHANCE: Do any of the other deputies want to speak to positions in their department that focus specifically on 2SLGBTQIA+ issues?

THE CHAIR: Deputy Minister Taweel.

TRACEY TAWHEEL: We don't have a designated position, but we do have an inclusion, diversity, and community relations team. Part of their area of focus is looking at and identifying issues in support of the community. It is an area of focus.

[10:00 a.m.]

THE CHAIR: Deputy Minister Thomas.

CANDACE THOMAS: The same applies with the Department of Justice. Obviously, we have the Office of Equity and Anti-Racism, and the strategy, as you're probably aware, will have a definition for 2SLGBTQIA+, as far as that strategy, which will apply across government and with all government-sector bodies.

THE CHAIR: Deputy Minister Robichaud.

LORETTA ROBICHAUD: We don't have a designated position specifically for 2SLGBTQIA+. I did want to comment that there is a commitment by Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada and the provinces and territories, of which we are signatory to the multi-lateral agreement, to participate in programming under the recently signed agreement and considerations for unique and diverse needs of Indigenous peoples and underrepresented and marginalized groups. This would include youth, women, visible minorities, the 2SLGBTQIA+ group, plus people and persons with disabilities. We are actively engaged in programming specifically for those underrepresented groups, and our target, through our minister, is that we will have contributions of 2 to 3 per cent of our programming, and recipients receiving that programming designated.

LISA LACHANCE: I'm wondering if Commissioner Anderson could speak to the revision of the Employment Equity Policy and whether sexual orientation, gender identity and expression will be included?

ANDREA ANDERSON: Yes. The policy is under review right now. We have been in consultation with our interjurisdictional partners, provincially and territorially. A significant number of them are leaning to legislation once the - I know that the review is under review right now. We do a lot of work with our departments. We like to align with them because we do work with them. However, we will be presenting options and recommendations to government.

THE CHAIR: Order. The time for the NDP caucus has expired. We will turn to the PC caucus. MLA White.

JOHN WHITE: Ms. Anderson, the Public Service Commission noted that to respond to COVID-19 lockdowns, the training sessions were moved online, understanding that this would make training more accessible to employees. Did it result in higher enrolment numbers?

THE CHAIR: The member for Glace Bay-Dominion, to repeat the question briefly.

JOHN WHITE: I'm trying to look at you while I'm speaking. Sorry for that. I have a tendency to look you in the eye when I'm speaking. I'm asking about the COVID-19 training. As a result of COVID-19, training sessions were moved online. Understanding that online training makes it more accessible, I'm just wondering: Did it actually result in higher numbers of response?

ANDREA ANDERSON: Higher numbers response to the actual training after it went online? Yes. I don't have the numbers with me today, but I can assure you that the numbers of employees who are able to access the training did increase. Of course, with COVID-19, we also had the flexibility of flexible work arrangements. That was also an opportunity for us to continue to provide the necessary training that we want to provide to staff while they were not able to be in the workplace because of COVID-19 - some of them, but there were others, of course, operationally in aligned departments that had to be in the place of work. But those who were doing flexible work arrangements, we were able to provide training on a continuous basis. Of course, COVID-19 forced us into that, but it had its good and it had its bad, we'll say.

JOHN WHITE: It is one of the good things that came out of COVID-19, for sure. I'm wondering if the higher numbers continued in subsequent years because after lockdowns, we also were able to go back out and do things as well. Did people continue to train online? Are those numbers still up there?

ANDREA ANDERSON: I so apologize - oh my goodness. You can imagine how my husband feels. But, yes. I will say this in response to your question, thank you for that. All of our training currently, we are trying to advance it online so that we are able to provide that training to employees across the province. In the past, what has happened is folk had to travel into town to take the in-person classes. Now with online training, there's an increase because we are providing more of it, and we've converted a lot of our in-classroom training over to online training, so it will continue to increase because of that.

JOHN WHITE: Moving on to the equity service report, how important are ESRs in addressing matters of diversity and inclusion?

ANDREA ANDERSON: I think it's very important. Employment system reviews are very important to understand what the barriers are. As you will recall, one of the pillars - four pillars - in our All Together action plan is identifying barriers and solutions. Through the employment systems review, we were able to do that, and the participation in the employment systems review, some of those focus groups were from unique groups that needed to have a voice in that, which is our 2SLGBTQ+ community network were involved, African Nova Scotian Affairs and Status of Women were involved. All the equity groups were involved in this, so we were able to really get a sense of what the barriers were and then look at the possible solutions.

There were several recommendations from that report, and we are still working through those to theme those to determine what our next strategies should be.

JOHN WHITE: I was going to ask you - I think you already answered it, to be honest with you. I was going to ask you if there are any key takeaways from the pilot period and if there are any findings that you'd like to share here about the process. I think you probably did that, so I'll move my question over to MLA Palmer.

