

## CURRENT INTERESTS

# Legal Knowledge and Information at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office

**Abstract:** In this article Caroline Mack provides an introduction to knowledge and information management services in the Legal Directorate of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. She describes the development of the organisation's library services in recent years, then traces the development of her own role from a Legal Librarian to a Knowledge and Information Manager. While continuing to maintain a print and electronic library service for its lawyers, the Legal Directorate has increasingly recognised the value of effective knowledge and information management in all areas of its work. The article outlines the decision to implement a Directorate-wide knowledge and information management Strategy and the impact this has had on its work. The article also considers how the provision of library and information services are affected by external pressures and events, such as the change in priorities brought about by the EU Referendum result.

**Keywords:** government libraries; Foreign and Commonwealth Office

## INTRODUCTION

The headquarters of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) in London is an imposing building overlooking Whitehall. While some people may still view the FCO as being bound by tradition and protocol – perhaps encouraged by the impressive building and its history – in fact it is a forward-looking organisation that is always positive about change and development, not least in its approach to knowledge and information management. I joined the FCO Legal Directorate in 2010 as a Legal Librarian but my job was soon re-titled Knowledge and Information Manager and has continued to evolve ever since. The FCO also constantly adapts its priorities and working practices in response to developments in the wider world, one recent example being the EU referendum and subsequent Brexit planning. This makes it always a varied, challenging and interesting place to work.

## THE FCO LEGAL DIRECTORATE

The FCO has over 14,000 staff, most of them working in its overseas network of nearly 270 embassies and consulates. Staff in London are organised into Directorates reflecting different geographic regions or themes such as consular services, human resources, defence and security, and of course the law.

The Legal Directorate's overarching purpose is to provide legal services to the FCO's ministers and staff.

The Directorate is led by the Legal Adviser and three Directors, with five teams of lawyers and three further sections of FCO policy and specialist staff. Almost all our staff is based in London but a small number of lawyers work in FCO posts overseas.

One of the most significant aspects of the Directorate's work is to advise on the legal issues involved in FCO policy work, but our staff also advise on treaties, lead on maritime policy and provide litigation services in UK and international courts. In addition to this core legal and treaty work, we have an extensive outreach programme, enabling us to keep in touch with stakeholders in academia, private practice and external organisations; and we run a programme of classroom-based and online courses in the Law Faculty, part of the FCO's Diplomatic Academy. We have a Business Support Team, responsible amongst other things for overseeing the Directorate's financial resources, supporting our work as agents before the European Court of Human Rights, and managing the process of laying legislation before Parliament. And last, although hopefully not least, the small Knowledge and Information Section, which I lead.

## LIBRARY SERVICES IN THE FCO

The Foreign Office's first Librarian was appointed in 1801, seventy-five years before its first Legal Adviser (at that time known as the Legal Assistant Under-Secretary) in 1876. The Library and Information Services have been



Figure 1. The FCO building from Whitehall.

through several name changes and reorganisations since then, but a legal library service for the lawyers has been a key element for many years. It was originally managed by the main FCO Library, although located separately, close to the lawyers' offices; but in 2005 it was decided that the legal library and its staff would be managed and funded by Legal Directorate, rather than as part of the main Library, and this arrangement has continued until today.

The Legal Library's collections primarily cover public international law, European Union law and the domestic law of England and Wales. We have special collections of British Overseas Territories legislation, and our Treaty Section has an extensive collection of hard copy treaties as well as maintaining the publicly available UK Treaties Online database.<sup>1</sup> We rely mainly on online sources for case law, legislation, journals and current awareness; and our use of

ebooks has increased as staff work more flexibly in different locations. We also still buy print books as we find that, with most of the library's users working in the same office for the majority of the time, they are often the most cost-effective and efficient way of accessing information. They are also usually more popular with the lawyers for intensive study and research than on-screen resources, even for those who have grown up as IT 'digital natives'.

The Legal Library is not open to the public but we do share information resources with other government departments, and in addition to the Treaties database, the Treaty Section runs an enquiries service for members of the public.<sup>2</sup> A digital library service is provided for the wider FCO by the Knowledge Management Department (KMD), whose expertise and resources are essential in underpinning the specialised legal information that the lawyers need.



Figure 2. The FCO Legal Library.

