Research and Information

FUNCTION

The Research and Information directorate serves the Assembly with a range of information services to source, process, transform and communicate information for and within the Assembly and to ensure that its business is open to public interest and scrutiny. The directorate is structured to give focus and direction to the different functional specialisms it employs. Nevertheless, all functional units share the same vision and strategic business aims and objectives, to ensure a coherent and consistent approach to the use of information by the Assembly and to the provision and presentation of information to the public. The directorate employs professional researchers, librarians and technical specialists in three functional units:

- Research and Library Services;
- Information Systems Office; and
- Information Office.

Research and Library Services

FUNCTION

To provide professional research expertise in the sourcing, analysis and presentation of data and information needed by Assembly Committees, Assembly Members and the Assembly Secretariat to carry out their remits concerned with the legislative processes and constituency work.

SERVICES

The Research and Library Service (R&LS) provides information and research services to Members, Assembly Committees and the Assembly Secretariat. In addition to the Library reference resources the service prepares information and research briefings to support the legislative business of the Assembly.

Research papers are published on the Assembly intranet and Internet facilities. All research papers are compiled on the basis of non-partisan assessments of available evidence. Requests for research support come from Members, committees and the Secretariat. Member research requests are handled in strict confidence so that their identity and query are not revealed either in conducting the query on their behalf or through communicating the research. The service does not, however, support partisan queries and will not conduct research relating to another political party or Member.

Factsheets are also published by the service and provide background information on the Assembly's operations, procedures and structures as well as providing briefings on broader matters relating to Europe and legislation. Prior to debates the R&LS provide briefing packs for Members (and party support staff) containing information relevant to the topics included in the Order Paper.

Prior to the Committee Stage of the legislative scrutiny of Bills passing through the Assembly, a Bill research paper is produced by the service. These papers are made available to Members and party support staff through the Library and the Assembly intranet site.

Research briefings and papers are routinely prepared for committee meetings. Research staff will make oral presentation of their research findings to committees and may also provide verbal briefings to Members on request. During an Assembly session the service provides seminars on topics relevant to Assembly business and the Programme for Government. These seminars are open to Members, party support staff and the Assembly Secretariat.

The Assembly Library maintains a comprehensive collection of information relating to the business of the Assembly. This collection is made available to Members and Secretariat staff either directly or through the Research and Library intranet. This Library holds substantial collections of information on Government and politics, law, the European Union and a wide range of other subjects. A selection of material is openly accessible in the Library reading room and other items can be retrieved quickly on request.

In addition there is a substantial collection of official publications. There is also a very large collection of official publications from Great Britain with a complete set of official publications back to 1921. A substantial collection of official publications from the Irish Republic is also held, together with the European Community Official Journal from 1973 onwards and many other EU publications. All Northern Ireland, Great Britain and Irish legislation is also held. Library staff are available to help Members trace legislation and other publications they may require. An enquiry service for answering queries on related subjects is also provided.

The Library's holdings of the debates of the various elected bodies in Northern Ireland are complete. There is also a set of Hansard back to the 1830s and of the various parliamentary histories covering earlier periods. Debates of Dáil Éireann and Seanad Éireann are also held.

The Library provides all the main Belfast, London and Dublin daily and Sunday papers. The three Belfast daily papers, the *Irish Times* and *The Times* are also held on microfilm. This is augmented through access to FT Profile, a searchable database of newspapers and a number of other electronic databases and the Internet. The main current affairs magazines are received, as well as material on a variety of topics relating to the business of the Assembly.

The resources of the R&LS are not available for help with party political, personal, business or commercial enquiries.

ACTIVITIES DURING THE PERIOD 1 APRIL 2002 TO 31 MARCH 2003

The First Report of the Northern Ireland Assembly set out a number of key challenges for the year 2002-03. A number of service improvements and initiatives have been taken forward and implemented in this year. The overall service level statistics provided by the Research and Library Service are given below.

