

Biography

John Furlong is Director of Legal Resources and Education at Matheson Ormsby Prentice, Dublin. He is a practising solicitor with over twenty years experience in legal information management. John became first Irish Chair of BIALL in 2000 and currently serves as Chair of the BIALL Conference Committee. He is a long serving member and former Chair of the Technology Committee of the Law Society of Ireland.

Legal Information Management, 11 (2011), pp. 176–181
© The British and Irish Association of Law Librarians

doi:10.1017/S1472669611000582

Working for Parliamentarians, Contributing to Parliament

Abstract: Madeline Dennison describes the work of the Oireachtas Library & Research Service (L&RS) and how it works for members of the Houses of the Oireachtas, the Irish parliament. The L&RS delivers a range of services to parliamentarians including a Legislative Analysis Service. Following a period of investment in the L&RS there is now a requirement to reduce costs while continuing to meet members' needs. A challenge for the L&RS is to become the research hub within parliament and the preferred information and research resource for members.

Keywords: Irish Parliament; information services; Ireland

Introduction

The Houses of the Oireachtas is the Irish Parliament. The parliament is administered by the Houses of the Oireachtas Service on behalf of the Houses of the Oireachtas Commission. The Commission is the governing authority and its budget allocation for the three year period (to end 2012) is €360million. Currently there is approximately 400 civil service staff and a similar number of political staff working in parliament.

The Oireachtas Library & Research Service (L&RS) is the parliamentary library¹. This article considers the impact of the 2011 elections on information and research services. The article describes some of the services provided by the L&RS to parliamentarians,



Madeline Dennison

and outlines the L&RS corporate role. There was considerable investment in the L&RS during the 'celtic tiger' years. This article outlines the current financial environment and the challenge of becoming the preferred information and research resource for members of the Houses of the Oireachtas.

Impact of the 2011 elections on information and research services

In 2011 there were elections to Dáil Éireann and Seanad Éireann, the two chambers of parliament. The 226 members (166 Teachtaí Dála (Members of Parliament)

(TDs) and 60 Senators) of the Houses of the Oireachtas are the primary users of the Oireachtas Library & Research Service (L&RS). L&RS staff followed the elections with particular interest. The question arose as to how might the composition of the new Dáil and Seanad impact on library and research services?

Firstly, there are 84 new members (this figure includes 14 members who were Senators in the previous Oireachtas and 6 who were TD's before). James Haughey's recent study of the information-seeking behaviour of Oireachtas members found that "Members of the Oireachtas with less experience tend to require more information to meet their needs"². Missingham has recently pointed out that "Members of parliament in the next two decades will have different experiences and knowledge to their predecessors. This shapes their expectations of library and research services and indeed of all the support that they will need to undertake their parliamentary roles"³.

Secondly, the former main government party moved into opposition after 14 years in government. These members may have less awareness of the L&RS which delivers a wider range of services than it did when they were last in opposition. An Australian Parliamentary Library study found "those in opposition indicated an increased reliance on the services of library since losing government and in some instances having to familiarise or re-educate themselves more with what the library can offer"⁴.

Third the new government parties may have less use for the L&RS given that they now have departmental resources and support. However early indications are that these members are using the L&RS in addition to using departmental information. There are also many government backbenchers, these members will want to make an impact.

Finally, there is an increased number of Independent members (from six to nineteen). These members might particularly rely on the L&RS as they do not have the support of a party infrastructure or research resources. In addition, Haughey found that "Independent Members have less opportunity to share information [with other members] or benefit from shared information"⁵.

Further to the elections the L&RS promoted its expertise and services to members with initiatives such as a *Research Matters* publication, electoral maps (see www.oireachtas.ie) and short 'Welcome to your L&RS' sessions. The *Research Matters* publication outlined our services to members and demonstrated the range of L&RS subject knowledge through 15 concise topical briefings written by L&RS researchers. In the months following the election, L&RS staff met with new members on a one-to-one basis to start building a relationship with them and specifically to develop a profile of their research needs. According to Roxanne Missingham this is important in an environment, "where the pressures on the time of members of parliament mean that we are unlikely to have long sustained personal interactions, and little face to face interactions"⁶. The L&RS also participated in the Houses of the Oireachtas Service's induction

programme for newly elected members of the Dáil and Seanad.