THE CHAIR: MLA Palmer.

CHRIS PALMER: It's been a wonderful discussion so far. I appreciate all of you being here. I'm going to go back to Ms. Anderson. You're on a roll, so I want to come back to you. I love your zeal, it's wonderful.

Just in reference to Recommendation 1.3 that recommended the Public Service Commission implement a process of data collection and analysis to address diversity and inclusion programs, you've already talked a little bit about the All Together diversity and inclusion strategy. In some of the research that I was doing ahead of time, I was very interested in that particular topic. You had also mentioned other programs coming up like self-identification programs - See Yourself, Be Yourself, I think was one you talked about? (Interruption) Yes, thank you. I was wondering if you could just expand on that a little bit more for me. Just talk about that a little bit more, and what's next? Is there anything else coming up on the horizon? But talk about that All Together strategy a bit more for us, please.

ANDREA ANDERSON: Our All Together strategy has four pillars, and of that strategy, one of them is leadership accountability, leadership development, and identifying barriers and solutions, and then the last one is progress reporting. For leadership accountability, I would say that we've been - the EDIB benchmarks have been very instrumental in that. This is an opportunity where aligned departments respond to questions, and we have taken those and are moving toward equity. Also, we have aligned those questions with the four pillars in our action plan.

Then, with the GDIB assessment, departments are able to report on that, which has been completed. Now they have a benchmark so that on a go-forward, that benchmark is set. They'll be able to measure their progress on a go-forward. Our hope is to do that biannually, so we will be able to measure the success on the things that they are doing in the aligned departments as it pertains to representation and leadership roles, also in leadership development. So, you'll see we'll be able to track that and be able to provide information and feedback on that on a go-forward.

CHRIS PALMER: My next question is for Deputy Minister Robichaud. Agriculture is big in my part of the province - obviously, in Kings County - and like you mentioned in your opening comments, we need to see ourselves - the province needs to see ourselves in all these departments. You mentioned about a position, the director of engagement, equity and belonging. Wondering if you could expand on that, tell us a bit more of that? That position's been filled, you said, back in September, I think you mentioned? What the role for that individual is going to be in implementing the strategy for diversity and inclusion going forward, and what their roles and responsibilities might be?

LORETTA ROBICHAUD: We're very pleased that in August of last year, we were in a position where we could hire our director of engagement, equity, and belonging, and her name is Natasha Gray. She started with the department - she hit the ground running. She has a lot of experience in this area, and she was hired directly into the policy branch of the department because we recognized very early on that to be impactful in areas of diversity, you need to have an individual who impacts policy in programs within the department and not a designated position merely to have a designated position. Natasha comes well equipped, sits at the executive table on a frequent basis to update us on initiatives that she has under way, of which there are many.

I could go through a shopping list of that, but I think the important thing is that she's very influential in bringing forward to senior leadership items that we need to pay particular attention to. She has inroads in the community, which I think was a big learning for us, in that community-driven initiatives will be impactful initiatives - they need not necessarily be initiatives that are born within the walls of government, and then try to be implemented into community, where we have reached out into community through our director and are getting guidance in that way.

In fact, we've hired a mentor in the community who works with our director. They do things in tandem in the community to see real impact and change in this very important area. I also want to say that in addition to Natasha and her team - because she's building it up - she has hired an engagement manager as well who works with her very closely.

On the outreach side of the department in industry development, we also have a team there who is made up of a regional manager and two extension staff - one who works directly with African Nova Scotians, and the other who works directly with the Mi'kmaw

community. This is on specific programming in the community. We've seen incredible success in that regard.

Again, if there's an interest, I'd be happy to share all of the programs that they've stood up.

CHRIS PALMER: I know I represent the Annapolis Valley First Nations and large agricultural producers there. They have a big interest in that. We may be in contact about some of those resources at some point, for sure.

I'm going to pass it over to my colleague, MLA Sheehy-Richard, but I would just like to say thank you again to all of you for being here. We're having a very important discussion this morning, and it's good to see progress is being made. There's still work to do, but thank you for highlighting these things this morning.

THE CHAIR: The honourable member for Hants West.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: I just want to continue on this conversation, because I know that position is new, but I wondered: Are there any more additional positions that were created also to address matters of diversity and inclusion? If so, are there any specific details that you can provide on what their responsibilities will be and how they'll work together, possibly with Ms. Gray or with the department as a whole?

THE CHAIR: Deputy Minister Robichaud.

LORETTA ROBICHAUD: In addition to the newly hired director, the newly hired engagement coordinator, the new manager, and the two extension outreach individuals, we have also designated positions within the department to advance on this very important subject. I want to share with you just a few statistics of what we've done in the department in this regard.

