

Asia-Pacific PAC Regional Workshop

REPORT

19 - 21 May 2025

OUTCOME

- Delegates are more effective in their remit to oversee and scrutinise government spending of public money and better able to hold their governments to account for the delivery of public services

OUTPUTS

- PAC chairs, members, and officials will have enhanced their skills to scrutinise and hold government to account during the inquiry process
- PAC chairs, members, and officials will have identified practical solutions to the common challenges faced by PACs or equivalent committees in their legislatures through peer-to-peer learning
- Participants will have strengthened their networks and contacts with the UK PAC, as well as PACs and equivalent committees across the Asia-Pacific region

Programme Overview

From 19 - 21 May 2025, in collaboration with the Parliament of the Republic of Fiji, the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association UK delivered the Asia-Pacific Public Accounts Committees Regional Workshop. Thirty-six delegates - including PAC chairs, deputy chairs, members, and officials - from eleven legislatures, gathered in Nadi, Fiji, to participate in the three-day programme.

Sessions consisted of panel presentations and discussions, roundtable exchanges, and interactive exercises, to encourage peer-to-peer learning in different settings. Topics included using parliamentary resources effectively, cross-party collaboration, and effective briefings and hearings. The workshop also aimed to strengthen the networks of PAC members and officials across the Asia-Pacific region, and to reaffirm the relationships between legislatures in the region and the UK Parliament.



The Role, Nature, and Purpose of the PAC

Delegates noted that Public Accounts Committees (PACs) across the Asia-Pacific region largely play the same role: to examine and scrutinise government expenditure in a non-partisan manner, and ensure value for money on government projects. How they carry out this role can differ across legislatures, with slight variations in powers and scope. The nature and purpose of the PAC means that it examines spending retrospectively, rather than prospectively. Whilst PACs do not scrutinise government policy, they hope to influence governments to be mindful with future policies of abiding by rules of public spending and considering value for money. Inquiries are generally selected by the committee, typically considering public interest and concerns, audit findings, and unaccounted public funding. The committee also takes into consideration recurring issues raised by the auditor general, service delivery impacts, and evidence of mismanagement either directly or through information from the public or social media.

Credibility in the PAC Context

Delegates also discussed the value of PACs maintaining credibility, noting that without it, the committee would be ineffective. Their aim in scrutinising expenditure is to have a positive impact on the decision making of the government, upholding democratic accountability and prompting systemic improvement. By ensuring it is perceived as a credible mechanism, the PAC is able to command respect, deter wrongdoing and bad decision making, and inspire a climate of accountability concerning recommendations made in its reports.

To build credibility, delegates observed that PACs should ensure that:

- They build a strong working relationship with the media, as this can be a useful tool in establishing the committee as one that is uncompromising in thoroughly scrutinising government expenditure
- They have consistent performance and reporting, with thorough, unbiased scrutiny and procedural fairness based on evidence received from a variety of witnesses and stakeholders
- They assert themselves as an independent authority, with a membership of strong, credible parliamentarians that collaborate and build consensus across party lines, without political agenda



Cross-party Collaboration and Building Consensus in a PAC Context

Having identified that cross-party collaboration is key to an effective PAC, delegates observed that the majority of PACs in the region are comprised proportionally, reflecting the membership of the legislature, so there are likely members from several parties sitting on the committee. Given the role of the PAC, to scrutinise government spending independently without any party allegiance, delegates concluded that being prepared for cooperation and building consensus across members of the committee is imperative for PAC effectiveness.

They identified three strategies that PACs can develop to encourage collaboration and ensure that political disagreements do not hinder the core aim of the committee:

1. To root all debate in the evidence received

When members focus on fact-based examination and debate, using audit reports, performance reviews, and budget data to support their argument, it limits any interference from opinion or political differences. When differing conclusions are reached on the evidence, it is important for members to be willing to compromise, finding a middle ground that can garner consensus. This can often be largely based on language, so avoiding combative or accusatory language towards one party's actions can help to reach an agreement.

2. To work together as a team

Parliamentarians should prioritise their commitment to the committee, seeing themselves during these meetings as members of the PAC first, and members of their party second. Having a good working relationship with other members and maintaining trust and respect can help to reach an agreement even when members have different political views. Where conflict persists, delegates noted that seeking external expert opinions to mediate discussions could help to resolve the differences without compromising accountability efforts.

