Governance Paper No. 5.2—Library—Policy—Responses to client requests

Date:	13 September 2012	**Review:**	13 September 2015
Approved:	Parliamentary Librarian	**File No:**	12/2022
Contact:	Assistant Secretary, Research Branch	**Extn:**	2470

1 This policy and procedure has been developed to:

(a) provide guidance to staff in relation to the appropriate policy and procedures to be followed in accepting client requests and preparing responses with information, research, analysis and/or advice; and

(b) ensure that responses provided by the Library to clients are consistent with the standards required by the *Parliamentary Service Act 1999.*

Introduction

2 The Parliamentary Librarian is required by the *Parliamentary Service Act 1999* to, among other things:

> … provide high quality information, analysis and advice to Senators and Members of the House of Representatives in support of their parliamentary and representational roles (paragraph 38B(1)(a)).

3 The Act further states (subsection 38B(2)) that the Parliamentary Librarian must perform this function:

(a) in a timely, impartial and confidential manner; and

(b) maintaining the highest standards of scholarship and integrity; and

(c) on the basis of equality of access for all Senators, Members of the House of Representatives, parliamentary committees and staff acting on behalf of Senators, Members or parliamentary committees; and

(d) having regard to the independence of Parliament from the Executive Government of the Commonwealth.

4 In meeting the need to provide high quality information, analysis and advice to Senators and Members, the Library produces information and advice at the request of individual clients.

Policy

Accepting and managing client requests

5 All staff must ensure that they are aware of the content of *Governance Paper No. 5.1—Parliamentary Library Statement of Client Services* and must follow its provisions when accepting and managing client requests. The *Statement of Client Services* clearly defines the scope of the Library's information and research services. It identifies priorities to be given to particular types of work, and circumstances in which work may need to be renegotiated or refused.

6 It is also important that all staff are aware of the Parliamentary Service Values and Code of Conduct and that their behaviour is consistent with the values and code of conduct at all times. In relation to client work it is particularly important to emphasise the need to act professionally, with integrity, care and diligence, maintaining appropriate confidentiality and demonstrating courtesy, respect and cooperation at all times.

7 When requests are received it is essential that staff manage them and their relationship with the client consistent with the Statement of Client Services and the values and code of conduct, including in cases where it is appropriate to refer a request to another member of staff or another section. Regardless of the client's initial point of contact with the Library, a request should be notified, without any unnecessary delay, to the section best able to do the work. Directors and staff within their sections must cooperate and work flexibly to ensure that best use is made of the resources of the Branch.

8 Take responsibility for satisfying the client's needs. If you are not the best person to speak to, explain who is and transfer the client. If that person is not

available, take a full message and ensure that it is passed on to the appropriate person as soon as possible. Sometimes work pressures and other priorities mean that a staff member cannot personally undertake a request, but there may be another staff member who can. In such cases, the client should be advised that a member of staff will get back to them promptly with advice about who can undertake their request.

9 Try to avoid putting a caller on hold. Remember that their time is valuable. If they are likely to be on hold for more than a minute, explain this and ask if they would prefer that you, or a more appropriate person, ring them back. Also assist by repeating the caller's name and details when transferring a call. This will save them the frustration of having to repeat their message. Discretion may be required when calling from the Central Enquiry Point to ensure that client confidentiality is maintained (for example when other clients or the media are present).

10 Staff should raise issues relating to workload (such as difficulties in meeting deadlines or large requests) or requests that may be beyond the scope of the service with their directors for discussion. Managers may need to assist staff to deal with these issues effectively (for example, by reviewing subject specialisations in the light of client demand, redistributing work between individuals, seeking assistance from another section which covers aspects of the issues in question, or making a case for a reallocation of resources on a temporary or ongoing basis).

11 If it is unclear which section is responsible for responding to the request, or the request requires input from multiple sections, the relevant Directors will be responsible for resolving which researcher will take the lead in relation to the response.

12 Where requests (or components of requests) are received second hand (for example, from the Central Enquiry Point or from one section to another), the researcher who will be preparing the response is responsible for informing the client within 24 hours that they are the appropriate contact, and the request should be confirmed if it has not been provided in writing. Emails from clients to the Library enquiries mailbox will receive a response acknowledging receipt of their request and stating that the relevant researcher will contact them within 24 hours.

Communication and customer service

13 The Library plays an important role in helping clients to be better informed by providing the information clients need in a timely, impartial and confidential manner. Effective interaction with the client is the key to providing efficient client service and, over time, building a high level of client confidence, loyalty and satisfaction.