Working for the members of the 31st Dáil and the 24th Seanad

As Ireland's longest-serving parliamentarian Michael D. Higgins has pointed out "there is no such thing as a typical parliamentarian...Life as a parliamentarian inevitably involves moving between different worlds, the world of one's life experience, professional training or skill, ideological and political roots, the needs of constituents and the formal rituals, often archaic, of the parliamentary assembly itself"⁷.

Members in most parliaments including the Houses of the Oireachtas "operate in a highly competitive, high public expectation environment with very immediate needs, issues and competing demands on their time and attention. They also have competing demands between their parliamentary, party and electorate roles and responsibilities"⁸.

The L&RS works for parliamentarians or members on an individual basis and also for parliamentary committees. The diverse professional qualifications and backgrounds of the 36 L&RS staff facilitates a multi-disciplinary approach to information and research services. There is a management team of four plus five librarians, twenty researchers (including social scientists, economists and lawyers) and seven information assistants.

The L&RS works to assist members as they contribute to parliamentary debates, scrutinise legislation, develop and analyse policy, keep abreast of constituency issues and prepare for media appearances. The L&RS supports members' parliamentary duties through its information and research services which are aligned with the three strategic priorities of the Houses of the Oireachtas Commission which are improving services to parliament, improving services to members and enhancing service capability. This is illustrated in *Table 1*.

Legislative Analysis Service

The 'Bills Digest and Debate' pack products make up the Legislative Analysis Service (LAS) which is designed to assist members in their scrutiny of legislation before the Houses. The LAS aims to provide relevant, authoritative and balanced information on the legislation before the Houses in time for Second Stage debate. Each 'Bills Digest' provides an impartial analysis of the background, policy context and principal themes of a Bill (rather than a section-by-section analysis). Each Debate Pack is a professionally presented information pack of carefully selected (in terms of content, credible/authoritative sources, balance) and edited secondary sources on the Bill. Members regularly comment favourably in the Houses on LAS materials. A number of members have indicated that the LAS materials helped them to interpret and prepare to speak

<i>Table 1 – Information and research services for members</i>		
Improving services to parliament	Improving services to members	Enhancing service (L&RS) Capability
Legislative Analysis Service Research for committees Documents laid Topical research briefings	On demand research service Access to collections Reading Room facilities	Professional development Innovative use of ICT Working collaboratively Good governance
Some of these services are outlined below.		

on legislation. The use and reliance on LAS materials is not confined to members of the opposition parties; Government parties and Ministers also use the service.

Research services for parliamentary committees

The information and research services for parliamentary committees are delivered under the framework of an annual L&RS Committee Secretariat Protocol. The services to committees include researching and writing in-depth research papers. A number of L&RS research papers form the basis for committee reports; recent examples include *Primary Care in the Community*, *Ireland's Foreign Trade Promotion Policy*, *Financial Disincentives to Marriage and Cohabitation*. A Questions in context 'service is also provided'. The purpose of this service is to provide both a briefing and objective lines of questioning for committee members in the context of witnesses appearing before a committee. Other services include press monitoring, advice on external subject specialists, and information notes in relation to proposals for EU legislation.

Topical research briefings

The L&RS provide all members with regular analyses of a wide range of policy issues through its *Economic Indicators* and *Spotlight* series. The latter is available at: www.oireachtas.ie

On demand information and research service

Similar to most libraries the L&RS answers reference queries. The L&RS researchers also write analytical research papers for individual members and/or provide them with face-to-face research briefings.

Processing documents laid before the Houses and making them available to members

The L&RS is responsible for managing the procedures relating to the laying of documents before the House(s).

