

Government Basics: What You Need to Know



This document provides an overview of the structure and function of the Nova Scotian government, including its three branches, key reporting bodies, roles of the Civil Service and Public Service, and unique aspects that govern its operation. Understanding these elements will help you understand how your role fits in the broader provincial context.

Branches of Government

The government is structured around three main branches:

Legislative Branch

- Forms the House of Assembly
- Includes 55 Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) who represent their constituencies, introduce and debate bills, and pass laws

Executive Branch

- Consists of the Premier and Cabinet, Government Departments, and Crown Corporations
- They make decisions and set direction

Judicial Branch

- Consists of appointed judges who are independent of the executive and legislation branches and uphold the law

The House of Assembly

The primary role of [The House of Assembly](#) is to introduce and enact laws. It typically sits twice a year and includes both the Government and the Opposition. To ensure transparency and accountability, several key groups report to the House of Assembly annually, including (but not limited to):

- **The Nova Scotia Office of the Ombudsman:** Investigates complaints about provincial and municipal governing bodies
- **The Office of the Auditor General of Nova Scotia:** Conduct and report on audits of public sector performance and accountability
- **The Chief Electoral Officer of Nova Scotia:** Provides fair and expert advice on elections and ensures the law is followed
- **The Conflict of Interest Commissioner:** Ensures ethical conduct of elected officials and public servants

Who Does What?

The government is supported by both the Civil Service and the broader Public Service, both of which significantly impact communities and the quality of life for Nova Scotians. The terms civil servant and public servant are used interchangeably, but they have distinct meanings:

- **Public Service:** Includes all publicly funded entities. This includes both:
 - All government departments, which are governed by the Public Service Act.
 - Other publicly funded entities, including [Crown corporations](#), agencies, boards, and commissions, the Nova Scotia Health Authority, and the Regional Centres for Education. These entities are what we refer to as the broader public service.
- **Civil Service:** Is comprised of all employees of the Government of Nova Scotia:
 - These are governed by the Civil Service Act
 - Since [government departments](#) are part of the Public Service, all Civil Servants are also Public Servants. However, because employees of the broader public service are not directly employed by government, not all Public Servants are Civil Servants.

Example: If you work in a government department, you can be considered both a public servant and a civil servant. If you work in a school or hospital, you are part of the broader public service, but not necessarily a civil servant.

What Makes Government Work Unique?

Creating legislation is integral for fostering a democratic society and supporting Nova Scotians, with several key factors distinguishing government operations from private sector businesses:

- **Funding:** Government operations are mainly funded by taxpayers, highlighting the importance of responsible management of public funds.
- **Transparency and Accountability:** Operates with a high degree of transparency and is held accountable to the public.
- **Public Interest:** The public good is prioritized in all government operational decisions.
- **Policies and Processes:** Must adhere to specific policies, approval processes, and privacy laws, including the [Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act \(FOIPOP\)](#).
- **Code of Conduct:** All government employees are bound by a [Code of Conduct](#), ensuring ethical behavior and integrity.