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JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON PUBLICATIONS

Reference: Distribution of the parliamentary papers series

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**JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON
PUBLICATIONS**

Monday, 28 November 2005

Members: Mrs Draper (*Chair*), Senator Watson (*Deputy Chair*), Senators Johnston, Marshall, Nash, Polley, Sterle and Wortley and Mr Adams, Mr Baker, Mr Baldwin, Ms Corcoran, Mr Hayes and Mrs Hull

Members in attendance: Senator Wortley and Mr Adams, Mr Baker, Ms Corcoran and Mrs Draper

Terms of reference for the inquiry:

To inquire and report on the distribution of the Parliamentary Papers Series (PPS), with particular reference to:

The potential impact of changes to the distribution of the PPS made by the Presiding Officers, namely the tightening of eligibility guidelines and the cessation of blister packs to commence on 1 January 2006;

The provision of the PPS in a digital format, either as an alternative or an adjunct to the hard copy series;

The feasibility of a subscription service, either in digital or hard copy form; and

The possibility of partial or full cost recovery for the series.

WITNESSES

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Committee met at 11.19 am

ALEXANDER, Mr Peter, Manager, Online Development, Service Delivery Branch, Australian Government Information Management Office, Department of Finance and Administration

CALLIONI, Mr Patrick, Division Manager, Australian Government Information Management Office, Department of Finance and Administration

LALOR, Mr John, Manager, Service Delivery Branch, Australian Government Information Management Office, Department of Finance and Administration

CHAIR (Mrs Draper)—Welcome. I declare open the Joint Committee on Publications inquiry into the distribution of the Parliamentary Paper Series. Although the committee does not require you to give evidence under oath, I should advise you that public hearings are legal proceedings of the parliament and warrant the same respect as proceedings of the House and Senate. The giving of false or misleading evidence is a serious matter and may be regarded as a contempt of parliament. Are there any corrections or amendments you would like to make to your submission?

Mr Callioni—No, there are not.

CHAIR—Do you wish to make a statement in relation to the submission, or would you care to make some introductory remarks?

Mr Callioni—If I may, just to set the context about what it is that we do in the Australian Government Information Management Office and what it is that we do not do.

CHAIR—Certainly.

Mr Callioni—We are part of the Department of Finance and Administration. One of our roles in that organisation is to look after the government's online publications. The main tool that we use to do that is the publications.gov.au web site, which we manage in consultation with a stakeholder group. That stakeholder group includes the National Library of Australia, the National Archives of Australia and several of the major agencies in government that publish—for example, the Australian Bureau of Statistics, the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry and the Attorney-General's Department.

The web site is a relatively recent innovation; it followed the closure of the Australian government bookshops. The web site was released in October 2004. It includes details on how to obtain publications that were previously available through the bookshops, links to agency publication pages so that people do not have to search individual agency web sites, and links to the National Library of Australia, parliamentary and other publication resources in government. The web site was reviewed and improved, and the latest version was released in April 2005. The major improvement to the web site was the addition of a whole-of-government web site search capability. The design for that latest release was prepared in consultation with the stakeholders that I mentioned, plus others.

Our minister, the Special Minister of State, Senator the Hon. Eric Abetz, has certainly been pleased with the web site and has received quite a lot of positive feedback from the community. However, we are still working on providing access to the records of Australian government publications held in the National Library of Australia's national bibliographic database, which will be a significant addition to the web site. We are also working with government agencies to improve the overall performance of government departments and agencies in making publications available. The focus of our work at the moment is producing a web guide for agencies, which is about reinforcing standards, reinforcing the expectations that government has of agencies when it comes to publications, and giving us the means then to review and assist agencies to do what they are supposed to do. The web guide was launched in March and, based on the feedback we have received, it is already having an impact on how agencies are performing.

The publications.gov.au website is certainly being used. There has been a 40 per cent increase since July 2004 when it was launched. There has been a continuing increase since the capacity to search the index was released in April. It is now up to 610 visitors a day, and increasing. They are not huge numbers when you compare them to large commercial web sites but for a government web site they are reasonable numbers. The fact that they are increasing is encouraging.

