

Research and Information Directorate Corporate Report 1999-2002

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.

A significant development in the year 2000 was the production of a strategic vision for the use of information by the Assembly and access to the business of the Assembly by the public. The vision identifies the importance of managing information in the context of an open and inclusive Legislature, and sets plans for the exploitation of information in line with the Assembly's business aims.

The Directorate is structured to give focus and direction to the different functional specialisms it employs. However, all functional units share the same vision and strategic business aims and objectives, thus ensuring a coherent and consistent approach to the use of information by the Assembly and to the provision and presentation of information to the public about the Assembly and its business.

The Directorate employs professional researchers, librarians and technical specialists in three functional units:

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

The business reports for each of the units are set out below.

Research and Library Services

FUNCTION

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

SERVICES

The Research and Library Service (R&LS) provides professional information and research services to Members, Assembly Committees and the Assembly Secretariat. These services include the integration of the research and library professions in the delivery of effective, timely, non-partisan and comprehensive evaluative and factual information tailored to the specific business needs of the Assembly.

The R&LS service strategy is based upon fostering professional subject expertise and team working while arranged to address the specific business needs of the Assembly.

Research teams are formed to support all areas of devolved governance and those relevant to the scrutiny of legislation. In addition, support is given to core research areas; e.g., European and reserved matters, that impact upon the work and policy areas of the Assembly business generally.

Member Services deliver proactive research in preparation for debates as well as managing the allocation of Members' questions to those divisions where subject expertise can best be exploited to answer a query. The Research Pool includes a research assistance capacity jointly managed by Member Services and a DRT Senior Research

Officer to allocate resources to respond to peaks in workload resulting from Committee work programmes, Member queries and forward research plans. Each research team develops a forward research plan through liaison with Committee work programmes, a study of the Programme for Government, monitoring of the legislative agenda and the budgetary cycle.

Information and reference requests from research teams are serviced through the Library Services Research Team. Library Staff work jointly with Member Services research staff on sitting days to assist in delivering reference and information responses to Member queries. Librarians in the Reader Service team take the lead in being responsible for requests for bibliographical resources. Technical Service ensures the proper cataloguing and referencing of the library collection. The Electronic Service is responsible for the development and maintenance of intranet and electronic information resources.

The research and library components of the R&LS work in close collaboration to deliver a rapid, flexible and professional response service. A specific dedicated team of librarians is in place to service researcher needs. The Member Services and Legislative Analysis research teams work jointly with librarians in responding to Member queries, the production of fact sheets and in the publication of the Members' Newsletter.

The Library Service aims to maintain a comprehensive collection of information relating to the business of the Assembly and to make this collection 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, history, 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 and legislation. Holdings of Northern Ireland official publications are as complete as possible. 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 Republic of Ireland 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 is complete. There is also a set of Hansard back to the 1830s and of the various parliamentary histories covering earlier periods. Debates of Dáil 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.

Resources are not available for help with party political, personal, business or commercial enquiries.

Ministers may use the service for in-person requests but not the Assembly research service on matters related to their ministerial portfolios where Ministers have alternative departmental research resources.

ACTIVITY DURING THE PERIOD TO 31 MARCH 2002

The key challenge has been to establish Research and Library Services appropriate to the needs of a modern legislature and consistent with the Assembly's business needs as they evolve during this formative period. In addressing this challenge, the Directorate studied models of other legislative bodies and adapted these to best suit the organisational context of Northern Ireland.