For example, we're roughly a department of 200 individuals. We posted 55 competitions last year. We had over 1,500 applications to those positions, but we actively requested some of those be designated positions. We were very fortunate to have Indigenous, African Nova Scotian, persons with disabilities, and racially visible persons self-identify for those positions. I'm happy to say that after the competitions, of which we had 44 new job offers within the Department of Agriculture, that we were very successful and very pleased to bring a renewed skill set from these self-identified groups and hired nine additional candidates into the department.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: Can you go into some detail of what their focus will be in particular, if you have any more of that information?

LORETTA ROBICHAUD: I would be very happy to share some of that information. Of course, they're all in different positions, but I want to focus on some of the work that's taking place that I think is very relevant, because it's impactful in a generational way, which is our Agriculture in the Classroom initiative and the great work that these individuals will do to support that. Grow Where You're Planted is an event that we host with Dalhousie University for African Nova Scotian students. What I'm going to speak to next is all of the different work that they're doing with organizations to help in community around the advancement these deserving groups.

Overnight, they spent 24 hours at Dalhousie University. This is a full immersion into the post-secondary environment, which is hugely beneficial for high school students who customarily don't have that opportunity. We partnered with African Canadian Services Branch, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, and Dalhousie University. This is about advancing careers. We really want to see not only the opportunity for the designated people who are working within the department in a meaningful way, but we also want to see the impact down in community, that individuals are also recognizing there are wonderful careers for them not only in the Department of Agriculture but across many departments.

[10:15 a.m.]

In that regard, we also partnered with Hope Blooms. Many of you would know Hope Blooms. We provide them, through these individuals whom we hired, with kits so that they can actually learn how to grow and how to produce. They're a very successful company, as you know, through manufacturing and garden kits with Hope Blooms.

We also championed development of the equity, diversion, inclusion, and accessibility strategy with Agriculture in the Classroom Canada. I'm pleased to say we co-chair that national committee now and bring this heightened awareness of diversity to that table. We're very fortunate as well to have one of our staff members partner on the Immigrant Services Association of Nova Scotia to promote foods for different cultures in classrooms. We have a lot of wonderful new immigrants arriving in the province, and we have our dedicated diversity staff who work with them very closely through the Immigrant Services Association around integration of those foods into the school system.

Just to segue, we had the transfer of the meat inspectors that came over to the Department of Agriculture in January. Many of those are immigrant women who also bring a cultural lens to the requirements for slaughter in abattoirs for meat inspection, which again our staff are developing policies and plans around that. It's a whole different way and it's a whole different menu for a whole different group of individuals who have joined us in the province.

We also did a series of social media videos for ages 14 to 18 to promote modern views of agriculture and agriculture careers specifically focused on diversity. Those are

wonderful videos that I welcome everyone to go online and have a look at. Then we helped build business profiles with our Mi'kmaw diversity employee for both Mi'kmaw and African Nova Scotian entrepreneurs that were inclusive for a resource for the class Entrepreneurship 12, so they are actually using that right now, and it's a wonderful program that they have in schools.

We also created supports for intellectually disabled adults, and that work is currently under way. Those are just the Agriculture in the Classroom initiatives. We have many more initiatives, as I alluded to, under our new policy framework, which our minister negotiated for a 25 per cent increase; 2 to 3 per cent of that additional \$9.25 million per year will go specifically to diversity initiatives, and we're very excited about that.

I could certainly go on, but there are some very good examples. I have to say, I do want to end with one more example, which is the Black youth initiative, that takes opportunities for Black youth outside of the HRM core, which is traditionally where the programming has taken place. The Department of Agriculture was successful in partnering with six other government departments to do a rural Black youth initiative in Truro and Bible Hill. We started last year. We had four candidates and two departments. This Summer we have 15 candidates working across those six departments, and it's absolutely wonderful, the outcome that's going to come from that and their exposure to potential careers.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: That's great. That was a lot of detail. Agriculture in the Classroom - my son is in that class right now, actually. I just want to shift gears a little bit so I can get this question in. We've talked a lot about the Department of Justice and the importance of diversity and inclusion within there and moving forward and building the trust. Can you talk a little bit about why that is so important?

THE CHAIR: Deputy Minister Thomas.

CANDACE THOMAS: Building trust in community, is that the question?

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: How it relates to the fact, and the importance of diversity and inclusion within the Department of Justice and how that maybe can tie into building the trust.

CANDACE THOMAS: Thank you for clarifying. Certainly, it is essential to the work of the Department of Justice that we reflect the communities that we serve - especially if one looks at the overrepresentation of Indigenous and Black populations within the criminal justice system, also within our correctional facilities. It is important that we have that cultural competency and the diversity reflected inside the department, as well, so we understand the communities that we're serving.