	Jan - Mar	Apr - June	July - Sep	Oct - Dec[1]
Members	74	71	35	16
Committees	183	91	53	14
Research papers *	29	58	9	4
Bill research papers *	11	18	1	Nil
Information packs	6	8	2	Nil
Library Enquiries		1,735	1,222	1,402
Books borrowed		1,189	1,021	883

* The number of Bill research papers is included in the total number of research papers.

[1] The Northern Ireland Assembly was suspended at midnight on 14 October 2002.

RESEARCH

The Research and Library Service hosted the inaugural meeting of the Inter-Parliamentary Research Network. Issues discussed included the exchange of good practices and procedures between Wales, Scotland, Westminster and the Northern Ireland Assembly. Joint research working between parliamentary research services has since been initiated.

The Research and Library Service introduced briefing packs on issues tabled for debate in Assembly plenary sittings.

A statistical research team has been established to take forward research analyses of cross-cutting interest to devolved policy areas. The unit has focused on the 2001 population census statistics and the preparation of constituency analyses through the use of geographical information systems. Since suspension this team has been involved in leading a joint 2001 census research programme with the Scottish Parliament.

During the year 2002-03, 20 research papers prepared by the R&LS have been published on the Internet. A total of 94 research papers have been placed on the Assembly intranet and are available to all those connected to the Assembly network.

A seminar series was introduced and a total of seven seminars were held for Members, party support workers and Secretariat staff. These were:

- Briefing on the work of the Court of Justice of the European Communities – Focus on Infraction Proceedings;

- Sustainable Development Commission conference;

- The European Water Framework Directive;

- Financial processes seminar for Assembly researchers;

- Northern Ireland's expenditure needs;

- Public attitudes to devolution; and

- Transposition of EU Directives in Northern Ireland, including the infraction proceedings.

The R&LS introduced a research series of Bill research papers. In total 30 Bill research papers were produced and placed on the Assembly intranet prior to the Committee Stage of the scrutiny of Bills.

LIBRARY

The previous Assembly report stated that the key challenge for the library in the next reporting cycle was to continue with the process of remodelling existing library policies and procedures to develop a library and information resource which would be able to satisfy the demands placed upon it by a modern, working legislative Assembly. This was to be achieved by taking the practice of the Library to date and benchmarking it against available best practice standards to ensure that the strategic goals of the Library Service were met in the most effective way.

During this period current Library practice was reviewed under the following headings:

Organisation and Structure

While the Library had performed well in assimilating the numbers of new staff who were recruited in the period from September 2000 the placement of new staff within team structures was carried out on an adhoc basis as the staff arrived. With all staff in post the opportunity was taken to review the strengths and weaknesses of the team structure and to assess workloads across the teams. As a result some changes were made both to the functions of the teams and staff placement within them giving, the following arrangement:

- The enquiry team – responsible for the enquiry desk rota and Member queries;

- The electronic team – responsible for Research and Library input to AssISt and for managing the electronic information resource budget;

- The resource team – responsible for the management of the rest of the Library budget and for classification, cataloguing and indexing; and

- The training team – responsible for the development of current awareness services and Library training.

Policies and Procedures

All policies and procedures were reviewed and changes made in the following areas:

- Cataloguing and classification rules;

- Disaster recovery plan; and

- Staff induction programme.

New Service Development

The Library's current awareness services were revamped with the introduction of a new style *Library Bulletin* detailing new Library acquisitions and abstracts of journal articles held in both hard copy and electronic format. Members' information packs on topics subject to No Day Named motions were enhanced in collaboration with Research Services.

Training Needs Analysis

A new Library staff training programme was developed. The purpose of these changes was to try to improve services to Members and to Secretariat staff with the aim of increasing the use made of the Library and its services, particularly to increase the number of enquiries made of Library staff.

Library usage increased by 26.6% in the number of enquiries dealt with by the Library over the same period in 2001.

