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Parliamentary Budget Office Stakeholder survey report 2021

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1. Executive summary

The Parliamentary Budget Office (PBO) commissioned Uncommon Knowledge to conduct the 2021 research with its stakeholders. This followed previous stakeholder surveys in 2015 and 2018. The research invited feedback from the PBO’s primary stakeholders of parliamentarians and their staff and from its secondary stakeholders, such as parliamentary and government department staff, economic analysts, representatives of peak bodies, research institutions, academics and media.

The research included a qualitative component of 20 in-depth interviews, and their responses were combined with a subsequent online survey to achieve a total sample of 85 respondents. As far as possible and appropriate, the research included questions consistent with those used in the 2015 and 2018 surveys so that direct comparisons could be made, while taking an approach to reduce respondent burden and cover important new areas of investigation.

Stakeholder segments

The qualitative research suggested a stakeholder segmentation based on experiences and needs showing four groups within the primary stakeholder group and three within the secondary groups. These were reflected and validated in the results of the survey and are shown below in Figure 1 along with the attributes which characterise each of them broadly. Of particular note are the ‘outlier’ and ‘minor parties and independents’ groups within PBO’s primary stakeholder group.

PBO’s primary stakeholder group (parliamentarians and their staff)			
Government (mainstream)	Opposition (ALP mainstream) and Greens	Outliers	Minor parties and independents
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Thought out positions and platforms Interconnecting policies Expertise in economics, policy development and parliamentary process Lower awareness of PBO and its services among backbenchers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Thought out positions and platforms although evolving and testing Interconnecting policies Expertise in economics, policy development and parliamentary process Specific instances of some dissatisfaction 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Testing ideas/promoting issues Don’t always view policies as part of a platform or view interconnectivity Varying levels of expertise in economics, policy development and parliamentary process 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Various positions, often not part of a platform Greater need to understand others’ policies and costings and see gaps, dangers, negotiate alternatives etc (quickly!) but their needs are not always met Varying levels of expertise in economics, policy & parliamentary process
PBO’s secondary stakeholder groups			
Economists (and some departmental and parliamentary staff)	Media	Others	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Actively use more PBO material than the primary audience (or sometimes providers of inputs) View material as important input to their jobs and their own analysis etc. View the info they get from PBO as an example of transparency of government processes Just want data and good analysis Have expertise in economics and some parliamentary process 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In many cases, use more PBO material than the primary audience Rely on PBO publications and want as much advance notice of publications as possible to plan for stories Some difficulty translating conditions into a paragraph for a story Expertise in economics and parliamentary process 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> It was assumed by those interviewed that there would be some others who viewed the PBO website and accessed publications — academics and students, and public servants — however this was probably minimal use The general public was considered unlikely to access the PBO website 	

Figure 1 Stakeholder segmentation based on experiences and needs

Overall awareness, perceptions and performance

Among the 92% aware of the PBO, there was strong agreement that the PBO is an important policy costing and budget analysis institution for the Parliament and community. There continued to be high satisfaction ratings for the quality of PBO’s work and its core values of non-partisanship, independence, integrity, and transparency, and strong agreement that the PBO maintains high standards of expertise, is a trusted source of costings and analysis and produces relevant and useful publications. This is summarised in Figure 2.

