



IFLA  
2005  
OSLO

## World Library and Information Congress: 71th IFLA General Conference and Council

### "Libraries - A voyage of discovery"

August 14th - 18th 2005, Oslo, Norway

*Conference Programme:*

<http://www.ifla.org/IV/ifla71/Programme.htm>

*June 13, 2005*

**Code Number:**

**110-E**

**Meeting:**

**156 Library and Research Services for Parliaments**

### **21<sup>st</sup> century challenges: the view from the Scottish Parliament**

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#### *Abstract*

Library and information services increasingly face the challenge of justifying the value they are adding to their organisation. SPICe, the Scottish Parliament Information Centre, was created at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to meet the needs of the new Scottish Parliament. With the opportunity to start afresh, this paper analyses the most important elements on which new services were based. These include the need to align your service with the objectives of your organisation, the need to build and maintain your credibility, and the need to meet your customers face to face. The biggest challenge facing research and information staff in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is identified as the need to embrace change.

#### A short history – establishing a 21<sup>st</sup> century service

The Scottish Parliament was established on the cusp of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Members of the first Scottish Parliament for 300 years were elected on 6 May 1999. With a four-year electoral cycle we have had another general election since then, so we are now in our second session. Despite our short history, there are so few examples of establishing new parliamentary information services that some analysis of the challenges we have faced and continue to face may be instructive.

Towards the end of 1998 a small team of about 20 people gathered within the Scottish Office (a UK government department) in Edinburgh. Our task was to establish a new Parliament with all the necessary accommodation, facilities, services

and procedures to enable it to start functioning as soon as the new Members were elected less than 9 months later. This process was able to take place in a remarkably short space of time due to the amount of prior planning and thinking that had gone on before the team had been established, and indeed before the legislation which established a parliament for Scotland had even been introduced into the UK Parliament. We were not, therefore, starting with a totally blank sheet of paper. A great deal of work had already been done over a number of years, on a cross-party and cross-community basis, not only to describe what the people of Scotland wanted the Parliament to look like but also by research into features of Parliaments elsewhere which might be usefully incorporated into a brand new Scottish Parliament. This task was also helped by the typically Scottish trait of going back to first principles and cutting through jargon and sophistry in order to come up with a solution that fits the required objective. I was seconded to this team from the House of Commons Library at Westminster, where I had worked for 20 years.

The Scottish Parliament was shaped by four fundamental principles, which were defined for it by a consultative steering group chaired by a UK Government Minister, Henry McLeish. Its report, *Shaping Scotland's Parliament*, was published in December 1998 and set out the four principles of accountability, sharing the power, equal opportunities and accessibility to the people of Scotland. In designing the framework for the Parliament and how it should operate, these four principles were the touchstone against which proposals were measured. Indeed, these were to become a benchmark by which any future developments could also be judged.

In setting anything up from scratch, you have the opportunity to leave the weight of tradition behind; to take a leap ahead of old practices and start afresh using all the experience that you and others have gathered before you. Each time you do this you hope that you will have got it right, you will have avoided the mistakes of the past and you will be ready to face the challenges of the future. The only certainty, however, is that nothing stays the same.

Those of us who were planning the research and information service for the new Parliament made a number of crucial decisions that shaped our expectations of our staff and our services. First of all, we decided *not* to call it a library. There was no collection of books, no room to house them, and most important of all, no suggestion that there would be a quiet atmosphere in which to study them. The emphasis was on speed, service, and innovation. We needed a brand; we needed to make an impact, and we needed to capture the imagination. SPICe, the Scottish Parliament Information Service, was born. The name's short, it's memorable, and it makes people smile.

Secondly, we recognised that our new staff would need to be adaptable; able to embrace change. However confident we were that the service would work; we could not fully predict what the demands on it would be. Change was inevitable. This meant that our new staff needed to be self confident, sure of their own abilities and able to communicate effectively and to work under pressure. They needed analytical and negotiating skills. Above all they needed to be flexible. We were determined that we would not create two types of information workers i.e. those in backroom and front room jobs. Customer-facing elements were built in to all jobs so that no one

could be squirreling away in a back room, insulated from customer demands. The recognition of customer needs is the engine of change.

