



# Information and expertise for parliaments

GPG's Guide to Parliaments series explores the key processes and functions of parliaments around the world. The Guide highlights the main elements affecting design and delivery of effective parliamentary strengthening projects. This paper looks at the ways in which parliamentarians can access information and expertise to assist them across the range of their parliamentary duties, and how parliamentary administrations can support them in this.

## 1. Introduction – why Parliaments need good access to information

Members of Parliament need access to up-to-date and accurate information and expertise in order to perform their parliamentary duties, whether as individual representatives or as members of committees, delegations or other groups. Parliamentarians have to propose and take views on legislation covering an enormous range of issues; they are called upon to scrutinise the wide-ranging work of governments; and they are expected to comment on issues and problems of concern to the citizens they represent, often at short notice. No Member of Parliament, however, can be expected to be an expert on every subject on which he or she may need to take a view.

At the same time, it can be hard to identify authoritative and relevant information. Parliamentarians can be deluged with information, but the quality of that information is very variable. They often lack the time or the resources to scrutinise or assimilate what they receive, to work

out what is useful and what is not, or to distinguish what might be biased from what is reliable.

Although a huge amount of information is now available online to almost anyone, much of this can be biased, unreliable or out of date. Though many sources of information and analysis are available to parliamentarians – political parties, civil society organisations, academics, journalists and so on – these often pursue their own agendas. Academic sources may be too complex or theoretical and few, if any, external sources will be able to meet the often short and unpredictable timescales by which parliaments make decisions.

### Benefits

Providing Members of Parliament with **direct access to sources of expertise and analysis** which is dedicated to them is, therefore, very valuable. Such access can improve the effectiveness of a parliament in several ways. At the simplest level, it can improve decision-making by improving Members' understanding of problems and help them reach more realistic and effective legislative solutions to those problems. It can help parliament oversee and comment on the work of government more effectively, by redressing the imbalance between the powers of parliament and those of the executive, which sometimes tries to monopolise information.

Better analysis available to MPs can also help improve the quality of debate. The provision of authoritative facts and analysis, provided by the parliament's own

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research service, can allow debate to focus primarily on differences in values, rather than disagreement over the facts of the case.

More broadly, the use of high-quality information by a legislature can improve the public perception of its actions. The work of parliaments is under close scrutiny by citizens, so needs to be seen as being soundly based on fact and high quality analysis in order to be perceived as being legitimate.

## 2. In-house expertise

Central to the provision of information and analysis in many democratic parliaments is a **dedicated parliamentary research service**. The International Parliamentary Union, which represents some 170 parliaments worldwide, describes a well-resourced parliamentary research service as “one of the building blocks of an effective parliament.” Such services are, it says, “of incalculable value as a source of independent, neutral and non-partisan analysis. They offer a safe space where parliamentarians from all political parties can ask questions and get answers they can trust. They contribute to a parliament’s autonomy by providing a reality check on the perspectives put forward by the executive branch of government, lobby groups and the news media. Their analysis informs a parliament’s legislative and oversight work and provides parliamentarians with the information they need to do their job well.”<sup>1</sup>

Parliamentary research services vary enormously in size, structure and the range of services they offer, but common to almost all of them is that they are **impartial, providing a non-partisan service for all parliamentarians, and that they are dedicated to parliament**. Most are staffed by a number of specialists in particular subject areas – lawyers, economists, scientists and so on – who also have strong skills in research and analysis. Only the largest research services can aim to cover, in any depth, most of the subject areas in which they may need to work, so flexibility and an ability to investigate new subjects are important skills for research staff, especially in newer and smaller services.

### Aims of a research service

The main purpose of a parliamentary research service is to provide **objective information, analysis and advice** in which parliamentarians from all parties can have confidence. Its aim is to save busy Members of Parliament considerable time by sorting out what information is useful and relevant to their work from the enormous amount of information to which

they potentially have access, much of which may be unreliable or presented from a narrow perspective, or is simply hard to find. It offers Members the collective memory, experience and dedication to parliament of those who work in it. It can provide easy access to reliable and useful sources to support the work of the parliament. It can improve scrutiny and the quality of policy making by providing contrary arguments to those provided by purely political sources. And it can tailor its work to the timescale to which a parliament operates and anticipate the issues that are debated.

The work of a parliamentary research service can be seen as that of an ‘information broker,’ scanning the world of knowledge for information that can throw light on the nature of public policy issues and then recasting that information in a way that can be readily used in the parliament. This is likely to include looking at different policy approaches and explaining them in a politically neutral manner, and doing this within often tight timescales. Research for parliaments is not primary academic research, which is usually carried out over a long period. Indeed a better way of expressing the aim of parliamentary research is ‘policy analysis.’

