Guidelines for Parliamentary Websites
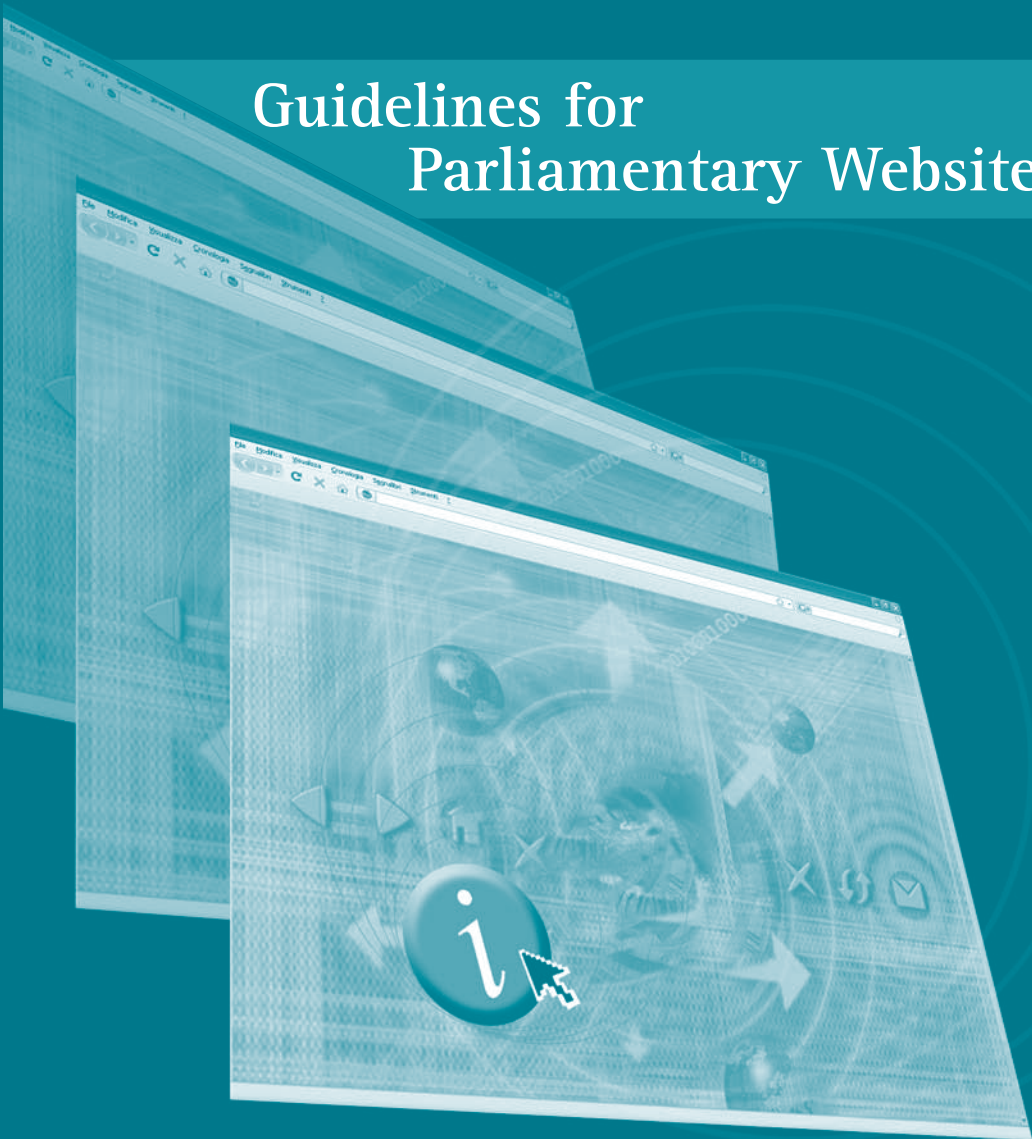
Guidelines for Parliamentary Websites

*A document prepared by the Inter-Parliamentary Union
and the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs,
through the Global Centre for ICT in Parliament*

- March 2009 -

Acknowledgements

Table of Contents

Overview

BACKGROUND

In 2000 the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) published *Guidelines for the Content and Structure of Parliamentary Websites*. The Guidelines were based on an extensive survey of existing websites. National parliaments were subsequently consulted through the Association of Secretaries General of Parliaments (ASGP). At the time of publication it was noted that because the Internet and its underlying technology were constantly evolving it would "become necessary to review and update the Guidelines in the light of future developments". The IPU Secretariat was entrusted with that task and also charged with the preparation of surveys to measure progress in the implementation of the Guidelines.