Recruitment timescales are lengthy in the UK, so we needed to describe the service and the jobs that we needed towards the end of 1998 in order to have staff in place to get things organised in time for polling day, 6 May 1999. With no relevant models in Scotland to look at, we recognized that we would have to explain what the new Parliament was and what it would be doing, what a research and information service would be doing for the Parliament, and how the posts that we were advertising would fit into that picture. Already we were in the business of justifying and marketing our services.

Our third decision was that there would be only one collection of stock to serve the needs of our research and information staff, and of our users. Furthermore, this collection would be, as far as possible, classified in a single browsable sequence. This would maximise the 'self-service' approach and simplify our cataloguing and indexing. Several years later this decision had the interesting effect of preventing our staff being split between different buildings when an accommodation shortage arose. It was more efficient to stay together because we all depended on the same collection.

### Positioning your service

The role that your service can play in your organisation will depend on a successful combination of two factors: structure and credibility. It is imperative that you position your service so that it is closely aligned with the objectives of your organisation. In order to do this you have to explain what you are doing in terms that those who hold the purse strings and take the big strategic decisions can understand. The Scottish Parliament has a strong corporate ethos. Departments can rarely act in isolation; collaboration is necessary and highly valued. SPICe's remit is its fundamental strength. Our first priority is to support the research and information needs of parliamentary committees. The Scottish Parliament is unicameral, and its committees examine legislative proposals as well as conducting inquiries on subjects of their own choosing. This automatically positions us close to Members and to parliamentary business.

Our research service, comprising 20 staff, is the primary source of research support to committees. Individual researchers are subject specialists in one or more of the areas in which the Parliament has powers to legislate (known as devolved areas). They are organised in teams based around knowledge clusters of similar policy areas. Their team structure intentionally does not reflect committee remits. This strategic decision has two purposes. First, it promotes the ability of staff to cover each other's subjects in the event of leave or absence. Second, it avoids researchers' subject knowledge being submerged in the current agenda. They need to be able to keep an overview of developments beyond short-term and often media-driven interests. Most committees have an annual 'away day' in the summer when they plan their future work programme. SPICe researchers usually present 'forward look' papers to these meetings to inform committees of topics that may become important in the coming year.

We also work for individual Members and their staff. One of our most popular products is a 'virtual debate pack', which we put on to the Parliament's intranet. Members, or more commonly, their staff, can follow up references to material relevant to forthcoming debates, and contact us if they need print sources or more background. Users like the service because it is timely, relevant, and easy to access. It is also our responsibility to supply printed copies of parliamentary and government documents to Members. Since moving to our new parliamentary building, Members have demanded a SPICe presence both in and adjacent to the Chamber to ensure that documents relevant to plenary debates are available at all times.

As a result of the Parliament's corporate culture, SPICe skills and services are available to other parliamentary staff. Their needs range from answers to reference enquiries, to in-depth, often comparative research. One recent growth area is in expert advice on the design of questionnaires for surveys commissioned by staff, such as travel to work surveys or surveys of customer satisfaction with services. It is better value to use existing staff for this purpose than to contract it out, and it avoids the need for a procurement exercise.

### Credibility and marketing

Whether or not you have a remit that is central to your organisation, the credibility of your service will directly affect your success. You must build a respected reputation, and once you have achieved it, you must work hard to maintain it. Your credibility will depend on the quality of your staff, of the services you provide, and of your products, externally published or not. Recruit well qualified staff who understand how policy works in practice. Train and retrain them. Introduce peer review procedures for your outputs both within your own team and outside it, and insist on quality. Create a positive atmosphere that values improvement. Seek external validation and reflect it, especially upwards. A survey of the users of our website unexpectedly revealed that SPICe research briefings were used and valued by a wide range of professionals as good summaries of current topics. We have been able to attract respected academics to co-author subject briefings which analyse election results. This visibility has enhanced our profile and our reputation both within and outside the Parliament.

Assuming that you have a good product, it is important to advertise it, otherwise it may be ignored because people are not aware of what you can do. There are simple ways of achieving visibility. For example, we publish our research briefings and fact sheets on our website. We ask our Media Relations Office to make a link from their news stories on the website's front page to the relevant SPICe briefing. This is partly as a contribution to democratic accountability; we believe it is right that everyone should be able to see the briefing material that we provide for our Members. It is also a means of building our reputation by allowing outside scrutiny. In some cases a briefing provokes correspondence from groups or individuals who feel that we have misrepresented or ignored their particular point of view. We will defend our papers, but if we think that the criticism is justified, we will amend the paper accordingly, without compromising our integrity. The fact that our papers are commented on publicly, almost always with praise, adds to our credibility with Members, who are our primary audience.