14 When discussing a client's request with them, it is important to:

(a) listen to what the client is saying;

(b) check your understanding by repeating the request back to them;

(c) probe to clarify what is required – depth of information, degree of analysis required, whether a written response or verbal briefing is required;

(d) determine how knowledgeable the client is about the subject;

(e) understand the purpose for which the information will be used (however if the client does not wish to disclose the purpose that position must be respected); and

(f) obtain a clear understanding of the client's deadline. If they say "as soon as possible" ascertain when is the latest the information can be provided to meet their needs.

15 Further detail on conducting the reference interview is at Appendix A.

16 Provide the client with a clear understanding of whether their request can be accepted in full or whether there needs to be negotiation over the nature and scope of the request (eg. for reasons related to the legitimacy of the request, competing priorities, resource or time constraints).

17 Confirm a request involving a significant amount of information retrieval or a major research effort. To ensure that client needs are met and Library resources are not wasted, these types of requests should always be confirmed in writing (eg. by email). Staff may also visit the client's office to discuss and clarify significant or complex requests.

18 An overwhelmingly strong message coming from past Client Service Surveys has been the importance of personalised services provided to Senators and Members. Where possible, staff should tailor their responses to the client's request, and offer oral briefings to explain and clarify information as appropriate. This is an important part of ensuring that the client is provided with the information they need and feels that their custom is valued.

19 The internet and search engines have made an enormous amount of information quickly available. Unless specifically requested to do so, staff should avoid providing clients with large volumes of information or merely sending a link without attempting to add value to the service by synthesising, explaining, summarising or analysing the information.

Quality control

20 Responses to client requests are not subject to the same rigorous quality control as are publications. If time allows peer review is encouraged. However, notwithstanding time pressures, information and advice provided by Library staff in their responses to client requests must:

(a) be appropriately sourced and referenced—plagiarism is not permitted;

(b) rely on information that is published or publishable;

(c) be accurate;

(d) be based on sound analysis;

(e) be reliable and consistent;

(f) be impartial;

(g) identify underlying assumptions, necessary qualifications and the basis for any calculations; and

(h) follow the Library's *Style Guide*.

21 In responses to client requests, Library staff may be required to produce information and advice that is not balanced, for example, providing arguments to support a particular position or perspective on an issue, or providing information based on assumptions supplied by the client. It is important that responses to such requests also meet the above criteria. Where staff have concerns that a particular approach they have been requested to address is not viable or is associated with significant problems, they should note those concerns in their response and, if possible, suggest a more viable approach.

22 The Parliamentary Library Statement of Client Services clearly states:

> The Parliamentary Library may refuse a request … if time constraints, staffing or resource considerations preclude the acceptance of a request.

23 Where information or advice is requested in circumstances subject to time, staffing or resource considerations, staff should endeavour to provide whatever published or publishable information, or soundly-based advice is available. However, in the absence of such information or advice, it is preferable that staff not accept a request, or attempt to renegotiate the deadline for a request, rather than provide poor quality, inconsistent or unreliable information, or advice. Such information or advice, if provided, may:

(a) mislead the client and/or parliament;

(b) offend that provision of the Act which requires the Library to perform its functions by "maintaining the highest standards of scholarship and integrity"; and

(c) undermine the reputation of the Parliamentary Library.

24 Where staff are unsure of their advice, they may find it useful to test their ideas with another staff member who has relevant expertise. However, if staff

are unsure of the appropriate approach in particular cases, they should discuss the matter with their supervisor.

Invasion of privacy

25 Staff could be asked to pursue research involving searches on behalf of clients into the personal lives of Senators, Members or their families which could be considered an invasion of privacy. Where this occurs, clients should be advised that it is Parliamentary Library policy to provide only such information as is readily available from the public record.

Use of the client memorandum

26 A client memorandum is the standard format for providing information and advice to clients and the Library templates for client memoranda should be used wherever possible for responses to client requests, except where this would be impracticable or is not required by the client. For example, clients may require a very urgent response, which may be oral, or a very short and simple written answer, or a link to a document which may be more appropriately provided in an email. Follow up advice, for example, clarifying the meaning of parts of a response may also be provided by email. In addition, requests dealt with at the Central Enquiry Point which do not require a detailed response may be answered by email. Email responses should be prepared using the Library email template.

27 The client memorandum and email template provide organisational branding and include important notices about copyright, confidentiality and attribution. They also ensure a consistent, professional and readily identifiable "look" to Library products. Therefore, it is important that requests are not handled within the body of an email which does not include such information.

28 Staff should open a new template for each job and not reuse old memoranda. Even when text is deleted, persistent metadata may identify the client and hence breach confidentiality.

29 The "Client-in-confidence" template should only be used where it is agreed with the client that individually-commissioned work will not be released to other clients without the client's permission. This is only justifiable where there is a need to protect information provided by the client on a confidential basis, such as in the development of a possible policy or proposed model, the details of which may be evident from the response. For further information see page 10, Governance Paper No. 5.7—Library—Policy—Copyright, Creative commons licensing, confidentiality and attribution.