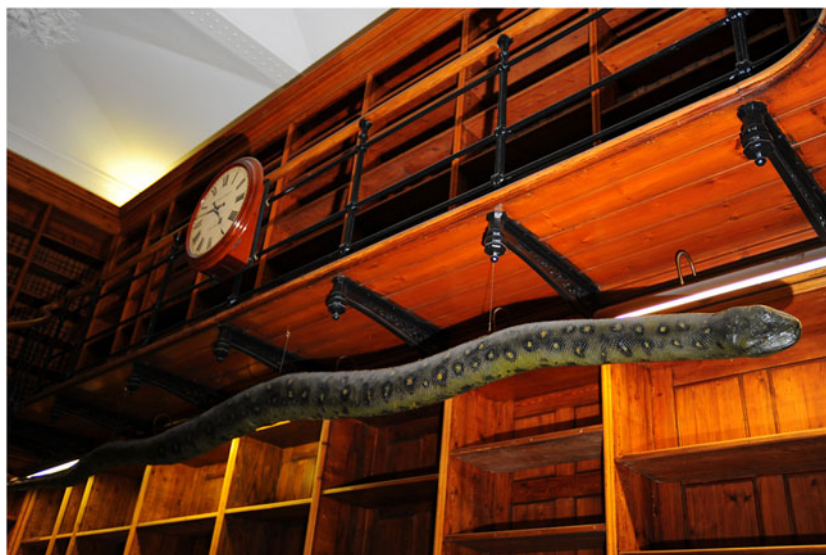


Figure 3. Albert the Anaconda.

KMD also manages the FCO intranet and its social tools including the FCO staff directory, blogs and online communities, making its staff experts on a wide range of knowledge and information issues. Being able to call on their knowledge and support is something I value highly, as is contact with other legal information specialists outside the FCO. Government legal information specialists are linked by the Government Legal Librarians' Forum, whose members meet two or three times a year and are in regular collaboration over shared services, framework agreements for purchasing, and support with enquiries and document supply. Contacts with other groups and organisations such as cross-government communities of practice, BIALL and CILIP are also a valuable source of information and support.

## WORKING IN LEGAL DIRECTORATE

Keeping in touch with other library and information colleagues is especially important given that I am the only information specialist in Legal Directorate. My line managers in the directorate have always been lawyers; and although this may require a few explanations of CILIP, BIALL, and other library-related acronyms and concepts, it works very well and brings a helpful perspective to my role. It gives me direct input from the people who the service is for, resulting in a better understanding of their requirements and working methods, and encourages me to ask different questions about why we do things the way we do in the library, or the potential impact and value of changes. In addition, I am a member of the Directorate Management Committee, where team leaders meet each month to oversee the directorate's administration and progress against its annual business objectives. This provides further insight into colleagues' priorities, helping me to target my work where it will be most useful.

The physical layout of the directorate also helps me understand the work of the other teams because all the London staff are closely located in a small number of open-plan rooms. When I first joined the directorate the lawyers worked in numerous small offices, with the legal library in a room of its own. However, as part of a wider office reorganisation, the entire directorate moved to the open-plan space occupied first by the Colonial Office Library and then the FCO Library before its print collection was transferred to Kings' College, London. This library space, with its original wooden bookshelves and famous twenty-foot stuffed anaconda, Albert, is listed; and makes a distinctive home for the legal library collection, along with three teams of lawyers and the directorate's senior management team. The other directorate teams are based in rooms immediately around the library.

Moving to a more open-plan environment involved adjustments for everyone in the way we worked together and used our shared space, but it was a positive step, helping to improve communication and collaboration amongst many other benefits. From a Library point of view, one of the advantages is that, instead of being in a separate room that people might not go into unless they had a specific enquiry, the collection and staff are now right in the middle of the directorate and therefore much more visible and accessible. Many of the lawyers have desks in the library space while others walk through every day, making it easier for them to stop with enquiries, browse the bookshelves or get help with online resources.

## FROM LEGAL LIBRARY TO KNOWLEDGE AND INFORMATION MANAGEMENT

Other aspects of my role besides location have changed in recent years, with the legal library now just one part



of my work that fits into the bigger picture of managing and implementing the Directorate's knowledge and information strategy.

Legal Directorate's current work is shaped by a set of strategic goals covering six broad areas: legal services and advice; management; legal awareness; outreach; a shared service to government; and knowledge and information management (KIM). When I was appointed there was no directorate-wide objective relating to KIM and my job was almost entirely about library services: collection and resource management; enquiries and research; and supporting staff in using online information sources. As a sign of things to come, there was just one reference to a knowledge management project. This had been started by my predecessor and involved creating a searchable database of key legal advice. It was launched in 2011 and is still in use as a repository of documents likely to be of long-term value, offering a more efficient search engine than the document management system used for day-to-day work.