In late 2008, the Global Centre for ICT in Parliament[1], in consultation with the IPU, undertook the task of updating the Guidelines to reflect advances in technology and new practices in parliaments that have emerged in the last several years. Background for this initiative included the World e-Parliament Report 2008[2], which contained the results of a worldwide survey also addressing parliamentary websites and the implementation of the IPU guidelines. A group of parliamentary experts from around the world contributed their time and knowledge to the task of evaluating and suggesting revisions to the guidelines. A draft of the guidelines was presented at the World e-Parliament Conference held in Brussels at the European Parliament on 25-26 November 2008, and comments from participants and other interested stakeholders were invited.

1.The Global Centre for Information and Communication Technologies in Parliament is a joint initiative of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) and a group of national and regional parliaments launched in November 2005 on the occasion of the World Summit of the Information Society (WSIS) in Tunis. The Global Centre pursues two main objectives: 1) strengthening the role of parliaments in the promotion of the Information Society, through fostering ICT-related legislation, in light of the outcome of the World Summit on the Information Society, and 2) promoting the use of ICT as a means to modernize parliamentary processes, increase transparency, accountability and participation, and improve inter-parliamentary cooperation. http://www.ictparliament.org

2. *World e-Parliament Report 2008*, published by the United Nations, the Inter-Parliamentary Union, and the Global Centre for ICT in Parliament, 2008, ISBN 978-92-1-023067-4. http://www.ictparliament.org

The final version was endorsed by the Board of the Global Centre for ICT in Parliament at its third meeting in Budapest on 6 March 2009.

As with the 2000 Guidelines, this document – *Guidelines for Parliamentary Websites* – is intended to provide recommendations that are practically oriented to facilitate the task of planning and overseeing websites and to enable parliaments to provide concrete guidance to their website designers, developers and managers.

Based on the evolution of technology and on the growing needs of members of parliament and other users, recommendations are made in the following areas:

1. General information about parliament
2. Information about legislation, budget, and oversight
3. Tools for finding, receiving, and viewing information
4. Tools for communication and dialogue with citizens
5. Designing for usability, accessibility, and language
6. Management

INTRODUCTION

Since 2000, websites have clearly become one of the most important windows for citizens to view the work of their legislatures[3]. They offer parliaments the means to communicate actively with citizens and to enhance public understanding of the legislature's role and responsibilities. In countries where the Internet is widely available, they have become one of the most important and frequently used methods for people to learn what their members have said and done, as well as what legislation the parliament has passed or rejected. As access to high speed telecommunications continues to grow on a global basis, this will become true for nearly all countries with legislative bodies.

Parliamentary websites are also important tools for members of parliament, committees[4], and officials. They are often the fastest and most reliable vehicle for obtaining copies of proposed legislation, receiving agendas, getting summaries of committee actions and the text of committee documents, and learning what members have said and how they have voted. They have become essential for enabling the parliamentary leadership and members to carry out their legislative and oversight work.

3. Note on terminology: 'parliament' and 'legislature' are used throughout this publication as equivalent terms to designate the institution of parliament.

4. Note on terminology: in this publication the word "committee" is intended to be equivalent to the word "commission" as used in some parliaments.

Official parliamentary websites, however, are not the only source for citizens and members to obtain information about the legislature and its work. Websites dealing with public policy and with legislative and oversight issues are maintained by civil society, by lobbying groups, by political parties, and by commercial companies. Especially among higher income countries, there is a wide range of web-based sources that provide information similar to that maintained on parliamentary sites. They often have particular viewpoints and include commentary about the work of the parliament. These sites are likely to continue to grow on a world-wide basis as access to technology increases and as economic and political issues become more globally intertwined.

This increase in the number of sources that provide information and opinions about public policy issues makes it even more important that the official site of the legislature be authoritative and non-partisan, and that it provide timely, accurate and comprehensive information. The website must be easy to understand and use, and be freely accessible to all. Finally, it must be well managed and supported so that it can respond to the growing needs of both citizens and members, keep pace with advances in technology, and support the objectives of transparency, accessibility, accountability and effectiveness of the parliamentary institution.