30 The client memorandum templates can be found in Word under New/My templates/Library.

31 A client memoranda should include:

(a) the title of the request;

(b) where the response is longer than 4 pages, an Executive Summary should be included. The Executive Summary should provide a summary overview of key points, in succinct dot point format;

(c) a statement of the client's request (as originally stated or confirmed by the client);

(d) the requested research or analysis and/or an explanation of the information materials provided;

(e) any qualifications, assumptions or limitations that apply to the advice, research or information about which the client should be aware or upon which the response is based;

(f) the author's name and contact phone number; and

(g) a statement similar to "Please do not hesitate to contact me for further assistance or if you require clarification", should be included either in the memoranda or in the covering email correspondence.

32 All client responses should be filed in the relevant TRIM folder relating to the subject area.

Reftracker

33 Reftracker is the Parliamentary Library's database for recording important information relating to client requests. The information collected is used for a number of purposes, including to:

(a) ensure that responses to client requests and deadlines are recorded and progress is monitored so that responses are completed and provided to the client within the agreed timeframe—including where input from more than one section is required to complete a request;

(b) meet legislative and other reporting requirements (for example, reporting against Portfolio Budget Statements and associated performance indicators through the Library's annual report); and

(c) provide information that can be evaluated for performance improvement purposes.

34 All client requests and associated mandatory fields must be recorded in Reftracker as soon as practicable after a request is received, but preferably before the end of the working day. This is to ensure, in the event that staff are unexpectedly absent (eg. as a result of accident or illness), that the relevant director can reallocate requests to other staff (if necessary), or renegotiate deadlines (if possible). Timely entry of information in Reftracker also facilitates the monitoring and coordination of input to requests where more than one section is involved in the response.

35 The Reftracker manual can be found on the staff intranet at http://dpsstaffportal.parl.net/~~/media/OurOrganisation/Branches_library/ReftrackerHelp.ashx

Other issues

Freedom of information

36 Section 46 of the Freedom of Information Act 1982 exempts all material for which parliamentary privilege can be claimed from the application of that Act. All material prepared in relation to "proceedings in parliament" falls within parliamentary privilege. "Proceedings in parliament" have been defined by subsection 16(2) of the Parliamentary Privileges Act 1987 to include "all words spoken and acts done in the course of, or for purposes of or incidental to, the transacting of the business of a House or of a committee", including:

(a) the giving of evidence before a House or a committee, and the evidence so given;

(b) the presentation or submission of a document to a House or a committee;

(c) the preparation of a document for purposes of or incidental to the transacting any such business; and

(d) the formulation, making or publication of a document, including a report, by or pursuant to an order of a House or committee and the document so formulated, made or published.

37 Departments of the Parliament (including the Parliamentary Library) are exempt from freedom of information by virtue of the interaction of these provisions when they are preparing materials in relation to "proceedings in parliament". The Office of the Australian Information Commissioner FOI Guidelines state:

> For s 46(c) to apply where there is no rule or order preventing publication, there must be a close connection between a document and some parliamentary purpose to which it relates which could be prejudiced by disclosure. Section 46(c) is concerned with circumstances where information provided to a house of committee of Parliament has been disclosed without authority or the disclosure otherwise improperly interferes with a member of Parliament's free performance of his or her duties as a member.[1]

[1] Office of the Australian Information Commissioner, 'Part 5 — Exemptions', *Guidelines issued under section 93A of the Freedom of Information Act 1982,* October 2011, paragraph 5.164, viewed 1 June 2012, http://www.oaic.gov.au/publications/guidelines/guidelines-s93a-foi-act_part5_exemptions.html#_Toc286409274

Commissioning consultancies from the ABS

38 Under its charging policy, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) does not provide free consultancy time for Senators and Members.

39 The Library has electronic access to a wide range of ABS data resources and, where possible, will use those resources to respond to requests from Senators and Members. Any requests that cannot be met through this access would need to be paid for by the client. The Library can act as an intermediary to scope the request to ABS and advise of potential charges.

Related policies and documents

40 This policy should be read in conjunction with:

(a) Governance Paper No. 5.1 – Library – Policy - Parliamentary Library Statement of Client Services;

(b) the Parliamentary Service Values and Code of Conduct;

(c) the Parliamentary Library, Style Guide;

(d) Governance Paper No. 5.17 – Library – Policy - Parliamentary Library feedback;

(e) Governance Paper No. 5.7 – Library - Copyright, Creative commons licensing, confidentiality and attribution- Policy;

(f) Governance Paper No. 5.8 – Library—Accessing child pornography or child abuse material by Library staff; and

(g) Governance Paper No. 5.9 – Library—Communication by Parliamentary Library staff with Government agencies.