However, it was becoming clear that the database only addressed one specific aspect of the directorate's knowledge and information management needs. The library was still well-used and highly valued by staff, but there was still more we could do to support the lawyers in organising and using all the information and knowledge they handle, and working more effectively as a result. The directorate's senior managers therefore asked me to look into good practice elsewhere in government and the legal profession and see what else we do to support this area of its work. It was also decided that my role would be retitled Knowledge and Information Manager rather than Legal Librarian to reflect the broader scope of the work I was now involved with.

I researched knowledge management procedures and new initiatives in other teams and organisations, including the Government Legal Service and a private law firm; taking some knowledge management training; and background reading. Early in 2014 I put forward a paper recommending that a new strategic goal on knowledge and information management should be included in the directorate's business plan. This would focus on valuing and encouraging knowledge and information management; being able to find and use the right information; managing our information well; and sharing our knowledge.

This recommendation was approved, and it was agreed that the new overarching goal would be "to enhance our expertise by effectively managing, accessing and sharing our knowledge and information resources." The next step was then to develop a KIM strategy setting out how we could work towards this goal. My team would lead on implementing the strategy but everyone in the directorate would be involved in taking a new approach to how they managed knowledge and information.

The first strategy was introduced later in 2014 and has been reviewed and updated each year since then. Certain key themes remain consistent: managing and

developing the library and enquiries service; making information accessible; ensuring that staff have the right skills and knowledge to use and exploit information and IT; and developing a culture of managing, developing and sharing knowledge.

In recognition of the fact that better management of knowledge and information would need to be the responsibility of all staff, not just a small central team, every directorate team was also asked to nominate a KIM 'champion,' and they continue to have an important role in co-ordinating and encouraging KIM work amongst their colleagues.

## STRATEGIC PRIORITIES

The KIM strategy for the current year (2018–19) sets out four priorities:

*Maintaining the existing library and information services, and planning their future development to ensure that staff have efficient access to timely, relevant information.* The ability to access information and call on an expert information and enquiries service is essential to the lawyers' work and it is important that we keep it under review and ensure it continues to meet their needs.

*Encouraging and fostering a knowledge-sharing culture in Legal Directorate, ensuring that knowledge and experience are valued, saved and shared.* This includes work to improve knowledge transfer during staff inductions and handovers, and continuing to build on the original legal advice database with an online 'knowledge base.' This makes it easier to find the key legal advice written by the lead lawyers for each subject area and is a valuable source of staff expertise and corporate memory, especially useful when staff are new to a team or someone is absent.

*Preparing for the next stage in the FCO's implementation of new IT systems.* The FCO will soon start using Office 365, which will transform the way we organise, save and access information and records. We will work with the FCO's knowledge and technology experts to prepare for the move to a Cloud-based system and be ready to make the most of the new ways of working.

*Enhancing the role of the KIM Champions.* Recognising the important role played by the team champions, this year's Strategy sets out key goals for them including co-ordinating new Knowledge Base material, supporting team members in inductions and handovers, and preparing for Office 365.

## MEASURING PROGRESS

In addition to an action plan for the year's work, the KIM strategy provides a useful structure for review and evaluation. One mechanism for this is the directorate

Management Committee, which is an opportunity to report on KIM activities and initiatives, request action from other team leaders, and address potential problems and delays.

In the strategy's first year we tried out a formal benchmarking process, asking the KIM champions to evaluate on a quarterly basis how their teams were progressing against the annual goals, but this took up time without supplying much useful data. We now focus more on ensuring that we build clear targets into the strategy that everyone can contribute to. These include the number of new Knowledge Base notes to be written by each team over the course of the year; and the number of 'KIM Focus Weeks' to be held, when everyone is asked to put aside extra time for KIM work. Keeping track of whether or not we are meeting these goals is straightforward and quick. At the start of each year, I also set out a timeline in graphic form to illustrate key milestones and show when we expect to start or complete different workstreams. This is a useful visual aid that can easily be reviewed to see if we are still on track with the original plan.

We have introduced different ways of reminding people how they can contribute to KIM and we try to highlight good work, for example by introducing competitions between teams and announcing achievements at staff meetings. These have proved popular and are an effective way of communicating messages about KIM. They can also be useful in generating conversations and gathering staff views on how knowledge and information are managed in the Directorate, as are induction sessions for new staff. Every new lawyer has a KIM induction which, amongst other things, allows discussion of support staff feel they need in order to manage their management of knowledge and information, and what worked well (or otherwise) in their previous roles or organisations.

It has been important to be realistic about how much time staff are able to spend on KIM. One aim of the strategy is to create an environment where good knowledge and information management becomes part of people's everyday work and helps them work more efficiently, rather than being an extra demand on their time. Inevitably, though, changing the way people work can require investment in terms of time or effort to learn new ways of working, and this has to be fitted in around other requirements.