Ms CORCORAN—I must admit that I have only been on your web site once, and that was this morning, in preparation for coming here. I was impressed that I put in an inquiry and three or four reports came up almost immediately from different government agencies, which I guess is the point of the web site—that you don't have to go to each one or think about which one to go to.

Mr Callioni—You don't have to know which agency has published what.

Ms CORCORAN—Exactly, and that was very useful. In other discussions we have had about this whole business of whether we stop doing the printed versions of reports we talked about disadvantage when departments change who they belong to or change names or somehow move and perhaps older reports are no longer there. For example, you might have the current report but not the annual report of the year before, that sort of stuff. How do you overcome that? Or is that not able to be overcome?

Mr Callioni—The web guide is intended to overcome some of those difficulties. There are rules, standards and expectations in terms of what departments should have on their web site, and that includes earlier versions of significant documents like annual reports. There are also processes that are to be used when web sites are decommissioned or where agencies transfer from one portfolio to another. The problem is that those procedures are not always adhered to. The publication of the web guide and the restatement of the government's expectations have given us and organisations like the Australian National Audit Office a much greater capacity to review what agencies are doing and to influence their behaviour if they are not living up to expectations as expressed in the standards. So you should be able to find older annual reports. Even if they are in an archived part of the agency's web site, that should not matter. The search tool should still find them. The only reason you would not find it is if it has actually been removed from the web site, which should not happen.

Ms CORCORAN—You talk about this giving you the capacity to track those departments that do not always do the right thing because they do not know about it just yet or whatever. Is that a big proportion or is it not a very common occurrence?

Mr Lalor—I think the simple answer is we do not know. There are 145-odd agencies out there. So I guess what we are relying on is that, as we move on with more of the search technology, that will give us a better idea of what is out there and what is not going out there. We are not sure at this stage what proportion of what agencies might be producing is not going up on to their web sites, but we are hopeful that as we move the technology along we will at least find ways of improving our ability to find out what is not going up on the web site, if that makes sense.

Ms CORCORAN—Yes, it does.

Mr ADAMS—That is an issue the committee started to have some concerns about—that we do not have a monitor. I take it from what you have just said that your role as the monitor is not to see that departments comply with their obligations under the online information services obligations. You do not enforce that? Are you the enforcer or the regulator of that?

Mr Callioni—We are not the regulator or the enforcer, but the responsibility for auditing whether agencies are carrying out their responsibilities does rest primarily with the audit function, be it internal or external, through the Australian National Audit Office. We work quite closely with the National Audit Office to ensure that, where there are standards like the ones to which you referred, they are included in regular audit programs.

Mr ADAMS—So what is our best practice? We have had some evidence that, for the paper series, it can be 2½ years before the agency puts the paper forward—so it does not end up in the series for that long. I think that is outrageous. There may be some reasons for it but there needs to be some best practice put in place in our processes of government to make sure that departments table things and put them online. This committee gave a tick to getting rid of the bookshops. I think there is an obligation that we bring the process in. I take Mr Lalor's point that we need to have the tools to be able to do that. We would really value your comments on that, because your agency is one that has a whole-of-government approach to it.

Mr Callioni—In part that is true, but of course we should not forget our colleagues in the National Archives and the National Library. The National Archives have the obligation to manage and preserve records, including those. That is one reason why we do not see ourselves as the regulators or the monitors. The National Library have a responsibility for making sure that publications are accessible to the public. Again, we do not have that obligation. We do not want to take over what they do. Our role is to work with them to make sure that, across the three of us, what happens is what government and the parliament expect. I would say we are still some way off but I would also say, having been in the Public Service for about 30 years, that in the old days, pre computers, getting access to government publications used to be very difficult nonetheless. That is not by way of excuse. I guess, in a way, the new technology that we have has made the problem more visible because we do now have the capacity to solve problems that were insoluble 20 years ago. That is a good thing—expectations should be rising—but it is going to take us a little while yet before we are able to give you the level of performance you expect. Certainly I would agree that 2½ years is in no way an acceptable time frame.

Mr ADAMS—So, as you have just said, there are different obligations on the National Archives, the National Library and you, with your mandate. But nobody has an overview. If the agency does not put the paper online or does not do what they are supposed to do and they are getting away with it for 2½ years, somehow they are not getting a letter from your minister or some minister saying, ‘You’re out of order.’ Do you have any evidence of agencies where information has not been made available to you, where there has been a failure of agencies to do that?