Training on diversity and inclusion, cultural competency in our staffing, and then how we actually interact with communities and populations is critically important. That

does then result in trust being built with society in government and in the Department of Justice, in particular. We know that it's very far-reaching - the justice system. It's not just correctional facilities. It's also our courts, it's our legal aid, it's Crown prosecutors. So the justice community is broad, and we work with all of our partners to ensure that equity, diversity, and inclusion element is working throughout, and being enhanced throughout.

THE CHAIR: MLA Sheehy-Richard with 45 seconds.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: I don't really have time for a question, so if you want to move on to the second round, that would be great.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much. We will move on to the second round, and we base the second round length of time on how much work we have to do at the end of the meeting after we thank you for being here. I'm looking at the time. I'd say five minutes per caucus is probably suitable for the amount of work that we have to do at the conclusion of the official meeting. So the Liberals will have five minutes, and we'll start with MLA Ince.

TONY INCE: First of all, I want to state thank you to all of you because a lot of this work had started before me, but also, a large part of it started when I was minister. So I thank you because I've also been in Opposition - a little out of touch - so I wasn't aware of all the things that are going on. Really, I'd like to thank you.

Secondly, Deputy Minister Thomas, I will inform all of you that I wasn't invited to the forum either. I took the initiative and inserted myself. That being said, I will share with you all that the Premier knew because I had a conversation with him about it. I said he should send somebody. I had the conversation with the minister of ANSA and the associate deputy minister. So the government side knew. My questions are primarily focused on the moves of taking equity, putting it under the Department of Justice - and maybe you can speak to this, or commissioner, or someone - and then to have a complicated issue like land titles, which is primarily the Department of Justice to be put into ANSA. To me, it doesn't make sense when ANSA at the time - I don't know about now - didn't have the employees that really had the ability to deal with such a complicated issue.

What is going on now to ensure that land titles - because even under us, there was a lot of complications in that process. Information was being withheld from us in that process. Can anyone explain to me how that happened?

THE CHAIR: Who is that directed to?

TONY INCE: It could be to the deputy minister of Justice.

THE CHAIR: Deputy Minister Thomas.

CANDACE THOMAS: Thank you for that very important question. The Land Titles Initiative is a key priority - continues to be - for this government as well. The responsibilities for the initiative really are spread across two primary departments. Well, now it's one department. The Office of Equity and Anti-Racism, Department of Justice - we're responsible for the legal services part, and now that there are external legal services supporting that work, as well as the commissioner's.

The ANSA side - the work that has been transferred to ANSA, which is where it started - is the actual surveyors, the navigators in community, the manager, director. All of that work and the front-facing work of the Land Titles Initiative is now with ANSA. It is complicated, but it is staffed to deal with those complications. There are three navigators going into community. There are a manager and a director, as I just mentioned. The legal services have been transferred from Nova Scotia Legal Aid out to the private sector with expertise in dealing with real property and land transactions. Again, the surveyor piece which was with the Department of Natural Resources and Renewables is - now there is staff and there is an ongoing contract within ANSA to deal with the land titles specifically so that work does not get overlooked. There are a number of resources that have been attached to that work, probably since the time that you were working on it, MLA Ince.

TONY INCE: Has there been any consideration about the move to take the Office of Equity and Anti-Racism Initiatives and put it under the Department of Justice - because as we know, when moves like that are done, the community sees it as a step backward because of being ill-informed or they don't trust. Can you explain to me what concrete actions are being done to show that you're working on the trust with the community?

CANDACE THOMAS: Ongoing - it hasn't stopped. We are in community. Relationships are very strong with community. The Department of Justice works very closely, for example, with the DPAD - African Nova Scotian Decade for People of African Descent. We have relationships within the Mi'kmaw community, with the disability community. Obviously, the Accessibility Directorate is also housed within DOJ, and there has been no diminishment of work on the accessibility file. That work, I think, will be enhanced and will be assisted with the Office of Equity and Anti-Racism coming over because of the long work that has been happening with the Accessibility Act. It's similar work that's being done with the strategy.

THE CHAIR: Order, please. Apologies, Deputy Minister Thomas. With respect, the five minutes for the Liberal caucus expired. The NDP caucus - MLA Coombes.

KENDRA COOMBES: I think I'm directing this to the PSC. I'm going to give an example. I know within DCS, anti-racism training was taken up by two white men previously. I also know that online modules are being used for training, but there's really no human interaction in those modules. So there have been times when in-person training has been occurring with anti-racism with white individuals doing the training, and modules that have no human interaction. I'm just wondering: How are we actually evaluating that

kind of training that needs to take place when we have white people - white men - and computers doing that training which is very concerning on both ends?

