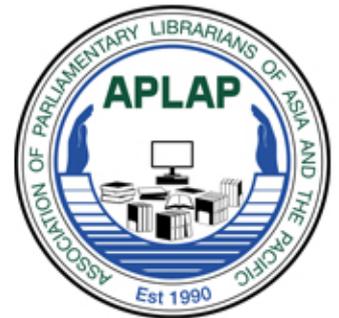


# COUNTRY REPORT: NEW ZEALAND

# APLAP 2021 ONLINE CONFERENCE (13th APLAP CONFERENCE) 15 - 17 JUNE 2021



HOSTED BY THE CONGRESS OF THE PHILIPPINES

## ***Strengthening connections: New Zealand Country Report, APLAP Conference June 2021***

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## Strengthening connections: New Zealand Country Report, APLAP Conference June 2021

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### *Abstract*

*This paper discusses four initiatives undertaken by the Parliamentary Library/Te Pātaka Rangahau to address the challenge of staying responsive and relevant to the New Zealand Parliament.*

The last decade has been a period of transformational change for libraries. Not only has the collection and research environment rapidly evolved, the behaviours and needs of users have also changed. Parliamentary libraries have not been immune to these changes.

The past eighteen months have seen no shortage of challenges for our business group. Like other libraries, we have had to navigate providing a library and research service during a pandemic – moving our workforce from the office to their homes, the repercussions of a delayed election, moving our collection and services from print to digital, and adapting to the rapidly changing subject matter that was being demanded.

Alongside the changes necessitated by the pandemic, the Library has commenced several initiatives to address the challenge of staying responsive and relevant at a time when the value of libraries is often questioned. This paper addresses four of these initiatives:

- engaging with our electorate and community offices
- supporting select committees in a more structured and visible way
- providing linked-up services to support policy development
- reviewing and updating our organisational structure.

### **Outreach and support to Electorate and Community Offices**

New Zealand has 72 electorates (65 general electorates and 7 Māori electorates). Each electorate is represented by one MP. The other 48 MPs in Parliament are selected from party lists. Electorate MPs have an electorate office, or sometimes multiple electorate offices, in their electorate. List MPs may have offices in electorates where they are based.

Electorate and Community office (ECO) staff are employed to work in the MP's local electorate or community office. They meet with the public, work on local issues and serve as the 'face' of the member when the member is in Wellington.

The role of ECO staff can be challenging and isolated. Often only one or two people staff an office at any one time. ECO staff can work on complex and troubling constituent matters and sometimes deal with difficult individuals, often in relative isolation from their managers and colleagues.

One of Parliamentary Service's [strategic intentions for 2019-2023](#) is that "Electorate office staff will feel connected to the Parliamentary Service." The Parliamentary Library/Te Pātaka Rangahau has embraced this mission to make sure ECO staff feel connected to Parliament and supported in their work.

Indirectly, Covid-19 provided a spark for our new approach. During the lockdown in New Zealand, when Parliamentary staff worked from home, several of our Library staff volunteered to call ECO staff to ‘check in’ and maintain connections during this challenging period.

Anecdotally, we heard from some ECO staff that they were either unaware of the full range of services the Library could offer or were apprehensive about asking us for help. These conversations sparked discussion amongst Library staff about how we communicate with ECO staff, and how we could do this better.

A small group of Library staff conducted a pilot project, visiting and calling ECO staff to get a fuller picture of their needs and their impressions of the Library. As a result of this informal, exploratory research, the Library has focused on outreach and personalising our offering to ECO staff. We now ensure that all new ECO staff receive Skype or Zoom inductions. The induction emphasises that ECO staff should feel comfortable approaching the Library with any question, no matter how small or large.

We have received positive feedback from ECO staff that these personalised inductions provide the reassurance they need to reach out to the Library for support. They also appreciate being able to put faces to the names of Library staff.

We have also re-designed our presentations to ECO staff, to focus on their unique needs. A recent opportunity to use this approach was the first nationwide ECO conference, hosted at Parliament over two sessions in April and May 2021. In our presentations to ECO staff, and while staffing the conference booth, we focused on services with particular relevance to ECO staff, such as help with constituent issues, our expertise with mapping software, and automated news alerts on local issues. Targeted promotional resources were developed and piloted. We received positive feedback, with some ECO staff stating they had not been aware of some of the Library’s services.