Mr Callioni—I would certainly say—it would be a statement I could make with absolute certainty—that there is information that agencies have not made available, but I would not have seen an occasion where it has been done on purpose.

Mr ADAMS—I am not saying that.

Mr Callioni—It is a failure of the process, not a lack of—

Mr ADAMS—I am coming from the point of view of a person that wants the information, whether it is an academic or somebody doing a report—they want that particular information and it is not available. It should be available to them. I just think that we need to get an overview to make sure that this information gets there in time.

Mr Callioni—My colleague Mr Lalor made reference to research. One of the great things that the online world makes possible is the ability to search much more quickly and much more deeply into holdings in agencies than has ever been possible in the physical world.

Mr ADAMS—There is not a problem with that, but it is when the information is not there or the old report has been taken off. Who is looking after that process? How do we go back? The present system is good, but it is the old information and seeking to make sure there is a process people can seek through. I think that is what we are trying to achieve.

Mr Callioni—I think that is our objective also. I repeat that, with the National Archives and the National Library, we are going to continue. If we appear before you again in a year or two years, we will be able to report improved performance but I still doubt that we will be able to report perfect performance.

Mr ADAMS—What about 99.9 per cent?

Mr Callioni—That is close enough!

Mr Alexander—I have one thing to add. As Mr Callioni mentioned, the web guide consolidates a number of standards. We have a number of legacy publication type standards that have existed for a long time and brought a lot of confusion into publishing electronically. With the web guide, we have consolidated those into one document and we are integrating further into the one document. So it gives agencies a very clear list of their obligations. If we give agencies a clear list of their obligations, we also give the Audit Office a clear list of their obligations which means that is easier to monitor, particularly for the Audit Office. At the moment, they might only audit one or two particular requirements. Now they have a full list of requirements for audit.

Mr ADAMS—We might ask the Audit Office a few questions.

Senator WORTLEY—My question is about the guidelines that you just talked about. Do guidelines exist which tell an organisation about not the content but the way a report is presented, so that somebody who does not have a lot of speed on their system is still able to download it? If you download something that is full of colours, dance and movement, it can take ages to download. Do you have recommendations or rules?

Mr Callioni—Our rules are intended to maximise accessibility. My colleague Mr Alexander can talk about that.

Mr Alexander—We follow international accessibility standards. There are World Wide Web Consortium WC3 standards on accessibility which we follow. All our agencies are required to meet them to at least A standard, which is the basic standard. Most agencies try for the next level up, which is AA. Australian government web sites are very different now to what they might have been in, say, the late nineties, when lots of Flash web sites came up that had dancing colours. Most Australian government web sites are not anywhere near that anymore. They are very basic information type sites. They might have a little bit of colour but there are always accessibility standards to meet, not only requirements of disabled users but also requirements of remote and regional users.

A particular concern is putting up huge documents and reports. There are requirements that say if you put up a report over a certain size, you have to break them up into chapters and various bits and pieces like that. So it is something that we do very carefully and it is something we monitor. Through the advent of our search, we can check the size of the documents. If we see particularly big documents, we might say to an agency, 'You have got a five-megabyte document there. That might be a pretty significant download in one chunk. Do you want to break it down smaller so we can monitor that?'

Mr Callioni—So there are standards and we have some capacity to monitor if they have been adhered to.

Senator WORTLEY—Do you have any views as to how you, together with the National Archives and the National Library, can work to achieve a better, more up-to-date outcome?

Mr Callioni—The best outcome possible is when all publications are easily available and, to go back to Ms Corcoran's point, easily accessible as well. The fact that we have to deal with a lot of older publications creates a significant problem. Anything that is published now most likely would go on the web site in a format that is easily findable and easily downloadable, but there are a lot of documents up there that have been there for four, five and 10 years. Someone would have to go in there and change the shape of the document and given that there are thousands, that is going to be a laborious exercise.

