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<table>
<tr><td>**Code Number:**</td><td>**195-E**</td></tr>
<tr><td>**Meeting:**</td><td>**64. Library and Research Services for Parliaments -
Research Day**</td></tr>
<tr><td>**Simultaneous Interpretation:**</td><td>**-**</td></tr>
</table>

Some of the challenges following an evaluation of a parliamentary research service

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1   Introduction

In my presentation I will focus on some of the results from an evaluation of the research service in the Norwegian parliament. The evaluation was carried out this spring, after the service had been in operation for about three and a half years. The evaluation report is still in the making so this will be based on what we have analyzed so far.

Let me start by mentioning that a research service in the Norwegian parliament, having been discussed on and off for many years, was established on the initiative of the opposition, in September 1999. The time seemed right for such a service in a situation of a minority government. By the time the service was established the opposition was, however, in a governing position!

The service was established with five researchers, which is still the number to day, but will increase to six in January next year. When the service was established it was indicated that it should be evaluated at some point. When an evaluation was initiated this spring it was not least at the initiative of the research service itself. We were interested in knowing more about how the service was assessed by our clients, and not least to get some input on what might be needs and viewpoints useful for future planning of the service. We had had some occasional feed-back, in most cases positive as I think you tend not to hear from the ones that are unsatisfied. We have not introduced any regular feed-back procedure.

The evaluation has three parts, 1) a questionnaire sent to the user-groups, that is Members, political advisors and committee-secretaries, 2) looking into our relations with other units in

Parliament (library, archives etc.) and 3) our own experiences with the handling of the requests, quality control, external contacts etc.

In this presentation I will point to some of the responds from the questionnaire and then to challenges this imply. I will also say a few words on our relations with other units in parliament.

2   Results from the questionnaire

All together 249 questionnaires were sent out and 144 were returned, that is 58 %, which we thought rather good and a sufficient basis for drawing some conclusions. Of the 144 returns 107 inform that they have used the service very often or occasionally, which means 43 % of our potential users.

2.1   Used the service very often or occasionally

What we particularly wanted to know from those having used the service very often was their main reasons for doing so. In general they expressed satisfaction with the service. More specifically they had *confidence in the qualifications of the researcher and in the information sources being used.* They also referred to *timely delivery.* Many indicated that the service *relieved them in their daily workload.* Some responds indicated that the service was mostly used on *certain tasks* and *in certain situations,* without explaining further what this might be.

From those using the service only occasionally we were of course interested in knowing why this was so. The most common response here was that they *forgot that the service was there, but really wanted to make use of it.* Many also expressed *uncertainty as to how the service could be used.* Some explained the occasional use by the fact that the service was *only used when no other option was available.* Responses in this group also confirmed what we all know, namely that research services in parliament is mainly for the opposition, as it was indicated that *belonging to parties in government position made the parliamentary research service less relevant.*

2.2   Non-users

It was of course of particular interest to us to find out more about the group that never had made use of the research service. The responses here were similar to the occasional users, namely *uncertainty as to what the service could be used for* and *forgetting that is was actually there.* Few did however express that they had never heard of the service. Some indicated that they *lacked the time it took to formulate a request* and also that the *political advisors gave sufficient assistance.* Both here and among those using the service occasionally it was, however, expressed that even though the Member personally had not made use of the service he was aware that the political advisors had. Also among the non-users it was referred to the lesser need when *belonging to parties in government.*

2.3   A better service

In addition to responses on their actual usage we also wanted the two user-groups to express what the research service, in their view, should stress further. Only about half of the respondents in these groups expressed their views on this. Among those who did the views were that the

research papers should be more elaborate and analytical, and also that they should *take into consideration the actual political party's standpoints* in the matter. There was also a comment questioning *the authorization of papers from the research service.* Some expressed that they would like an opportunity to *discuss their approach to a problem/request with the researchers*.