3. To ensure the PAC Chair acts as a unifying influence

In jurisdictions where the committee members elect their chair, this can initiate a sense of consensus in the committee. Part of the chair's role, they noted, is encouraging the involvement of all members, encouraging comments or amendments on reports early on with the aim that any necessary discussion will have happened by the time the report is ready to be published. The chair also plays a vital role in keeping debates constructive, ensuring discussion remains goal-driven, impartial, and professional.



Effective Use of Parliamentary Resources

Members' Knowledge and Expertise

PACs across the region considered the resources at their disposal during the inquiry process, and observed that utilising the correct resources effectively is key to the success of an inquiry. One such resource is the PAC members themselves, both present and past. Current members can draw on each other's inquiry subject knowledge, and more technical skills such as effective questioning techniques. In jurisdictions where there has been a large turnover of members, likely following a recent election, former PAC members can be encouraged to share their expertise.

Parliamentary Officials' Skills and Knowledge

Delegates acknowledged that the importance of the PAC secretariat and supporting staff could not be overstated. The parliamentary officials who form the secretariat of PACs support members with both administrative tasks and research. Secretariats have varying scope in different legislatures across the region, because of different human resource capacities. However, they generally support the PAC with tasks such as stakeholder and witness preparation, briefing preparation, and logistical assistance. Some secretariats also assist with writing the questions for PAC members to ask witnesses.

Official Documents and Institutional Expertise

Delegates identified three broad categories of resources for authoritative data for PACs to draw on:

1. Core Official Documents

These include audit reports from an auditor general or national audit office, which provide a comprehensive overview of the financial audit of a government. Other administrative records that could be examined are court reports, parole reports, and parliamentary debates.

2. Institutional Expertise

This includes expertise and knowledge from current or former officials of the relevant departments. Besides such departments, drawing on the knowledge of external experts and witnesses can help PAC inquiries, which often require technical as well as sectoral knowledge. Delegates noted that such authoritative sources of information could include academics, civil society organisations, and members of the military, emphasising the value of gathering data from a variety of external insights and diverse perspectives for inquiries.



3. Technological Tools

Delegates acknowledged that legislatures are most likely to experience the greatest disparity when it comes to the technological tools available to them. They observed that the use of technology and artificial intelligence could prove particularly helpful for PACs that have limited secretariat capacity, for example by digitising reports and using artificial intelligence to assist in searching through documents. However, the implementation of this requires significant financial resources and infrastructure, as well as technical knowledge, which can be an issue.

The use of the above can improve a PAC's ability to conduct an effective inquiry despite common challenges such as: the time constraints of being a PAC member and a Member of Parliament, particularly for detailed and drawn out inquiries; limited resources (financial and human); and managing information complexity and length.

Effective Briefings and Hearings

Delegates highlighted the importance of parliamentary officials providing informative briefings to PAC members before an inquiry or hearing. The quality of briefs can influence members' knowledge and engagement, and committee behaviour and commitment to the inquiry. It is therefore important that their assertions are evidence-based, that they maintain objectivity and impartiality, that they understand the boundaries and mandate of their role and the abilities of the committee, and that they communicate clearly and concisely. For jurisdictions with newer secretariat staff, they noted that these can be paired with more experienced colleagues to share best practice and clarify any procedural aspects of inquiries, hearings, and reports.

How to Produce an Effective PAC Briefing

Delegates stressed that preparation and research is paramount to delivering effective briefings to PAC members. Information can be gathered from many sources, most often auditor generals' reports, past committee findings, and insights from ex-officio members from key agencies, who can also provide any necessary data verification. The PAC secretariat can consult with academics, external experts, and relevant stakeholders to gather further information. Where possible, the secretariat might utilise in-house researchers and parliamentary research services to help with analysis and briefing notes. For smaller jurisdictions with limited staff capacity, they may be able to reach out to an external organisation to seek help with producing briefings if they have an existing partnership, such as the Solomon Islands with the Westminster Foundation for Democracy.



Delegates also noted that the secretariat may organise to have experts speak at meetings before the hearing, for members to gain a greater understanding of the subject, and thus improve their line of questioning.

Preparing Questions in a PAC Context

To question witnesses effectively during a hearing, delegates identified two necessities: preparation and developing a strong questioning technique. When preparing questions, whether this is done by the PAC secretariat or committee members themselves (depending on the conventions of the legislature), research is vital to ensure the most pertinent questions are asked. This can come from looking at financial statements, especially those from the auditor general or national audit office, and any annual statements or reviews that are available.