This sometimes requires re-prioritisation, and a recognition that we will not always see quick results. For example, the Knowledge Base is not yet a comprehensive reflection of all the legal topics the Directorate might work on and will always need reviewing and updating as legal issues develop. But it illustrates the fact that one benefit of an ongoing strategy is the way it allows for planning beyond the immediate future and starting projects with longer-term value. The key is to be adaptable, using the strategy as a working tool that guides us towards where we want to be (and reminds us of what

we have done) but doesn't restrict us if circumstances change.

It is also essential to be aware of the bigger picture, keeping in touch with developments elsewhere in the profession as well as other external events.

## PLANNING FOR CHANGE

As well as providing a structure for planning and evaluation, strategic planning also needs to allow for response to new pressures and priorities from outside the team. The decision in June 2016 for the UK to leave the European Union had an impact on the work of much of the Civil Service, including the FCO and Legal Directorate.

The FCO works closely with the Department for Exiting the European Union (DExEU) and the Department for International Trade (DIT) so our staff are involved in many Brexit-related legal issues. These include ongoing negotiations, litigation, and the passage of new legislation. In addition to their work on the *EU (Withdrawal) Act 2018*, Legal Directorate staff have played a key role in the passage of the first Brexit-related Bill to receive Royal Assent, the *Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Act*, which entered into force on 23 May 2018.

Some roles have been relocated and others created to ensure that the Directorate and other government legal teams had appropriate staff and resources to manage the Brexit process. This has led to some re-organisation of Directorate teams, the departure of some staff and the arrival of others. There is a KIM aspect to supporting these changes, for example in making sure that our document management system reflects new team structures, and updating Directorate information on the intranet and other publications.

It has also been important to facilitate knowledge transfer as staff moved to new responsibilities, and reduce the risk of knowledge loss. The Knowledge Base already serves as a central point for saving and locating key guidance; and to further encourage knowledge-sharing and bringing more consistency to the way we capture knowledge, we developed a Directorate Handover Pack. This includes a checklist of administrative procedures to follow when staff move teams or leave the Directorate, and a template for recording key information and knowledge.

In addition, we introduced the idea of 'Moving On' discussions. These are distinct from exit interviews as they involve a guided conversation between the person leaving and the rest of their team, with the help of a facilitator. The aim is to draw out someone's knowledge and experience of the issues they have worked on and share these with colleagues. For example, if an area of work was especially successful or disappointing, what lessons were learned so that success can be replicated or future problems avoided? What are the key challenges that may face a new team member and what advice might help them handle these? The discussions are proving to be a

popular complement to written handover notes and have generated useful conversations and follow-up actions.

The changes following the EU referendum also highlighted the importance of collaboration and working across teams. For example, there has been an increased requirement in government for trade law resources. I liaised with colleagues in other departments about access to these and as a result was able to use existing contracts rather than making separate arrangements. While the two new government departments were being set up, we supported their lawyers when they did not have immediate access to library resources. We have also expanded our current awareness service – which in addition to the FCO, is used by lawyers in several other government departments including DExEU, DIT and the Ministry of Defence – to take account of the wider range of topics that government lawyers now work on, including international trade and the many legal issues that Brexit involves.

## LOOKING AHEAD

Staff moves, new priorities and rapid change all serve to illustrate how a strategic plan for knowledge and information can support an organisation's work. Systems for saving and sharing knowledge, a specialist library and current awareness service, and effective use of IT are all examples of the ways that specialist KIM staff can help their organisations to work more efficiently and make best use of limited resources.

Regardless of external events, it will always be essential for the efficient running of government that those staff who formulate policy and make decisions are able to access accurate information, make use of shared knowledge and keep effective records. The Legal KIM Strategy will continue to play an important role in the way we support our colleagues, plan ahead and meet the challenges of the future.

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> UK Treaties Online, <http://treaties.fco.gov.uk/treaties/treaty.htm> accessed 12 July 2018.

<sup>2</sup> Guidance: UK Treaties, <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/uk-treaties> accessed 12 July 2018.

## Biography

Caroline Mack is head of the Legal Directorate Knowledge and Information Section at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, where she is responsible for the Legal Library and knowledge and information management. She joined the FCO in 2000, working first as an Assistant Librarian and then as an Intranet Editor before moving to the Legal Directorate in 2010. Prior to joining the FCO she worked for Westminster City Council Libraries, most recently as manager of the lending library in Charing Cross Road, London.