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**UPDATED AND RELIABLE KNOWLEDGE TO PARLIAMENTARIANS –
THE MAIN CHALLENGE FOR PARLIAMENTARY RESEARCH
SERVICES**

1. INTRODUCTION

The English author Samuel Johnson once said that; *“Knowledge is of two kinds. We know a subject ourselves, or we know where we can find information upon it”*.

I believe this quotation is particularly relevant for someone who works within a parliamentary research service, not least when the research service is young and the researchers are few.

In my presentation I will try to describe the many challenges we face as a relatively young research service seeking to provide updated and reliable knowledge to our clients.

2. SOME FACTS ABOUT THE NORWEGIAN RESEARCH SECTION

First I will give you some facts about the service which I am part of;

The Research Section of the Norwegian Parliament was established six years ago;

in the autumn of 1999. In Norway, the library and research service are organized as two separate sections, but linked under the umbrella of the same department - The Information and Documentation Department. The library provides information from different sources; books, journals, the Internet etc., whereas the research section processes information and analyses issues using professional knowledge like political and social science, economics or law. We are five full-time researchers. In addition, one researcher is shared with the *Budget Office* and another is shared with *The Standing Committee on Scrutiny and Constitutional Affairs*. This means that they work in our service when they are not occupied in these units. The service answers annually approximately 300 requests to Members and their staff. Our responses to clients are confidential.

3. THE AIM OF OUR SERVICE

The aim of our service is to assist members in their parliamentary role by using our professional knowledge. It is of vital importance to us to produce professional, accurate and up-to-date information and analysis.

4. THE PRIMARY CHALLENGES

As you all know there are many challenges to face in order to provide updated and reliable knowledge to members of Parliament, but I would like to draw your

attention to three primary challenges which I find essential in this respect.

4.1 Challenge number one is *reliability*

In a user survey carried out some years ago, one of our clients raised the following issue: *Are your papers authoritative?* When we asked him to elaborate, it appeared that he was uncertain as to the status of our papers, and whether he could refer to them in debates in Parliament. Could he refer to the Research Section if it turned out that the information given was not accurate? Our answer was that we take the full responsibility for any mistakes that we make. This was a reminder that to gain our clients confidence is one of the primary challenges for a relatively young service like ours.

4.2 Challenge number two is short deadlines and complicated issues

Another major challenge is the very short time limits that often are given by our clients. The deadlines that are set do not necessarily reflect how comprehensive and complicated the issues are. Perhaps more to the contrary.

4.3 Challenge number three is how to meet increasing demand

I also see a major challenge in achieving a balance between quantity and quality. And the question is: How is increasing demand met?

5. HOW DO WE MEET THESE CHALLENGES?

5.1 Reliability - Gaining our clients' confidence

Obviously, the best way to face that challenge is to produce high-quality research papers which meet the client's needs in his or her role as a member of Parliament.

In order to do so, it is vital that we have qualified and experienced staff, easy access to different sources of information and implemented routines for quality assurance. I will come back to these issues later on.

Let me first address two other important aspects;

5.2 Short deadlines and complicated issues - Communication with our clients

In my opinion it is important to make the aspect of short deadlines visible to the clients and try to negotiate more realistic deadlines, instead of trying to meet the client's demands at the expense of quality, because that benefits no one. Another important aspect is to develop good relations to our clients by encouraging more contact and dialogue. Some months ago we established a new routine which implies that we in general are going to deliver our papers by hand to our clients in addition to the usual electronic response through our intranet portal. This will allow us to visit our clients and to make some comments on the papers we have produced.

The goal is to create personal contact and credibility so that the clients will turn to us when they need information or analysis. So far we have little experience on this initiative, but the clients we have met have given us positive feedback.

5.3 Increasing demand - Achieving balance between quantity and quality

Responding to an increasing number of requests without increasing the staff, I fear will affect the way we respond. It will make it necessary to simplify and reduce the scope of the responses. This will imply a reduction of the quality of our work, and our clients will not be offered a full service. This is not the way to proceed. In order to be updated and produce reliable papers, researchers need to be able to practice their professional skills. Therefore it is very important to seek a balance between the number of staff and the number of requests. We have not been allowed to increase the number of full-time staff since we started off. Our service of a total of 7 persons is a critical mass in order to meet the demand of our current and potential clients, and to develop an environment for professional debate. Our main priority for further development of our service is to provide professional knowledge and analysis, which means that simplifying and reducing the scope of our response is not an alternative.

6. STAFF

6.1 The importance of qualified and experienced staff

In order to provide reliable knowledge it is important to appoint qualified and experienced researchers. In our service there is a mixture of generalists and specialists. The professional disciplines that are represented are economics, political and social science and law. All of our researchers have many years of working experience from inter alia ministries and other public authorities, research institutions and interest groups.

Last year we were allowed to engage a researcher from the Ministry of Education on a six month contract. He was a specialist on the Norwegian school and education system. He provided updated and reliable knowledge in his field of expertise, and he is now a part of our network and a valuable contact within the ministry.