GOALS OF WEBSITES

During the past decade the objectives of parliamentary websites have become more complex and more challenging. They began with the goal of providing basic information about the history, the functions, and the members of the legislature. They were soon tasked to provide copies of official texts of proposed legislation, then the verbatim accounts of debates and summaries of plenary actions, and copies of committee documents. As the interactive web has emerged they have added tools that encourage two-way communication between members and citizens, inviting them to share their views and possibly engaging them in the policy process.

Websites have also had to provide improved methods of access. In addition to obtaining copies of texts, many members and citizens now use search engines to find specific documents and speeches. Alerting services enable them to be notified of the introduction and changes in proposed legislation, the filing of committee documents, and members' activities and speeches. Increasingly, they can learn about the parliament through a variety of media such as audio or video webcasting, live or through an on-demand archive.

Parliaments have been further challenged to improve the design and usability of their websites so that they are understandable and easy to operate. They have also had to enhance accessibility, ensuring that they can be used by all, including persons with disabilities. And they have had to address a variety of related issues, such as multiple official languages and a digital divide that can result in some citizens being excluded from the web.

WEBSITES OF COMMITTEES AND MEMBERS

In updating the guidelines, the panel noted the increasing use of websites by parliamentary committees. In many legislatures committees play a key role in the legislative and oversight process. This role can vary considerably among countries depending on their particular rules and procedures. Therefore guidelines for committee websites warrant a separate effort that can take into account the differences among parliaments regarding such bodies. However, because of the importance of committee actions and documents in the legislative process in many countries, a number of recommendations contained in these revised guidelines do address committees and committee websites.

Members' personal websites are also growing in number and importance. However, these sites often have different objectives, and the rules that govern their creation and use may be different from those of the institution. Therefore, no specific recommendations concerning member websites are included in these guidelines, other than to state that the parliamentary website should link to individual members' sites.

EXPLANATORY NOTES

In proposing these revised Guidelines, the panel had to address a number of broader issues that affect many of the recommendations. Because of the intent to keep the guidelines and their recommendations in a consistently brief format, the explanation of these issues is presented below.

Guidelines as recommended or optional

The distinction made in the 2000 IPU Guidelines between Recommended and Optional has been eliminated. All guidelines should be considered to be recommended if applicable under the rules and procedures of the legislature. For

example, if plenary voting is by party rather than by individual member, then a guideline about the voting records of individual members would not apply to that legislature.

The level of Internet use and the resources available for maintaining and developing parliamentary websites may vary greatly from one country to another. However, the principles expressed in the guidelines are considered to be universal in scope and the recommendations are addressed to all parliaments. The objective of the guidelines – to contribute to the development of effective parliamentary websites - is equally valuable to the citizens of any country.

Recommendations dealing with new technologies focus on the value of testing and evaluation, but do not propose their implementation until there is more experience within the parliamentary community. Not all parliaments will have the interest or resources to carry out such evaluations, but those who do are encouraged to conduct assessments and share their results with others.

Regional networks may wish to suggest additions or modifications to the guidelines as they apply to the legislatures in their areas. For example, they may wish to emphasize the importance of participating in a collaborative effort to develop shared software or adjust the proposed standard on official languages to reflect circumstances among their membership.

Languages and the digital divide

In countries with multiple official languages parliaments face the risk of exacerbating the digital divide if the website is not translated into all languages. On the other hand, the need to translate into many languages can require significant resources. Each parliament will have to decide for itself what is possible. The guideline on this issue emphasizes the need to translate the website into as many official languages as feasible. If only a partial version can be made available in some of the languages, the focus should be first on permanent information such as how parliament works, how to contact members, etc. A summary of current parliamentary activities should also be provided on a periodic basis.

How far back in time?

It is challenging to propose a guideline regarding how far back in time documents should be available in digital format. Ideally, in today's environment every document for the entire history of the parliament should be accessible online. However, this can present enormous challenges to many older legislative bodies from both a practical and a resource perspective. While these guidelines do not recommend a particular span of time, the intent is to encourage parliaments to make their documentation available as far back as possible. This objective is expressed in a recommendation that parliamentary documentation be digitized and made accessible on the website for as many prior years as feasible. It is assumed that documentation that is already digitized will remain available on the website, updated as necessary to comply with the requirements of new technology.