THE CHAIR: To Ms. Anderson or Deputy Minister Taweel?

KENDRA COOMBES: This is to the PSC.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Anderson.

ANDREA ANDERSON: We do have staff within the PSC in our learning and development centre that represent equity now. In addition to that, the PSC provides equity training to anybody who wants to be a consultant and to provide that training through our Leadership Development Program. They have to undergo training with us first before we approve them to actually facilitate in our Leadership Development Program, so it is encompassed in our Leadership Development Program.

The facilitators - if you would like more detail about that, I would have to pass that to my director who's in the room today to give you detail. I can tell you that it is still in the classroom, it is still at the forefront, and that we are even taking it one step further by ensuring that those that we bring into the classroom are culturally competent and able to speak to it on a go-forward.

[10:30 a.m.]

KENDRA COOMBES: To my colleague, I just want to make a comment that maybe you can take back because I know the PSC really does care about this. That is: Those who did that training with the white individual felt inadequate training was done. Just to bring that back as a look-see, and I'm going to pass it off to my colleague.

THE CHAIR: MLA Lachance.

LISA LACHANCE: I want to take the chance to ask Deputy Minister Thomas about the implementation of the Accessibility Act. In the most recent review, there was some delay indicated. When will we see standards in all six of the required areas?

CANDACE THOMAS: I do have Dawn Stegen here with me. I'm going to ask her to come up and answer the question. She is the executive director of the Accessibility Directorate.

THE CHAIR: Welcome, Ms. Stegen.

DAWN STEGEN: We are standing up five standards presently, and we are on track by the end of this calendar year to be working in six standard areas. Our goal this year is that sometime over the Summer, we will make public the draft standard for built

environment. It's required under our Act to be posted for 60 days for feedback. The minister has received recommendations from the Accessibility Advisory Board for an education standard. Departments have begun work on reviewing those recommendations and to begin the drafting.

We are working with the Employment Standard Development Committee, as well as there will be the first meetings of the Goods and Services Standard Development Committee. We'll start this Fall. Finally, we'll be recruiting for a standard development committee on transportation later this Fall, and research has begun on a communications standard. Our goal is that by 2029, all standards will be enacted.

LISA LACHANCE: How much time do I have left?

THE CHAIR: Fifty-two seconds.

LISA LACHANCE: I just want to clarify, in terms of the positions that aren't official but exist in other departments around 2SLGBTQIA+ issues, are there objectives in job descriptions and educational requirements? Is it actually included in people's job descriptions, and are they being measured on their ability to do that work?

THE CHAIR: To?

LISA LACHANCE: We can start with Deputy Minister Thomas and go down . . .

THE CHAIR: Deputy Minister Thomas.

CANDACE THOMAS: Specifically with respect to the 2SLGBTQIA+ community? I'm going to ask Emmanuel to come up, because I don't want to misspeak. While he's coming up, I do want to say that it's everyone's responsibility to do this work. Even though we have a position of a senior advisor on diversity and inclusion, Emmanuel will tell all of us and we all share that we cannot make a difference or a shift in culture unless everybody is doing the work.

THE CHAIR: Order and apologies. The time for the NDP caucus has elapsed. Mr. Itiveh, I might suggest you stay close for a second. MLA Palmer.

CHRIS PALMER: I'd like to offer the gentleman an opportunity. Sorry, I forgot your name, but please feel free to answer that question.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Itiveh.

EMMANUEL ITIVEH: In the Department of Justice, we're doing a wonderful job in ensuring that when it comes to the work of equity, diversity, and inclusion, that it's moving forward. Like the deputy minister said in the past, we have our action plan.

When it comes to the work of the 2SLGBTQIA+ we've done, we've done a lot of cultural competence training in that aspect, in collaboration with the PSC. We've done some supplementary training as well. We did one called Afro-Caribbean 2SLGBTQIA+ training. We've encouraged a lot of individuals to do self-training as well. During Pride Week, we definitely take initiative and do some training as well, and education for staff. One of the things that we do is to make sure that we have resources available for staff to educate themselves. On our SharePoint site and our IDEA committee, we do provide those resources to staff to ensure that they are being developed in that aspect, including managers and directors as well.

CHRIS PALMER: Not a closing question, but a summary question with the limited time we have. I think Nova Scotians watching today should feel encouraged by the collaboration that goes on between the departments. You say that we're not working in silos anymore, so that's a good thing. I'm just curious to expand on that collaboration. If you could maybe all speak to this, if you'd like, to talk about what practices and methods are going to be used to ensure that your departments continue to work with the Public Service Commission to review HR practices going forward. That's a general question. Maybe you could answer.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Anderson.

