

Report of a survey May-August 2020

Introduction

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic required urgent and far-reaching responses from parliamentary library and research services. Some challenges were common to many organisations, and library & research services in general. These included the speed and scale of change needed to keep services operational, and the challenges of remote working, management and service delivery. More specific challenges were also apparent from the start:

1. As the pandemic demanded swift and radical policy choices there was a parallel requirement for informed parliamentary scrutiny and approval – the need, and potential demand, for quality information and research services *increased*, they could not simply be suspended.
2. Parliaments are intensely social organisations and effective service depends on close contacts with Members and their support staff – those interactions and routine acquisition of knowledge of clients and policy issues were impoverished overnight. Forms of remote contacts had to be strengthened or invented, as far as possible.
3. Parliamentary library and research services are rather artisanal producers for a very small, very well-served, clientele – boutique rather than mass-market. Ideally, they are often working directly with Members and close support staff in the legislative engine-room, delivering highly-customised products. The boutique model of service delivery is more difficult to reproduce in a remote service environment.
4. Parliamentary library & research services are producing high-value products with an extended production process across an integrated team of diverse specialities, drawing on multiple resources and capabilities. This ecosystem and working processes had to be transposed to a remote working model, at very short notice.
5. Parliamentary library services often have unique collections/expertise normally accessible only in-person

The results of the survey suggest that these challenges were to a large extent met by services round the world. Some issues proved more difficult, in some places, but everywhere the professional teams responded with great determination – and with success. They also found new opportunities in the new environment. I have reported the survey responses below without editorial comment. The responses are anonymised, as promised to contributors, but the original material is really quite moving in its spirit. All services found a way to keep going, somehow, no matter what their situation and level of resources. A few services can show greater preparation for risks, with some benefit. But equally some had prepared for risks which were different to those of this pandemic, with no benefit. Prepared or not, an amazing amount of adaptation was achieved on very short notice. The pre-existence of digital services in most places allowed continuity of delivery (at some level) even where the onset of the crisis was very rapid. Library services have been keen adopters of technology for decades, and many research services have also been enthusiastic. This crisis showed the value of digital investments, if proof were needed. The question is

rather about the longer-term consequence – some see the pandemic as definite inflexion point in the shift to digital.

The survey was open to respondents from the IFLAPARL mailing list, COVID-19 discussion forum and Standing Committee, from May to August 2020. Twenty-nine responses were received via the form, and one informal response with the core information provided. Sixteen responses came from Europe; six from the Americas; six from Asia-Pacific; two from Africa. Most of the responses came when services were in the lockdown period but some of the latest submissions were from services returning or preparing to return to a form of 'normal' activities. Respondents were assured of anonymity in reporting the results and, therefore, the cases reported are not identifiable. There were many good stories and respondents are invited to share them in more detail via the IFLAPARL Covid-19 Forum on Basecamp and in the forthcoming virtual event of IFLAPARL.

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1. To what extent has Coronavirus/COVID-19, and the government and institutional policies to deal with it, affected the operation of your service?

A **majority of services reported a moderate (13) or small (4) impact**. Nevertheless, eleven services reported that their operations had been affected a 'great deal'.

2. Considering your answer to question 1, would you please summarise why you gave that rating?

The **main impacts** mentioned are:

1. All or many staff obliged to work from home, full time or part-time in e.g. split-team arrangements
2. Library facilities largely closed and hard-copy collections largely inaccessible, although there were some exceptions which managed with minimal staffing on site, reduced hours and/or restricted access (e.g. by appointment).
3. Onsite activities such as client training largely terminated
4. Clients all or mostly working from home

In a very few cases it appears that the scarcity or absence of a digital offer (if library/research remains largely paper-based) meant that services were seriously compromised, and the crisis has prompted a shift to digital.

Many services had some previous experience of some staff working at home some of the time, and at least one had previous experience of running the entire service from home (in a period of severe weather), but no-one had experience of running an entire service from home for a prolonged period. It brought unexpected challenges.

