

Senate Finance and Public Administration Legislation Committee —Supplementary Budget Estimates Hearing—October 2012

Answers to Questions on Notice

Parliamentary departments, Department of Parliamentary Services

Topic: **Bills Digest**

Question: **139**

Written **Senator Ronaldson**

Date set by the committee for the return of answer: 30 November 2012

With respect to the Bills Digest:

- a. How does DPS ensure the quality control of client advice and, in particular, the Bills Digest?
- b. Has DPS ever met with any external Australian legal body and discussed its work with the Bills Digest and/or the quality control of the Bills Digest? If yes, when was this meeting held, who was present and what was discussed? In that meeting, were any recommendations given by that legal body, and were those recommendations accepted by DPS?

Answer

- a) The approach to the preparation of client advices by the Parliamentary Library is set out in *Governance Paper No. 5.2—Library—Policy—Responses to client requests*, the current version of which was endorsed by the Library Committee on 13 September 2012 (copy at **Attachment A**). Quality control issues are discussed at paragraphs 20-24.

Inquiries are directed to the Research Branch officer who is best equipped to provide an accurate response within the given timeframe. Where there is a subject matter expert within the Library, the enquiry will be directed to that person. To ensure the quality of client advices, Library officers are encouraged to work collaboratively with colleagues and engage the assistance of a second reader when the request involves a complex or sensitive issue.

Section Directors are copied into advices that are sensitive or complex. A list of advices is also compiled and circulated within each section on at least a monthly basis, and discussed regularly at section meetings, for information and to ensure that all researchers are aware of current issues.

Subject specialists keep up-to-date in their fields by accessing a wide range of specialist literature, by attendance at appropriate conferences and workshops (when funding permits), by contact with external agencies, and by careful scrutiny of relevant comments about our publications that are received from interested parties in the community.

The purpose and operation of the Library's feedback and complaints handling system is set out in *Governance Paper No. 5.17—Library—Policy—Parliamentary Library feedback*, which was endorsed by the Library Committee on 21 June 2012 (at **Attachment C**). The paper recognises the importance of client feedback in continuing to improve the Library's products and service, and prescribes a detailed process to respond to suggestions and complaints.

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Library executive have implemented a program of client outreach visits to provide Senators and Members and their staff with information on library services and obtain their views about library services.

The Library also conducts a formal review of the needs of clients once in every Parliament to assist it: measure satisfaction levels with services; gain insights into the use of services; and determine the direction of future information and service delivery. The most recent review (completed in May 2012) found high levels of satisfaction with Library services (93%).

Bills Digests

Bills Digests provide an independent perspective on legislation before the Parliament; 178 Digests were produced in 2011-12. The Library recently completed a review of the Bills Digest publication and processes to explore the most effective ways to deliver timely research and analysis on legislative issues. A number of improvements were identified through the review. These were embodied in an updated Bills Digest Governance Paper which was endorsed by the Joint Standing Committee on the Parliamentary Library (the Library Committee) on 21 June 2012. (A copy of this *Governance Paper No. 5.13—Library—Policy—Preparing and Publishing Bills Digests* is at **Attachment D**.) This Paper provides guidance for Parliamentary Library staff when preparing Bills Digests and emphasises the priority to be given to this publication. Paragraphs 20 to 38 set out the quality assurance framework for this publication.

In addition, the Library recognizes that, in order to maintain quality in the production of Bills Digests, it is important to provide researchers with appropriate support and training. This is being done by:

- i. providing more rigorous quality assurance from second readers;
 - ii. providing greater guidance to authors in the Digest templates;
 - iii. implementing a rolling training program for Research Branch staff, including presentations from staff of chamber departments and other relevant agencies on the legislative process. The training program commenced in December 2011.
- b) On 16 June 2011, the then Assistant Secretary of the Research Branch, Dr Dianne Heriot, and the then Director of the Law and Bills Digest section, Kerry Knowler, met with Catherine Emami, Legal Research Officer, and Leonie Campbell, Senior Policy Lawyer, from the Law Council of Australia. The meeting was requested by Ms Emami and Ms Campbell. The focus of the meeting was information sharing, with Parliamentary Library representatives explaining the process of preparing Bills Digests and their role in providing an independent perspective on legislation before the Parliament. Ms Emami and Ms Campbell offered to share information that the Law Council prepared on areas of mutual interest. No recommendations were offered.

The only contact after the meeting occurred on 15 July 2011, when Ms Emami provided Ms Knowler with an article on the Crimes Legislation Amendment Bill (No.2) 2011, which had appeared in issue 114 of the Law Council's weekly update, *Precis*, published on 28 June 2011.

The Library is not aware of any other meetings with legal bodies regarding Bills Digests. However, staff may, on occasion, consult with external subject matter experts on specific issues.