ANDREA ANDERSON: I was ready to jump in. First and foremost, at the Public Service Commission, we have a division that is called the Client Service Delivery Division. That division has HR business partners, which connect with the line departments on a daily basis. So there's a connection there, so if there's work that needs to be done. Also, in our EDI unit, every consultant in our EDI unit is assigned to a department so there's ongoing collaboration within those departments. The major departments also have their own EDI representatives, so there's collaboration there.

We also have a cohort at the highest level across government of EDI advisors within government that also come together and collaborate on this work. There is a great amount of collaboration that takes place. There is a lot of work that happens together to develop strategies and programs, and all those things on a go-forward. The collaboration is daily, and it's extensive.

CHRIS PALMER: Just curious if any of the deputies would care to respond or answer that in particular.

TRACEY TAWHEEL: I mentioned in my opening remarks that the Department of Community Services is standing up a centralized hiring team in collaboration with the Public Service Commission because of the high number of transactions that a large department conducts. Because of our focus on anti-Black racism, inclusion, diversity, anti-Indigenous racism, we're standing up a centralized team that will look at using different

recruitment tools and assessment tools so that we shift the complexion, if you will, of our workforce within the Department of Community Services.

That is being done in partnership with the Public Service Commission so that we are adhering to all employment equity regulations, all policies, procedures, and ensuring that our staff participate in training, et cetera, and that we bring in individuals who reflect the population they're serving, but who also come to the department understanding what it means to be a public servant, and understanding how important this work is - that it is fundamental to being a public servant.

The last point I would make is that - and I'll take the liberty of speaking on behalf of my colleagues - we sit at a table of deputy ministers, and we are tasked with ensuring that this work is front and centre on a daily basis. Our performance is measured on this work, and we are challenged every day to ensure that we are working together collaboratively, and that we are creating the conditions for our staff to do the same.

CHRIS PALMER: I would defer to my colleague, MLA White, but again, thank you very much for coming this morning and highlighting this very important topic for all Nova Scotians.

THE CHAIR: At this point, the time for questioning has expired, but we do have the opportunity to allow each of you to offer brief closing remarks, should you like.

Ms. Anderson, you were so eager to speak throughout the meeting. (Laughter) I'm wondering if you have any closing remarks?

ANDREA ANDERSON: Yes, I do. I do want to say of the Public Service Commission, I'm so proud of the work that we have done and changed the face of the Public Service Commission. In the last two years - and I have data here, but I won't get into the data - I would just say high-level, 39 competitions, and of those were filled by 18 competitions that we didn't designate, and we filled an additional 11 to 12 staff. We are continuing to do this work.

It is my hope that we will get to the point that we don't have to designate - that we will be so ingrained within this organization, within government, that it will be a top priority. We won't have to worry about designating positions, but folks will understand the significance and the importance of having that diverse workforce that actually represents the communities that they serve.

LORETTA ROBICHAUD: I think you can note how infectious and passionate sitting with Andrea is every week on this subject. We're very privileged that we have her at the table.

I want to thank you. It's been a pleasure to share the work we're doing in the Department of Agriculture to support diversity and inclusion - both at our own workplaces, but also in the agriculture sector. This work is important, and I can't overemphasize on so many levels, it brings different diverse backgrounds, perspectives, experiences, and can only make us stronger in our services to our sector and Nova Scotians.

We are absolutely committed to advancing this work and continuously improving. Happy to talk about this more in any other venue that people want to hear about what we're doing, because there's some great work happening. I want to thank you.

THE CHAIR: Deputy Minister Taweel.

TRACEY TAWHEEL: I would just echo the comments of my colleagues and say a sincere thank you for the opportunity to discuss this very important topic. As this committee and others are aware, I am very proud of the work of the Department of Community Services. The work that we do touches lives in very important and sensitive ways, so it is critically important that we support our staff in the delivery of that work, and that the staff in our department reflect those they're serving.

I'm really proud of the work that we're doing in this area. I think it is making a difference. We are seeing that reflected in the individuals who are applying to work in the department and the relationships that we're nurturing with the clients that we serve. Again, thank you very much for the opportunity to be here today.

THE CHAIR: Deputy Minister Thomas.

CANDACE THOMAS: I'll be very brief and also say thank you for putting this on the agenda of Public Accounts Committee. This topic is one that has been overlooked for a very long time. It also has been given lip service for a very long time. I hope we've left you with the impression that we are doing the real work, and the work is being done throughout government at every level. Only when the people we serve feel it and know it, and the people who work with us feel it and know it, are we going to be successful. We are accountable for our departments and for the work that we're doing, so thank you for allowing us to be here to speak to this topic today.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much to all the witnesses. To those who got a chance to sit at the mic and those who didn't in the back, we appreciate you all being here today. On behalf of the committee, a sincere thank you. We will take a two-minute recess to allow the witnesses to gather their belongings and depart.

