

MLA JULIE GREEN – YELLOWKNIFE CENTRE – IN THE MEDIA

GNWT does decent job responding to concerns and questions,

MLAs say

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Despite the reputation of governments being opaque, slow-moving bureaucracies, communication within the GNWT has been satisfactory since the Covid-19 pandemic began, say several MLAs.

The speed and thoroughness of government responses to inquiries by MLAs vary, but overall their experiences have been good.

For Caitlin Cleveland, MLA for Kam Lake, the GNWT has been “very responsive” to her concerns considering the larger volume of questions that she and the government have been fielding from the public since the pandemic hit.

“Sometimes they don’t get to my emails because they get tons and tons of emails. Over the course of the last eight weeks everyone has been incredibly busy and trying to make sure they’re juggling all their hats.

“I wouldn’t say I’m overly upset or unimpressed with the way (the territorial government) handles communications. I wouldn’t say that there’s a particular minister whom I haven’t received a response from. I’m sure there are moving parts to the government and there are many times I would like to get answers to everything, but them briefing MLAs for every change that happens isn’t realistic,” she said.

“Some questions I put through require some reflection or research on the part of the minister. Sometimes they’re not straightforward. Sometimes they’re easy. The good news is that I find my colleagues very easy to talk to.”

Rocky Simpson, MLA for Hay River South, feels similar to Cleveland. He said he’s pleased overall with the responsiveness of each GNWT department.

“As a regular MLA, I receive a wide range of questions and concerns from constituents. Depending on the depth of the response required, I may have to expect that some of responses

may not be as timely as I would like. But what I do expect is that the (department's) response is factual and satisfactory the first time — a standard bureaucratic answer will not suffice," he said.

Julie Green, MLA for Yellowknife Centre, said she gives the GNWT a "B" grade because its response time to her inquiries can range from less than a day to a few weeks.

"I was having a good response time from ministers from my constituent inquiries, but once the pandemic began, the volume of questions increased substantially," she said.

"We have been waiting for weeks for a breakdown of (Covid) testing by region, although we now have partial info on that. We have also been waiting for a response to questions about how to get students set up with tablets so they can do school work. We would like to know what's up with the economic council announced on March 20. Others are requests for clarification from the chief public health officer."

Transparency issues

The experiences of Cleveland, Simpson and Green contrast with the words of Rylund Johnson, MLA for Yellowknife North, who in an email on April 13 criticized the GNWT for not identifying spokespeople when responding to media inquiries.

"If Cabinet (Communications) is also massaging the message coming out of departments and then not attributing decisions to actual people, we lack the transparency needed from our government where such important decisions are being made," he said.

The MLA followed that up with a post on his website on April 17, when he made reference to transparency issues with government during the pandemic.

"We need to cut the fluff. We need to stop adding government comms nonsense to answers. Perhaps doublespeak was an acceptable tool to delay answering before, when the government took its time to move. It is not now. Answers must be in facts, not waffling."

However, Johnson was among the nine MLAs who didn't respond to NNSL inquiries by press time for this story.

Not necessarily worse since Covid

From the perspective of the territory's ombud, an independent office that investigates concerns with the functioning of the GNWT, most complaints it receives relate to communications issues, but there hasn't been an increase in such issues since the coronavirus outbreak started.

"I haven't had any complaints about the GNWT related to Covid-19 or the pandemic," said Colette Langlois, who completed one year in office as ombud last month.

The office, based in Hay River began accepting complaints on Nov. 18, 2019.

“Sometimes (with complaints) there was a decision made or a procedure and it wasn’t explained well to them. Or sometimes someone didn’t call them back and there was a break in communications. I don’t think it has changed since the pandemic started. Sometimes we’re dealing with something going on right now. Sometimes it goes back further and has more history to it.

“(Complainants) might be upset about the process they’re supposed to follow. Plain language is really important in a lot of cases and you don’t always get that in government. It’s challenging (for the public) and it’s challenging for my office too. It takes extra time and it’s really important. I think some people are really familiar with the jargon when they’re working with it every day but others might not understand that.”