Efforts to improve our outreach and services to ECO staff continue. One challenge has been measuring the impact of our actions, beyond simply collecting verbal feedback. An upcoming initiative to improve evaluation capacity in the Library may address some of these challenges.

### **Supporting select committees in a more structured and visible way**

The report, [\*Foresight, insight and oversight: Enhancing long-term governance through better parliamentary scrutiny\*](#), identified the provision of additional research, analysis and advisory support for subject select committees as an option to enhance parliamentary scrutiny.

The [New Zealand Parliament](#) has 12 subject select committees and seven specialist committees. The duties of clerks of committees are performed by staff employed in the Office of the Clerk (OOC). The OOC is a separate agency to the Parliamentary Library/Te Pātaka Rangahau (which is part of the Parliamentary Service) and Library staff have not historically been involved with committees—only providing specialist subject advice when it was requested by the clerk. Such requests often lacked context as Library researchers did not have access to confidential material before the committee and were not present for any of the committee’s deliberations.

After a successful pilot with six committees, all 12 subject committees and one special committee in the current Parliament now have a Library researcher as part of their secretariat. These researchers can access the information available to the committee and are present during meetings. This provides valuable background and context that Library staff can draw on when forming their advice. We also hope our presence on the secretariat increases the Library’s profile, making our clients more aware of what we can do to help them in their various scrutiny, legislative and representative roles outside the committee.

The role with committees is new and still developing. Researchers are more likely to provide support to committees for inquiries, briefings and petitions, whereas Government officials support committees when they are considering bills.

## **Providing linked-up services to support policy development**

### **Policy scenario presentation to research units**

The Parliamentary Library/Te Pātaka Rangahau is often used as a source of information and analysis when MPs and their parties are developing policies. Traditionally, we have done this in response to a series of discrete questions for information that were, from our perspective, not necessarily connected. Short deadlines hampered our ability to consult with colleagues across the library or to access resources not immediately at hand.

More recently, we have been promoting ourselves as “research partners” working alongside our clients as they develop policy, from a simple idea to a substantial proposal. Rather than one or two researchers presenting individual clients with a catalogue of services, we have trialled a business-unit to business-unit approach to promoting our services: a team of library researchers present a fictitious policy proposal to teams of political researchers, highlighting the variety of research and analytical skills the Library can provide.

Our key messages to these teams are to involve us early, and that we are a safe place to discuss policy ideas. The Library has always had a reputation for maintaining confidentiality, but not all our clients realise we are not subject to the Official Information Act, i.e. the public have no right to request access to the information we prepare for clients. We have also had to manage client expectations by acknowledging the limits of our service—for example, that we cannot provide policy recommendations.

We hope this initiative will allow us to develop a “whole of Library approach” to substantial research requests: i.e. library researchers working together more often to provide a linked-up service as they investigate the economic, social, environmental, and legislative implications of a proposed policy.

### **Policy costings**

New Zealand does not have an independent office to cost policy proposals, such as Australia’s [\*Parliamentary Budget Office\*](#).

The [2017 OECD Economic Survey of New Zealand](#) noted that opposition parties have no access to independent policy costings. It recommended that an Independent Fiscal Council be created, focused in part on providing policy advice. In 2018, the government published a [consultation document](#) that outlined a proposal for an independent fiscal institution. One of the proposed functions was to provide independent costings of political party policies. The proposal has not progressed beyond consultation.

During this process we learned it was not common knowledge that indicative cost estimates of proposed policies had been undertaken by the Parliamentary Library/Te Pātaka Rangahau for decades (albeit in a limited and non-public way). Political parties often have large formal policy proposals costed by independent consultants, but we are sometimes asked to generate indicative estimates of cost during the early stages of policy development.

Library services include costing new policy proposals and the expansion of existing policies, and also estimating the savings from reducing or eliminating existing agency functions. We are often asked to check the integrity of data, and the appropriateness of both the methodology and underlying assumptions used by government agencies in forecasting future policy costs. We currently rely on publicly available data as we do not have any preferential access to government data.