What documentation and information should websites include?

In this instance, the word "include" can mean residing on the parliament's own domain or linked from another website. It is assumed that parliaments will make their own documentation available on the website. There are also cases in which parliaments have found it necessary to obtain and reformat information from an outside source that was important to their work but was not presented in a manner that was useful or relevant. Some parliaments also include links to a variety of sources that provide information, news, and, in some cases, opinions about proposed legislation and government actions. Establishing such links can raise issues regarding balance, inclusiveness, and objectivity. These guidelines take a conservative view and recommend the inclusion of parliamentary and relevant government documentation and information, but they are not intended to exclude a more expansive approach for parliaments that wish to include a wider range of sources. The guidelines assume that parliaments will decide for themselves the definition and scope of parliamentary documentation and relevant government documentation to be included on their website.

Level of detail

For the most part the guidelines provide examples of the kinds of information and documentation recommended rather than suggesting lists of required items. This appears most often in the use of the phrase "such as". Example: "Activities of individual members of parliament, such as legislative proposals,

questions, interpellations, motions, political declarations, voting record, etc." This is done in part because not all the items in such lists will be relevant to all parliaments, and because it is difficult to know every item that might pertain to a specific category. The intent is to give concrete examples that will help parliaments understand what is intended without suggesting that such items are mandatory.

Overlap among recommendations

While these guidelines are intended to be as brief as possible, some overlap was deemed useful for clarity and to assist readers in finding related information. This occurs most often between Section 2, which covers primarily the documentation resulting from various parliamentary processes or produced by various groups, and Section 3, which deals primarily with the tools for finding and viewing that documentation. These relationships are identified through "see also" notes. As the guidelines continue to evolve in response to enhancements in the underlying technology, it is anticipated that Section 3 will add recommendations concerning the technical capabilities of finding and viewing tools that are useful to parliaments, and that Section 2 will continue to focus on the scope and characteristics of the content.

Gender issues

Gender issues are important in some parliaments and an argument can be made that there should be a guideline highlighting the work of women members of parliament. The challenge in doing this is to determine what other groups in addition to women might merit a special focus. This can vary considerably by country. Rather than suggesting one particular group for emphasis, these guidelines recommend links to websites of formal and informal groups if they exist and are recognized within the parliament. The guidelines also recommend statistics that show the percentage of women and other groups elected to the legislature.

Parliamentary versus presidential systems

These guidelines are intended to be applicable in both parliamentary and presidential systems and to systems that may have elements of both.

Role of the parliament: legislation, budget, oversight

Parliaments vary in the extent to which they engage in legislative, budget, and oversight activities. These guidelines are intended to fully encompass all three areas with the understanding that they may not be equally relevant to all parliaments.

Open document standards

Open document standards, such as XML, are one of the technology components that are becoming essential to the sustained effectiveness of parliamentary websites. Open standards are critical to the exchange, preservation, searching, linking, output formatting, and display of documents. Although implementation can be challenging, the sharing of knowledge and experiences among parliaments as well as collaborative development efforts are making it easier to employ open standards. The recommendations state that open document standards, such as XML, should be used to prepare proposed legislation and other parliamentary documentation. Eventually all documentation and media should be made available using open standards.

Support for downloading

An increasing number of organizations outside the parliament are making use of parliamentary documentation in their own websites. Many of these websites, maintained by government agencies, civil societies, media, and the private sector, contribute to democracy and an informed citizenry. To ensure that those making such use of parliamentary documentation have access to authoritative versions, the recommendations call for systems that can support high speed downloading of parliamentary files.

LOOKING AHEAD

As technology and its uses in parliaments continue to evolve at a rapid pace, the creation and support of websites must remain a dynamic process For this reason, the IPU and the Global Centre for ICT in Parliament will maintain an open and collaborative website where members, officials, and staff of parliaments as well as academics, political scientists, members of civil society organizations, technologists, citizens, and other interested parties are invited to

comment on the guidelines, to suggest future updates, and to report their use in development efforts and evaluation studies.

The IPU and the Global Centre for ICT in Parliament are particularly aware that differences in political systems and the role of parliaments in their respective countries present significant challenges in offering guidelines for websites that are widely relevant, useful, and effective. Proposals for their ongoing improvement are actively encouraged and will be most welcome.