Despite these impacts, **many services felt they had managed the transition to new ways of working in a relatively smooth way**, and they were delivering a quite effective service in the new circumstances. Some reasons given for these positive stories:

1. **Many library and research services had, to a large extent, already made a transition to digital and remote services.** One service was already almost entirely digital/remote and so noticed very little difference; many others reported having substantial digital and remote services in place so could continue to offer a viable service with those.
2. Delivering **digital services was easier and more successful than expected and produced unexpected benefits.** As an example of the latter, online training courses were accessible to people who could not have accessed the in-person equivalent (e.g. because they worked off-site or even abroad).
3. **Services which anticipated or had warning of the 'work at home' order were able to make preparations.** From the reports, 1-2 weeks was enough to make quite effective preparation. One service had a Business Continuity Plan and had previously rehearsed its possible response to a pandemic – these preparations helped.
4. Technology-related factors in successful adaptation:
 1. **Quality of staff home IT setups** and/or how quickly the institution provided technology for homeworking. As well as equipment, the quality of home internet connections was mentioned as an issue.
 2. Those services with **experience of (occasional) working from home** had tested methods and technology which could potentially be scaled up.
 3. **Technical support** to provide remote access to internal parliament networks, email, information resources. Parliaments with the technology already in place and the **resources** to extend it to many staff found it easier to adapt quickly. Some services were already providing laptops for all staff for everyday work, rather than PCs, while others could not provide all staff with a laptop when the crisis struck. Possibly library & research

services with some dedicated IT support did better than those wholly reliant on corporate-level support.

4. **Information staff** with the **skills** to create and adapt to new digital services and the knowledge and customer service skills to support **clients with variable levels of technical ability**.

The fact that in most cases the entire institution - the entire society - was affected, made for easier **acceptance of service adaptations and limitations**. One respondent mentioned that 80% of the parliament's administration was working at home. The rating of the impact as 'moderate' may even be a relative term – compared to other services or to worst expectations. The context has also meant that **clients have appreciated the efforts made to adapt** and keep services going.

The **challenges** were largely the converse:

1. **Reliance on paper-based content and/or on electronic information sources only available physically inside the parliament.**
2. **Lacking experience, equipment and methods for working at home** (although many adapted very quickly). Also slow speed of home connections. Some staff using specialist equipment (including adaptive equipment) were not able to work at home, and provision of equipment for home offices was a challenge in lockdown.
3. **Lockdown life** : as the entire society was affected, people working at home found themselves responsible for child care, home schooling and other essential tasks. While people continued working, they were not necessarily working the same office hours or to the same rhythm all the time. Some managers mentioned a difficulty in knowing who was available, when, for tasks – such as client requests.
4. **Shortfalls in the technical skills of library & research service staff** exposed by the requirements of the new situation.
5. **Parliament IT systems not designed for remote access**. (Either not at all, or not for the scale required in the crisis). This affected information research but also basic functions like communications and access to files.
6. **Lack of resources and/or IT staff** to put in place the technical adaptations.
7. **Short/no notice of the lockdown** – unable to prepare.
8. **Members and other clients lacking the technical ability and knowledge to make use of the type of services offered.**

One of the main impacts noted is the **loss of direct client access and service** in most cases – either totally or with new restrictions. Parliamentary libraries serving the general public have generally closed completely or admitted only Members and other priority clients. Activities such as client training in information sources and research, library tours, exhibitions and events were in some places terminated, but in others they were **reinvented as online products**. Or if the online version already existed, it became the primary focus.

Probably many parliamentary libraries rely on the **inter-library-loan** system for at least some specialist content: only reported by one service, but most likely this function was largely unavailable in many countries during the crisis, highlighting a vulnerability.

There has also been a significant philosophical or psychological impact: many felt that this crisis will **accelerate the trend to digital and remote services**. Some saw the crisis as a prompt or **opportunity to reinforce an existing preference for digital/remote**. Others expressed surprise at how well they managed without access to the hard-copy collection and on-site activities, suggesting **re-appraisal after the crisis**. One service mentioned they had already been looking to reform their organisational structure and workflows - the crisis had required rapid decisions and priorities had become clearer, and the reforms were now likely to be even more radical.