So I would say that, in terms of new documents, I am pretty confident that they are being published in a way that makes them easy to find and easy to download. Where we do continue to have a problem is older documents and previous versions of documents. I will use the word 'legacy'. They are things that have been up there for some time and perhaps predated the online

world. We are working closely with the National Library and National Archives to find ways of making those documents easier to find.

Senator WORTLEY—So what would someone doing research who needed an older document that was not online need to do to access it?

Mr Callioni—Through the service <http://www.publications.gov.au/>, they can still find that document. They will be told who published it and where it can be obtained. So even though it might not be available in an electronic form, the user will be told quite clearly who published it, when and how to get it.

Senator WORTLEY—And that information is available online?

Mr Alexander—When you search on the publications web site, you will get two types of results. One is a link to that particular document. The other is an extract from the National Library's national bibliographic database, which is the library reference for that information.

Mr Callioni—Which means at least it gives you an idea what the document was about. You might then make a decision about whether it is actually the document you wanted or not, so you do not just get the title.

Senator WORTLEY—Looking at documents published over the years, how do you determine which documents are going to be put online? What are the criteria by which you decide which annual reports or which documents are going to be put online?

Mr Callioni—Agencies are required to place documents like annual reports online. Any key reporting documents are required to be placed online. With some other publications, I think that is a matter of judgment as to whether they should be published online or not. But with key reporting documents, documents that are there to establish an agency's accountability or documents that are fundamental to policy that a minister might have released, the expectation will be that those should be available online.

Senator WORTLEY—I am referring specifically to documents that have been published previously in hard copy but are not available online.

Mr Callioni—If they were ever only published in hard copy, it is unlikely that an agency would now decide, five or 10 years later, to make them available electronically.

Mr Alexander—The National Archives do digitise some documents that they determine to be historical.

Mr Callioni—And they are looking at a project that would involve digitising a lot more of the government's paper holdings, but that is a matter you would have to discuss with them. You could imagine what a huge task it would be.

Mr Alexander—But that is also not necessarily to make them publicly available; that is to archive them for historical records and such. They would probably have reference to them, but they may not publish the full document.

Mr ADAMS—Do you think the digital version of the Parliamentary Paper Series should end up at the Archives?

Mr Alexander—Historically, yes, I would think so, definitely. You would have to talk to Archives, but the Parliamentary Paper Series would seem to be the type of document that they would collect and archive.

Mr ADAMS—And the National Library, I think.

Mr Alexander—Yes, and the National Library as well—those two definitely.

Mr ADAMS—They are saying that the life of digital information on a CD might be limited to 10 or 15 years.

Mr Lalor—It is like paper. Years ago the same was being said about paper files; that they would have a certain life and that sort of thing too. I do not know the exact technology that the Archives intend using in this proposal, but I am sure they would take that into consideration. Technology these days probably lasts a lot longer than, I guess, we will.

Mr Callioni—The way I understand their approach to storage is that it is supposed to be a permanent record and it has to have at least as much durability as paper. It is interesting, by the way, that the most durable records still are paper, especially if it is good acid-free paper. I love books myself. Paper is attractive.

Mr ADAMS—I love paper.

CHAIR—With regard to your previous answer about the reports that are required to be published online, does AGIMO check that all of the agencies' reports are online after tabling in the parliament?

Mr Alexander—No, we have not historically done any checking of what is published. We know what is published, but we do not have any mechanism to see what is not.

Mr Callioni—Although, we probably now have the capacity to. Now that we have a search capacity, we probably have the ability to do that. Beforehand, we would have had to go to each one of the 100 and however many government departments and agencies there are and check them individually.

Mr Alexander—And there is a piece of work we are looking to do now. Since the last time we were before the committee, we have put online the full list of the Parliamentary Paper Series back to about 1996. It is just the list of the documents. The next piece of work we are looking to do with the secretariat, if that is available online, is to have a link to that document. Now that we are getting the lists and putting them on the publications site, we will be going through a process of saying: 'Is this available online? We will have a link to it if it is.' If not, we can ask the question, 'Why not?'

CHAIR—In that case, does AGIMO see that it is perhaps their role in the future to be checking that all of the agencies' reports are online after tabling in the parliament or is that primarily somebody else's role?

