Guidelines for a Parliamentary Research Service
Highlights from the IFLA Workshop
August 14, 2015

Introduction

The Library and Research Services for Parliaments Section of the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) held a Workshop on August 14, 2015 to discuss the content of the *Guidelines for Parliamentary Research Services*, a publication produced jointly by IFLA and the Inter-Parliamentary Union *(IPU).*

The Guidelines are grounded in the work that librarians and researchers carry out every day, in the reality they face while serving the institution they work in, and in the collective expertise and knowledge grown in the Section through cooperation, collaboration and the sharing of ideas. They were developed in response to a persistent demand from members of the Section for guidance in strengthening research services for parliaments.

In accordance with the Section's tradition for collaborative learning activities, Workshop participants were invited to discuss four questions illustrating the considerations explored in the Guidelines. Highlights from the conversations with respect to each question are provided below.

1. How are new services introduced in your parliament?

The focus of this discussion was meant to draw parallels with recent experiences across parliaments with the introduction of new services. The following key points were highlighted:

− Support from high-level and influential leaders is an essential factor to facilitate the introduction of a new service in a parliament. Political and administrative champions have proven to be key assets in past experiences. These include Presiding Officers, Secretary Generals, influential parliamentarians, etc.

− The need for new services can emerge from an evolution in the structural or procedural context. For example, growth in committees or increased demand by parliaments for oversight and scrutiny of government activities can result in demand for new services. An external "shock" can also lead to demands for specific support. It was noted that demands for advice from economists and statisticians emerged as a result of the financial crisis of 2008-09.

− A formal mechanism is often the official starting point for the creation of a new service. The voting of a law or legal requirement for certain services, or the adoption of a motion by an internal parliamentary governing body can result in the identification of a budget and specific mandate for a new service.

- For many parliaments, the availability of international assistance can be a catalyst to the creation of new services.

- Pilot projects can also be used to assess requirements and best approaches to introduce a new service.

2. What types of services are most in demand? Why?

The discussion identified first the type of needs generally expressed by parliamentarians, followed by the type of products best suited to respond to these needs.

- By far, the prime consideration is the lack of time available to parliamentarians. Therefore, they are seeking support that helps them understand quickly complex issues. As they do not have the time to research matters themselves, they are seeking support to accomplish tasks related to their role as parliamentarians. This can include:
  o Information that can be used in speeches;
  o Information or "model" answers to assist in responding to questions from constituents; and
  o Background information explaining positions on specific public policy issues.

- Products will typically be simple and short briefs on complex issues. These will need to be made quickly available to parliamentarians. Generally, they include synthesis of issues, comparative analysis of issues or legislation across different jurisdictions, or provisions of pros and cons in relation to public policy issues or legislation. Analysis of government documents is also commonly requested.

- A layered approach to service appears to be favored. The provision of quick "takeaway" information, supplemented by the possibility of coming back for more detailed analysis as needed is appreciated by parliamentary patrons.

- Assistance must recognize the uneven ability of parliamentarians to participate in various activities. New parliamentarians often request assistance in understanding how parliament works. In addition, support should also focus on non-expert members to help them contribute to law-making. Hence, there is a need for simple and easy-to-understand briefs that summarize key points related to proposed legislation or approaches to address public policy issues.

- Personalized and individualized assistance is a valued service. Responses to requests from individual members are appreciated, including through the provision of in-person briefings. While some individual members request dedicated support, resources are not generally available to offer such levels of service.

– The state of democratic development of the parliament will also impact on the type of services most in demand. Parliaments that are in early stages of democratic development will have a strong need for passing legislation. They are more likely to focus on legislative analysis. Parliaments that are in more advanced stages of democratic development will tend to request more support in scrutinizing the activities of the Executive; focusing on holding governments to account. They focus on ensuring that money is spent as intended and tend to seek information from "value-for-money" audits.

3. What factors would most contribute to the success of a sustainable research service?

Workshop participants identified a wide range of factors that impact on the success of a sustainable research service. They ranged from a series of elements that should be in place right from the start to considerations related to the way such services are offered on an ongoing basis. The following highlights the key points made during this discussion.

– Some factors relate to the context in which the research service is being developed. The presence of influential champions, the availability of resources through a dedicated budget and management support towards a research function will assist in setting the right conditions for the creation of a new research service. Participants suggested that the development of a strategic plan aligned with the mandate identified for the research service would be helpful in setting the overall direction and priorities for the new service.

– Adherence to clear values and the adoption of a code of conduct were identified as contributors to the success of a research service. Key values mentioned included creating "client-oriented" products and services, maintaining objectivity, political neutrality and integrity in the conduct of research and sharing of information, and the promotion of work ethics focused on ensuring the delivery of quality and timely products. Employees must be able to leave their political views and biases at the door.