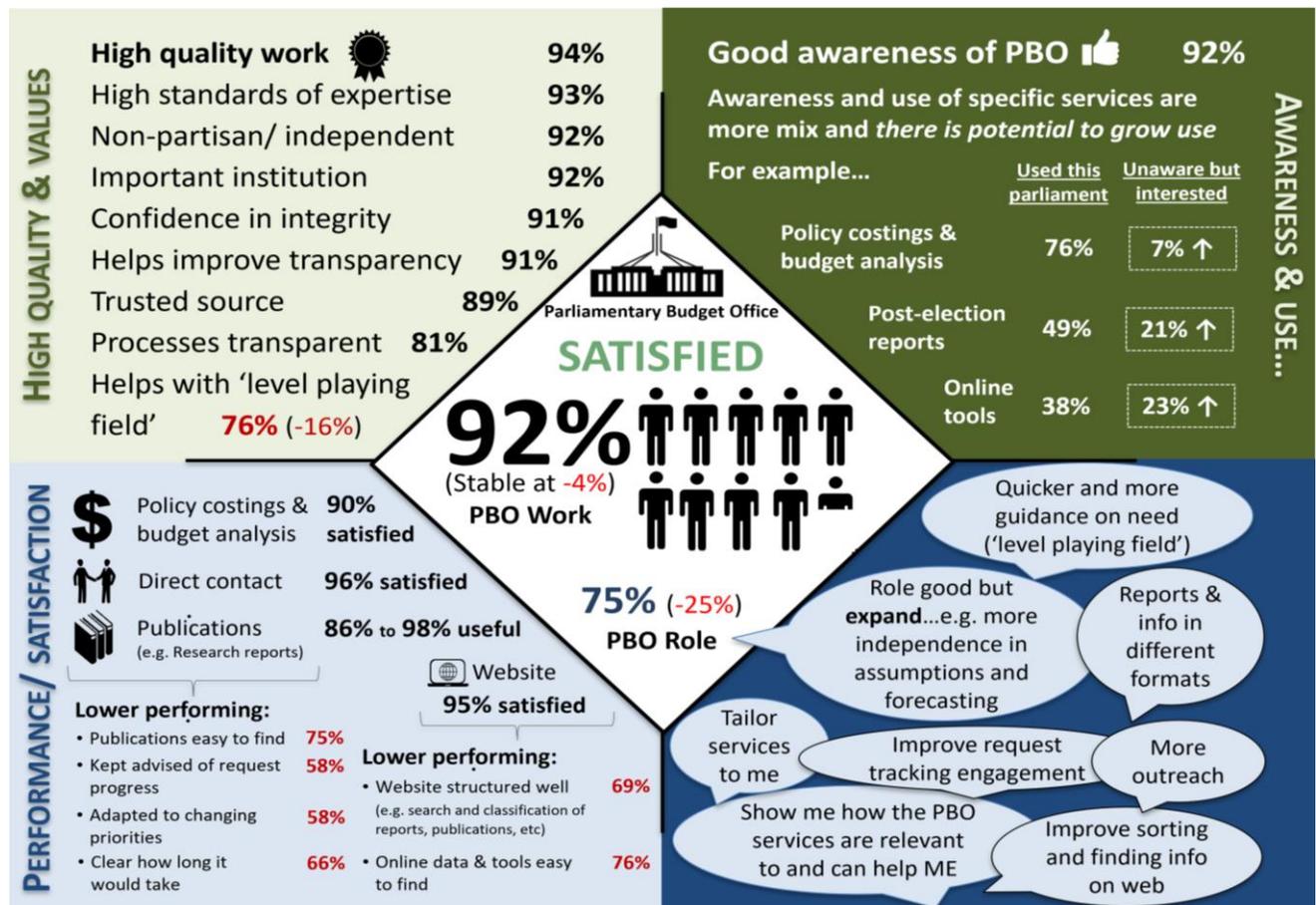


Figure 2: Summary of the key research results

There were, however, specific potential areas for improvement, particularly in how the PBO follows through on requests for policy costings and analysis, and how well its business model meets the needs of all members of its primary audience.

There has been a significant decline in agreement that the PBO helps provide a 'level playing field' for all parliamentarians. Independents and those from minor parties were more likely to disagree. Based on research responses, this was because independents and those from minor parties felt their needs weren't always met (e.g. advice on costing options to help them negotiate other parties' policy proposals).

In addition, while three quarters were satisfied with the PBO role, this was a statistically significant decline since 2018. The survey results confirmed feedback from the in-depth interviews that there was some desire for the PBO to have broader scope and greater capacity in the use of its own assumptions and forecasting and that this would enhance its independence and transparency.

Three quarters of respondents agreed the PBO's focus on the medium-term outlook is important, although almost a quarter were neutral or indicated they didn't know, and 2% disagreed.

Opinions were divided on whether it would help if policy costings and budget analysis were simplified or better explained. The in-depth interviews and analysis suggest that this divide in opinion would be based on their level of understanding and expertise in economics.

Awareness, use and interest in PBO services and publications

Awareness of the PBO among those who participated in the research has remained high and stable (92%) compared to 2018 (94%), and significantly higher than in 2015 (63%). Eight per cent of parliamentarians and their staff who responded to the survey were not aware of the PBO and these were more likely to be from the Government.