Mr Callioni—Without giving a very complex answer, the way the parliament has structured the Public Service is to place the responsibility for running each agency in the hands of the CEO, whoever he or she might be. The way the Public Service operates, that is where the responsibility sits. There are external audit capabilities in the Australian National Audit Office. It is up to us to apply these standards, and it is up to us to work with the Library and the Archives to make sure the standards are applied broadly and, where we are able, to identify and remedy shortcomings, but I do not think our charter would include policing that. That does not mean to say that government cannot give us that charter but, at the moment, we would not see ourselves as having it.

CHAIR—There has been some criticism of CanPrint Communications in relation to claims for library deposit scheme documents. Who is responsible for chasing agencies who do not comply with their requirements? Is there a role, perhaps for AGIMO or somebody else, in ensuring that these agencies meet those requirements?

Mr Lalor—CanPrint has the current contract for that. That contract is administered through our office. The contract works on the basis that the agencies are to make available a number of publications to CanPrint, which distributes them. Again, we do not have a formal process of checking what publications—we know what is distributed but, again, if an agency chooses not to do that, at this point in time we rely on the awareness of the program and of the standards to ensure that the correct thing is done. That contract is out to tender at the moment.

Mr Callioni—However, if the committee has any specific cases where it is aware that a publication has not been made available, if the information could be made available to us outside these proceedings that could be followed up. In fact, it could be relevant to the tender process.

CHAIR—Thank you very much, gentlemen.

[11.52 am]

BARR, Mr James, Deputy Director-General, National Archives of Australia

ELLIS, Dr Stephen, Assistant Director-General, Government Branch, National Archives of Australia

CHAIR—Welcome. Although the committee does not require you to give evidence under oath, I should advise you that public hearings are legal proceedings of the parliament and warrant the same respect as proceedings of the House and Senate themselves. The giving of false or misleading evidence is a serious matter and may be regarded as a contempt of parliament. Are there any corrections or amendments you would like to make to your submission?

Mr Barr—No.

CHAIR—Do you wish to make a statement in relation to the submission, or would you care to make some introductory remarks?

Mr Barr—The submission was prepared in the context of responding directly to the terms of reference. Its perspective is from the point of view of researchers who use the National Archives and the reading room at the National Archives. It is also from the perspective of our library, where the parliamentary papers are kept.

Ms CORCORAN—You make the comment that you do not support the provision of the parliamentary paper series in digital format to replace hard copies. Can you tell me why? I know your submission is not very long, but I have not read the whole lot yet.

Mr Barr—It is essentially because they are not perfect substitutes. The audience that uses them is likely to be an audience which will also welcome a paper record.

Ms CORCORAN—We are trying to get to the bottom of who uses these, and it must be a range of different people with different sorts of access limits or capacities. Do the people who prefer a hard copy do so because of simply being able to access the things or because they do not want to have to print it off themselves? What do you see as the pros and cons?

Mr Barr—I suspect the story would vary considerably depending on the user, but I would also guess that it goes to a familiarity with the paper record. Indeed, the researchers who are coming to our reading rooms are coming because they want to access primary source documents.

Dr Ellis—I think also there is an issue with very large documents. Reading very large documents in digital form on screen is—

Ms CORCORAN—Hopeless.

Dr Ellis—a very onerous and tedious task. Reading large documents is a tedious task at the best of times, but particularly on screen it is quite demanding. Then, if people as an alternative

have to arrange to print it off, either they have to bear that cost themselves or someone else has to bear that cost. That said, of course, it depends on what digital format the papers are put in. Again, as a previous witness said, if the materials are in digital format, you can actually apply search mechanisms across the digital content a great deal more flexibly than you can normally with printed material. So there are pros and cons. Again, as James said, it will come down to the particular circumstances in which the researcher is working.

Ms CORCORAN—My guess is that your preference would be for records to be held in both hard copy and digitally.

Mr Barr—Yes, that is correct.

Dr Ellis—In relation to this, yes.

Mr ADAMS—The issue of preserving records and agencies maintaining longer-term reports et cetera on line or having them otherwise available has come up several times. I think some agencies pull off their old reports, and then they are not available for people who may want them. You keep copies of all reports. I guess you are the end product. Your role is slightly different. We are coming across this: several agencies have roles but nobody has an overview role to make sure that everything is preserved. You preserve things but it is not your prime task to make things available for people. How do you go about preserving agencies' reports, for example? Do you have every agency report from 1901?

