

Ethics in Parliamentary Research and Library Services - Introduction to the Checklists

[A printable PDF version of this introduction to the checklists is available [here](#).]

The ethics checklists (links below) are drafts and the current version is set out as a survey. The aim for now is to establish - through workshops and through online consultations - which elements are seen as valid and important by the community of parliamentary research & library services. The checklists are very much open to revision and to be developed.

A. Background to the checklists

The IFLA Section for Library & Research Services for Parliaments identified in 2016/17 that, although it had developed quite extensive guidance on setting up and running a parliamentary service, there is no general guidance on how to manage ethical issues. While there are general standards for ethics in the library profession, and for academic research, as well as standards for public services in general, there are specific ethical issues in parliamentary research and library services that require management. While some services have explicit policies covering at least some of these issues, comprehensive models are rare and there is no common approach. A presentation from the 2017 Pre-Conference explains the issue and its significance: [link to slides or PDF of the slides]. The work done at the 2017 Pre-Conference showed that there were many real, practical, ethical issues facing services and there was enthusiasm to develop general guidance.

There is some overlap in the checklists with the wider standards for libraries, academic research and the public service, but the checklists focus on what is specific - or of particular importance - in parliamentary research and library services. The checklists are intended to be complementary to these wider ethical frameworks - not replacements for them.

The checklists are the product of multiple sources:

- survey of participants at the Pre-Conference in Warsaw, 2017
- workshops examining case studies at the Pre-Conference
- actual policy documents bearing on ethics, kindly submitted by several parliamentary services (notably Canada, USA, Australia, UK)
- discussions with colleagues in the informal working groups at IFLA in 2016 and 2017, and members of the Standing Committee between conferences

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B. Content and purpose

From these multiple sources it was a practical process to sift the testimony and documents to identify what has worried services in the past, what worries them now and what solutions have been tried.

There is scope for someone to undertake a more exhaustive survey of ethics from a philosophical viewpoint and perhaps to identify additional issues that should be covered, or offer a more elegant and structured approach. We should also consider the checklists a product of 2017/18 - there is scope to look forward and consider future issues that we are not yet worried about - but should be!

Creating immediately a general standard of ethics would have been challenging, not least due to the diversity of situations IFLA member services are in, with very different histories and contexts. The checklists are intended rather as **a working tool for individual services**, which may help them to identify issues and risks, and take some action where they find it appropriate and possible. The use of the checklists may eventually lead to some agreement on common standards, or at least common aspirations, but that is not the primary purpose now.

C. The seven checklists

Based on the evidence, there appear to be seven areas of concern to services. This structure is also open to discussion and amendment. Each checklist has some notes and key points on the area - in the right-hand column. In summary the areas are:

1. [Service mandate](#)

The constitutional documents of the service may define the answers to many ethical questions. In some cases, they may have explicit reference to ethics, and to governance structures to protect ethical standards. To note that the mandate itself might be ethically questionable, for some, but that is a matter for the institution not the service.

2. [Autonomy within the administration](#)

The ideal in parliamentary research and library services is to deliver unbiased information in a non-partisan way. This is most obviously achieved with **independent** professional analysis and information research. 'Independence', however, is put in question by the location of the service within a wider administration. The tension between independence and accountability/control is the source of many ethical issues.

3. [Access to service](#)

While the '[IFLA Code of Ethics for Librarians and other Information Workers](#)' implies an ideal of equality between clients and their requests/needs, the parliamentary research/library service may have a hierarchy of clients and requests/needs. There are usually explicit policies, but also often some reliance on tradition, judgement and discretion. The explicit policies may not themselves be 'fair' or treat clients equally, but they should at least be *applied* evenly and fairly.

4. Resource allocation

Given that choices must always be made (no-one has infinite resources to respond to clients) an absence of explicit guidance on priorities risks to have unethical consequences.

5. Production methods

Is research produced in an ethical way? Some of the issues are dealt with by academic research ethics; some are more specific to parliamentary services.

6. Staff (human resource management)

This is a broad field but there are some questions of particular relevance in parliamentary research & libraries - around impartiality and conflict of interest, for example.

7. The power of Members

Beyond the question of formal service autonomy, there is the (unspoken) reality of the everyday power and influence of Members in a parliament - which can put pressure on the operation of formal processes and policies as well as on people. There were many instances of this raised in the cases from the Warsaw survey.