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Parliamentary Budget Office Stakeholder survey report 2024

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Executive summary

The Parliamentary Budget Office (PBO) commissioned Uncommon Knowledge to conduct the 2024 research with its stakeholders. This followed previous stakeholder surveys in 2015, 2018 and 2021. 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 the media. There was also a link on the website for anyone else interested in participating.

The research included a qualitative component of 18 in-depth interviews, and their responses were combined with a subsequent online survey to achieve a total sample of 83 respondents. As far as possible and appropriate, the research included questions consistent with those used in the previous surveys so that direct comparisons could be made, while also covering important new areas of investigation.

The research was undertaken in the first half of 2024, just over two years after an election which saw a change of government, 53 new parliamentarians and an increase in the number of independent parliamentarians. As a result, the 2024 cohort has presented very differently from 2021. Given this change, many primary stakeholders are less knowledgeable of PBO and are using many of its products and services for the first time. The qualitative research suggests some stakeholders are grappling with how to use PBO to meet their needs in a way that wasn’t as apparent in the 2021 research, and are less familiar with the PBO’s products and services.

The 2024 research also appears to reflect an attitude of less enthusiasm or positivity which has been noted by other researchers nationally — difficult financial times, international unrest, and many ‘crises’ being discussed in the media seem to take their toll. This has come through in many of the results where there have been slight (not significant) decreases in results. That said, there have been very few significant changes from the high results of 2021.

Key changes since 2021

There were very few significant differences between the results from 2021 and those of 2024 but these are noted below.

TOPIC	Measure	2021	2024
Overall awareness	Awareness of the PBO – Parliamentarians and staff	82%	100%
Use of services and publications	Used distribution analysis this term -Parliamentarians and staff	31%	63%
	Used chart packs and budget snapshots	70%	50%
	Requested work from PBO this term – Parliamentarians and staff	56%	85%
Policy costings and budget analysis performance	The information was relevant to my enquiry	75%	91%
How respondents became aware of new publications	Via word of mouth (colleagues and PBO staff)	15%	32%
Performance attributes of publications and reports	Findings were supported by the analysis	92%	73%
Visiting PBO website	To find contact information	5%	23%

	To access a tool	5%	51%
	To answer a query	5%	23%
	It was easy to find the information	85%	62%

2024 Findings

Overall awareness, perceptions and performance

Among the 95% 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. There is 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.