6.2 Opportunities for training and personal development

It is necessary for a research service to provide its staff with opportunities for training and further development. Our researchers are encouraged to attend relevant education courses and conferences to remain up-to-date on their subjects. The budget on professional training and development for 2006 is estimated to NOK 200 000. Personally, I attend annually between 6-8 different courses under the

direction of *The Center for Continuing Legal Education*, each course with the duration of 1-2 days, in addition to relevant conferences and seminars.

A researcher should not only be updated on his or her subject, but also on the current issues on the agenda, ex. in the media. There are for instance several national and international newspapers and journals available in our recreation area.

7. ACCESS TO SOURCES OF INFORMATION

7.1 The easy access to information – the Internet

The Internet has made information much easier to access. You can in a very short time find information on almost anything. This has made it necessary to address questions such as: How reliable and updated is the information? It has become more and more important that we use professional knowledge and critical faculty when we are shopping around for information. In addition, it is important to remember that there may be other relevant sources that also need to be taken into account. Not everything can be found in full text on the Internet. The library possesses considerable knowledge on how to search reliable information both on the Internet and in other sources, and we have realized that the Research Section could benefit from that knowledge by increased co-operation with the library.

Early this year the library and the Research Section carried out a joint project on further development of the co-operation between our two units. The aim of the project was to identify our special qualifications and to clarify what kind of requests each of us should be dealing with, and at the same time accommodate and encourage the two units to further co-operation taking advantage of our different qualifications. This implies that for example reference requests, which do not require our professional assessment or analysis, are handled by the library. In addition, the library makes substantial contributions to many of our research papers by searching and compiling background information. From our point of view the co-operation with the library contributes to better and more *reliable* research papers.

7.2 Contact with universities and research institutions

In order to provide easy access to updated and reliable knowledge, and to compensate for lack of staff, it is vital that we develop networks in the professions we represent. One of the approaches we have chosen is to invite ourselves regularly to different universities and research institutions to learn more about what they do and to establish valuable contact. This kind of network will be helpful in order to find updated and reliable knowledge and information on a subject. The challenge is to maintain the network of contacts once it is established. It is vital that Members

of Parliament have access to the most updated research and knowledge; yesterday's research is not good enough.

This autumn we have been able to launch a pilot project which allows us to engage two research fellows who will work partly for a research institution and partly for us. He or she will write a dissertation on a relevant subject, and will at the same time be providing basic research assistance to our service. The first on the line is a research fellow from the Centre for European Law at the University of Oslo.

In case the Research Section does not have sufficient expertise or capacity to respond on an issue, external experts are sometimes asked to produce a research paper. In that case, it is essential that the question or the request is suitable for external research. That may not always be the case. Using external research institutions is definitely not an option when dealing with requests with a short deadline as is often the case. Research papers produced in a research institution are often comprehensive and use a technical language which make them less accommodated to the immediate use in a political context, for example in debates in Parliament. To build a network with universities and other research institutions is therefore important in order to have easy access to updated and reliable knowledge, but there are also obvious limits to the use of external resources compared to in-

house expertise.

7.3 Contact with research services in other parliaments

We strongly appreciate being part of a worldwide network of research services, and thus having the opportunity to ask colleagues in other countries to provide updated and reliable information on issues which are difficult to obtain otherwise.

7.4 Contact with public authorities in Norway and abroad

Because of the short deadlines there is often no time to submit requests regarding other countries to our colleagues in other parliaments. Other reliable sources of information which we therefore use a great deal, are ministries and other public authorities, both in Norway and abroad. On our intranet we have made links to Norwegian and International Government Agencies. In case we do not find the relevant information on their home pages, we often make direct contact to the relevant authority in a country. We have good experiences with making such direct contact. Getting hold of the right person makes for very updated and reliable information on legislation and political measures.

8. QUALITY ASSURANCE

In order to provide updated and reliable knowledge it is important to implement

routines for quality assurance and peer review. In our quality assurance guide we have established routines which assure that a request is handled by the researcher with the relevant professional background. There are also established rules of procedure for second opinion or peer review.

Another important aspect is to clarify what the request is about before it is undertaken. This is also emphasized in our quality assurance guide. It is always important to know in which context a client is asking the question. Background information for a private Bill requires a more formal approach than a briefing in connection with study tours or background information for a speech. In these instances it is also important to know the client's own knowledge on the subject. Does the client need basic information or is he or she already an expert on the topic? Many have also conducted their own research before they turn to us, but many times our clients are not aware that it is important to give us that information. My personal opinion is that seeking interpretation and elaboration on requests are by far some of the most underrated aspects of the quality assurance process.

9. SUMMING UP

Summing up, I would like to emphasize that to gain our clients confidence is one of the primary challenges for a relatively young service like ours. We can only gain

this confidence if we provide updated and reliable knowledge. In order to do so, it is vital that we have qualified and experienced staff, easy access to information sources and implemented routines for quality assurance. Other important challenges are coping with short deadlines and achieving a balance between quantity and quality.