Guidelines for Parliamentary Websites

1. CONTENT: GENERAL INFORMATION ABOUT PARLIAMENT

Parliamentary websites serve as one of the most important ways for citizens to learn about their parliament – its history, its work, and its members. Section 1 provides recommendations regarding the ways in which parliaments can introduce themselves to the people they represent. This includes information about how to visit the parliament both in person and through the website; an overview of its history, activities, and organization, including its various committees and commissions; and links to related websites. It also recommends information about the leadership of the parliament, the electoral process by which its members are chosen, the documents it publishes, and the information services it provides. Of special importance are the recommendations concerning information about members, present and past, their representational duties, and their activities.

1.1 Access to parliament

a. Information about access to the parliamentary building, such as visitors' centres, guided tours, educational visits, visiting hours, access to plenary sessions and information services available to the public.

b. Diagram of seating arrangements in the plenary and other official meeting rooms.

c. Virtual 'Guided tour' of the parliamentary building.

d. An explanation of the organization of the website.

1.2 History and role

a. Brief history of the parliament.

b. Description of the role and legal responsibilities of the national legislature.

c. Text of the country's Constitution and other founding documents relevant to the work of the parliament.

1.3 Functions, composition, and activities

a. Overview of the composition and functions of the national parliament and its constituent bodies, including a general description of the role of each parliamentary chamber (for bicameral parliaments) and non-plenary bodies (committees, commissions, etc.), understandable to a variety of audiences.

b. The budget and staffing of the parliament.

c. Schedule of general activities and events occurring in the parliament today and planned for the future. (See 2.1.a for the business agenda.)

d. Bicameral legislatures

    1. A single page that introduces citizens to both chambers with links to the websites of each.

    2. A prominent link on the websites of each individual chamber to the website of the other.

    3. Information that explains the legislative and oversight responsibilities and procedures of both chambers.

    4. For functions that require action by both chambers, such as passing proposed legislation, the associated documentation reflects the activities and the decisions taken by both chambers.

e. List of international and regional parliamentary assemblies of which the parliament is a member.

f. Annual report(s) of parliament, including plenary and non-plenary bodies.

g. Statistics on the activities of the current and previous parliaments, such as the number of bills considered, number of committee hearings and meetings held, scrutiny instruments employed, hours of plenary debate, etc.

h. Texts of official press releases of the parliament.

1.4 Elected leaders

a. Biodata and picture of the current and previous Presiding Officers of the parliament or parliamentary chamber.

b. Brief description of the Presiding Officer's powers and prerogatives.

c. Names of Deputy-Speakers/Vice-Presidents.

1.5 Parliamentary committees, commissions, and other non-plenary bodies

Note: *Recommendations in this section should be considered in conjunction with those in Section 2.5.*

a. Complete list of non-plenary parliamentary bodies with links to the website of each body.

b. Description of the mandate and terms of reference of each body.

c. Description of the activity carried out by the body since the beginning of the mandate.

d. Membership and names of presiding officer(s) of each body.

e. Contact information (addresses, telephone and fax numbers, e-mail) of each body.

f. Selection of links to websites and documents relevant to the field of activity of the non-plenary body.

g. Composition and other relevant current and historical information concerning the National IPU Group, parliamentary friendship groups and national delegations to international and regional parliamentary assemblies of which the parliament is a member.

1.6 Members of parliament

a. Up-to-date list of all current members of parliament with publicly available biodata and photo; information about each member's constituency, party affiliation, membership in parliamentary committees and/or commissions, and link to personal website.

b. Description of representative duties and functions of members.

c. Contact information for each member of parliament including his or her e-mail address.

d. Activities of individual members of parliament, such as legislative proposals, questions, interpellations, motions, political declarations, voting record, etc.

e. Basic information concerning the status of a member of parliament, such as parliamentary immunity, inviolability, salaries and allowances, codes of conduct and ethics, etc.

f. Statistical and demographic data (current and historical) on members of parliament (gender, age, education, job, etc.).

g. List with biodata of previous members of parliament with dates served.

1.7 Political parties in parliament

a. List of all political parties represented in parliament.

b. Link to each party's website.