Delegates also highlighted that it may be useful to consider transcripts from previous committee hearings on the topic and press releases. Whilst this is time consuming, there may be mention of previously outlined commitments that can be followed up on and progress assessed. They noted the value in also considering publicly available information, such as right to information requests that are often on a government's website, or other reports relevant to the topic.

Asking Questions in a PAC Context

When questioning witnesses, delegates underlined the importance of not simply asking the question, but listening carefully to the answer and recording relevant details, to be able to cross reference any dates or remarks and follow up on these. It can also help to develop a timeline of events, to build up a clear picture of what has happened, confirming specific details with witnesses. They noted that a good question is typically targeted, clear, and evidence-based, though it is best to assess each witness individually to decide on the best approach to extract the necessary information from them.

Delegates observed that when dealing with cooperative witnesses, open-ended questions often work well, as they allow the witness to talk as much as possible, which gives the committee opportunities to follow up with probing questions to extract more information. However, when dealing with hostile witnesses, delegates noted that short, direct questions are usually more effective, as they don't allow for tangents or evasion. They stressed that it is vital to be persistent with uncooperative witnesses, repeating and refining a question if necessary, until they provide an acceptable answer.



Assessing PAC Effectiveness and Measuring Impact

Delegates underlined that monitoring the impact of PAC reports and recommendations is key to assessing whether the committee is effective in its aim. This can be done partly by the auditor general or national audit office when they carry out their annual audit, as they will easily identify whether there has been any effective action taken. Delegates noted that an advantage of this is that, as an external office, the office of the auditor general provides a separate verification of the implementation and tracking of recommendations, preventing possible accusations of bias.

Tools for Effective Follow Up

Many legislatures stated having developed tracking tools within their committees, which can be as simple as an excel spreadsheet, to consolidate all the information and progress made. The committee may consider holding a follow-up related hearing within a reasonable amount of time, during which the relevant department could be questioned on progress made on the recommendations. Delegates also discussed examples of good practice from other legislatures, who use action notes effectively to follow up on recommendations. To succeed, this approach requires the ministry in question to produce an action note to the committee to show what action will be taken within the next three months, which the PAC will persistently follow up if it is not fulfilled.

Using the 'SMART' Framework to Track Recommendations

Delegates acknowledged that some legislatures may not see much impact from their recommendations if they are not action-orientated and there is a lack of clarity as to what the committee's expectations for government action are. They highlighted the value of PACs adopting the 'SMART' framework to address this, which ensures that recommendations are:

- **Specific:** articulating the change the committee seeks, what the government needs to do, and who in the government should do it
- **Measurable:** with some way of quantifying the change, as where change cannot be measured properly, individuals and institutions cannot be held to account
- **Achievable:** with changes recommended being considered realistic
- **Relevant:** ensuring that the recommendation will directly address the problem that the committee has identified
- **Time-bound:** listing time-specific milestones to be met



Utilising Technologies to Enhance PACs

Reaching a Wider Audience and Operating More Efficiently

Delegates discussed the opportunities that technology and digital tools present for PACs in the Asia-Pacific region. Many jurisdictions implemented measures during the Covid-19 pandemic, such as virtual meetings and hearings, which have increased accessibility and inclusivity, allowing for participation from remote witnesses, particularly useful in legislatures with outer islands and limited flights to parliaments. This also proved useful in ensuring that those with disabilities were able to participate in PAC hearings.

Furthermore, when PAC meetings could be recorded (with either virtual or physical witnesses) these could then be published online for public viewing, which could reach a more diverse audience and increase public engagement with the PAC's work. Nonetheless, delegates also acknowledged that it is easier for witnesses to evade questions online, which puts the committee and the witnesses on an uneven playing field. Delegates noted also that technology has been used by PACs in the region to improve operational efficiency, including the improved communication with ministries, as they developed secure platforms where sensitive information is shared.

Opportunities and Challenges of Artificial Intelligence for PACs

Delegates observed that tasks such as report and brief writing, analysing large data sets, summarising financial reports, and cross-checking data from different agencies are mainly carried out by PAC members and the secretariat, but that these could be completed more efficiently with the use of technology, predominantly artificial intelligence. They underlined that the incorporation of these digital tools could particularly help those in smaller jurisdictions with limited capacity and staffing constraints, but they require the infrastructure, technical knowledge, and budget to implement them.