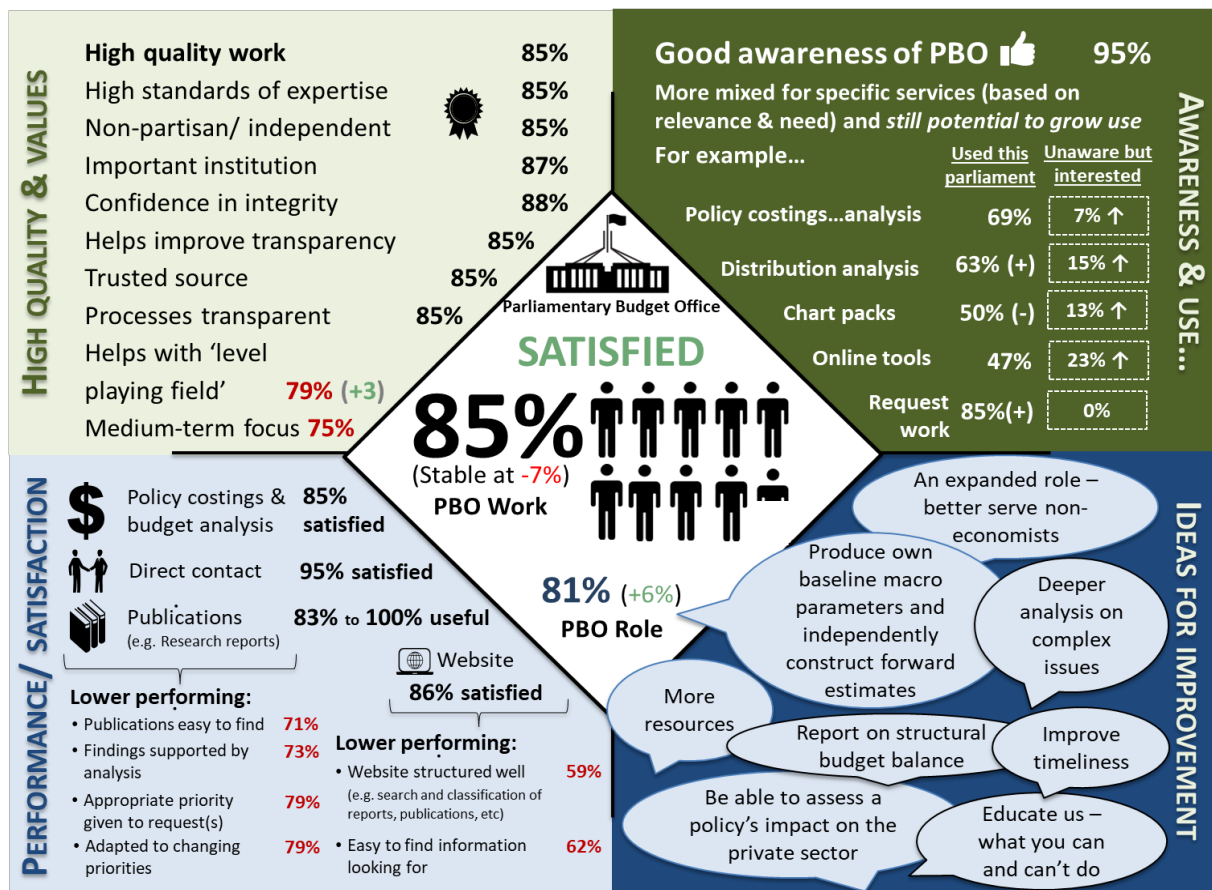


Figure 1: Summary of the key research results

There were, however, specific potential areas for improvement, particularly in reaching out to new members of parliament with communication and training in the role of the PBO and how its products and services can be of use in their roles.

Overall satisfaction with the PBO’s work and role continued to be consistently high and stable. Around one third of respondents (36%, +9%) indicated that their experience in dealing with the PBO in this parliamentary

term had become easier than before, and a further third (36%, -17%) said it had remained the same. Importantly, there continued to be high and stable agreement that the PBO is non-partisan and independent (85%, -7%) and that there is confidence in the integrity of the PBO (88%, -3%).

While there was still strong agreement that the PBO helps improve transparency of budget and fiscal policy settings, there was a continued trend down in agreement. As seen in 2021, there continues to be lower agreement that the PBO helps provide a ‘level playing field’ for all parliamentarians, with the qualitative research suggesting some respondents felt their inability to access government departments put them at a disadvantage. This attitude was reflected in comments about the PBO’s role — while generally supportive there were calls for PBO to have a broader scope, to be less conservative and to provide more behavioural analysis.

Three quarters agreed the PBO focus on the medium-term outlook was important, but as in 2021 there was some interest in a short-term outlook because of the speed things moved, and in a long-term outlook because it was difficult to find this focus from any other institution.

The results for policy costings and budget analyses being simplified was divided – those with higher levels of economics expertise were more likely to disagree this was important.

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 (95%) with 100% of parliamentarians and their staff who responded to the survey aware of the PBO.

There has been a significant increase in parliamentarians and their staff who have Requested work from PBO (+29%) and Distribution analysis (32%), and a significant decrease with the use by stakeholders in general of Chart packs and budget snapshots (-20%) in this term of parliament. Use of other products and services have remained stable when compared with 2021.

There is potential to increase use of PBO services and publications by increasing awareness.

Improved timeliness, greater engagement with media, more analysis on topical and ‘controversial’ issues, and some considerations of behavioural and social impacts were given as suggestions for increasing interest in and use of products.

Policy costings and budget analysis

The work the PBO does on policy costings and budget analysis was received very positively — 86% satisfaction from parliamentarians and staff and 83% from other stakeholders. There was no statistically significant difference between years or between parliamentarians and their staff and other stakeholders.

There was strong positive agreement across the performance attributes and particularly for policy costings and budget analysis being relevant to enquiries which was significantly higher than in 2021 (92%, +16%). There were small scores against strongly disagree and disagree for the other attributes representing one or two respondents. There were no other significant differences from 2021.

Overall satisfaction with policy costings and budget analysis remained high and stable at 85%, with just over half (58%) reporting being very satisfied. There were dissatisfaction ratings with 5% of parliamentarians and their staff indicating they were quite dissatisfied (same as in 2021) and among other stakeholders, 4% were quite dissatisfied and 4% were very dissatisfied (but none were dissatisfied in 2021).

Dissatisfaction generally related to respondents without an economics background finding the information difficult to understand, and some questioning of assumptions and sourcing.

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 the primary stakeholders.

Among those who indicated they had read and used publications in this term of parliament, nearly all claimed to be aware of the different PBO publications and half or more of the respondents had read and used the regular publications (and slightly fewer for the other publications). They were also found to be useful by nearly all stakeholders who had used them. All publications received a small score of not aware but interested again suggesting some potential for increased readership.

Most respondents found out about PBO publications via email alerts, followed by the website and then via PBO staff, the media and colleagues.