This is a formal procedure regulated by the constitution, statute and the standing orders of the Houses. The laying of documents makes materials available to members for their scrutiny before the documents are published. Approximately 2,000 documents per annum have been laid in recent years. The L&RS is currently managing the transition of this procedure from a paper-based to an electronic environment.

Contributing to the Houses of the Oireachtas Service

Ian Watt (2010)⁹ has highlighted that “parliamentary libraries possess a distinctive combination of skills and knowledge focused on information; parliaments are in large part information businesses. Why should these competences be used solely within library walls?... The competences of the library can also be deployed internally to improve access to in-house parliamentary information...and to support a wider 'knowledge management' agenda”.

While the L&RS must deliver member-focussed services, it must also demonstrate that it can contribute to the Houses of the Oireachtas Service. The L&RS has developed a corporate role with freedom of information and information management responsibilities, and it is currently working collaboratively with other sections on a range of initiatives. This is outlined in Table 2.

In 2010 the Freedom of Information (FOI) Officer transferred to the Library & Research Service. Approximately 100 FOI requests are received per annum and the majority of requests come from the media. The L&RS currently has responsibility for leading a Service-wide records management project. A survey of the records series held by the Houses of the Oireachtas commenced in 2011 with the purpose of establishing and quantifying the scale, scope and range of these records. This will inform the development of records management policies and tools.

In 2010 the L&RS/Office of the Commission and Secretary General jointly produced a best practice policy and guidelines for Houses of the Oireachtas Service staff responsible for undertaking research. The L&RS advises

Table 2 – Contributing to the Houses of the Oireachtas Service

Improving services to parliament	Enhancing Service capability
Freedom of Information Web projects	Records management Knowledge management Research methodologies Indexing projects
Some elements of the L&RS corporate role are outlined below.	

these Service staff on designing and administering surveys, and other research approaches. The L&RS is also involved in a number of web and metadata/indexing projects.

The L&RS has considerable information management expertise but others in the Houses of the Oireachtas Service have complementary skills and competencies. The development of an umbrella strategy during 2011 for parliamentary information management should facilitate more joined up thinking and synergies in this area.

Library & Research Service – a ‘celtic tiger’ service

There was significant investment in the L&RS by the Houses of the Oireachtas Commission during 2006–2009. This enabled the Oireachtas Library (as it was) to address one of the findings of an internally commissioned international benchmarking review of the Houses of the Oireachtas. This was conducted by Deloitte & Touche in 2002¹⁰ and identified that the library and research function in the parliament was inadequate by international standards in relation to both staffing and services.

The findings of this review reflected those of an internal review undertaken ten years earlier. This earlier review found that there had been “chronic understaffing and underfinancing over a very long period; the absence of forward planning or any strategic view of the way in which the library service should develop [and] the perception of the library as a reactive provider of information rather than being an active information service geared to anticipating Members’ needs and initiating the provision of information”¹¹. This had resulted in a parliamentary library that “...not alone compares extremely unfavourably with the facilities on offer in all EU parliaments but falls seriously short of providing the minimum service which Members of the Oireachtas have a right to expect”¹².

Two L&RS strategic plans provided the framework for the recent investment which enabled the L&RS to catch

up with its parliamentary library peers. The investment facilitated a trebling of staff numbers to 36 and the introduction of a new range of services and products for members and committees. The investment also facilitated the implementation of a new collection management system and digital repository, the digitisation of 70,000+ documents with a focus on Documents Laid before the Houses and the comprehensive reorganisation of the collections for the first time since the Oireachtas Library was established in 1924.

Doing more with less

The current management and development of the L&RS is being undertaken in a very different environment. The Commission has applied the principles of a government moratorium on civil service appointments to its own staff and there is also a commitment to meet a target reduction in staff numbers. The *Public Services Agreement 2010–2014* (known as the *Croke Park Agreement*) requires all public sector bodies including the Commission to reduce both expenditure and staff numbers, and to implement more efficient ways of working. Pay reductions and pension levies have affected all Houses of the Oireachtas Service staff.