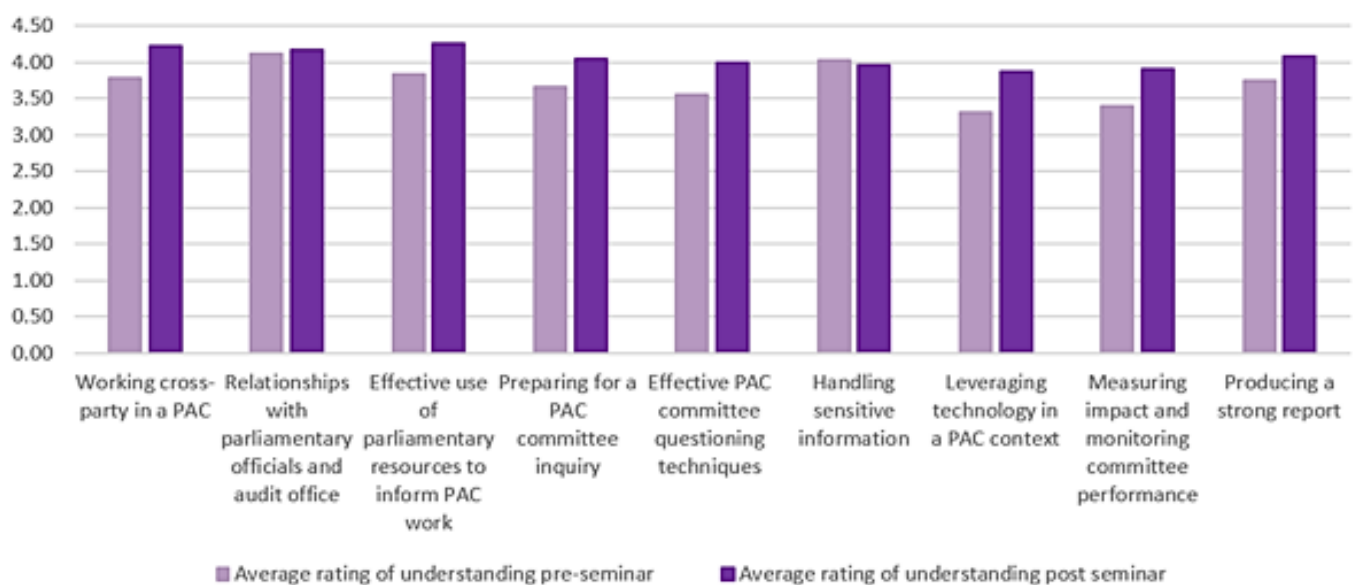
Delegates also noted that an increased use of digital tools can come with its own challenges. They stated the need for a base level of digital literacy across the members of the PAC and the officials supporting them, as well as specifically skilled staff to look after the infrastructure that supports the digital broadcasting and meeting platforms and to prevent cyber attacks.



Evaluation of the Workshop

Each participant completed an assessment form at the beginning of the workshop and at the end of the workshop, to evaluate their own level of understanding of the nine areas explored in the programme. The scale of understanding ranged from (1) 'None' to (5) 'In-depth'.

Overall, participants found that the workshop increased their knowledge in eight areas, with an average increase of knowledge across the programme of 9.56%, and the highest change in 'leveraging technology in a PAC context'. 96% of participants considered the workshop to be 'fully relevant' to their role, with the remainder stating it was 'partially relevant'.



Participating Legislatures



 Cook Islands

 Fiji

 India

 Malaysia

 Maldives


 New South Wales

 Niue

 Pakistan

 Solomon Islands

 Tasmania

 United Kingdom

List of Delegates



Parliament of the Cook Islands

Vaitoti Tupa
Hon. Sonny Williams
Margret Numanga



Parliament of the Republic of Fiji

Hon. Filimone Jitoko
Hon. Esrom Immanuel
Hon. Alvick Maharaj
Hon. Hem Chand
Hon. Jovesa Vocea
Hon. Naisa Tuinaceva
Ajendra Pratap
Jeanette Emberson
Vasiti Uluinayau



Parliament of India

Kozhummal Chattadi Venugopal MP
Dr Kova Laxman MP
Purushothaman Muraleedharan



Parliament of Malaysia

YB Datuk Wira Hajah Mas Ermieyati binti Haji Samsudin
YB Dato Dr Richard Rapu @ Aman anak Begri
Ahmad Johan Bin Mohd Afandi