Use of the different PBO publications and services was more varied and depended mostly on awareness, relevance to the person's role or area of interest, availability of time and their access to other sources. The use of policy costings and budget analysis (76%) and research reports (75%) in this parliamentary term remained high and stable. Use of chart packs and budget snapshots was also high (70% and a significant increase from 2018), as was use of the PBO website (66%). Other services had lower use and in particular online data and web tools (38%) and distribution analysis for parliamentarians (31%).

There is potential to increase use of all the different PBO services and publications by between 7% and 33% through increased awareness and understanding of their specific relevance and value to the stakeholder, particularly among parliamentarians and their staff and targeted groups within this cohort (e.g. independents and minor parties). Those who were not interested mostly indicated it was because it is not relevant to their role, they don't have time, or they use other sources.

Ideas provided by respondents for improving awareness included:

- induction training and refresher sessions
- targeted outreach (e.g. minor parties, independents, backbenchers, committees, new starters, media briefings/ meetings)
- promoting availability for informal discussions
- use of different report formats and channels (podcasts, YouTubes, seminars, PowerPoint slides for others to use, presentations via Whips' offices)
- regular emails, bulletins, power user flyer, sharing snapshots and timetables of regular publication releases
- website and social media use enhancements
- being more connected to professional groups and speaking at professional conferences.

Policy costings and budget analysis

The work the PBO does on policy costings and budget analysis was received very positively. Overall satisfaction with policy costings and budget analysis remained high and stable at 90%, with half of those reporting being very satisfied. There was no statistically significant difference between years or between parliamentarians and their staff and other stakeholders.

There was strong positive agreement across all the performance attributes and particularly for policy costings and budget analysis being a valuable resource (92%). Agreement was lower at 75% for the two attributes relating to information being relevant to the enquiry and answering their questions. The reasons given tended to relate to timing, the need for greater advice and a concern with some costing conventions used. There were no ‘strong disagree’ ratings and only very small percentages of ‘disagree’ for three attributes – the information being easy to understand, the data limitations being made clear, and the information being clearly sourced and referenced. Responses suggested that while the information could be difficult to understand, it was understood that the subject matter was complex, and it was acknowledged the PBO worked hard to make the information understandable.

Analysis, reports and publications

The different PBO costings, analysis and publications were found to be useful by most stakeholders who had used them. There were high ‘very useful’ ratings for policy costings and budget analysis and for distribution analysis. Among those who indicated they had read and used research reports in this term of parliament, nearly all claimed to be aware of the specific PBO publications tested with respondents, and between 52% and 78% had read and used them (depending on the individual publication in question).

Both regular and ‘other’ specific PBO publications were found to be useful by nearly all those stakeholders who had used them. There was strong agreement across the different performance attributes for PBO publications, with slightly lower agreement in them being ‘easy to find’ (75%). This tended to relate to difficulties in understanding the categorising of the publications and reports on the website and the search functionality. There was also a high ‘don’t know’ response for being ‘a valuable resource in decision making’.

Emails alerts from the PBO continued to be the main method for finding out about new PBO publications, followed by the PBO website. Use of the email alerts channel has significantly increased since 2018, while the media channel has significantly decreased.

Direct contact with the PBO (customer service)

Among the respondents who had direct contact with the PBO during this term of parliament, most (88%) had contact at least every few months, including an increase in those who had fortnightly contact.

Most stakeholders were satisfied with their direct contact experiences with PBO, particularly with the professionalism of staff, the ease of access to relevant staff and the helpfulness of staff. Overall satisfaction in direct contact experiences remained consistently high and stable (91%) with no significant difference over time or between stakeholder groups.

Parliamentarians and staff were positive regarding PBO knowledge and expertise, initial request interactions and the final output. They were still positive, although less so, with keeping the requester advised of progress, PBO staff adapting to changing priorities in the request, and in making clear how long it would take to finalise the work. This suggests that after the initial interaction, performance against expectations is lower for these aspects and could be an area to focus on as part of the PBO’s continual improvement efforts.

Website and online tools

Most visits to the PBO website were to obtain a copy of or information from a PBO publication, research report, costing or analysis. The website rated well overall and across the attributes tested, particularly in having the information and detail needed, and the information being easy to understand.

The website performs weaker in the ease of finding information and in the way it is structured. The data suggests some improvement since 2018 in having all the information and detail needed, and in the ease of finding the desired information, but that there was still potential for improvement.