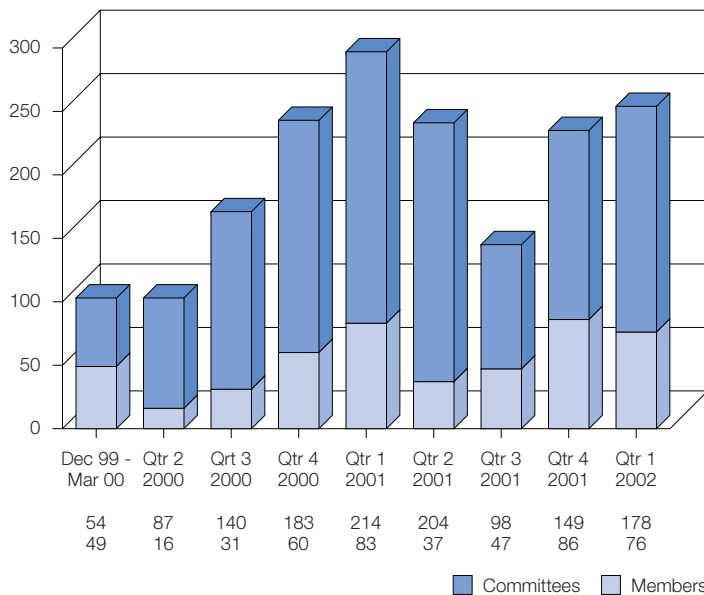
The R&LS has continued a strategy of improvement in the effectiveness of service delivery while responding to increasing levels of demand. The

capacity for this development strategy is based upon a combination of actions involving; organisational restructuring, greater management control of operational services, efficiency improvements, the employment of temporary staff to cover staff shortages and the enabling of strategic initiatives through the engagement of research in greater levels of proactive work. Changes are introduced through detailed study and evaluation of other similar legislative research services, evaluation of service demands specific to the Assembly and consultation with the clients of the R&LS.

Research

The Research Service has needed to adapt to the developing demands of the Assembly and has focused on the specific responsibilities of Statutory and Standing Committees as well as responding to queries from Assembly Members.

Figure 2: Research Requests from December 1999 to March 2002



In total, Research Services responded to 456 queries from committees and 156 from Assembly Members during the year 2000. In 2001 the number of committee requests increased to 665 and Member requests rose to 253 over the year. Since the launch of the Member Services research

team, engagement with Members has increased significantly. Committee research demands form the majority of queries but since the introduction of the Committee Research Good Practice Guidelines information-only queries have reduced and been replaced by greater concentration on those research products to which the service adds value. Research requests over the first quarter of 2002 have built upon previous research responses and are requiring greater levels of in-depth study. This is shown in Figure 2 as an overall reduction in quantity of committee research requests.

Work carried out to date by research staff for committees:

- Critique of reports/documents from Departments and other bodies;
- Drafting terms of reference for inquiries;
- Providing lines of questioning for potential witnesses to committees;
- Identification of potential specialist advisers to committees;
- Evaluation of the work of specialist advisers
- Providing research briefing (oral and written) on issues of interest to committees; and
- Interpreting legislation (including Bills).

The role of committees in scrutinising departmental policy presents a crucial requirement for research. Examples of briefing papers produced by Research Services have included:

- EU Funding;
- The Common Fisheries Policy;
- Sustainable Agriculture;
- Sectarianism in Sport;
- New Targeting Social Need;
- E-Government; and
- Gender and Educational Achievement.

Library

The key challenge over the period was to ensure that the library was provided with sufficient staff to carry out its aims and objectives in an effective and efficient way. In the period of this report the number of staff employed in the library increased from 2 to 15 and staff were allocated to one of four functional teams to meet the increasing demands placed upon them. As the library moved to meet the needs of a working Assembly a programme to review all existing established policies and procedures was undertaken and will continue into the next period.

This resulted in substantial changes to the way in which the library operated and to the development of a number of new services which were designed to improve library performance. In particular in the following areas:

Library Intranet – the library Intranet was developed to provide desktop access to library services including:

- Online library catalogues for the Assembly's own collections and other libraries such as QUB, UU, the Linenhall and the British Library;
- Online access to more than 5000 full-text electronic journals;
- Links to Internet resources;
- Subject guides to library resources and an A-Z guide to electronic resources;
- User guides; and
- CD-ROM databases.