– Another set of factors related to the ability to hire and invest in the right employees was deemed critical to the success of the service.

   o The ability to recruit employees with the right skills and expertise was considered critical. In addition to their subject-area expertise, employees should be able to use computers and be at ease with the digital world, have some knowledge of internationally-recognized languages, have an ability to summarize and synthesize information, and be good communicators. As for the professional backgrounds of employees, it was recommended that a research service focus not only on economists and lawyers, but also hire scientists. For some participants, the ability to preserve the independence of the research service in the recruitment of employees, including

decision-making on allocation of resources and selecting the individuals who will work in the research service was an important factor.

o The availability of resources to equip employees with the training and tool they require to perform their work was identified as an important factor. Employees need access to in-house and external training. For some, the reliance of internal peer-review of work produced and the promotion of team work were identified as ways to structure knowledge transfer internally. An ability to retain institutional memory/knowledge was considered an asset.

o Participants suggested extending the assets available by seeking the support of interns, volunteers and external resources such as researchers in parliamentary networks (e.g. IFLA) or in academia.

– The last set of factors pertains to elements shaping the daily operations of the research service. These include several dimensions of how the work is carried.

o The need to manage expectations was identified as an important factor. Participants mentioned that a "service charter" or some form of framework to clearly state the products and services available is helpful. Clear guidelines and procedures in the provision of service were encouraged. These can include how to prioritize the work conducted by the service.

o It was considered imperative to know the needs of clients in order to ensure relevance of the research service. Participants highlighted the need to offer products that are relevant and of use to parliamentarians and their staff. In that spirit, many participants identified the need to respond quickly to requests. It was seen imperative to meet deadlines and be agile in an effort to respond quickly to changing environments. Colleagues were encouraged to survey the parliamentarians they support or work at understanding what their tasks are and how they accomplish them in order to better align the products and services of the research unit. It was considered important to understand the political context in which parliamentarians evolve in order to provide relevant support. This could be achieved by proactively talking to parliamentarians, or tracking and analyzing what is requested.

o Employees of the research service must be easily reachable and products easy to find. Discussions therefore highlighted the need to engage in marketing and branding activities. These included the production of brochures, personally responding to a request or interest expressed by a parliamentarian, and creating a special section for the research products in the physical or virtual space occupied by the Library. As a companion strategy, offering orientation and training sessions to parliamentarians and their staff was recommended.

4. What are the benefits and risks of partnering?

Parliamentary administrations across the world enter in diverse partnership arrangements with internal and external organisations to supplement the expertise available to them to respond to requests from parliamentarians. Despite the variability of models in place across the different parliaments, participants highlighted a common set of benefits and risks of entering in partnership arrangements. A summary of these is presented below.

- The benefits identified tended to be associated with the possibility of accessing expertise or resources not readily available within the research unit. Typically, partnerships with like-minded institutions such as other parliamentary administrations or colleagues from other units in the parliamentary administration were considered beneficial. These allowed access to networks of knowledgeable colleagues who have a common understanding of the political context in which non-partisan parliamentary research is provided.

- Although participants recommended caution in pursuing partnership with academia or think tanks, as mentioned in the risk listed below, the following benefits were noted.

    o Access to wider-range of information base and pool of experts than internal budgets permits;
    o Provision of broader range of perspectives on an issue, which can enrich the political debate;
    o Supports internal employees to opportunities to broaden their knowledge;
    o Save time if it permits quick access to information and experts not available within the research service;
    o Can improve quality of the products prepared for parliamentarians; and
    o Can help develop a business case for the establishment of a research service by demonstrative the value of analytical products.

- On the other hand, serious risks were also identified, largely owing to the different context in which partners (such as academics) conduct their work. The following risks were noted.

    o Academics tend to take more time to complete their projects which does not align with the quick pace at which parliamentary research must be completed;
    o Work prepared for parliamentarians is often done on a confidentiality basis – such a requirement was seen to limit the opportunities for partnership;
    o Many academics or think tanks are actively trying to get on parliament's agenda and feed their policy positions into politics – partnerships with these groups were therefore seen as bringing the risk of the work turning into a lobbying exercise;
    o Credibility of the research service may be at risk if the reliability and accuracy of the information provided by the partner is weak or biased;

- o Partners may not be aware or feeling bound by parliamentary procedures and traditions governing how work is conducted in parliament; and
- o If parliamentary research is funded by external partners, the future stability of an independent research agenda can be at risk if the partner disappears or disagree with the nature of the work to be performed.

Conclusion

The Workshop allowed members of the IFLA Section to quickly grasp the range of considerations presented in the Guidelines. Discussions highlighted the fact that many considerations can shape the design of a parliamentary research service. There are no strict recipes to be followed. Ultimately, many considerations must be assessed and pursued with deference to the culture and context within which the parliamentary research service is established. Hopefully, the Guidelines can be of assistance in this process.