Although many saw a positive aspect in the new emphasis on digital/remote, some services reported that they **still relied on hard copy and they were unable to operate fully**. Many responded creatively – e.g. introducing their own table of contents service from the library with scanning on demand of articles, and home delivery of book loans or contact-free borrowing. A complete shift to digital appears unattainable for now. Whether or not digital/remote services are fully developed, probably many services would agree with the respondent who insisted that it was **a challenge to support the parliamentary process while working remotely**.

No-one reported any direct impact from staff illness in the pandemic.

3. How has it affected the service offered?

As noted above, **most services switched to digital and remote service almost exclusively**. For some, this meant a fairly complete product range with a new emphasis on the digital version of each product; for others this meant a more restricted offer; and for others this meant adding new or improved digital products. Some services maintained onsite and in-person services – most but not all at a reduced level. Only a couple of services reported that on-site and in-person services were unaffected. One service mentioned that 30% of staff remained at the workplace and in other cases all staff worked at the office but on a rota or split-shift basis. It appears common to have had one or a few staff and managers on duty to provide limited client service. One service has maintained access to the library collection through a form of self-service (access by swipe card and honesty system of signing-out books borrowed); another mentioned ‘contact-free’ book borrowing.

It appears that **everyone managed to maintain some level of service** – no-one was defeated by the crisis.

In terms of **client response**, many services experienced an initial **reduction in demand** but in many cases it picked up again over time. One service noted a decline in requests but stable demand for digital products – and very high demand indeed for some products. Use of online services often increased – it seems not only greater volume but a wider reach in the parliamentary community. For direct requests, the only service quoting a comparative statistic for before and after the crisis began refers to a 15% reduction. The subject matter of client demand in many cases initially focused on **health policy issues relating to COVID-19** and also notably on **parliamentary operations in other countries during the crisis**. These requests for comparative information are reported to be onerous/complex to respond to. Other topics mentioned by later respondents are **‘smart working’** (questions of how to adapt jobs and services to pandemic conditions) and **historic enquiries** on the 1918 influenza epidemic, the 1930s depression and post-war economic recovery. Many services are, however, **still getting requests on their usual range of topics** – especially so as the crisis has gone on.

Clients were reported by one service to be less constrained by the past formal opening hours and were making requests as and when it suited them, although it is not clear if they expected an immediate response 24/7.

There are several references to a **positive client reaction** to what library and research services have delivered in the crisis, with one service reporting that their clients were “impressed and ecstatic”. One service noted that some Members had previously been opposed to the switch to remote and online services but this hostility had disappeared in the crisis.

Some services were planning a **return to on-site services and activities** – in adapted form – from June onwards.

A few services mentioned they would run special **surveys** after the crisis to gauge the client response to digital/remote services and to shape the service's plans for the future. This is another indicator that the crisis is being seen, by some, as a major inflection point in service evolution.

4. What effect has the crisis had on your working arrangements?

Most services in the survey have **all or most people working at home, most of the time**. In cases where a proportion of staff remain at the office (or have now returned), services have been required to address requirements for physical distancing and the supply of PPE (personal protection equipment).

As in other workplaces, managers and staff have adapted more or less well to working at home and e.g. conducting meetings by Zoom and similar means. At the level of individual duties the temporary shift to homeworking has generally proved quite feasible. One service surveyed its staff (anonymously) and reported that on average staff considered almost 90% of normal tasks were feasible working at home. Another respondent mentioned that 80% of work processes were possible at home. Many services mentioned that work on the hard-copy collection had ceased during the crisis, but one service mentioned that their staff visited the library once a month to pick up materials to work on at home.

Based on replies to the IFLAPARL survey, staff members with good home office facilities and fast internet connection found it easier; those with past experience of home-working even more so. In services with no experience of home working and in parliaments without the tools in place to facilitate home working, the challenge was altogether greater. For example, one service had, in the midst of the crisis, to purchase and install software to allow remote working and support staff in adapting to it.

Establishing an ergonomic home office was a challenge for some, and for managers seeking to address the needs of their staff. Staff who normally used two screens at work had difficulties if they had just one screen at home; and they had concerns about effects on their well-being. The presence of children and the demands of home schooling reduced the efficiency of home working in the crisis, and this is an issue of gender - one respondent noted that this particularly concerned women who are strongly represented in her service (and probably in others). One manager noted that in lockdown it was difficult to know who was working, when, and who could deal with an urgent task.