### Links to the library

A well-run parliamentary library can be an invaluable source and organiser of information that can be used by all those in parliament. Library staff have the skills to find and manage information and make it easily available, whether in hard copy or online. However, the research capacity of many parliaments goes beyond the typical work of a library, which will usually find existing material on a topic and present it to the user for evaluation and further study. A research service assesses the information available and **adds value** to it by creating a new information product which analyses, or at least synthesises, information from a range of sources in a form that is immediately useful for busy parliamentarians, where and when they need it. Good relationships between the library and research service are valuable, though, and they are closely linked in the administrative structure in most parliaments.

## 3. Who can benefit?

Parliamentary research services can support a number of (overlapping) groups of users:

- **Individual Members of Parliament.** Information and analysis can be provided to assist individual MPs from all parties in various aspects of their duties, including making speeches inside or outside

Parliament; detailed work in committee; putting well-informed questions to ministers and others; drafting motions or amendments to Bills; supporting the development of Member-led proposals for legislation; media appearances; dealing with constituency issues and cases; overseas visits; and more general policy development. Research for individual MPs is usually provided in confidence to the MP concerned.

- **Parliamentary committees.** If parliamentary committees are to be effective in their work of scrutinising legislation, finance and the activities of government, they must be able to draw upon high quality, independent, research and information. This might include:
  - » legal analysis of Bills (for example on compatibility with the Constitution, other national laws or international laws and treaty obligations);
  - » background material on legislation or other public policy issues that are being dealt with by the committee;
  - » budget analyses;
  - » analysing and providing second opinions on the information provided to committees by government, civil society bodies and others contributing to their work;
  - » assessing whether government has implemented the actions it committed to take;
  - » suggesting expert witnesses or questions that the committee can put to them;
  - » the organisation of seminars on a topic; and
  - » drafting reports.

How committees obtain this support varies. In some countries such services are provided by a central research service serving all the information needs of the parliament. In others, research support is provided by staff dedicated solely to the work of committees. Both models have their merits and may often reflect the size and history of a parliament as well as the availability of the necessary expertise and the relative priority given to research support for committees. Whatever the precise organisational model, it is sensible if all researchers work closely together wherever possible. In many countries, committees are also empowered to employ their own expert advisors on a temporary basis, in order to draw on specialised advice for specific pieces of work.

- **The Speaker and the 'Bureau'.** All Parliaments require mechanisms for determining the organisation of parliamentary business and for

making decisions on the finance and administration of the Parliament itself. These mechanisms are usually operated through a formally constituted body, or bodies, most likely chaired by the Speaker and often described as 'the Bureau'. A research service may provide a support service to the Speaker and Bureau, for example by providing analysis to inform decisions on the scheduling of debates or the selection of MPs to speak, or to be members of committees; or providing background on topical issues in the countries of incoming official delegations.

- **Political blocs.** The formal status of political blocs varies considerably between parliaments – some have their own offices and staff and provide direct support to members of their parties. Though research capacity within blocs will likely focus on the development and support of their own policy arguments and party political priorities, it will often wish to draw on the more objective expertise and analysis provided by parliamentary research staff. It is sensible, therefore, for a parliamentary research service to consider whether and how it wishes to work with blocs to complement other, less objective sources of research and information.
- **Parliamentary delegations.** A research service can provide briefings on subjects to be discussed in assemblies attended by delegations from their parliament.
- **The Parliamentary administration.** While Members of Parliament are the main focus of the work of a research service, it can also provide support on occasion to the work of senior members of the parliamentary administration.
- **The public.** While the primary role of a parliamentary research service must be to serve parliament itself, there is scope for it to provide information to the public in two main ways. First, if it produces briefings on legislation or other topical issues that are made available to all MPs, these can also be provided to the general public, either on request or through the parliament website. This can improve the public's understanding and appreciation of the work of parliament. Secondly, some research services are responsible for the production of statistics and other information on the work of parliament itself and for making these publicly available. A parliamentary research service that puts trusted, relevant and accessible information into the public domain can serve a valuable purpose in informing wider debate and raising the

reputation of parliament in the eyes of the public.

#### 4. Different types of parliamentary research

The provision of written research and analysis to individual Members of Parliament is the core work of almost every parliamentary research service. Most do this both reactively, in response to specific requests from users, and proactively, where the needs of users are anticipated. Most work in the latter category is in the form of written briefings on current legislation and other topical issues of concern – these might be subjects where legislation is likely in future, or national and international developments which are in the minds of parliamentarians and the public because they have received a lot of coverage in the media.