KEY CHALLENGES FOR 2003-04

- To develop research to support European policy scrutiny;
- To enhance the public visibility of research through publication on the Assembly web site;
- To enhance the utilisation of expertise from external providers;
- To exploit the 2001 population census through the generation of UK population profiles;
- To review service effectiveness; and
- To continue staff development and training.

Information Systems Office

FUNCTION

The Information Systems Office supports the use of information systems and the application of information technology by the Assembly. Users encompass Assembly Members, their staff – including staff in constituency offices throughout Northern Ireland – party support staff and Assembly Secretariat staff. The service is provided by in-house IS/IT specialists and is supplemented by service contracts with the private sector when the need arises.

The services include:

- Supply of computer hardware and software;
- Development of IS/IT policy and strategy;

- Support of the Assembly network of over 600 users;
- Development of computerised business applications; and
- IT training, advice and troubleshooting.

ACTIVITIES DURING THE PERIOD 1 APRIL 2002 TO 31 MARCH 2003

Application of the Assembly's Information Strategy

A draft code of practice for the use of Assembly computer resources was accepted by the Commission in June 2002 and is now in use across the organisation.

A project to assess the application of open standard data transmission technology (XML) to the Assembly's Official Report production was successfully completed.

Ongoing development of corporate IS and IT strategies and policies has continued.

Provision of an Effective IS/IT Service to Assembly Users in a Secure Environment

A performance survey was conducted in May 2002 to measure customer satisfaction with IT services. 96% of respondents rated the overall service as either 'excellent' or 'good'.

In May 2002, the IS Office set up an IT user group, comprised of staff from the IS Office, party support staff and representatives from across the Assembly Secretariat. The group meets every two months, and provides an opportunity for parties/ offices to comment on the IT services provided and to raise any IT-related issues for further discussion and investigation.

A telephone survey and a series of follow-up visits were conducted during the summer of 2002 to assess the level of satisfaction of IT service provision to constituency offices.

Improvements to the security of the Assembly network have been a constant priority. Virus handling procedures have been developed and

refined – there were 14 virus incidents reported during the period of this report, all of which were contained. User education on security issues is ongoing, through the promotion of the code of practice and regular IT factsheets and advice notes.

Recruitment of Specialist IS /IT Staff

This has been delayed due to the suspension of the Assembly's recruitment programme.

Development of Intranet and Internet

The Assembly intranet (AssISt) has grown substantially over the last year. It has become the major source of corporate information for the organisation, with all of the major business areas now having dedicated areas detailing their functions and services.

The IS Office continued to provide consultancy and advice on the development of the Assembly's Internet.

Development of Information Repositories and Access Systems

The development and consolidation of business application systems has continued, in support of both the procedural and administrative work of the Assembly, in particular a substantial update to the Bill Office system and development of the Speaker's rulings system.

Research has continued into the appropriate application of document management and multimedia technology for Assembly business areas.

Use of IT in the Chamber

A major project was launched to remodel the Speaker's desk, including the potential use of touch-screen technology.

Support of the computerised lobby voting and departmental communication systems continued.

Inter-Parliamentary Collaboration

The close links developed with other legislatures continued in 2002-03, with exchange visits between the Scottish Parliament and Westminster. The 'Inter-Parl' electronic inter-parliamentary information exchange forum continued to attract new members from the British Isles, Ireland and Canada. In August 2002, IS Office staff visited the Canadian Parliament in Ottawa, regarded as a world-leading legislature in the application of information technology. Whilst there are obvious differences in terms of organisation and scale between Canada and Northern Ireland, many of the IT issues and aspirations were common. The need for strategic long-term investment, building a solid infrastructure, close working relationships between IT and business areas and sharing of common systems were all re-emphasised, and valuable knowledge and ideas for application development were acquired.

KEY CHALLENGES FOR 2003-04

- The provision of an effective IT service to Members and staff during the parliamentary transition period;

- The replacement of Assembly IT equipment and an increase in IT provision for constituency offices, incorporating a significant technology upgrade;

- The recruitment of specialist IS/IT staff and contracting of IS/IT service providers;

- Continued application of the Assembly's information strategy, in line with business aims;

- Continued provision of an effective IS/IT service to Assembly users in a secure environment;

- Continued development of information repositories and access systems, including the adoption of strategic methods and products for both document and data management; and

- An upgrade of AssISt, the Assembly intranet.