Ms CORCORAN—Can I interrupt, if you do not mind, and question the premise of that?

Mr ADAMS—Please.

Ms CORCORAN—I was interested in your comment that the Archives' role is to preserve, not necessarily to make available. Can I test that?

Dr Ellis—Thank you, Ms Corcoran, for the opportunity to discuss that. I was going to raise that issue myself. It is one of our roles to ensure that records are preserved in an accessible state. Accessibility is controlled by the provisions of the Archives Act, which are aimed at protecting government information for a period of time. In relation to most of the parliamentary papers series, most agency annual reports and other published reports, because those reports and those parliamentary papers have normally been published, there is no continuing government interest in keeping them confidential. So those sorts of provisions of the act do not apply and normally we could readily make available to the public material which a government has previously readily made available to the public.

Having said that, the mechanics of it do not quite work that way. Normally when records come from a government agency to the Archives, they come in accordance with provisions we make under section 24 of the Archives Act, in which we classify all of their records according to their functions and activities and decide which ones can be destroyed immediately, which ones need to be kept for a continuing period of time and which ones ultimately should come to the Archives to be kept for public and government reasons. Annual reports fall into that last category. They would be deemed to come to the Archives. However, they would not come to the Archives in a consistent series; they would come with a whole lot of other records which also at

the same time come into the Archives. So they are not held by the Archives, as it were, in a series of annual reports. In practical terms, they are actually quite tricky to find.

I would not like to assert that we have a copy of every annual report going back to Federation, because the Archives only came into existence in 1948. But if any organisation should have a copy, we should. Because of the manner in which it is accumulated, it would not necessarily be very easy to find, because the final annual report submitted to parliament may well come into the Archives in a file which is today entitled: 'corporate governance annual report 2005'. In 1954, words like 'corporate governance' would not have been used. So, if you can get my drift, it will be there and it will be discoverable through our systems but not as it would be in a library, where they might have a continuous run of annual reports from specific agencies.

Mr ADAMS—You are maintaining hard copies as well as going into digital form?

Dr Ellis—At the moment the classification of records to come to us is based on the function that those records perform regardless of the format they are in. The reality again is that the vast bulk of records that come to the Archives are currently in hard copy. We can accept them. We have accepted in the last few years digital forms of records and we are preserving them in digital form.

Mr ADAMS—What is your view on the issue of how long digital form will take? You must have been to a conference or two where there has been talk about these things. How long do they say a CD keeps—that sort of technology?

Dr Ellis—Particular technologies last very short cycles. Depending on the quality of the CD it can be less than 12 months or it can be longer. It depends on the quality of the particular media. The major challenge, especially with recording media, is that the whole technological cycle occurs so rapidly.

Mr ADAMS—You need something to play it on.

Dr Ellis—Yes, you need something to play it on. When CDs were invented—and still nowadays—they were supported by the audio market. So the reality is that, as long as we are listening to audio CDs and DVDs, there will be machines around that will play them. It is the spin-off from that industry which sustains it in relation to records and publications. That, however, will change, of course. You will be aware that, for example, iPods and other audio devices are starting to move into that field; so eventually those of us still with library shelves full of old LPs who were about to get them off and onto library shelves full of CDs will skip a generation—we will get straight into our iPod. Just how long that cycle of technology will last is anyone's guess too. Because of those reasons in the research works which we have been conducting over the last five years or so, we have avoided tying our preservation strategies to specific media.

Our objective has been to ensure that we can reproduce the essential performance of a particular record regardless of what media we happen to be storing it on from time to time. We believe that is, in the long term, a more sustainable approach. In order to do that, what we are quite careful to do is choose technology which again is right in the middle of the marketplace—is currently supported by the industry and so on. Therefore you can progressively migrate the

documents to other technology without having to have devised a very specialised format for archival preservation. That is feasible now and we are doing it.

Mr ADAMS—Thank you.

Ms CORCORAN—You said before that you are getting some records now in digital format. Do you try to get a hard copy as well?

Dr Ellis—Not normally. Our preference would be to only keep it in digital format.