1.8 Elections and electoral systems

a. Explanation of the election procedure such as voting system, electoral divisions/constituencies, who votes, who can be elected, nomination requirements, who conducts the election, etc.

b. Link to the electoral commission website.

c. Results of the last elections by party affiliation and constituency.

d. Current composition of party groups and coalitions.

e. Results of previous elections.

1.9 Administration of parliament

a. Diagram/organization chart and functions of the Secretariat of Parliament together with the names of, and other relevant information about, the Secretary General/Clerk of Parliament and other heads of bureaus.

b. General descriptions of jobs in the legislature; a list of current vacancies; and details of how to apply.

1.10 Publications, documents, and information services

a. Description of the types and purposes of parliamentary publications and documents.

b. Information about how and where to obtain parliamentary publications and documentation either directly through the website or through other means if not available online.

c. Information about parliamentary library, archive, and information services.

1.11 General links to websites

a. Presidency, Government, Constitutional and Supreme Courts.

b. Ministries and other national agencies.

c. State/provincial legislatures.

d. Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU).

e. Other international, regional, and sub-regional parliamentary organizations.

f. National parliaments of other countries.

g. Other links of interest to parliament as the people's representative body.

2. CONTENT: INFORMATION ABOUT LEGISLATION, BUDGET, AND OVERSIGHT

The core of the work of a parliament is its legislative, oversight, and budget responsibilities. Because parliaments vary in the extent to which they engage in each of these activities, the recommendations are intended to encompass all three areas but with the understanding that they may not be equally applicable. Section 2 focuses on explanations of these activities but with the intent of offering more detail than those provided in Section 1. It also includes recommendations on documentation and other information, arranged first by the process - legislative, oversight, and budget review and approval – by which they are generated, and second by the organizations – the committees or commissions and the plenary – that produce them. Of particular importance are the accuracy, timeliness, and completeness of the agendas, documentation, and other information posted on the website. Section 3 makes recommendations regarding the methods for searching and viewing this information.

2.1 General information about legislative, budget, and oversight activities

a. Today's business schedule in the parliament, including the legislative and oversight agendas, and committee and plenary schedules, with links to relevant documents; also, future business schedules in all areas, both plenary and non-plenary.

b. Chart or diagram showing how the business of parliament is conducted and the relationships of its constituent bodies in carrying out those responsibilities; and a chart or diagram showing the relationships of the national parliament to other national and regional bodies.

c. Glossary of parliamentary terms and procedures.

d. Overview of parliamentary procedure and routine order of business.

e. Full text of the Standing Orders, Rules of Procedure or similar rule-setting documents.

2.2 Legislation

a. Explanation of the legislative process, including the relationship among the legislature's constituent bodies and between the legislature and the government and other national and sub-national bodies.

b. Text and status of all proposed legislation.

c. Links to parliamentary and government documentation that are relevant to proposed legislation.

d. Text and final status of proposed legislation from previous years.

e. Text and actions taken on all enacted legislation.

f. A searchable database of current and previously proposed legislation and of enacted legislation.

Note: *See also recommendations 3.1.a-e*

2.3 Budget/Public Financing

Note: *In this section, the term 'Budget/Public Financing' refers to the processes for receiving revenues and allocating public funds.*

a. Explanation of the budget and public financing processes, including constitutional authorities and responsibilities, the role of government, and the role of the parliamentary bodies that review or approve the budget and/or other public financing activities.

b. Explanation of proposed budget/public financing.

c. Status of parliamentary review of the proposed budget/public financing activities.

d. Documentation from parliamentary bodies that review or approve the budget/public financing activities.

e. Documentation regarding the budget from previous years.

f. A searchable database of documentation related to budget/public financing from the current and previous years.

Note: *See also recommendations 3.1.a-e*

2.4 Oversight (Scrutiny)

Note: *This section covers all oversight or scrutiny actions (these words are used here synonymously), such as questions (written/oral); answers, replies, and ministerial statements; reports of committees of enquiry; interpellations; and special debates.*

- **a.** Explanation of oversight responsibilities and the activities of oversight bodies.
- **b.** Summary and status of oversight activities.
- **c.** Oversight documentation, such as questions (written/oral); answers, replies, and ministerial statements; reports of committees of enquiry; interpellations; and special debates.
- **d.** Oversight documentation from previous years.
- **e.** A searchable database of documentation related to oversight activities from the current and previous years.