Limitations to this work include the Library not always being able to access the necessary data as well as the time it takes to develop an estimate. Both limitations can be mitigated to some extent with additional time, and this is part of our rationale for reaching out to party research units to promote our involvement in policy development at an early stage.

### **Members' bills – research to assist with evidence-based policy**

Providing link-up services to support policy development is a motivating factor behind the Members' Bill initiative noted in [Parliament Sector Strategic Intentions 2020-2024](#). The initiative aims to partner the Office of the Clerk drafting service with the Parliamentary Library/Te Pātaka Rangahau, in order to ensure that work going into members' bills is supported by good evidence and research.

The first stage has been an education and awareness campaign to ensure MPs and their staff are aware of the research and analysis that the Library can offer to inform the early stages of policy development. Our education campaign has included:

- updating all existing members' bills guidance documents and relevant intranet pages to include information about how the Library can help
- working closely with the Office of the Clerk's drafting team on new member induction sessions and members' bills presentations
- raising awareness of the specialist skills the Library can provide to assist with policy development via policy scenario planning (as discussed above)
- having regular meetings and conversations with the drafting team to ensure we are capturing all opportunities to work together.

In this Parliament (i.e. since November 2020), we have seen a significant increase in requests for background research for members' bills. The next phase of the project is still being mapped out, but we will continue to look for ways to integrate the Library's research service with the formation and drafting processes for members' bills.

### **Our identity and structure**

In late 2020, our Parliamentary Librarian, Barbara McPhee, announced she would be moving on after almost nine years leading the Parliamentary Library/Te Pātaka Rangahau. Barbara left Parliamentary Service at the end of January 2021 and a new Parliamentary Librarian stepped into her place at the beginning of March – Amy Brier. Amy brings a wealth of knowledge and experience of the parliamentary environment having worked in many roles within both Parliamentary Service and Office of the Clerk. What is unique, and worth noting in this forum, is that Amy is our first Parliamentary Librarian with no formal library qualification or experience in the library sector. This will almost certainly bring a new perspective to the future work and focus of the group.

Alongside Amy's appointment to the position of Parliamentary Librarian, the Parliamentary Service's organisational structure was changed to bring the Parliamentary Engagement team into the Parliamentary Library, Research and Information business group. The Parliamentary Engagement team is responsible for encouraging public participation in our parliamentary democracy. The team look after Parliament's website, social channels, communications, education programme, and Inter-Parliamentary Relations programme. The intention behind bringing this group under the same leadership as the Library was to facilitate a closer relationship between the two groups, exploit synergies, and enhance collaboration.

The final element of the 2021 structural changes was to review the Library's organisational structure. The last review of the Library occurred in 2011 and since then much has changed, including:

- the composition of our Parliament

- how MPs and their staff use our services
- the number and complexity of requests coming to our research teams.

With that in mind, a new structure was proposed in May 2021. The aim is to ensure a modern, fit-for-purpose Library that aligns with the work of the House, its committees, and parliamentary agencies; a Library that offers strong support to MPs and their staff; and one that helps to increase New Zealanders' engagement with the work of parliament.

Although a final structure will not be decided until mid-to-late June, some of the proposed changes being considered include:

- moving from subject-based research teams to teams built around our customers: the House and select committees; and MPs, their staff and the public.
- larger teams made up of people with varied skill sets.
- fewer levels of hierarchy and fewer job titles to encourage more collaboration.
- a centralised customer service hub aimed at reducing duplication and building a clear ethos of customer service and best practice.
- a dedicated principal researcher, who would be considered a technical lead and be responsible for planning and coordinating the research programme and ensuring the quality of our work and products.
- information management, resources and collections functions to become one team responsible for managing the organisations business records as well as our digital and physical library collection.

## **Conclusion**

Many of the initiatives undertaken by the Parliamentary Library/Te Pātaka Rangahau over the past couple of years have been about strengthening connections – with our clients, Parliamentary agencies and our library colleagues. These initiatives have been driven by a knowledge that our environment has changed and we need to change with it in order to remain relevant. Offering more personalised and tailored solutions, extending the reach and breadth of our services, as well as rethinking our organisational structure are examples of ways we are responding to change and ensuring we continue to bring value to Parliament.