

Achieving and learning against a backdrop of economic boom to bust: the Oireachtas Library & Research Service 2005 – 2014

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1. Introduction

In November 2005 I took up the post of Head of Library and Research Services in the Houses of the Oireachtas (the Irish parliament). This was a newly created post and my job description was ‘to provide the leadership and strategic vision to expand, develop and improve library, information and research services to and on behalf of the Houses of the Oireachtas.’

I thought 2005 was a good time to take up this new post because the parliament had decided to invest in the parliamentary library which had been under-resourced for decades. In addition the Irish economy was booming which seemed to augur well for the proposed investment.

One of the catalysts for the decision to invest in the Oireachtas Library was an international benchmarking review of staffing and Members’ services in the Houses of the Oireachtas generally. This review identified that the library and research function in the parliament was inadequate by international standards in relation to both staffing and services. In 2005 there were twelve staff in the Oireachtas Library who endeavoured, with limited resources, to deliver information services to Members.

In this paper I will describe the current Oireachtas Library & Research Service and our key achievements since 2005. I will outline our strategies for surviving (so far at least!) the Irish economic crisis. Finally I will share nine key lessons that we have learned over the last nine years.

2. The Houses of the Oireachtas and its Library & Research Service

The Houses of the Oireachtas, the Irish parliament, is bicameral comprising Dáil Éireann (lower house) and Seanad Éireann (upper house). There are currently twenty one parliamentary Committees. There are 226 Members (166 Deputies and 60 Senators), these Members employ approximately 300 political staff. In addition there is approximately 400 civil service staff in the Houses of the Oireachtas Service (the parliamentary administration).

The Houses of the Oireachtas Commission is responsible for the running of the Houses of the Oireachtas and the management of the Houses of the Oireachtas Service (the Service). The Service's staff are organised into two divisions: Parliamentary Services, and Corporate and Members' Services. The Library & Research Service (L&RS) is positioned in the Parliamentary Services Division.

What has been the impact of the investment in the library and research function? A recent Value for Money and Policy Review (VfM) found 'the Oireachtas Library has been transformed since the Commission's investment in it and the establishment of ... [a]Library & Research Service'. The VfM also found 'The Oireachtas is on par with other relevant parliaments in the breadth of information and research services that it provides to Members.'

The L&RS currently has 30 staff comprising 17 researchers, 5 librarians, 5 administrative staff and 3 managers. As outlined in the L&RS's current strategic plan our vision is to contribute to a well-informed parliament and our mission is to deliver two strands of services as follows

- expert information and research services which are impartial, value-added, responsive and accessible to the Houses, Committees and Members. These services are designed to strengthen parliament.
- professional information and records management services to strengthen the Houses of the Oireachtas Service.

We have identified three strategic priorities to support parliament, committees and Members and our services are broadly aligned to these priorities as follows:

1. Research and analysis: legislative analysis including pre legislative scrutiny and second stage analysis; topical research briefings; elective research and questions in context service to support committees; on demand research and information for Members.
2. Value-added information: current awareness services including blog; access to current information resources; information skills training.
3. Information governance and management: information and records management including Freedom of Information and Documents Laid, and supporting the implementation of the information management strategy.

Looking back over the last nine years these are our key achievements:

1. Established an integrated parliamentary library and research service, this is essentially a new function which is embedded within the parliamentary administration.
2. Pushed out the boundaries of the initial library/research function to include an information management role.
3. Developed a portfolio of relevant information and research services and products aligned to the work of parliament.
4. Transformed the historical collections and made significant elements of them publicly available on the parliamentary website.
5. Transformed the process by which departments and agencies lay documents before the Houses from a paper process to an electronic environment. All documents laid since the foundation of the State (1924) are now available on the parliamentary website.