People's Majlis Of Maldives

Hon. Abdulla Shareef MP
Aminath Suman



Parliament of New South Wales, Australia

Hon. Anthony John Roberts MP
Jenny Leong MP
Alison Buskens



The Niue Assembly

Rhonda Tiakia Tomailuga
Logopati Seumanu
Christine Ioane

List of Delegates

**National Assembly of Pakistan**

Junaid Akbar Khan
Aurangzeb Maral

**National Parliament of Solomon Islands**

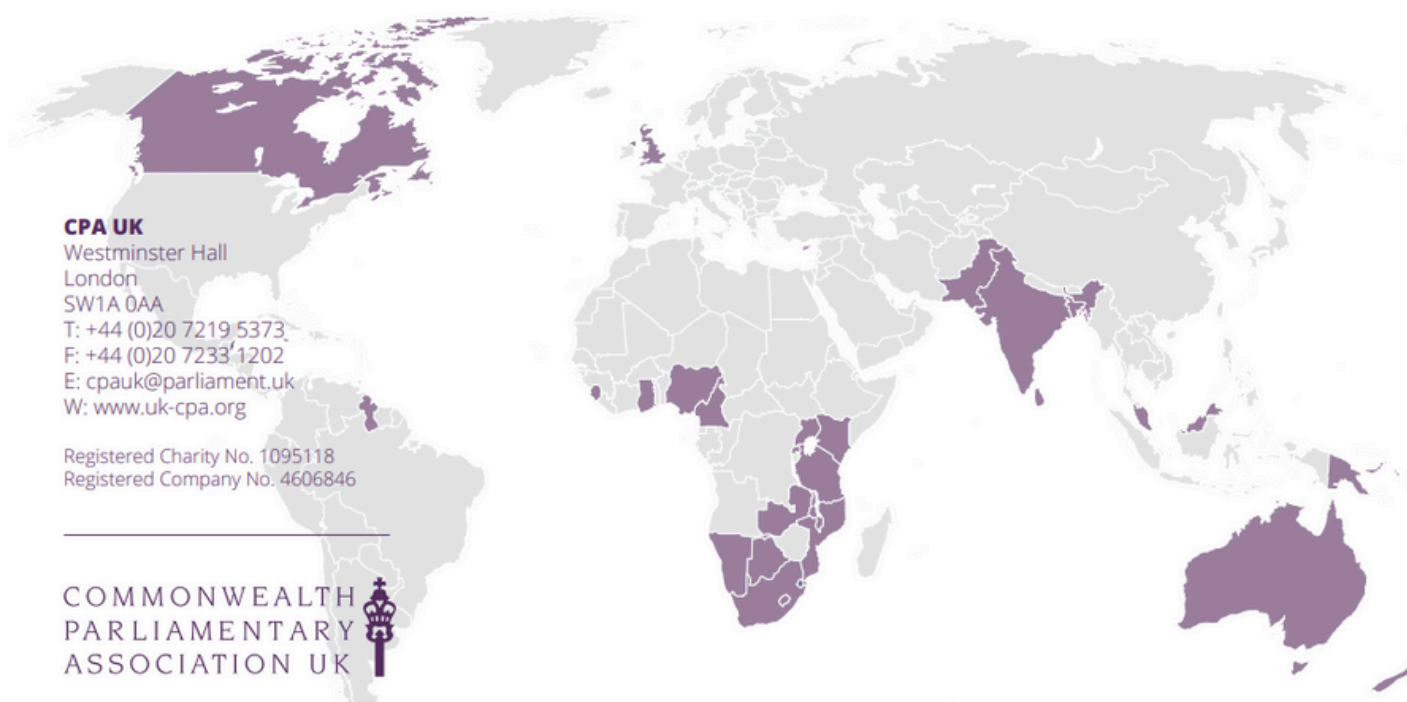
Hon. John Deane Kuku
Heston Kelly Rence

**Parliament of Tasmania, Australia**

Hon. Ruth Forrest MLC
Josh Willie MP
Simon Scott

**UK Parliament**

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown MP
Clive Betts MP
Bradley Albrow



CPA UK

Westminster Hall
London
SW1A 0AA
T: +44 (0)20 7219 5373
F: +44 (0)20 7233 1202
E: cpauk@parliament.uk
W: www.uk-cpa.org

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Registered Company No. 4606846

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