The performance attributes of the publications were consistent with 2021 – they were easy to find, understand and download, assumptions were made clear, clearly sourced and referenced, helped to understand budget issues and were a valuable resource in decision-making. There was a significant decrease in those agreeing that findings were supported by the analysis. The decrease comes from both groups (parliamentarians and staff -20%, and other stakeholders -16%), however parliamentarians and staff show notable scores for *neither agree nor disagree* (22%) and *don't know* (17%) suggesting they're not as sure as they were in 2021. The qualitative research didn't suggest there were any concerns around findings not being supported by analysis, only a desire that analysis could be expanded to include things like different assumptions and behavioural analysis.

Direct contact with the PBO (customer service)

Among the respondents who had direct contact with the PBO during this term of parliament, most (87%) had contact at least every few months, and almost half (45%) claimed to have direct contact monthly or more frequently.

Most parliamentarians and staff were satisfied with their direct contact experiences with PBO, particularly with the professionalism and helpfulness of staff, and the frequency of contact. Overall satisfaction in direct contact experiences remained consistently high and stable (94%) with no significant difference over time or between stakeholder groups.

Parliamentarians and staff were positive about staff having appropriate knowledge, the advice being easy to understand and staff making it clear how long it would take to finalise a request. In 2021, making it clear how long it would take to finalise a request (65%) was considered an area for improvement, so 2024's result of 89% indicates it is no longer an area of concern. Scores were lowest for adapting to changing needs and giving appropriate priority to requests although at 79% are still considered high.

Website and online tools

Satisfaction with the PBO website continued to be relatively stable, although slightly down, however, qualitative feedback in the interviews was very positive towards its improvements. Neutral or negative feedback appears to relate more to individual experiences with the categories of publications or their own lack of knowledge and experience. With a change of government since the 2021 research, many parliamentarians and their staff will be first-time users.

Most visits to the website were to view a PBO publication, research report, or costing or analysis (69%). The next most common reasons to visit the website were to access a tool (51%), access data or the data portal (39%), or obtain a copy of an information/guidance paper (31%).

The PBO website performed strongest in having the information and detail needed (82%) and the information being easy to understand (79%). The website performs weaker in its structure (59%) and ease of finding information (62%), and these two measures also scored highest disagree scores (both 13%).

There was good awareness of the specific online data and interactive tools, particularly for the Online budget glossary and the Build your own budget tool, but the Guide to the budget, the data portal, and the PDI calculator were considered most useful.

The suggested improvements to the website and online data and interactive tools included removing jargon, more promotion and enhancing the searching and sorting of publications.

Conclusions

- The 2024 cohort has presented very differently from 2021. Many primary stakeholders are less aware of PBO and are using many of its products and services for the first time. This has meant some stakeholders are grappling with how to use PBO to meet their needs in a way that wasn't apparent in 2021.
- While awareness of the PBO and its services remains high among respondents, the data suggests there are still primary stakeholders who are unaware of the PBO services or who are unsure how its services could be of use, probably as a result of the change of government. The qualitative data suggests some stakeholders face challenges in accessing PBO services in a way that they are used to, which in turn has a negative impact on believing the PBO played a role in ensuring a 'level playing field'.
- Publications are widely used and where they are known but not used, the comments suggest that this is because they are not relevant to all people at all times. The qualitative data also suggests there are many people who find it difficult to find the information they are looking for because publication titles are not always explanatory. This is possibly also preventing the website being rated more highly, whereas there was mostly positive results and feedback regarding the online tools.
- There is a divide between those who find it easy to understand PBO advice and publications (and want the detail) and those who want the information to be easier to understand. Many of those without extensive economics knowledge are keen to have greater engagement with the PBO and its services but need some help in understanding what the PBO can and can't do to help them.
- Email alerts are the primary communication channel. There is potential to develop these further with interesting facts, upcoming publication dates and explanations of what they contain, links to other documents etc.

Recommendations

Engagement and communication

1. Consider an outreach strategy for primary stakeholders focusing on making personal contact with and meeting the needs of those who are new to their roles, and those people with limited expertise in economics and policy. Focus should be on **how** PBO products and services can be used in their jobs, as well as what PBO can and cannot do.
2. Consider appropriateness of and approaches to correcting PBO information published or cited in the media if used incorrectly.
3. Given the high use of email alerts, consider using these strategically to improve understanding of what different reports cover and tools can do as well as links to other documents, while avoid making the email alert too lengthy or not relevant.

Website, publications and information delivery

4. Continue work to improve the website, particularly providing more information about what is included in each publication and what a tool can be used to achieve.
5. Given there are issues with stakeholders easily finding the information they need or understanding how it is relevant, the terminology and how it can be of use to them, consider using a stakeholder/user design centric approach to determine the ways information such as publications are titled, presented and made available, that is meaningful and easy to find from their perspective.

Role of PBO

6. While broadening the role of the PBO may not be possible, consider where it is appropriate and possible to address stated needs or misconceptions and consider providing advice on where additional information or desired services could be accessed.