3. From economic boom to bust and the impact on the L&RS

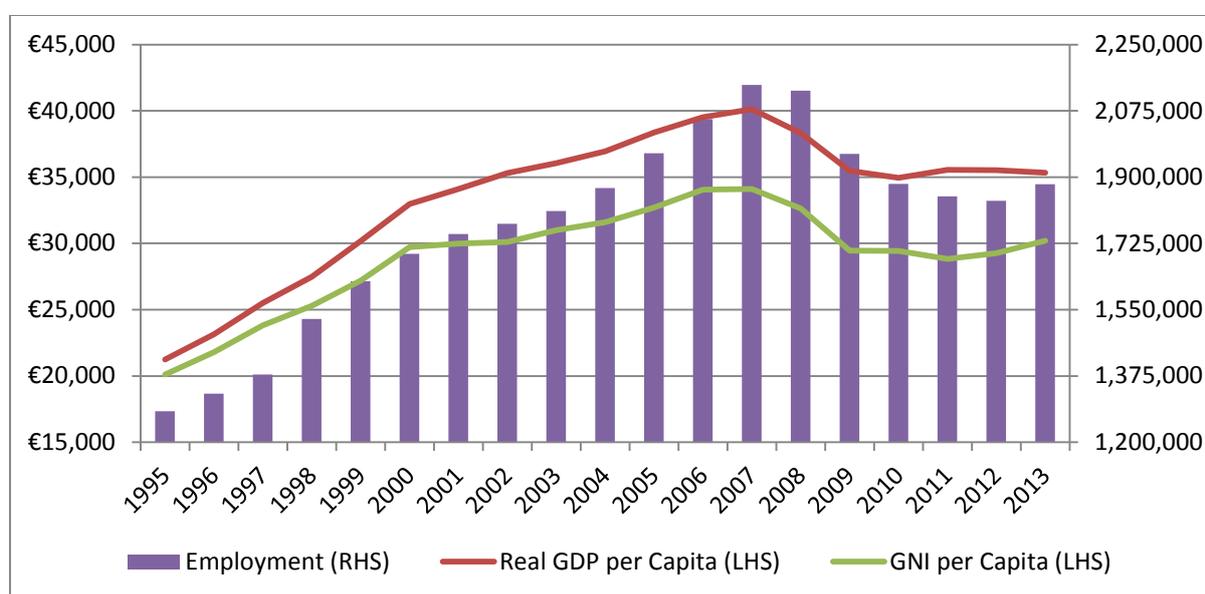
Within a couple of years of my commencing work in the Houses of the Oireachtas the economic boom had turned to bust. This obviously had an impact on the parliament's budget and the L&RS had to reduce its costs.

Irish economy 1995- 2013¹

Ireland experienced strong economic growth from 1995 to 2007. In 2008 the construction boom collapsed causing an economic, financial and fiscal crisis which Ireland is slowly emerging from.

Figure 1 shows how some of the main economic aggregates have evolved over the boom and bust period.

Figure 1: GDP per capita and employment from boom to bust



Source: CSO National Accounts and CSO Quarterly National Household Survey

Ireland's GDP rose rapidly in the period from 1995 to 2007. The economic downturn has meant a fall in GDP from 2007 to 2010 of 9.3% with modest rises since then. The unemployment rate fell from 12.2% in 1995 to a low of 3.9% in 2001, and the unemployment rate averaged 4.5% between 2002 and 2007 inclusive. The unemployment rate increased to 15% in early 2011. More recently the economy has shown positive employment growth and the unemployment rate was 11.7% in April 2014.

As with GDP and employment the economic boom transformed Ireland's Government finances. The rapid rise in the economy increased Government revenue dramatically. In 1995 Ireland's current general Government revenue (mostly tax revenue) was €18.6 billion, this rose to €60.4 billion in 2007. This allowed an increase in nominal and real expenditure over the period.

¹ This economic information has been prepared by Barry Comerford, Senior Researcher (economics), L&RS

Government spending (excluding interest payments) fell by approximately 16% between 2008 and 2012. The general government balance, which was in surplus during the period 1997 to 2007 (with the exception of 2002), went into deficit. These deficits were large: well over 10% of GDP in 2009, 2010 and 2011. These deficits along with the recapitalisation of Irish banks have meant that Ireland General Government Debt has risen from 24.9% of GDP in 2007 to 123.7% in 2013. In 2014 the government deficit is expected to fall to 4.8% of GDP. It is expected that it will be eliminated by 2018.

Houses of the Oireachtas budgets 2004 - 2015

The Houses of the Oireachtas Commission (the Commission) is funded directly by the Exchequer (Central Fund) within a three year provision which is set by legislation. A new three year sum is set every three years under the legislation and the Commission has authority over the spend within this limit.

The following table summarises the Commission’s budgets since 2004.

Table 1 – Houses of the Oireachtas Commission – tri-annual budgets since 2004

FUNDING PERIOD	BUDGET	OUTTURN
2004 – 2006	€295M	€282M
2007 – 2009	€393M	€360M
2010 - 2012	€360M	€333M
2013 – 2015	€324M	-

In 2009 the Commission applied the principles of a government moratorium on civil service appointments to its own staff and there was also a commitment to meet a target reduction in the Service’s staff numbers. There were a couple of public service agreements requiring all public sector bodies to reduce both expenditure and staff numbers, and to implement more efficient ways of working. Pay reductions and pension levies affected all Houses of the Oireachtas Service staff².