We are in a competitive environment. You will find increasingly that you have to justify what you are doing, prove its worth and prove that you are providing value for money. A number of challenges face us in this field. How often have we heard the cry 'it's all on the web', 'why do you need so many people when everything I want is available at the touch of a button?' We are in the business of managing information and knowledge. This relies heavily on human judgement, expertise, and professionalism. The world has not yet been taken over by 'google monsters', but they have made finding information seem easy and almost instant. It is our responsibility to demonstrate the limitations of internet search engines, and the added value that professional information specialists can bring to users' enquiries. This is likely to involve more one-to-one training of your users, and at their desktops rather than yours.

Expectations are that responses will be faster, quicker and shorter. Even five years ago we were composing enquiry responses on letter templates, printing them out on headed notepaper and sending them to Members in the mail. Now, more likely than not, the answer will be either in the form of an electronic attachment to an email or it will be an email itself. Sometimes the response will be requested over the telephone, along the lines of 'please read me out the key points in your answer and confirm them in writing later'.

How much of your agenda is driven by what is happening in the news? How ephemeral is the information that catches the attention of your clients one day but not the next? This fast moving environment makes it harder to keep an overview of a developing subject area. It leaves information specialists with less time to analyse and evaluate the information that it required to answer the question. However, the intrinsic value of your service lies in this human intervention and in the judgements and synthesis that makes sense of the huge mass of information that is available. This demands the development and maintenance of new skills, which will have a greater emphasis on judgement and evaluation. We have to provide and protect an environment within which our own staff are given the space and the time to use the skills that we are paying them to employ. The perennial question is 'what value are you adding?'; 'if anybody can do what you can do, then why am I paying you?' This is a harsh message, but unless you apply this test to your outputs and products you will never be able to build a reputation for providing a service that adds value to what your customers can do for themselves.

### Getting out more

You also need to market your service to your users so that you can make sure that you are in fact used. In an age of electronic information provision this is a major challenge.

We have an explicit preference for the electronic storage and delivery of information wherever possible. Naturally there are many customers who prefer to have things in print, and for them we accept that we will duplicate sources or print from electronic sources to meet their needs. We also have to be mindful of equality and accessibility issues and so we do not insist on electronic delivery unless there is no alternative. SPICe provides about 60% of the content of the Parliament's intranet and the editorial function for that intranet is located within SPICe. Electronic resources have

many advantages, but they do have the effect of making the customers' contact with you more likely to be a screen than a person. This reinforces the need for you and your staff to get out more to meet the customer in person. This action not only impresses on the customer that electronic resources do not just arrive at their desktop on their own, but it also reinforces the human element of services which is always the basis for any improvement. Unless you can understand your customers' needs, you cannot possibly shape the services to meet them. You can, of course, conduct online surveys and send out questionnaires but this still maintains a barrier between staff and customer which you need to remove.

Traditionally, many staff who choose to work in research and information services are not particularly good at marketing themselves. This is curious because we insist that all of our staff have good communication skills. However, marketing requires you to be confident about your own service and your own abilities, and to be good at selling them. Following the lead of my colleague Moira Fraser, the Parliamentary Librarian in New Zealand, we have recently initiated a Client Liaison Programme, which involves a series of qualitative interviews with representatives of each sector of our client base. In order to prepare for these we trained a large number of our staff in interview techniques. This training, provided by an external professional body, opened many people's eyes to the simple techniques that you need in order to get the best out of a discussion with the client. It is too early to make a full assessments of the results, but we believe that better quality information from face to face meetings with our clients will encourage a continuing dialogue with them so that we can align our services more closely to their needs. If your customers are vocal in their support of your services you will find them far easier to justify than if you only have statistics, or silence.