Acquisitions – an acquisitions policy was developed which detailed what the library buys and why in a way which balanced library procurement between electronic and hard copy and allowed services to be delivered in ways which were the most appropriate for our users

Retention – an agreed Retention schedule was developed and the collection reorganised so that it is catalogued and classified in a consistent manner to improve ease of use and to maximise the available storage area. A substantial amount of stock which had previously been uncatalogued was catalogued during this period.

Indexing of Assembly Information – arrangements were put in place with the House of Commons to index Assembly Proceedings and to make this index available to the public through the House of Commons website <http://www.polis.parliament.uk/> and through the service of Parliamet <http://www.parliamet.com/>. A complete index is now available for Oral and Written Questions and work has begun to index other types of Assembly information including:

- Debates;
- Legislation;
- Parliamentary Papers;
- No Day Named Motions; and
- Library publications.

Marketing – a marketing strategy was devised that will allow the library to develop services which meet the needs of Members and other library users. This should ensure that users are aware at all times of the library services available to them and are able to use library tools and sources of information effectively. A number of specific services were introduced in cooperation with the Research side of the Directorate as a result including:

- A Members' Newsletter – highlighting recent developments in Research and Library Services;
- Research and Library Factsheets – providing basic information on legal, parliamentary and European dimensions to the work of the Assembly;
- Information packs on No Day Named motions;
- Library Notes – providing basic instructions on how to access the library and its services;
- A Library's Additions list;
- A monthly Library Newsletter; and
- Selected abstracts of journal articles.

Training – developing competent effective librarians able to work at all levels within the organisational structure in a proactive way.

Library Usage – the library processes, on average, 500 enquires and 400 book issues per month.

KEY CHALLENGES FOR 2002/2003

The Service will adopt a process of continuous monitoring and improvement with the goal of achieving standards of excellence in the delivery of an effective and efficient service to the Assembly. Its work in providing high quality and objective information and research to Assembly Members and Committees will be informed by:

- Experiences of good practice from other legislative bodies;
- Review of and adaptation to the developing demands for research and information; and
- Direct survey of customer views and satisfaction.

Service initiatives underway include:

- Development of briefing packs for Members prior to Assembly debates;
- Launch of statistical and geographical information services to produce constituency profiles and spatial impact assessments;
- The publication of Fact Sheets to supply information on key topics to all Assembly staff, Members and their support staff in a manner that is concise and easy to understand;
- Publish research papers on the internet;
- Introduce a programme of seminars for Members, party support staff and the Assembly secretariat;
- Initiate a substantive series of external research projects;
- Develop inter-parliamentary linkages between parliamentary researchers for the sharing of expertise and practices;
- To set in place a specialist adviser register to better acquire specialist support to the work of Committees;
- The publication of Bill Research Papers prior to the Committee Stage of the legislative process;
- The implementation, monitoring and review of Committee Research Good Practice Guidelines;
- The further development of public finance expertise;
- Development and implementation of joint R&LS management information system to track usage, investment/resources and outcomes; and
- Review of the R&LS staffing structure.

The key challenge for the library over the next 12 months is to continue with the process of remodelling existing library policies and procedures to develop a library and information resource which is able to satisfy the demands placed upon it by a modern, working legislative assembly. This will entail taking the practice of the previous 12 months and benchmarking it against available best practice standards to ensure that the strategic goals of the library service are met in the most effective way. It is proposed to review current library practice under the following headings:

- Organisation and structure;
- Policies and procedures;
- The development of new services; and
- Training needs analysis.

This should allow the library to be promoted to ensure maximum take-up of the services offered with the aim of achieving a month on month increase in the use made of the library by both Members and Secretariat staff.

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 supplemented by service contracts with the private sector when the need arises.

SERVICES

The IS Office provides the following services:

- IS/IT Policy and Strategy: The IS Office develops policies, standards and guidelines on the use of IS/IT within the Assembly. It also advises on best practice methods and legislative requirements with regard to information handling, including IT security.