Among those who had used the online data or web tools in this parliamentary term, there was good awareness of the specific online data and web tools, particularly for the guide to the budget and to a lesser extent the budget glossary and data portal. The data portal had the highest actual use, while the public debt interest (PDI) calculator had the lowest use and lowest awareness. All who had used the online budget glossary, guide to the budget and the public debt interest (PDI) calculator rated them as useful, while 92% rated the data portal useful. There were no statistically significant differences by type of stakeholder. The PBO online data and web tools rated well across the tested attributes.

The main suggested improvements to the website and online data and web tools included enhancing the searching and sorting of publications (26%), having a direct pathway to the PBO website (26%), explanatory infographics (19%) and providing calculators (5%).

Conclusions

- The broad attributes which characterise each of the PBO's four primary stakeholder segments and three secondary stakeholder segments provide insight into the needs and approaches PBO needs to consider, with particular note for the 'outlier' and 'minor parties and independents' groups.
- The PBO has a strong foundation with continued high overall satisfaction and ratings for the quality of its work, standards of expertise, as a trusted source of costings and analysis, the relevance and usefulness of its publications and its performance against the core values of non-partisanship, independence, integrity, transparency.
- There are specific areas for consideration and potential improvement, particularly in how the PBO follows through on requests for policy costings and analysis, how well its business model meets the needs of all members of its primary audience and in how the scope of its role is perceived. Independents and those from minor parties face challenges in accessing PBO services in a way that meets their needs, which in turn has a negative impact on their believing the PBO plays a role in ensuring a 'level playing field'.
- While awareness of the PBO and its services remains high among respondents, the data suggests there is still a considerable number of primary stakeholders who are unaware of different PBO services or who are unsure how its services could be of use to them.
- Publications are widely used and where they are known but not used, the qualitative and quantitative data suggests that this is simply because they are not relevant to all people at all times.
- There is a divide between those who find it easy to understand PBO advice and publications and those who don't. Many of those without extensive economics knowledge are keen to have greater engagement with the PBO and its services but need some movement in the PBO's business or engagement model, or greater understanding of how they can engage with the PBO in a more meaningful way.
- Email alerts are the primary communication channel. There is potential for this to be built on (e.g. with interesting facts, upcoming publication dates, links to other documents etc).
- Contact with the PBO appears to be more frequent than in the past, possibly indicative of the timing within the parliamentary cycle and/or a growing preference for frequent, informal contact.

- Respondents were positive about PBO knowledge and expertise, initial request interactions and the final output. However, performance was lower with keeping the requester advised of progress, PBO staff adapting to changing priorities in the request, and in making clear how long it would take to finalise the work. This could be an area to focus on as part of the PBO's continual improvement efforts.
- The website would be improved with better navigation and structure, particularly by reflecting the way non-PBO users thought of and wanted to access information (e.g. publication listed by topic or date rather than type of publication).

Recommendations

Engagement and communication

1. Review approaches to keeping stakeholders informed on the progress and timing of responses to requests.
2. Consider using a targeted approach based on the awareness, experiences and needs segments that exist within the stakeholder groups.
3. Consider an outreach strategy for primary stakeholders focusing on making personal contact with and addressing the needs of the offices of independents and minor parties, those staff who are new to their roles, those people with limited expertise in economics and policy, and committees and committee staff (e.g. increase awareness of ability to chat and scope of advice and maybe use partnerships with Parliamentary library or other potentials sources).
4. Consider a strategy to encourage informal but regular contact with key economic journalists, including media channels that appear to have limited contact with the PBO (e.g. ABC).
5. Given the high use of email alerts, consider ways to increase what is included in these, for example, links to other documents, key facts, timetable of upcoming publication release dates etc. This would need to be balanced to avoid making the email alert too lengthy or not relevant.

Information delivery

6. Consider multiple formats and channels to disseminate information products including explanations of complex material via short YouTube presentations, in-house seminars and/or making PowerPoint slides available for general use. The PBO could also consider fact sheets, podcasts, rolling induction sessions, presentations to parliamentarians via Whips' offices etc.
7. Continue website enhancement, particularly in taking a user-focused approach to structure and navigation.

Role of PBO

8. While broadening the role of the PBO may not be possible, consider where it is appropriate and possible to address broader state role needs and misconceptions; and consider raising the PBO's external profile by speaking at conferences, publishing papers, encouraging stakeholders to have input to topics for papers, and other ways to provide information and analysis on issues being discussed in the public arena.