Getting out more is also an important element of the success of our research service. The Scottish Parliament is a sub-national Parliament. This means that it only has powers to legislate in some areas, while others are retained by the UK Parliament at Westminster. Logically, therefore, and for practical reasons, we can only be resourced to deal with the subjects in which the Parliament has legislative competence. These are largely domestic policy areas such as health, education, transport and the environment, but they also include the legal system, both criminal and civil justice, where Scotland has a long tradition of separate legislation. Furthermore the Parliament has the right to debate any subject of its own choosing, and from time to time it does debate issues which are reserved to the UK Parliament. This immediately gives us the difficulty of how to brief Members on these issues, but we have taken the decision that briefing on reserved matters will be done either at the level of the provision of reference material or by the provision of material already produced by our counterparts in the UK Parliament who, by definition, have the ultimate responsibility for briefing on these subject areas in the legislative and policy context.

In terms of keeping up to date, it is important that both our researchers and our information specialists keep in contact, both electronically and in person, with their professional counterparts. For example if you are a subject researcher specialising in, say, transport or housing, we would expect you to go to at least one major relevant conference a year; to visit your counterparts in the relevant government departments, and to maintain contacts with relevant academics in universities and

other institutions, not only in Scotland and the wider UK, but wherever they happen to be. In order to make this happen we have to make sure that it is an objective in everybody's job description to maintain their professional contacts. This means that time away from their desk must be facilitated. This in turn means that you must have a system with adequate flexibility to maintain your services. It is not acceptable for a customer to phone up and for the response to be 'I'm sorry, our transport expert is out of the office until next Thursday and there is nobody who can help you in their absence'.

### Politicisation

Finally there is the challenge of politicisation, which seems to have increased in recent years. Parliamentary information services are by their nature vulnerable to being brought into the political and public arena. Few services have so many customers (129 in our case), who are independently-minded political animals who can and do quote your advice and your words in public and on the record. Impartiality and objectivity are essential elements of our work. We have to be politically aware, without being politically partisan. Building and maintaining a reputation of trust and respect are priorities. Nevertheless, sometimes your work can be taken out of context or can be used by one faction to attack or criticise another. It is important to have clear procedures for ensuring the quality of your work, and to check that they are being followed. Staff also need to be trained and prepared to deal with the consequences of unwanted publicity. If they are expected to speak directly to journalists, for example, they should have appropriate training. If that is the responsibility of others, your staff must know to whom those enquiries need to be transferred.

If your service plays an essential part in the business of Parliament, there will be times when it becomes a political football. We have experienced this recently in the Scottish Parliament. One of our responsibilities is to receive information or documents referred to in answers to parliamentary questions, and to make them available to all Members. A Member of an opposition party had asked the Minister for Health for information about waiting lists for National Health Service patients. The answer to his written question promised to place the information in SPICe. After a few weeks, despite our staff phoning the relevant office on many occasions, at the request of the Member, to chase the information requested, still nothing had appeared. The opposition party then raised the issue at First Minister's (oral) Question Time, which is the media highlight of the parliamentary week. They suspected that the Minister was reluctant to release the figures in case they embarrassed the coalition government at a time when there was a UK general election in progress. In the course of this rather heated exchange, our staff were unfortunately misquoted. As parliamentary officials there is no public opportunity to reply, although we were able to set the record straight through private channels. This example serves as a salutary reminder that no matter how straightforward your role, it can become the subject of political debate.

A related feature of most parliamentary information services is that their customers tend to come from opposition Members. In many parliaments, including ours, Ministers are precluded from using library, information and research services because they have access to the resources of the relevant government departments.

Members from parties which form the government usually have less need to question the government position, so tend to use these services to a lesser extent. In aligning your services to the needs of your customers it is important to balance the loud voices against the silent majority, otherwise you risk compromising your impartiality and your integrity.

### Conclusion

The biggest challenge facing parliamentary – and other – information services in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is the need to embrace change. The culture of the Scottish Parliament values innovation and genuinely promotes a ‘can do’ attitude among its staff. There is a drive towards continuous improvement and an expectation that mistakes are acknowledged, without blame, as lessons for the future. In the Scottish Parliament it is not good enough to say, as was commonly heard in the House of Commons Library 10 years ago, and no doubt elsewhere, that things are ‘just about right’. As a young institution we have never been able to say that we’ve ‘always done it like that’. If someone used that justification today, they would be challenged with the simple question ‘why?’.

May 2005