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3 May 2007

4 MAY 2007

Mr Jason Sherd
Secretary
Joint Publications Committee
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Mr Sherd

Review of printing standards

Besides the Department of the House of Representatives' Annual Report, the most common documents prepared by the Department for presentation to Parliament are reports of parliamentary committees and parliamentary delegations.

Use of colour and illustrations

In regard to the use of colour and illustrations in documents to be tabled in Parliament, the practice of the Department of the House of Representatives is as follows:

- parliamentary committee reports – are prepared fully in accordance with the guidelines;
- delegation reports – are printed in black ink, with modest use of photographs; and
- annual reports – are printed in two colours, with modest use of photographs.

In relation to the Department's annual report, colour and photographs are used to enhance the presentation and readability of the document, at minimal additional cost.

The Department would welcome some additional flexibility in the printing standards to accommodate modest use of photographs in annual reports.

No change to the guidelines is suggested in relation to the Department's other documents.

Costs of producing documents and value for money

The Publications Committee's concerns at production costs appear to focus primarily on the use of colour in documents presented to Parliament. However in terms of value for money and environmental costs, the main issue confronting the Department is the volume printed of parliamentary committee reports.

As well as the copies required for tabling, the Parliamentary Papers Series and other statutory obligations, as a matter of course, secretariats supply printed copies of reports to:

- committee members;

- executive agencies that are required to respond to report recommendations including Ministers and departmental secretaries;
- witnesses who appeared before the committee and others who made submissions to the inquiry for their information and in recognition of their contribution; and
- media, which on occasion can account for a significant demand on committee reports.

Where possible, committee secretariats encourage all clients to access electronic reports in place of paper copies in order to reduce the volume of printed reports. Reports are posted on committee websites promptly after being presented in Parliament.

Government agencies often request multiple copies of a printed report for the purpose of responding to recommendations. It is not clear why agencies prefer printed reports over electronic reports (particularly as the relevant parts of an electronic report can be printed out in hard copy). Secretariats may also receive requests for reports from different areas of an agency with little apparent knowledge that other requests from the agency have been made.

The Publications Committee may wish to consider recommending that executive agencies put in place procedures that would encourage electronic access to parliamentary committee reports and better coordinate the use of the printed reports they receive.

In terms of the environmental benefits of moving from paper to electronic copies of reports, the Committee may wish to consider exploring the feasibility of sending out reports on compact discs rather than hard copies (and having limited hard copies to table and available for those who request them). However the cost of compact disc production and labelling would need to be assessed against the cost of printing. Alternatively letters could be sent out to submitters advising them of the report tabling, providing a link to the website with copies sent only on specific request.

The financial savings in implementing the above strategies may not be substantial given that small numbers of printed reports will be required for tabling and the majority of printing costs occur in the set up rather than in ordering additional numbers.

While the availability of reports electronically may provide a means of reducing demand for printed copies, printed reports remain important to members of the public with limited electronic access. The House of Representatives has a clear obligation to make the reports of its committees as accessible as possible to the public of Australia. Considerations of limited access to electronic committee reports is particularly relevant if an inquiry has involved input from specific demographics of people such as those living in remote or regional communities or the elderly.

The Committee might also consider whether moving to an A4 standard for reports presented to Parliament and the PPS would assist in providing more options for printing documents (eg in house production) and potential for reducing costs. Reduction in costs can also come from using standard paper sizes, reduction in the number of pages and less paper wastage. However the reduction in costs by moving to A4 would need to be assessed against the readability of the documents.

Yours sincerely



Bernard Wright
Acting Clerk of the House