The L&RS has reduced its costs, and staff vacancies will be unfilled. The L&RS strategic plan 2010–2012 reflects the challenge of delivering quality services with constrained resources. Our previous strategic plans focussed on L&RS priorities which were aligned with Houses of the Oireachtas Service (the Service) priorities. In the current plan the Service’s priorities (improving services to parliament and to members, enhancing service capability) are explicitly listed as the L&RS priorities. The plan identifies L&RS core services and indicates that priority will be given to enhancing these services. While the strategic plan doesn’t include details of proposed expenditure it does indicate in broad terms how the L&RS budget will be spent.

The L&RS has reduced its costs by using zero-based budgeting and using public procurement tenders for the acquisition of most information resources. The latter resulted in the L&RS obtaining additional services from suppliers, reducing direct costs and/or reducing L&RS staff time required to process resources. In addition, as part of a Service-wide review of non-pay expenditure the L&RS examined what service of value was being provided by its own expenditure, whether any aspect could be discontinued, whether there was any potential for shared services.

The L&RS is effectively in competition with other areas of the Service with regard to the allocation of financial resources. The L&RS must demonstrate its expenditure is providing services of value to members, and that these services are providing the Service with value-for-money (VFM). A formal VFM review of the L&RS will be undertaken by the Service in 2011.

Future challenges – the research hub within parliament

Some of our future challenges will be familiar to many libraries. For example meeting users' demands for customised services with reduced budgets and staff numbers, and forecasting what future technologies may emerge and how we can use them.

There are also parliamentary library-specific challenges. Missingham's recent Delphi study of parliamentary library and research services in the 21st century concluded that parliamentary libraries "...must immediately take steps to better understand the changing needs of the parliament and community; understand how our core values can best serve our clients; and adopt an active positive approach to change"¹³. Watt highlights research that "paints a somewhat bleak picture of decreasing awareness and use of parliamentary library services, suggesting a growing gulf between service and user understanding of 'need', while users turn increasingly to a growing variety of alternative sources of information"¹⁴.

The challenge that we have set ourselves over the next couple of years is to become the research hub within parliament and the preferred information and research resource for members.

The 'new' L&RS is five years old, this is quite a short time to become an authoritative and trusted part of the parliamentary process. A former Head of Research in the Australian Parliamentary Library, Dr Verrier has pointed out that "to establish a research service's credentials with both the government and the opposition may take years

as it did in Australia's case"¹⁵. Verrier suggests that it was only when a party that had spent eight years in power spent 13 years in opposition that its members "came to appreciate fully the value of access to independent research services, especially for the Opposition frontbench"¹⁶.

Members do not have to use the Library & Research Service. While most Members do use our services, some members use a limited range of our services or use our services infrequently. L&RS services and products are in competition with other information sources used by members. These sources include the internet, media, political party sources, local and personal information networks¹⁷. Each L&RS service and product must be of real benefit to the member if we are to become their preferred information and research resource.

We have identified four priorities (in our client relations and marketing strategy) to help us to meet this challenge:

1. Know our customers, understand their changing information needs;
2. Raise awareness of, and confidence in, the L&RS;
3. Promote L&RS products and services as essential resources for Members'parliamentary work;
4. Make the most of the post-general election phase to promote the L&RS.

The future of the Library & Research Service will be shaped by its ability to anticipate and meet members' information and research needs and to demonstrate its value to parliament.

Footnotes

¹Houses of the Oireachtas website, www.oireachtas.ie

²Haughey, James (2009), *The information seeking behaviour of Members of the Oireachtas*. School of Information and Library Studies, University College Dublin. Minor thesis, p.53.

³Missingham, Roxanne (2011), *Parliamentary library and research services in the 21st century: a Delphi study*, IFLA Journal 37(1) p.56.