Responsibility for this policy

41 Responsibility for implementing this policy rests with all Library staff who provide direct services to clients. All staff are responsible for applying the policy and procedures and working cooperatively and flexibly to ensure their effective implementation.

42 The Assistant Secretary, Research Branch and the Assistant Secretary, Information Access Branch are to notify their staff of the policy, to monitor and review its application and to facilitate consultation, cooperation and the efficient allocation of work across sections as appropriate.

43 Research Branch Directors are expected to undertake responses to individual client requests, in balance with their publication, managerial and leadership responsibilities. They are also responsible for:

(a) ensuring their staff follow the policy and procedures;

(b) managing workloads within their sections; and

(c) working with other staff, directors and the Assistant Secretary to facilitate cooperation and the efficient allocation of work across sections.

44 The Parliamentary Librarian is responsible for handling complaints by clients in relation to the quality and management of responses to their requests.

Approval of policy

45 This policy was approved by the Joint Standing Committee on the Parliamentary Library on 13 September 2012.

Dianne Heriot
Parliamentary Librarian

Appendix A: The reference interview

The **reference interview** plays a crucial role in providing effective and efficient client services. When discussing the client's request with them, staff need to exercise a range of skills to ensure that they ascertain and fulfil the client's real information and research need. These skills include listening, clarifying, verifying, paraphrasing, probing, asking open questions, and following up to ensure that they have all the necessary information to meet the client's needs.[2]

The first step in a successful reference interview is to take the time to really **listen** to what the client is saying—listening is important to providing clients with the response or resources that are most helpful, rather than the response or resources that staff can most easily provide.

Having listened, next it is important to **check your understanding by repeating** the request back to the client to make sure that you have heard and understood correctly. This can save time in the longer term and will also increase the client's confidence that you have understood their needs.

Staff are also encouraged to **probe** by asking questions to make sure that they understand what is required. For example, how much and what kind of information is needed? Does the client want source material as the basis for their own research, or do they need analysis of an issue? Do they really want a string of links to information sources, a short summary, or a comprehensive exploration of the subject? The most common form of negative feedback the Library receives is that too much, or too little information, or the wrong type of response is provided. This can be avoided by effective communication. However, the client will not always let staff know exactly what they want, unless they are asked. Probing helps to refine the request and also helps to assure the client that their request will be handled in an intelligent way.

In determining how much and what kind of information the client needs it can be important to determine **how knowledgeable the client is** about the subject. Are they an expert or a beginner? What information do they already have? Where did they hear about the subject? In some cases, the most useful resources require some effort to understand, so it is also important to determine

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[2] This section relies in part on Kris Cole, *Supervision: The theory and Practice of First-Line Management*, Pearson Education Australia, 2nd ed., 2001, pp. 306-337. Also see "Modules 1 and 2", "Real Information Needs" and "Interview", Ohio Reference Excellence, http://www.olc.org/ore/1real.htm; "The Reference Interview", http://web.utk.edu/~wrobinso/590ref_interview.html; "The Reference Interview: a Common-Sense Review", the Public Libraries' Learning Disabilities Initiative, American Library Association; "Guidelines for Behavioural Performance of Reference and Information Service Providers", American Library Association, http://www.ala.org/ala/rusa/rusaprotools/referenceguide/guidelinesbehavioral.htm; Theodora Fox, "The lost Art of the Reference Interview", Thomson Dialog, Sydney.

whether the client requires summary material, explanations or briefings to assist their understanding of difficult resources.

Sometimes clients will find it difficult to recognise or express what information they really need. In these cases it is important to let them know that the more information you have, the more likely it is that you will be able to meet their needs. To do this you will need to be **approachable, patient, understanding, show interest in the subject, and assure the client of confidentiality**. Ask open-ended questions (that is, questions that cannot be answered with "yes" or "no") to establish dialogue, involve the client and focus the search. For example:

(a) Can you tell me more about your needs?

(b) What do you want to achieve?

(c) How will this information be used?

(d) What will be the audience for this information?

Understanding the **purpose** of the request can be important to framing an effective response. If, however, the client is reluctant to reveal their purpose, that position must be respected. In some cases, staff of clients who are tasked with asking the Library for information have a limited understanding of what their Senator or Member requires. In such cases, Library staff should request that the purpose is clarified with the client in order to more effectively respond. Where this is not possible, researchers should consider whether they can proceed with the request. If the researcher elects to provide advice without clarification of the request, this should be noted in the response.

It is also critical to ensure that you have a clear understanding of the client's **deadline**. If they say they require the information "as soon as possible" it may be necessary to clarify "What is the latest we could provide this information to you and still meet your needs?" Also find out to whom the response should be sent, by what means (eg. email, hard copy) and any format preferences.