- Supply of computer hardware and software: The IS Office procures and provides PCs, portable computers, printers and additional IT equipment to Assembly Members and staff. PCs are supplied with office application software, Internet and e-mail facilities. The IS Office also provides hardware support for the TV Distribution system.
- Support of the Assembly Network: The Assembly Network connects Members and staff in Parliament Buildings and Members' Constituency Offices throughout Northern Ireland. It allows the sharing of information throughout the Assembly community using office applications, e-mail and Internet access in a highly secure environment.
- Applications: A number of customised computer applications have been developed to assist a wide range of business functions throughout the Assembly.
- Advice and Training: An in-house Helpdesk service offers assistance on all aspects of the hardware and software provided, and general advice on IS/IT policy matters. The IS Office has also developed a customised training programme for Members and staff, and provides computer aided training via the Assembly network.

ACTIVITY DURING THE PERIOD TO 31 MARCH 2002

IT Infrastructure and Office Automation

The most significant challenge since February 1999 has been the development of an efficient, secure electronic communications network for Assembly Members, their staff and Secretariat staff. Prior to February 1999, use was made of the existing IT infrastructure that served the needs of the Northern Ireland Civil Service – previous occupants of Parliament Buildings. Since then the Assembly has established an independent electronic infrastructure that provides desktop computing facilities to over 600 users. This incorporates office automation tools, Internet access, electronic mail and bespoke business applications. Security of the network has been of paramount importance, and the systems used are

consistent with best practice in both government and private sectors.

IT Applications

A number of computer applications for use by other Directorates have been developed, encompassing a wide range of functionality ranging from the legislative drafting process, organising the work of Committees, automation of the production of the Official Report and recording questions. Within the debating Chamber, computers are used to assist with the complex voting system and to facilitate communication between Ministerial officials and their Civil Service Department. Additional systems to support ongoing administrative work in finance, personnel, budgeting and records management have been established.

IT provision to Constituency Offices

One of the largest projects undertaken has been the supply of computer facilities for Assembly Members and their staff in Members' Constituency Offices throughout Northern Ireland. This involved the implementation of innovative Virtual Private Network technology that allows remote access to the Assembly network based at Parliament Buildings whilst maintaining a high standard of security. A dedicated Helpdesk service for Constituency Office IT users has been established.

Assembly Intranet (AssISt)

The Assembly Intranet (known as AssISt) was launched in March 2001 as a method of sharing information throughout the organisation. It is envisaged that AssISt will evolve into a core information service for Assembly Members and staff.

Inter Parliamentary Collaboration

In March 2000, the Research and Information Directorate hosted a meeting of the Devolved Assemblies Forum in Belfast (now known as the Inter Parliamentary Information Group). This was a two-day meeting at which staff from each of the Parliaments/Assemblies of the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland had an opportunity to discuss and share ideas on improving the provision of Parliamentary information through common

standards and systems. Relationships forged at the Forum have continued, with subsequent visits by IS Office staff to the Scottish, Welsh legislatures, Westminster and the Dáil. The Northern Ireland Assembly has implemented an electronic inter-Parliamentary information exchange forum (known as "InterParl") to allow those from other legislatures to collaborate on matters of common interest.

IT Help Desk and Training

A dedicated IS Office Helpdesk provides day-to-day advice on any matters connected with IT. A comprehensive IT training programme has also been developed for Assembly Members and staff. The varied format includes formal group training courses on eight different topics, individual training for Assembly Members and computer-based training via the Assembly network; feedback indicates that individual training for Members has been particularly successful.

KEY CHALLENGES FOR 2002/2003

The key targets and associated projects for the IS Office are as follows:

- Application of the Assembly's Information Strategy – including the updating of the Assembly's IS and IT strategies in line with evolving business aims;
- Provision of an effective IS/IT service to Assembly users in a secure environment;
- The recruitment of specialist IS/IT staff and contracting of IS/IT service providers;
- Development of the Assembly's Internet and Intranet;
- Development of information repositories and access systems; and
- Development of the use of IT in the Assembly Chamber.