Information Office

FUNCTION

The Information Office manages the interface with, and facilitates the provision of, information about the Assembly and its business to Members and to the public, the media, and external organisations.

The office is responsible for:

- Dissemination of official papers to Members;

- Providing information to the public, the media, and external organisations about the work of the Assembly and its Members;

- Providing training and advice on media communications;

- Managing facilities for the media in Parliament Buildings;

- Developing and delivering the education programme;

- Updating and developing the web site, the Assembly annunciator system and the *Weekly Information Bulletin*;

- Managing the contract for sound and vision broadcasting services;

- Managing the contract for printing and related services; and

- Preparing for the implementation of the Freedom of Information Act 2000.

ACTIVITIES DURING THE PERIOD 1 APRIL 2002 TO 31 MARCH 2003

Media Relations

During the period of this report the Information Office has responded to enquiries from the media, the public and outside organisations about the work of the Assembly and its Members and has supported press conferences and interviews with the media. The Information Office has worked closely with Committee Office staff to develop systems to communicate better the activities of Assembly Committees and raise awareness of their work.

Education Programme

Two Education Officers were appointed to assist with the development and implementation of the Assembly's education programme aimed at increasing the level of knowledge of the general public of the work of the Assembly. Educational materials and visits programmes have been developed to meet the requirements of the CCEA's Citizenship and AS Government and Politics specifications. A *'Guide to the Northern Ireland Assembly'* has been produced for visitors and others interested in the Assembly. The leaflet has been distributed to all schools and libraries and a version is on the Assembly web site. An educational presentation for general visits is available as well as presentations tailored to meet more specific needs.

Web site

During the past year the Information Office has focused on improving its systems for ensuring that all information on the site is up to date and better meets the needs of those visiting the site. There has been an average of 30,000 visits to the web site each month. The web site is being developed to include pages dedicated to the education programme and the public can now view a virtual tour of Parliament Buildings online.

Sound and Vision Broadcasting Services

The sound and vision services continue to expand and the television distribution system in Parliament Buildings has been revised. During the year, 145 video recordings were supplied to broadcasters and 270 recordings were supplied to non-broadcasters. Twenty-four external committee meetings were recorded and there were recordings of 26 other events. During suspension, demand has been high for the provision of recording facilities to assist in staff training, to record some of the activities of the education programme and press conferences in Parliament Buildings.

Printing Services

The Printed Paper Office manages the Assembly's contract for printing and related services. During the period of the report it met some 680 requests for printing; this included the production of just over 72,000 copies of core documents such as the Official Report, legislation and the Order Paper. Three bound volumes of the Official Report were published and 134 requests for publications were met. While suspension has had an obvious impact on the production of core documents, demand has been high for a range of other services such as leaflets, reproductions of the portrait of Assembly Members and guidance and information materials for Members in preparation for the election and new mandate.

Freedom of Information Act 2000

Preparations are under way to ensure that the Assembly is in a position to comply fully with the requirements of the Freedom of Information Act 2000 when it comes into force in January 2005. A publication scheme, which details how the public can access certain Assembly publications, is ready to be approved by the Assembly as soon as suspension is lifted. It will then be sent to the Information Commissioner for formal approval before being made available to the public.

KEY CHALLENGES FOR 2003-04

- To carry out a comprehensive review of the operation of the printing, publishing and related services contract;

- To develop procedures to ensure compliance with the Freedom of Information Act 2000, including obtaining approval from the Information Commissioner for the publication scheme;

- To extend sound and vision broadcasting facilities and maintain a quality service;

- To carry out a review of the web site;

- To develop an education section on the web site;

- To develop an education centre; and

- To promote and develop the educational visits programme.