##### Proactive research

Proactive briefings can vary widely in scope, format and length and a research service may produce different kinds of output to meet different needs. Among the types of briefing that can be produced are (this is not an exhaustive list):

- A balanced analysis of the background, history and content of a piece of current legislation, incorporating a range of views and comment on the subject.
- Analysis of the background and current position on a particular topical issue.
- A comparative analysis of the law or practice in other countries on a particular issue.
- A brief note along the lines of Frequently Asked Questions on a specific topic of current interest.
- A compilation of selected press reports on a topical issue or relevant to a forthcoming debate.
- A chronology relevant to a topical issue.
- A bibliography or reading list on a topical subject, preferably with easy-to-follow links to the source material.
- Economic and social indicators or background statistics relevant to a particular issue.
- Information packages for parliamentary delegations.

Such documents can be made available in printed form – usually in a standard format that makes them instantly recognisable as being the work of the research service – and made available as widely as possible; and electronically, for example through a parliamentary intranet or website. Increasingly, parliamentary research services make use of digital outlets, such as blogs

and social media, to make information available to a wider audience, with greater immediacy and in accessible form.

Some research services also provide various types of **training**, seminars and learning materials that are designed to help Members of Parliament – and their personal staff if they have them – learn more about a subject and develop their understanding of it. For example, research service subject specialists might invite one or more outside experts on a subject to lead a seminar about an issue, answer questions, consider the range of sources available for further research and provide a written summary of the proceedings.

##### Supporting legislative work

Central to the work of many parliamentary research services is a commitment to **providing proactive research** in advance of the key parliamentary stages of a piece of **legislation**. At the start of the legislative process, for example, the research service might produce a briefing pack that addresses many of the points listed above in respect of the bill in question. At later stages it may provide Members with updated information reflecting the progress of the bill, how it has been amended, emerging arguments and so on.

Many will also use the subject expertise of their staff to prepare papers on other issues of political interest – both anticipating demand from Members and also helping to provide some shape to the debate by highlighting the most important aspects of a topic and illuminating these with high quality, politically impartial, balanced briefing which focuses on facts and assists MPs to add their own political value to the debate.

##### Responding to MPs' requests for information

The other major area of work of most parliaments' research services is **responding to requests for information** from individual parliamentarians. The requests that MPs make can range from a substantial written briefing on a significant policy issue to a question requiring an almost instant oral answer in anticipation of a question to a minister or a media interview, for example. Depending on the resources available, the research service may be able only to provide written answers to MPs' requests after a minimum notice period, or may be in a position to allow Members to consult specialist staff with little or no notice in order to get immediate information or insight into an issue.

In many parliaments individual Members are able to bring forward their own proposals for legislation. In some, the research service will provide extensive support to help the Member develop the policy thinking and financial information behind the legislative proposal as the Bill is taken through its parliamentary stages. A unit separate from the research service, staffed by specialist lawyers, will often do the technical work on legislative drafting but the research service can provide assistance by helping develop concepts and consider the economic, social and legal impacts of proposed new laws.

## 5. Specialised units

The scrutiny and oversight of financial matters is a vital function of parliaments. But most Members of Parliament are not financial experts and therefore need access to specialised information and expertise if they are to properly carry out their work on financial and budget issues. Many parliamentary research services will, therefore, seek to employ one or more economists, statisticians or financial experts, even if they are quite small.

### Budget offices

Some parliaments have taken this role further by establishing a specific Parliamentary Budget Office which undertakes functions such as analysing the government's fiscal plans and its annual budget proposals and providing both committees and individual MPs with financial analysis of policy proposals. These Budget offices have differing levels of independence. One example is Canada's Parliamentary Budget Officer who is mandated to provide independent and objective analysis to Parliament on the state of the nation's finances, the government's estimates and trends in the Canadian economy; and upon request from a committee or parliamentarian, to estimate the financial cost of any proposal for matters over which Parliament has jurisdiction. The Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has established a network of these offices and guidance on best practice for their working.<sup>2</sup>

### Science and technology

Another area to which some parliaments have paid special attention is science and technology. The UK Parliament's Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST), for example, provides accessible overviews of academic research from across the sciences, runs seminars and other events on science and technology topics and runs fellowship schemes through which doctoral students are sponsored to

spend a period working in parliament.<sup>3</sup>

## 6. Connecting parliament and civil society

An important role of the research service in many parliaments is to facilitate the connection between the parliament and civil society. This is increasingly seen as an essential aspect of parliamentary work: enabling Members and committees to benefit directly from the expertise and experiences of civil society and members of the public directly affected by public policy, and reflecting the work of parliament back to the general public.