Ms CORCORAN—Does that then contradict what you were saying earlier about your preference for parliamentary papers being for them to be in hard copy as well as digital?

Dr Ellis—No. I am sorry if I conveyed that impression. What I meant was that in practice, up to date, we have largely received hard copy. I do not think we have received any annual reports or parliamentary papers in non-hard copy or in digital format. The numbers of digital records that we have received have been quite specialised—a couple of royal commissions and things like that. All I meant was that that change is starting to happen, so we do have a small capacity to cope with that at the moment.

There is another complication in relation to the Parliamentary Paper Series in that they are records of the parliament; they are not Commonwealth records. Our principal responsibility is to look after Commonwealth records. There are special regulations under the Archives Act to distinguish between the treatment which will be accorded records of the parliament and records that are produced by parliament but are ordinary Commonwealth administrative records. I am not certain as to which side of that the Parliamentary Paper Series falls on, but that might be something you need to pay attention to.

Ms CORCORAN—Thank you for that. I also want to ask about the AGLS metadata standard. Who enforces that standard or does no-one have responsibility for doing that? Is enforcement necessary? Do most people abide by those standards? What is the general picture?

Dr Ellis—It has had quite a take-up. The National Archives developed that in collaboration with a number of government agencies. It was indicated in the government online strategy that was endorsed by cabinet that government agencies should use the Australian Government Locator Service standard. It is currently being used, as I said, in quite a number of agencies.

Ms CORCORAN—You were here before when we were talking to the previous witnesses. We were asking questions about who chases up reports if, for instance, some agency does not lodge their annual report. Does somebody have responsibility for noticing that and chasing it up?

Dr Ellis—Someone who does not lodge their annual report?

Ms CORCORAN—If something does not get lodged that normally would be lodged, is there a mechanism to chase that up—if they do not send you a copy of their annual report, for instance?

Dr Ellis—Does not lodge it with us? I thought you meant with parliament.

Ms CORCORAN—No, sorry. They just leave you off their mailing list, for instance.

Dr Ellis—No, we do not monitor that in the sense of ensuring that an agency has actually lodged those records with us. Normally the interest of government agencies is to offload as much on to us as they can as early as they can once they can fit it into those classifications. So we have never had to monitor that in relation specifically to reports.

Ms CORCORAN—Thank you.

Mr ADAMS—How many of the papers do you think go missing between the agency and your historical record?

Dr Ellis—In relation to papers tabled in parliament?

Mr ADAMS—No, all papers from departments. Do departments have the choice of making the decision about what they send you? Or is there a mandatory—

Dr Ellis—Under section 24 of the act, we collaborate with government agencies to work out what are called ‘disposal authorities’ or ‘disposal schedules’. Those classify records according to very broad classes, which in most disposal classes would, for example, include a category called ‘reports’. They would then subdivide that category. Agencies would ordinarily apply those disposal authorities to a body of material that they have accumulated over time. Out of that, as I said before, they divide them up into three groups and specify that the highest value group comes to the Archives. When they propose those for transfer to the Archives, we normally check that what they are proposing does fall within that class before we accept them.

In terms of major reports and things like annual reports, I think the production of those reports is surrounded with so much formality and so much obligation in relation to reporting to parliament that it would be quite likely that most of those reports in fact should and would come to the Archives. The sorts of things which would tend not to, which would perhaps fall through the net, would be the unusual reports which are not necessarily high profile or resulting from a notorious case or anything like that.

Mr ADAMS—Those are important ones to get into the record, really, for the social history of the country.

Dr Ellis—Yes, they would be, and in many cases you can think of historical examples where they were. But in a lot of cases such reports, if tabled in parliament, are ordered to be printed by parliament and therefore have got into the Parliamentary Paper Series, so those omissions would be picked up there.

CHAIR—Could you outline, in a nutshell, how costly and/or time consuming the process of accepting a digital record into the Archives custody is?

Dr Ellis—Accepting it into the Archives is not more costly than the other process, because we simply have to confirm that the records are what they purport to be and that they do fall into the correct categories. However, the Archives have not been specifically funded for this transition to a digital environment, and we have only developed a prototype repository to handle this sort of

thing, so doing all of the necessary digital checking of the material is work that we are currently devoting research resources to.