In addition we also wanted all the recipients, users as well as non-users, to respond more generally to what they would want from a research service in order to meet their needs. Here an overwhelming respond was *for the research service to be more visible and accessible,* having obviously to do with the fact that they forget that the service is there. Some indicated that they would want the research service to *produce papers beforehand* on issues likely to come on the political agenda and some also wanted the service *to work more closely with the committees*. Only five respondents expressed that there was *no need for a research service* in the Norwegian parliament, while a large portion *wanted the service as it is today*.

3. Challenges - improvements

The evaluation process indicates that we are doing something right, and also reveals some users' needs that can easily be implemented. But the main result is that it is now the task begins, namely to face the challenges that follows in the wake of such an evaluation. Below I have indicated some of the main challenges that we see so far.

3.1 More visible and accessible

It seems that the research service has been able to convey that it exists, but it is obviously not clear to all potential users how the service may be of help. Another important respond points to the need of keeping users reminded of the service as it seems to be forgotten in the daily work. The challenge according to this is thus

How to make the research service more visible and accessible, and to make sure that the service is an option in situations where it might be useful

With a situation in the research service today characterized by an amount of requests that does not leave much room for increases, this leads to an additional challenge namely

How to meet the consequences of a possible increase in requests following from a greater awareness of the service among potential users

What we may have to consider in this respect is:

- *Stricter criteria concerning what sort of requests the service accept*

So fare we have been accepting more or less all sorts of requests, one of the reasons being to find out what the needs for assistance were, but also, as a new service, to be forthcoming to the users.

We may also have to

- *Differentiate between users*

That could be to give priority to Members

We may also consider

- *Increase in commissioning external research*

When established it was expressed that the research service might commission external research and budgetary means were made available. We have made use of this possibility at some occasions, but we may have to extend such commissioning, finding ways to handle the challenges involved

Increasing amount of requests will no doubt imply

- *Closer cooperation with library and archives and possibly other entities in parliament (more on this later)*

In other words, the challenge is on one hand to meet a need for being more visible and accessible with at the same time being able to meet the demands for extended service that this may imply!

3.2   Business as usual, but need for changes/improvements

Responds to our questionnaire showed that many of our users were satisfied and wanted us to go on as usual. But there were responds that indicated a need for the service to consider changes and improvements that definitely need follow-up. Such indications were:

- *To have a more elaborate and analytical approach in the papers*
- *To consider the respective party's view on the matter*
- *Questioning the "authorization" of the papers from the research service*

All these are aspects that we need to clarify more precisely. As for the need to be more elaborate and analytical this may be hard to combine with the fact that there were also indications that users wanted easy-to-read papers. This may, however, not be opposites, but rather indicates the need to communicate more closely with the user in order to find out what is the most relevant form in that particular instance or for that particular user.

Wanting the paper to consider the party's political view on the matter, in other words to be more partisan, will definitely need some further clarification. So far we have taken aspects of interest to a political party into consideration when this has been particularly asked for, but having party politics influence the discussion and conclusion in a paper is a different matter.   This may touch on the relationship between the role of the research service and that of the political advisors. I will come back to this later.

As for the authorization of our products this is a very interesting matter and we are looking forward to a further clarification on this. It may have to do with the relationship between parliament and the ministries, as to where our products fit in, or it may relate to the actual quality of our products.

What we also have to consider regarding responds from the questionnaire is that

- *Some seems to lack the time to formulate a request*

This may for instance have to do with a conception – or rather misconception – that an elaborate formulation is needed when contacting the research service

As for the respond asking for

- *Communication between user and researcher in the process of responding to the actual request*

This is something we have been practising to a certain extent already, but perhaps been too afraid to "bother" the Member. With this respond increased communication will be implemented.

We also have to take into consideration the responds that wanted the research service to

- *Produce papers beforehand on issues likely to come on the political agenda*

This is something we anticipated a need for when the research service was established and also intended to do, but so far have not been able to realize. It is primarily a question of capacity, but we will look into it again, not least as efforts put into a paper available to all, may imply a reduction in requests.