Some managers are concerned about team cohesion, creativity and the types of work that are only possible when people are together. Managers and staff had concerns that the social aspect of work was less effective – for example that meetings worked less well online, it was harder to run them, harder to communicate and harder to read body language. In at least one case, managers were offered new training in how to manage remote teams. Just keeping staff and managers up-to-date on what everyone was doing was more challenging with remote work. One manager mentions issuing a daily newsletter to staff – not only for practical communications but also to maintain cohesion and reinforce positivity. The use of video chats and meetings are seen as important in maintaining team connections. **Uncertainty** and even **fear**, and concerns about **motivation**, in a working group that was disrupted and unused to homeworking, were reported as issues by only one or two respondents but were possibly more widespread (based on reports from other sectors).

Some managers noted that the enforced changes of the crisis, towards digital and remote service, had generated explicit resistance from sceptical staff. Others reported that some staff had duties which were simply not possible in the crisis; those staff had to be temporarily found new duties in areas of service that were still viable. Some such staff were reported to lack the technical knowledge or aptitude to work on digital/remote services.

Some respondents mentioned the challenge of a return to work in the office/library with the demands of physical distancing and the provision of PPE. This is seen as one reason why home working may continue on a large scale for some time.

5. Did you have a business continuity plan and was it useful? Are there lessons for future business continuity plans?

Many services had no explicit business continuity plan, or they had one but it was **designed for a different kind of crisis**, or it was **too general** – notably if it had been prepared at institutional level and did not address the specifics of the library/research service. Other BCPs anticipated an event that might impact on the service but did not envisage a whole-country event. **In only a few of cases was an existing business continuity plan (BCP) mentioned as being useful, and in only two cases was that described as including planning for a pandemic. One of those two services mentioned rehearsing the scenario for a pandemic in 2019, updating the BCP annually and active training for business continuity in the preceding years.** This preparation was useful. Even the service that had planned for and rehearsed the pandemic scenario found that the real-life scenario had unexpected features. Some services described a period of notice before lockdown as an opportunity to prepare an **instant business continuity plan**, which proved effective. In one case this period of notice meant that an existing BCP was not used – customised solutions were found instead. One service mentioned that as a business continuity precaution they had been digitising their collection and this had eased remote working for staff.

There is certainly interest in doing more business continuity planning in future. One respondent suggested that IFLAPARL should collect resources for common use e.g. up-to-date links to key organisations and their information.

For future business continuity plans, one manager noted the effect on internet speeds of an entire country seeking to work remotely from home.

6. Have the demands of the crisis and changes in client demand led to new service offers?

Many services had already been putting an emphasis on digital, remote, self-service and even 24/7 services. There was no mention in responses of new products previously unknown to the sector, but services do report innovation in their offers and notable effort to improve and increase their online service offer. Options such as digital exhibitions, online events, chat reference, video reference, client training by video, podcasts, use of social media and electronic newsletters have been strengthened or introduced. Websites have had more attention. Service innovations include home delivery for hard-copy book loans, table of contents & article scanning services, and simplified methods for online information requests. Services have also increased promotion of their digital offer, and some have offered more help to clients in using digital services.

One service mentioned a shift from producing briefings (i.e. formal publications) to using **blog posts** more often – as blog articles could be posted and updated quickly as the crisis and information evolved. This included a listing of trusted information sources updated daily. It probably helps to have such a blog established as a source for clients *before* the crisis.

While there is in many places no regular onsite service, some have offered clients a meeting/visit by appointment. One service said that due to reduced demand they had been able to increase follow-up with clients, contacting them by phone and providing more customised service than in normal times.

As mentioned at point 3, information content has been developed to meet new interests: COVID-19 health policy, comparative information on parliamentary responses to the crisis, 'smart working', new historical interests (epidemics and economic crises/recovery). There is also new business answering remote enquiries based on hard-copy materials which the clients would normally look at themselves. As they cannot visit they now send requests.