Note: *See also recommendations 3.1.a-e*

2.5 Activities of committees, commissions, and other non-plenary bodies

Note: *Recommendations in this section should be considered in conjunction with those in Section 1.5.*

- **a.** Documentation produced by non-plenary bodies (committees, commissions, and other official groups) such as schedules and agenda of meetings published in advance, records of meetings and actions taken, reports and documentation (including from other parliamentary offices relevant to the work of the body), hearings, and other activities.
- **b.** Documentation of non-plenary bodies from previous years.
- **c.** Websites of non-plenary bodies.
- **d.** Audio or video broadcast or webcast of meetings.

Note: *See also recommendation 3.2.a*

- **e.** Audio or video archive of meetings.

Note: *See also recommendation 3.2.b*

2.6 Plenary activities and documentation

a. Documentation produced from plenary sessions, such as schedules and agenda published in advance, records of actions taken, text of statements by members, and text of debates.

b. Documentation from plenary sessions from previous years.

c. Audio or video broadcast or webcast of plenary meetings.

Note: *See also recommendation 3.2.a*

d. Audio or video archive of plenary meetings.

Note: *See also recommendation 3.2.b*

3. TOOLS: FINDING, RECEIVING, AND VIEWING INFORMATION

Section 3 makes recommendation regarding methods of finding and displaying documentation and information about parliaments and its members. Search engines that can serve the needs of both members and citizens, at both the beginning and advanced levels have become essential. Also of growing importance are various methods for providing audio and video webcasting, and the archives that must be developed along with such capacity. Finally, the recommendations note the value of alerting services and mobile access to the website for both members and citizens. Many of these new and highly useful means of access, however, also require recommendations regarding security and authentication.

3.1 Search engine

A system for search and display that can:

- **a.** Be used to find and view all parliamentary documentation and information included in Sections 1 and 2 above.
- **b.** Search for major elements, such as words in the text, status of legislation, dates of actions, members, committees, political parties, and other components that may be required.
- **c.** Sort results by various criteria.
- **d.** Meet the needs of members, staff, and the public, and be understandable to both novice and expert users.
- **e.** Link the results from searches of documentation to relevant audio and video records.

3.2 Broadcasting and webcasting

- **a.** Capacity to broadcast or webcast live meetings of any parliamentary body as well as parliamentary events and programs.
- **b.** An archive of broadcast or webcast meetings, events, and programs that permits on-demand viewing.

3.3 Alerting services

Alerting services, such as email, RSS, or other appropriate technologies that enable members and the public to be informed about important parliamentary actions such as the introduction of, and changes to, the status and text of legislation; members' activities; committee activities; oversight and scrutiny activities; and plenary activities.

3.4 Mobile services

    a. Services that enable members and the public to access information and documentation available on the website through mobile devices.

3.5 Security and authentication

    a. Secure services that enable members of parliaments to receive, view, and exchange information and documentation on a confidential basis.

    b. Authentication services, such as digital signatures, that enable the authenticity of documentation and information to be verified by any user of the website.

4. TOOLS: COMMUNICATION AND DIALOGUE WITH CITIZENS

Feedback is vital to ensure that websites are responsive to the needs of users. In addition, interactive communication with citizens through the Internet is becoming increasingly important and valuable to parliaments and their members. In the era of the Information Society more and more citizens expect to be able to communicate with their representatives and to receive some form of acknowledgment or reply. The techniques for fostering dialogue continue to grow both in number and in capability, with the potential to place greater burdens on parliaments and members as they try to be responsive. This section makes recommendations concerning the availability of these tools on the website, while noting that testing and evaluation is equally important so that they can be employed effectively but also efficiently.

4.1 General feedback

a. A feedback utility that allows users to send comments and ask questions about any section of the website.

b. Information about options and recommended ways to contact members, committees, and officials of the parliament such as by phone, by mail, in person, and through the web.

4.2 Communication between members and citizens

a. The capacity to contact members, committees, and officials of parliament by unstructured email messages or email forms.

b. Tools to enable members, committees, and officials to efficiently receive, manage, and respond to email from citizens and civil society.

c. Interactive tools such as blogs, online fora and discussions, e-petitions, and other methods for interacting with citizens.

d. Systems for allowing online polling when the subject matter is sufficiently important and the results can be considered helpful.

e. Testing and implementation of new methods for citizen-parliament interaction as the technologies emerge and as they prove useful to parliaments.