⁴Uncommon Knowledge (2010), *Australian parliamentary library customer service research evaluation: report*, p.7.

⁵Haughey, James (2009), p.32.

⁶Missingham, Roxanne (2011), p.57.

⁷Higgins, Michael D. (2010), *The role of the public representative in today's Oireachtas* in *The Houses of the Oireachtas: parliament in Ireland* edited by Muiris MacCarthaigh and Maurice Manning, p.417.

⁸Uncommon Knowledge (2010), p.5.

⁹Watt, Iain (2010), *Members' use of information and changing visions of the parliamentary library*, *Library Trends*, Vol. 58, No. 4, Spring 2010, p.452.

¹⁰Deloitte & Touche (2002), *Houses of the Oireachtas Final report – International Benchmarking Review*.

¹¹Joint Services Committee (1994), *Report on the Oireachtas library facilities*, p.2.

¹²Joint Services Committee (1994), p.1.

¹³Missingham, Roxanne (2011), p.59.

¹⁴Watt, Iain (2010), *Members' use of information and changing visions of the parliamentary library*, *Library Trends*, Vol. 58, No. 4, Spring 2010, p.442.

¹⁵Verrier, Dr J.R. (2004), *The theory and practice of developing parliamentary research and information services: the experience of the Parliament of Australia*, Department of Parliamentary Services – Parliamentary Library, p.39.

¹⁶Verrier, Dr J.R. (2004), p.39.

¹⁷Haughey, James (2009), p.51.

Biography

Madelaine Dennison, BSocSC MCLIP ALAI, has held the post of Head of Library and Research Services in the Houses of the Oireachtas since November 2005. In this role she has led the expansion and development of the parliamentary library including the establishment of research services for members and committees. Madelaine previously held the post of Law Librarian/Information Manager in the Office of the Attorney General, Dublin. Prior to that she worked for KPMG in Dublin where she was responsible for delivering business information services to both the firm and its clients.

Legal Information Management, 11 (2011), pp. 181–184
© The British and Irish Association of Law Librarians

doi:10.1017/S1472669611000594

Reflections from George Woodman, MBE

Abstract: This article takes the form of a short interview with George Woodman, Librarian at the Northern Ireland Assembly Library. The questions were posed by the LIM Editor. George was recently given Life Membership of BIALL and received the Wildy BIALL Law Librarian of the Year 2011 Award at the 2011 BIALL Annual Dinner in Newcastle. More significantly, George was awarded an MBE in HM The Queen's Birthday Honours 2010 in recognition of his services to the profession.

Keywords: parliament; information services; Northern Ireland

Since your article for the Law Librarian in Sept 1996, in which you provided an outline of the work of the library at the Northern Ireland Assembly, what have been the greatest changes to, and challenges for, the library service in that time?

Of course the return of devolution to Northern Ireland changed everything but this is a separate topic and I shall consider wider developments here. The most important changes have resulted from the major developments in online services and the Internet. In 1996 the Internet did not feature in the work of the Library as it contained virtually no materials relating to Northern Ireland. This started to change in 1997 when Northern Ireland legislation first appeared on the Her Majesty's Stationery Office website. A few years later Google revolutionised access. Now the range of material accessible both freely through the web and through commercial databases is enormous and the majority of inquiries are

answered through electronic sources. At the same time the development first of electronic communications and then of social networking have increased the ways in which a library and its collections can be accessed and raised the expectations of clients.

In all this there are many challenges. In the 1980s, when online searching started for most of us, cost was an overriding concern. One was always aware of how much it cost per minute to stay online. As a result, one did a great deal of work before going online working out precisely what was wanted and the best searching strategy. I am now glad of this discipline when I search the Internet. Now that electronic access has become commonplace my experience is that people do not know how to ask the right questions to make the best use of the vast inchoate resource that is the Internet and that the major contribution librarians can make is through their ability to do this. Paradoxically, the traditional skills of a librarian are more important than ever in an