CHAIR—How do you make your digital repository available to the public, and how does the repository compare with the National Library's PANDORA project?

Dr Ellis—At the moment, the prototype repository we have built has preservation, not access, as its primary target. In fact, our repository is not accessible to anything at all. This might sound a bit odd. The purpose of it is to ensure that those materials can be preserved completely without any threat to their integrity, so it is an entirely isolated repository. It is in a security classified facility and it is entirely disconnected from any other networks. That particular prototype repository does not have a short-term public access objective. It has a primary preservation objective. The logic of that is that normally we have to hold records for as long as 30 years before they can become public. Thirty years is quite a long period of time over which to ensure that digital materials remain accessible, so we had to take a lot of precautionary measures about that.

The way we plan that those materials would ultimately become accessible to the public is that after the 30 years have elapsed, or at an appropriate point during it, we would take copies out of that digital repository. We would examine them for exemptions from access under our legislation, and then we would create a copy which could be delivered through our normal internet connections. That copy may well not actually be a complete copy. Under our legislation, we may have to exempt certain parts of certain records. We would ultimately plan to have a public access repository which held those digital copies.

CHAIR—Thank you.

Senator WORTLEY—Do you have a view as to the most appropriate agency to host a central web site of Parliamentary Paper Series documents?

Dr Ellis—We have published, in collaboration with the National Library—I am aware you have received a submission and evidence from the National Library—a set of guidelines for government agencies about the long-term preservation of access to publications and records. The general line of division that is suggested in those guidelines is the distinction between a publication and a record. Of course, a record may become a publication, but usually a publication does not have all of the characteristics of a record. A record normally relates to transactions and is evidence about transactions between various entities, whereas a publication is normally a compendium of information which usually comes out in multiple copies and is duplicated frequently, whereas records tend to be unique. A letter is a letter between two people, and that sort of thing. That is roughly the dividing line we have agreed, allowing that it can be blurred at times.

As the Parliamentary Paper Series has historically and traditionally been treated as a publication—it is a publication of the parliament that is laid on the table and ordered to be printed and so on—our view has been that parliamentary papers would normally be treated as a publication. Therefore, the responsibility, in our joint position, would normally lie with the National Library. That is a very long answer.

Senator WORTLEY—Thank you. I got it in that last sentence.

Dr Ellis—I was trying to explain the background as to why, because I detect that you may well have received a number of witnesses here, all saying, ‘It is not our responsibility, it is the other people’s.’

Senator WORTLEY—Perhaps if I could elaborate a bit. The National Library have indicated they would be willing to host a web site. Do you think that is the appropriate agency to do so?

Dr Ellis—I think it is an appropriate agency, yes. The National Library is strongly committed to the continuity of public access, especially to government publications, and I know they work quite closely with AGIMO on that area. There is a problem in the digital publication area about the continuity of access to materials, as was discussed with the previous witnesses. Materials can be put up and persist on the internet for a short time, but then they can be taken down and are not readily accessible after that. An institution like the library has that as part of their mission.

Senator WORTLEY—The National Archives of Australia said:

The [National Archives of Australia] promotes best practice in the management of government records from the point of creation for as long as they are required to support the needs of government and the people.

I thought that was interesting. How is it determined ‘for as long as they are required to support the needs of government and the people’? I imagine that different people would have different answers in relation to that.

Mr Barr—There is a considerable science to the disposal authorities. It would perhaps take much longer to explain than the committee has time available. If you would like, we could provide you with information after the session.

Dr Ellis—There are some materials on our web site that explain that; a publication called *Why records are kept* explains the principles by which we make those decisions.

Mr Barr—It is also in hard copy.

Senator WORTLEY—I will get it from the web site.

CHAIR—As there are no further questions, I thank you very much, Dr Ellis and Mr Barr, for your very helpful submission. It was very much appreciated by the committee. Thank you very much.

Resolved (on motion by **Ms Corcoran**, seconded by **Senator Wortley**):

That, pursuant to the power conferred by section 2(2) of the Parliamentary Papers Act 1908, this committee authorises publication of the evidence given before it and submissions presented at public hearing this day.

Committee adjourned at 12.21 pm