3.3   Clarify some aspects in relation to the political advisors

As indicated earlier the political advisors to Members are heavy users of the research service. A respond to our questionnaire indicating a potential for increased usage of the research service, combined with the fact that the number of political advisors is increasing substantially, have actualized our relations with this user-group. More precisely it would be useful to have a discussion with the political advisors on:

- *In what circumstances they find the research service most useful, whether on specific topics or in certain situations or more generally when short on time. It is interesting to know more on to what extent the service is used primarily when the work-load is very high or if there are some other guidelines for using the service*

This may have to do with the other important aspect in relations to the political advisors, namely

- *To explore a possible need for drawing up some form of cooperation-procedure taking into account the limited capacity of the research service in relation to the amount of political advisors, as well as the question of the role of the research service in dealing with party-political aspects*

Another aspect here is for the research service to be more aware of practicing "help to self-help". Many of the political advisors are rather young and inexperienced and it is important that they

- *Are aware of, and make use of, the library's homepage with links to useful information, and thus to reducing the number of requests to the research service*

4 Relations with other units serving Members

Increase in requests and sometimes receiving requests that could very well and often better, have been answered by library or archives, made us more aware of our relations with these units. When the research service was established it was indicated that both library and archives would play an important role in retrieving information. This has definitely been the case.

But as we do see a need to extend our relations with these units,

- *We have established an understanding with the library and with archives when it comes to forwarding a request to the right recipient. As we all know, the user does not always know where to send a request.*
- *We are also aware that on some requests it may give the best result for the user if there is a co-operation between research service and library or research service and archives*

We have also established that we have a common interest with the library

- *In promoting awareness, especially among the political advisors, of the services offered on the library's homepage*

And in relation to archives we both

- *See that in dealing with to-days request there may be a need for increased awareness on what has been debated and decided on similar issues in previous sessions in parliament .*

In this evaluation process we have also been in contact with other units in parliament such as the International department. Here we found many concurrent tasks and interests.

- *We have agreed that we would benefit from sharing each others experience, knowledge and contacts and thus from establishing procedures that ensure keeping each other updated on issue-areas of mutual interest.*

In other words, our present workload, and not least a potential increase in requests, made us more aware of the need to cooperate as closely as possible with other entities in parliament that work towards Members and their advisors.

5   Committees

In addition to Members and political advisors, committees were mentioned as the third user-group for the research service. This usage has been rather limited, with the main requests having to do with background-papers and analysis for committee study-tours, for committee-hearings, and also with assisting in arranging seminars.

Two committees have had a closer relationship with the research service, namely the Committee of Finance and the Committee of Scrutiny and Constitutional Affairs. Here one of the researchers have actually worked in the committee for a certain period or been given specific tasks. The research service would like for this kind of assistance to extend to other committees as well. More precisely we suggest that researchers, according to background and interests "follow" more closely certain committees' work. In this way a researcher will be better prepared to assist if and when the actual committee has a need. For the researchers this would imply a closer contact with the political process which is both useful and meaningful in their work.

To realize this idea implies of course that the committees find it useful. Nearly all committees have only one secretary and it is thus a rather vulnerable system, which should welcome some sort of "back-up". It has, however, been indicated that there may be some formal obstacles related to the role of the committees in the political system. In the Norwegian Parliament the initiative lies with the Member rather than with a committee and this may have an impact on the need for assistance from the research service. Nevertheless, we do want to raise the issue on a closer cooperation with the committees and see where it leads.

Our point of departure here is also that we have to clarify what the respondents have in mind when they expressed that they

- *Wanted the research service to work more closely with the committees*

6   Conclusion

Having conducted an evaluation has in other words raised challenges that we have to face in order for the research service to be able to meet users' demand in the best way possible. While some is rather straight forward and can easily be implemented, others need further clarification in order to make sure that we get the right picture of what the needs may be. As I know, from previous meetings with colleagues from other parliaments, we often face the same challenges and I hope to bring back from this research day many inputs on the challenges we face in the research service in the Norwegian parliament.