



Submission: why the hard copy requirements for tabled parliamentary documents should be reduced or eliminated

Biotext is a science writing, editing and design company providing services to many government clients.

Through our work, it has become apparent that the unnecessary requirements for printing of tabled parliamentary documents has a very high financial and environmental cost for Australia, and that it is restricting the accessibility and transparency of government information.

Background

Australians increasingly expect government departments and agencies to use digital channels to provide information and communicate with citizenry.

This reflects broader community values, where information across all topics and disciplines – services, health, recreation, business, investment, research, history – is being accessed digitally. Information managers, for example journals and library services across Australia and the world, are moving to make their books and other printed material available digitally.

Yet, going against this tide, the Australian Government still requires a significant number of hard copies of all tabled documents and reports.

According to the *Guidelines for the presentation of documents to the parliament (including government documents, government responses to committee reports ministerial statements, annual reports and other instruments)*¹, 182 copies of tabled government documents must be printed, covering:

- 5 copies PM&C Tabling Officer
- 40 copies Senate Table Office
- 30 copies House of Representatives Table Office
- 40 copies Press Gallery
- 9 copies Parliamentary Library
- 30 copies Parliamentary Paper Series
- 28 copies Commonwealth Library Deposit and Free Issue Schemes.

This requirement should be reduced or abolished, for five key reasons.

¹ www.dpmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/publications/PMC_Tabling_Guidelines_Feb_2016_0.pdf

1 The printing task costs over \$14 million every year.

Around 7000 documents and reports are tabled in Parliament each year².

To print 182 copies of a 100-page report costs around \$2000.00, and many are much longer than this. The hard copy requirement therefore costs the Australian Government at least \$14 million every year. Storage for all these documents is an additional cost.

(By contrast, the cost of supplying 110 \$500 tablets for the Senate, House of Representatives and Press Gallery so that they could access reports online would only be \$55,000.)

2 The printing task has a huge environmental impact.

Printing 182 copies of 7000 100-page reports represents 127.4 million pages every year, which is a huge environmental burden in paper, ink, glues and laminates, and in transport for both the materials and the completed publications.

3 The printing runs counter to government policy.

In 2011, the National Digital Economy Strategy or 'Digital First' was launched, with the aim of advancing Australia as a leading digital economy by 2020, including improving online government service delivery and engagement. This was followed by an update to the strategy in 2013.

The establishment of the Digital Transformation Office (now Agency) in 2015 was a clear and welcome recognition that digital communication continues to be a growing and essential component of government business.

4 The printing requirements can restrict the accessibility and presentation of information.

The Digital First strategy, along with Web Content Accessibility Guidelines, encourages government departments and agencies to make digital information clear and accessible.

However, because the hard copy requirements lock authoring agencies into producing a print publication, they often do not have the time or resources to achieve best practice in the area. For example, they choose to put a Word version or basic HTML online along with the required PDF, rather than developing a well-designed website that would present information clearly and allow effective searching.

As editors and designers, we frequently see government clients choosing the easy option, rather than what their audience may need, because of the printing requirements.

5 The printing is unnecessary.

The guidelines already specify that documents tabled in Parliament must also be available digitally. Almost all government, industry, media and community members who wish to access the documents do so digitally.

If hard copies are required, this decision can be made by individual readers or the authoring agency. Individual readers can decide whether they need to print from the online PDF or contact the authoring agency for a copy. If the authoring agency requires hard copies for specific audiences, then they can organise a print run or can also print as required from the PDF.

² webguide.gov.au/required-information/documents-tabled-in-parliament/

Indeed, we suspect that few, if any, of the 182 copies are actually used by the areas or groups to which they are sent. It would be useful to assess this to inform potential reform. For example, perhaps some of the recipients of the 182 could be taken off the list, or fewer copies could be provided.

In conclusion

With simple changes in tabling rules, Australia could save money, reduce its impact on the environment, and help to ensure that government information is presented in the clearest and most accessible format.

There are already moves to reduce the printing requirements for departmental annual reports, and this could easily be extended to all tabled documents.

We therefore urge you to reduce or eliminate the hard copy tabling requirements for the Australian Parliament.

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