[10:42 a.m. The committee recessed.]

[10:45 a.m. The committee reconvened.]

THE CHAIR: Order, please. We shall resume the Public Accounts Committee meeting. Following our agenda, we have to discuss and finalize the Subcommittee on Agenda and Procedures - Record of Decision. This pertains to what we've proposed as the Friday, June 23rd meeting, with the topic being the 2023 Report of the Auditor General on Island Employment Association.

Any discussion? MLA MacDonald.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: Plus the briefing June 21st, correct?

THE CHAIR: The briefing June 21st - let me just clarify with the clerk. I believe that was - yes. There are three witnesses proposed: the Department of Labour, Skills and Immigration, deputy minister; Office of the Ombudsman; and a representative from NSGEU.

Could we have a motion to formalize that, please? MLA Coombes.

KENDRA COOMBES: I move that we approve the 2023 Report of the Auditor General on Island Employment Association for the topic, and the witnesses being the Department of Labour, Skills and Immigration, deputy minister's office; the Office of the Ombudsman; and an NSGEU representative.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much. You've all heard the motion.

All in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

As a sidebar, could someone please close the back door for me, please and thank you. (Interruption) I believe the question was the other items on the record of decision. They've all been previously approved.

Moving along to correspondence: Nova Scotia Legal Aid, information requested from the March 29th meeting. Any discussion on the correspondence? Hearing none.

The next item for correspondence: Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing information requested from the May 3rd meeting. Any discussion on that correspondence? Hearing none.

Item 3 under correspondence: Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing information requested from the May 17th meeting. Any discussion on that? I do have notes that the regular Chair for this committee - MLA Regan - does wish to send additional correspondence to clarify some of the things that we received. I'd prefer to allow her to be

in the chair when that takes place. So just note that this item will probably come back on the agenda at a future meeting when MLA Regan is in attendance.

Item 4 under correspondence: Department of Public Works follow-up information regarding the April 12th meeting. Any discussion on that? Hearing none. We will move on to the next meeting date, unless there is other business to attend to.

MLA Maguire.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: I'd like to put a motion on the floor. I move that the Public Accounts Committee schedule an emergency meeting on the topic of inclusion in our education system, calling on witnesses from the IWK and Inclusion Nova Scotia to appear before this committee to address the ongoing and widespread long-term impact that the strike is having on our children and our loved ones. I'd like to put that motion on the floor.

THE CHAIR: There is a motion on the floor for an emergency meeting of the Public Accounts Committee with a description of what the member would like to see.

MLA Sheehy-Richard.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: With all due respect, we know that CUPE in Halifax region is disrupted. We get that, and the concerns of the member. However, they would know that it's an ongoing negotiation. Details are still unfolding and conversations surrounding that should remain between the employer and the employee.

A standing committee, like I said yesterday, is not the place to have those discussions, and I would like to say that during the Liberal and NDP governments, they certainly did not bring those discussions to the committee. Those will remain between the employer, which is the Halifax Regional Centre for Education, and the employee.

THE CHAIR: MLA Maguire and then MLA Lachance.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: I don't know if the members understood what I said. I thought it was a very clear motion. It has nothing to do with the actual negotiations if people were listening to the actual motion. The motion was to bring the IWK Health Centre and Inclusion Nova Scotia to talk about when inclusion is not happening in our school system, the widespread impact it has on the individuals. It has nothing to do with negotiations. I will say there is a lot of misinformation being put out there about who's negotiating and what's negotiation. HRCE is not negotiating. It is the Government of Nova Scotia. HRCE is at the table, and they take their marching orders from both the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development and Premier Houston.

This continued misinformation that's being put out there from members to prevent government members from taking the responsibility of having our most vulnerable youth

in HRM not being able to get an education shows quite frankly, Mr. Chair, a lack of caring and abdicating the responsibilities they hold. They might not represent an HRM community, and they may not think it's important to them, but it's important to everyone that our children get the best possible future. With that, I call the question.

THE CHAIR: I had an order of speakers, MLA Maguire, so I'm going to stick with that. MLA Lachance.

LISA LACHANCE: I am happy that this has come back to the table and to also provide some clarification based on our discussion yesterday. I don't think at any time we've suggested that we negotiate a labour dispute at the table of the committee. That's not at all what we've been talking about, so please let's dispel that and not keep misquoting us and misstating what our intentions are.

What I'm concerned about is the impact on young people. As I shared at yesterday's committee, we were reliant on the support of Educational Program Assistants for several years of my son's elementary school education. I can tell you that any change in schedule, any disruption was not just about the six hours of the day where he wasn't engaged in his education or wasn't able to attend. It's their whole lives. The message that we're sending to hundreds of students who are Nova Scotians - and yes, just to say, maybe they're not in your constituency - but they're Nova Scotian children. What we're saying is, "You're not good enough, we don't care if you come back to school this year, and actually we don't care if we flush this whole year down the toilet." That's what happens when young people miss school.