It appears that providing high-quality information to the general public (usually but not always the recycling of information already prepared for internal use) was either introduced as a new activity in the crisis or it had enhanced importance in many cases. Two services mentioned that their content was presented on the parliament website either for the first time or in a more prominent way than before.

One respondent did sound a note of caution: the maintenance of services in the crisis had shown flexibility but could the effort be sustained longer term? Were the resources there to make it viable longer term? What had been an exceptional effort should not be assumed to be the "new normal".

7. How is your service contributing to oversight of government response to the crisis?

Parliamentary library and research services everyday business is contributing to oversight so this question caused some bafflement. Many answers could be summarised by "Its what we do" or "Business as usual".

Most responses were general, but specific activities mentioned included: support to committees dealing with COVID-19, contributing to twice-daily media summaries on coverage of government policies; provision of comparative studies on responses by other governments. Counteracting misinformation was mentioned by one service, linking with the increased emphasis on information to the public. One specific case was reported of information from a research briefing on COVID-19 issues being used by Members to help achieve a significant change in government information and policy.

One service mentioned setting up a framework research contract with 30 experts on different aspects of the COVID-19 crisis – increasing the scientific knowledge available to the parliament.

At least one service reported that Members were making more use of research publications on social media, using them as a reliable information source for citizens, and this might be considered a form of keeping the government under scrutiny.

8. In your opinion, has the crisis increased interest in 'evidence' for policy work in your parliament?

About **one in five services felt there was increased interest in evidence due to the COVID-19, around one in three thought not, and the rest could not say.**

Even if the term 'evidence' is not used, however, in at least some states there is interest across society, not only in parliament, in high-quality information on the pandemic; and in what scientific advice is an input for policy and how that input is used and relates to policy decisions. At least some services are seeing the crisis as **an opportunity to demonstrate the value of independent high-quality parliamentary research.** Some services have sought more input from external scientists. Promotion of reliable external information sources has also been increased.

9. Do you see any long-term impacts on your service arising from this crisis?

In terms of longer-term impact from this crisis, **many see no substantial effect once the crisis is over**, or find it impossible to predict now what it will be. A distinction was also made between the essential content

of the service – which would not change – and the ways it was produced and delivered – which might. For those seeing this crisis as producing definite long-term effects, their expectations are:

1. **Acceleration of the trend to digital services and to self-service.** This would be partly driven by supply (the ability to deliver such services) but also by demand – through the crisis, clients have discovered the existence of digital and remote services. As one respondent noted, clients may also make the choice to switch their activities more to a remote/digital model – or be required to if the pandemic continues – and the library and research services will be obliged to follow. One service noted the crisis as an opportunity to introduce their digital services to clients who may have previously been unaware. Some services discovered through this crisis that print was less essential than they thought – but this is not true for all, and it was mentioned that some/many clients will still appreciate and need a physical library. The impression from responses is, though, that innovations made in the crisis will be maintained and may further increase – some going as far as ‘service redesign’. There are, however, concerns that the temporary effort to deliver 100% digital/remote service cannot be sustained as a long-term development, that parliament will not have the IT capacity (people & resources) to support it.
2. **More flexible working**, with more home working, and **fewer in-person meetings** – but with concerns about team cohesion and effectiveness.
3. **Redesign of work processes and structures** to fit digital, remote, flexible working and home-working. Some reported that the crisis has triggered an enthusiasm for change which would make it easier to continue the change. Others mention that it has surfaced the underlying resistance to change: which might be an opportunity or an obstacle. There are concerns about the skills and aptitudes required of the management and workforce in a re-shaped service.
4. The **workspaces and reading rooms of the library and research services will be reduced** to make room for physical distancing in the parliament.
5. **Reduction in staff/budget** for library & research services (due to general budget cuts after the crisis).
6. Crisis an **opportunity to show the importance to the parliament of a strong library & research service**. Several services mentioned they had an improved profile – seen as an essential service for the first time; featuring on institutional web pages for the first time; new recognition of the value of information and the ability of the library & research service to provide it; demonstration of the dedication of the library and research service by continuing throughout the crisis, and its adaptability in being able to do it.