5. DESIGN: USABILITY, ACCESSIBILITY, AND LANGUAGE

The section provides recommendations in a number of areas that make websites easier to use and more inclusive. These include usability, to ensure that a website is understandable; accessibility, to ensure that persons with disabilities can use it successfully; languages, for parliaments in countries with more than one official language or languages used by a significant percentage of their citizens; and general design elements that constitute good practices for all websites.

5.1 Usability

a. Design elements and choices derived from a comprehensive vision and understanding of different tasks, different requirements, and different user profiles.

b. User testing and other usability methods employed to ensure that the design and use of the website is understandable by its intended audiences at its initial launch and whenever major changes are made.

5.2 Accessibility standards

a. W3C standards or other applicable standards implemented to ensure that the website can be used by persons with disabilities.

5.3 Languages

a. For countries with two or more official languages, or languages used by large percentages of the citizens, every feasible effort should be made to have the entire contents of the parliamentary website available in these languages.

b. If only a partial version can be made available in other languages of the country, the focus should be on permanent information such as how parliament works, how to contact members, etc. A summary of current parliamentary activities should be provided on a periodic basis.

c. A complete or partial version of the site should be provided in one of the languages commonly used for international communication.

5.4 General design elements

a.   The following design elements available to users:

1. Frequently Asked Questions

2. What's new on the website?

3. Site map

4. About this website (who owns it, manages it, update policy, etc.)

5. Help function

6. Whom to contact for questions about the operation of the website

7. Guidance on how to search

b.   Support for multiple browsers and assurance of a reasonable level of backward compatibility of new features and content that does not interfere with needed innovation.

6. OVERSIGHT: MANAGEMENT AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Having good websites requires parliaments to provide active leadership at the highest levels, adequate resources and a strong commitment to the accuracy and quality of information. Achieving transparency and accountability requires a willingness to share documentation with civil societies and other institutions. The use of open standards has also become highly important for the exchange and preservation of information. This section provides recommendations dealing with authority and responsibility, resources and support, strategic planning, roles, the management of documentation and information, and publicity about the website.

6.1 Authority and support

   a. Website has the approval and support of the highest parliamentary and administrative authorities.

   b. Adequate long term funding and trained staff (internal, external, or a combination) are made available.

   c. An adequate and secure technical infrastructure is provided.

6.2 Strategic vision and planning

   a. Officials, members, officers, and staff participate in establishing needs and goals.

   b. Goals of the website are defined in writing.

   c. Needs of the intended audiences are defined in writing.

   d. Periodic evaluation of the website is conducted to ensure it continues to meet the strategic goals of the parliament and the needs of members and the public.

6.3 Roles, responsibilities, and coordination

   a. Oversight and management roles and responsibilities are defined in writing.

   b. A team is established for ensuring that content is timely and accurate.

   c. A high level of collaboration is established among the

staff responsible for content and the staff responsible for technical systems.

6.4 Management of documentation and information

a. A work flow system is in place to prepare and manage proposed legislation, and oversight, committee, and plenary documentation.

b. Open document standards, such as XML, are used to prepare proposed legislation and other parliamentary documentation.

c. All parliamentary documentation is available for downloading in open standard formats, such as XML, so that it can be incorporated and easily reused in government, civil society, and private sector systems and websites.

d. Manual or automated procedures and systems are in place to ensure the accuracy of documentation and media available on the website.

e. A strategy is in place to meet the requirements established by national or international standards organizations for improving the quality and management of information and communications technology to better support the website.

f. The text of proposed legislation, related reports and documentation, and the status of parliamentary actions are available on the website as soon as they are available to members and officials.

g. Explanatory material that makes the text of legislation and procedural steps as understandable as possible is provided.

h. Material that explains the context and assesses the possible impact of proposed legislation is available.

i. Parliamentary documentation is digitized and made accessible for as many prior years as feasible.

j. A strategy is in place to preserve parliamentary documentation in digital formats.

k. Methods are established to ensure that links to parliamentary documentation from outside remain stable.

6.5 Promotion

a. Publicity and other information is made available to help members, citizens, and students become aware of parliament's website, how it can be accessed, and how it can be used.

b. Close links are promoted between the website and other government and civil society websites.