Even where a research service is small and may therefore lack the capacity to carry out all the functions discussed above, it can provide an important role in bringing the expertise that is found in many external organisations, in particular Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) and the academic sector, to parliament. One way in which this can be done is by organising seminars on current issues, in which internal or external experts are brought in to explain and discuss specific topics, either to the relevant committee or to MPs more generally. This approach can be extended so that the direct engagement of the public and external groups is a significant element of the work of committees, providing MPs and committees with unique exposure to external expertise and 'real life' acquaintance with the impact of public policy.

Some CSOs, while undoubtedly being important sources of expertise, pursue their own specific agendas. Academic research, while important, can often be complex or theoretical. A clear benefit of having a parliamentary research service as mediator between parliament and such external sources is that it can moderate the impact of such factors, by providing a clear parliamentary context for the engagement and by making clear that it is parliament that owns the information and analysis they provide.

## 7. Developing a parliamentary research service

Parliamentary research services are generally shaped by the culture and traditions of their countries and their legislatures and there is no single model for developing new services. As the Inter-Parliamentary Union's guidelines point out, however, there are some commonly-agreed steps which help to shape thinking when planning a new research service or expanding an existing one. Precisely how these steps will be implemented will depend

on part on the budget available for the service and the degree of access it has to corporate support.

#### Define a mandate

- What are the overall objectives of the research service? This might start with a vision for several years' time which then shapes thinking about the practical steps need to achieve that vision.
- Who may access the service? Will this just be MPs (and their personal staff if they have them) and committees, say, or will the offices of political party blocs also be able to use the service? Will some aspects of the service (for example, proactively produced briefings available to all MPs) also be available to the general public? And so on.
- What types of services will be offered (see section 4, above)? How can priorities be managed to balance the likely demand for work for committees, requests from individual parliamentarians for customised work, and the need for general analysis providing all MPs with analysis of topical issues?
- Where will the research service sit in the overall organisational structure?
- Will the service be established formally – for example by a motion in parliament or even legislation – or be developed more informally?
- What steps can be taken to limit the risk of partisan interference?

#### Determine how the service operates

- Identify staff requirements. Law-making and the economic management of the nation are important for all parliaments, so employing researchers with backgrounds in law or economics and finance will help a new service quickly respond to the most urgent needs for analytical support. If they have other skills that make for good researchers – for example, strong oral and written communication skills and the ability to find and analyse relevant information and synthesise complex ideas, and present the results in a readable manner – they will also be able to turn their hands to other subjects when necessary. As the service is able to expand, staff with knowledge of a wider range of public policy fields will be valuable.
- Ensure access to a range of information sources. Good access to the Internet is first and foremost here, but the availability of physical material, for example newspapers and legal and parliamentary sources, is also important, and the parliamentary library is likely to play a role

in this. Also important is the development of relationships with external sources of knowledge, including government ministries, CSOs and NGOs, universities, research centres and think tanks.

- A service charter can be a useful tool that both summarises the scope of the services provided and helps manage expectations. This states what the service will commit to provide to its users, spells out the parameters that guide how services are delivered, and states what is and what is not within the scope of the service.

#### Build relationships

- In order to be effective and to meet the needs of a parliament and its members, the expertise of a research service needs to be focused on the issues and priorities of Members themselves. Clear and direct communication between Members, committees and research staff is, therefore, crucial, both to explain what services are available and to obtain feedback on these services so they can be refined and improved in future. The products that the research service generates should be made available where their users spend time – this may be through a parliamentary Intranet or website, via email, or physically in hard copy close to Members' offices, for example.
- A parliamentary research service will succeed only if it has the support of the Speaker, Secretary General and other senior staff, to ensure that it works well with other parts of the administration and is provided with a suitable budget, staffing and wider administrative support.
- Good relationships with various bodies outside parliament will also help enrich the sources on which the research service can draw and help it learn from the experience of others doing similar work. These will include agencies such as supreme audit institutions; research colleagues in other parliaments, many of which have established regional networks that provide mutual support and learning; and the experience and expertise that is available from parliamentary strengthening projects.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> International Parliamentary Union. Guidelines for Parliamentary Research Services, 2015. <http://www.ifla.org/publications/node/9759>

<sup>2</sup> OECD Network of Parliamentary Budget Officials and Independent Fiscal Institutions (PBO) <http://www.oecd.org/gov/budgeting/oecdnetworkofparliamentarybudgetofficialspbo.htm>

<sup>3</sup> European Parliamentary Technology Assessment (<http://www.eptanetwork.org/>) provides background on 18 such institutions in Europe.

<sup>4</sup> There is considerable more detail of these steps in the Guidelines themselves – see Note 1.

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