Information Office

FUNCTION

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

The Office is responsible for updating, developing and maintaining both the Website and the Assembly Annunciator system and for managing the contracts for sound and vision services.

SERVICES

The services provided include:

- Responding to enquiries from the public, the media, academics and researchers about the work of the Assembly and its Members;
- Development and management of the education programme;
- Distributing Order Papers, the Business Diary and reports to the media;
- Updating and publishing all Assembly information to the website on a daily and weekly basis;
- Updating and publishing the Weekly Information Bulletin;
- Managing the operation of the Annunciator system;
- Managing access, accommodation and press conferences within Parliament Buildings for media personnel;
- Managing and monitoring the Assembly's sound and vision contract; and
- Providing training and advice to Members and staff on media handling.

ACTIVITY DURING THE PERIOD TO 31 MARCH 2002

The Information Office has developed the Weekly Information Bulletin and it now provides a comprehensive source of information about the Assembly and its business.

It has redesigned the Website to provide a wide range of information about the Assembly. Improve-

ments to the site have included upgraded search facilities, a new feedback option, links to other Parliamentary sites and the addition of a help page and noticeboard. Further improvements to site navigation have also been carried out and links have been enhanced.

The Office has organised discussions between the Assembly Commission and the media and there are plans to develop the relationships between the media and Committees.

The Information Office has been working with the Council for the Curriculum, Examination and Assessment to produce educational material for Key Stage Three pupils who are studying the Citizenship module which is being piloted in fifty schools.

The television distribution service within Parliament Buildings has been improved and expanded to include extra TV and radio channels.

The sound and vision broadcasting service has been expanded to cover Committee meetings outside Parliament Buildings and backup recording services are now provided in the Chamber and the Senate.

General Statistics

Website Access

Successful Hits For Entire Site	1,855,180
Average Hits Per Day	20,844
Home Page Hits	141,498

Visits

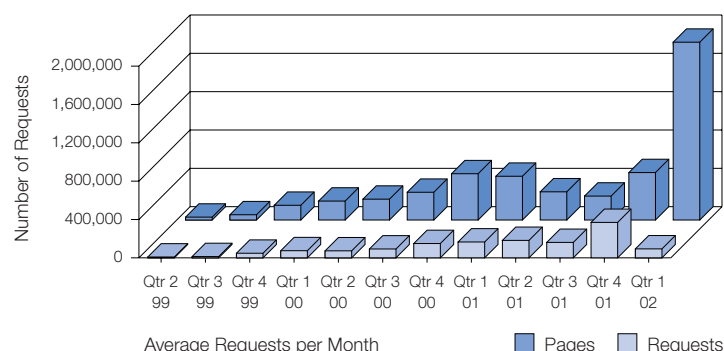
Visits	93,423
Average Per Day	1,049
Average Visit Length	00:12:40
International Visits	49.00%
Visits of Unknown Origin	25.46%
Visits From UK	25.54%

Visitors

Unique Visitors	35,590
Visitors Who Visited Once	29,598
Visitors Who Visited More Than Once	5,992

Explanatory Note: Website requests (hits) represents the overall number of hyperlink requests to a server, many of which may be multiples from the same website page, whereas the figure for total page requests represents the total number of individual website pages requested. Therefore, total page requests can be regarded as the best general indicator of website page usage (see diagram).

Website Statistics



First Quarter of 2002: although the number of 'pages' for this period decreased, the number of 'requests' increased, as technical changes to the website meant that the number of dependant files for each web page increased.

A dependant file is a separate file that is also accessed when a web page is being viewed, as it is in some way linked to the page being viewed. They include image files (e.g. the Assembly logo is a dependant file on all of our web pages), style sheets and templates.

KEY CHALLENGES FOR 2002/2003

- Compliance with the Freedom of Information Act including the production of a Publication Scheme;
- Development of a proactive information service, including an education programme, directed to the public;
- Development of the Assembly Website;
- Maintenance of quality Sound and Vision facilities and services;
- Introduce a media monitoring service; and
- Develop an information archiving policy.