I've shared from friends of mine on Facebook, and I shared yesterday in committee a number of people whose young people are truly suffering. It's not just about missing this month of school or the next month. It is going to have a long-term effect on their development. Wouldn't that be great to hear from the experts about that? If you don't think this is a big deal and we can just wait it out and see when we get the most vulnerable kids back to school - I think we are doing incredible damage to vulnerable young people in this province for whom we are all responsible. I really think that we need to understand the impact of what's happening so we can plan remedial action, because this will not simply be over. I think this is a very important topic. This is not about union negotiations. This is about the health and development of Nova Scotian children.

THE CHAIR: MLA Sheehy-Richard.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: Again, we get that. Perhaps if you wanted to bring up that topic in the next round of discussions and have the Auditor General look into that and have the witnesses called, that would be the time for that. Bringing this topic now before Public Accounts Committee is not the mandate of this committee. We would highly encourage that the memberships go back, speak to their employer, and works out a solution so that we can get our most vulnerable back to school.

THE CHAIR: I have a speaking list, MLA Maguire.

MLA White.

JOHN WHITE: Thank you, Chair. (Interruption) What was that? (Interruption) Thank you.

This has come to several committees. The fact is, regardless of what you say over there, this is a negotiation that's ongoing with details happening on a regular basis. It is ongoing. (Interruption) It is ongoing, and unlike the member opposite who will not let me speak while I have the mic, I am not part of a government that has stripped away legal rights for labour. Take it away.

THE CHAIR: Order, please. (Interruption)

MLA Maguire will bring himself to order, please.

MLA White.

JOHN WHITE: Legislating people back to work, if that's what he's asking for is an absolute disgrace to do. I can tell you from working through a system that has seen the ongoing damage of such legislation, what it does to people. People are still not back to normal, not back to doing what they used to do. (Interruption)

THE CHAIR: Order, please. MLA Maguire will bring himself to order, please.

MLA White.

JOHN WHITE: It is hard to keep my thoughts straight, but I want to say - I'll name them. Carole, Arlene, Todd - you want me to continue? I'll name a dozen - 500. I'll name them all. The TAs - or EAs as you call them here - who have been in the classroom with me are absolutely amazing people. They surely are. What you fail to realize, based on your experience in legislation you've passed, is that there are very real consequences to your actions - very real consequences. There are people - students - who have friendships with their EAs. (Interruption) Is this continuing to be allowed?

THE CHAIR: Order. MLA Maguire, this is disorderly conduct right now. (Interruption) Interrupting the Chair is disorderly conduct.

You do not have the floor, MLA Maguire. I respectfully request that you maintain order and decorum while MLA White is speaking. (Interruption)

MLA Maguire, this will be the last time that I ask you to maintain order before I ask you to leave the committee.

MLA White.

JOHN WHITE: Thank you, Chair. The party opposite, their actions speak on legislation and strong-handed actions that take away people's rights and have ongoing consequences. As I was saying earlier, when I think of Jessie and the students she worked with on a regular basis, my God, there's a relationship there that is second to none, that is being destroyed, and the year-end activities are being missed. That's the problem. I know that's the problem - but misleading is not the answer.

This is not the place for negotiations. This is the Standing Committee on Public Accounts. It's a rear-looking committee. It's not to deal with current situations. In your motion, you actually said, "the ongoing," and then you stopped. That's what you said. So you were talking about the labour dispute, which is not part of this committee here today.

THE CHAIR: Order. MLA White, please ensure your comments come through the Chair, please and thank you.

MLA White.

JOHN WHITE: Look, I'm going to tell you how it is when you're sitting as a union member. I'll tell all you guys how it is. In a union, when you're sitting and you're waiting for a deal to come through, Chair, and it doesn't happen, everybody's heart sinks. You suddenly start looking at your very real personal situation. What can I afford to do - not as a union, as a member. What can I afford to do? Can I afford to strike? Can I afford putting my faith in somebody else's hands? They had a very real choice to make, which we are allowing to happen, which is the right thing to do. They can do . . .

THE CHAIR: Order, please. The time allotted for the Public Accounts Committee meeting today has expired. I would like to note that the next scheduled meeting is next Wednesday, June 14th, where witnesses will be from the Department of Public Works and Build Nova Scotia, and the topic will be the 2019 report of the Auditor General: Selection and Quality Management of Bridge Projects, and the 2020 report of the Auditor General: Contaminated Sites.

This meeting is adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 11:00 a.m.]