The direct cost of the L&RS (pay and non-pay costs) represents approximately 2% of the Commission’s annual outturn. The L&RS expenditure 2006-2012 and its percentage of total Commission outturn for this period is outlined in table 2 (over).

² Dennison, M. Working for parliamentarians, contributing to parliament , Legal Information Management, II (2011), p.179

Table 2 – L&RS expenditure 2006 – 2012 and percentage of total Commission expenditure

	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
	€m						
L&RS Outturn	1.4	2.2	2.5	4.6*	2.5	2.3	2.1
% of Commission's Outturn	1%	2%	2%	4%	2%	2%	2%

*In 2009 we undertook a major collections project at a cost of approximately €2m.

Reducing the cost of the L&RS

There were a number of external and internal reviews of all parliamentary services including the library/research function. Some of these reviews considered the model for delivering library and research services that had been agreed in 2006. In particular there was a re-examination of whether the Houses of the Oireachtas needed both a centralised library/research function in addition to Members' parliamentary assistants and political party researchers.

The L&RS strategic plan 2010-2012 explicitly recognised the changed economic environment in which we were operating.

The context of this plan is different from those of its predecessors. There was considerable investment in the Library & Research Service during 2006-2009. However during 2010-2012 our budgets will be reduced and, under the current moratorium, staff vacancies will be unfilled. Our response to this challenge is reflected in this plan. In particular we will focus on delivering core services to parliament and to Members, and on enhancing Library & Research Service capability.... During 2010-2012 our budgets and staff numbers are likely to be reduced. It will be ever more important to use key performance information in our planning and decision-making. Information resources and services will continue to be purchased and delivered in a cost-effective manner. We will improve our ability to cost our services. While opportunities for developing new services for parliament and for Members will be explored, we will give priority to improving our core services which are outlined in this strategy. (Library & Research Service strategic plan 2010 – 2012)

Since 2009 the L&RS's strategies for reducing costs and managing during the downturn have included the following:

Staff

- Reducing our number of administrative staff through outsourcing, improved workflows and innovative use of ICT.
- Restructuring staff along service lines, this highlighted the level of staffing available to each core service as outlined in the strategic plan. There is still flexibility between teams but each team is focused on delivering a specific service.
- Obtaining sanction from the Commission in 2012 for a 'critical mass' of staff required to deliver a specific level of services (we had previously done this in 2006 when establishing the L&RS).

Primarily as a result of the moratorium on recruitment our staff numbers had fallen by 25% between 2009 and 2012. The sanction for a ‘critical mass’ protected our staff numbers from reducing below that sanctioned in 2006 (as far as there can be ‘protection’ in a fiscal crisis).

Table 3 - L&RS sanctioned staff numbers 2006 – 2013

	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
	Library								
Total serving FTE	12	30	36	36	41	35.3	31.5	30.5	30.5
Sanctioned	12	30	36	36	38	38	38	30.5	30.5

Services

- Restating our services and priorities in a Statement of Services which replaced our 2006 Users’ Entitlement Guide.
- 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, and whether there was any potential for shared services³.

Reducing non-pay costs

- Reducing non-pay costs via good governance including zero based budgeting, public procurement tenders, policies for management of resources. Our public procurement tenders resulted in the L&RS obtaining additional services from suppliers, reducing direct costs and/or reducing L&RS staff time required to process resources. We also brought the cost of some services (eg print newspapers) to the attention of political stakeholders and asked them to consider whether they needed the service.

Overall we have reduced our non-pay costs while continuing to provide fit-for-purpose and high quality information resources and services . Table 6 outlines L&RS expenditure since 2006.

Table 4 - L&RS non-pay costs outturn 2006 - 2013

	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
	Outturn							
	€000	€000	€000	€000	€000	€000	€000	€000
L&RS	463	670	597	2,549*	529	449	468	421

*In 2009 we undertook a major collections project at a cost of approximately €2m.

While we reduced L&RS costs the question remained – were we providing value for money?

³ Dennison, M. Working for parliamentarians, contributing to parliament , Legal Information Management, II (2011), p.179

5. Value for Money (VfM) review of the L&RS

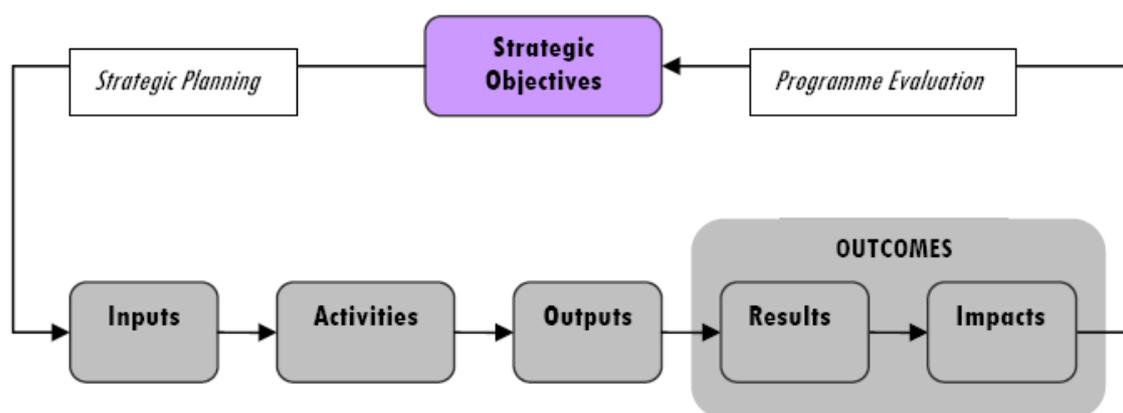
In Ireland there have been processes to formally review value for money from public expenditure programmes for many years. The VfM initiative was introduced by the Irish Government in 2006 and a new VfM code was introduced in the Budget 2012.

The senior management team of the Houses of the Oireachtas Service decided to undertake a VfM review of the L&RS as part of its ongoing VfM programme. The L&RS was selected because it was a new function which had received considerable investment.

The VfM Steering Group was chaired by an independent chair (an economist) and comprised senior managers from the parliament (including the L&RS), and the public and private sector. This Group also included an experienced lead Evaluator from the parliament. The Terms of Reference were based on those prescribed by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform.

The review used the Programme Logic Model (PLM) as its evaluation model. The model is sometimes referred to as the 'Input-Output Model', and it is shown in the figure below:

Figure 2 – Programme Logic Model (PLM)



In July 2013 further to eighteen months work the Steering Group submitted a 200+ page report including nearly twenty key findings and eight recommendations. The report was very positive, and its overall evaluation statement was

'The Steering Committee found the Library & Research Service's objectives are stated clearly, these objectives are valid and relevant in the context of the Oireachtas Commission's statements of strategy. Since 2006, the L&RS has achieved its objectives and is efficient and effective in the delivery of its services.'

Its findings included that:

- The Houses of the Oireachtas is on par with other relevant parliaments in the breadth of information and research services that it provides to Members and delivers these services with lower staffing levels and resources than most equivalent parliamentary library and research services.
- There is a very high level of satisfaction of Members, Committees and Members' staff with the services provided by the L&RS

- Overall there is growing demand for the L&RS services. In particular the L&RS has taken over a significant amount of research work for Committees that previously would have been contracted out to external consultants.
- The L&RS is delivering 'more with less' and is operating efficiently.

This was a lengthy and resource-intensive review, the late completion of the report meant that its findings did not inform the L&RS strategic planning process 2013-2015 as had been planned. In any case the Committee discussed very little at a strategic level and the recommendations were along 'continue with business as usual' lines. Following a Service review it was subsequently decided to use a more focused model of policy assessment in the future.

6. Nine lessons learned over nine years

I was new to working in parliament in 2005 as were most of my colleagues who have joined me over the years. At first we learned from the existing library staff and from other parliamentary libraries. Over the years we have learned a lot from planning and delivering services particularly during the economic crisis. I have talked to my colleagues about the key lessons that we have learned over the last nine years and these are outlined below.

1. Be prepared to 'start again' in an economic crisis

Since 2008/2009 I have had a sense of 'starting again' with regard to the development of the L&RS. I have 'started again' with regard to the role of the L&RS and the resources required to deliver its services. The findings of the international benchmarking review with regard to L&RS resources were no longer considered relevant by the Service given the economic crisis.

The Service has been focussed on reducing costs for a number of years, and as a manager I have had to contribute to that. More than ever the L&RS has been competing with other functions with regard to the allocation of financial resources.

Also as a result of the economic crisis I have had to be mindful that L&RS staff have had their terms and conditions cut and that as a consequence may be concerned about their personal circumstances and less energised at work.

2. Building credibility can help to obtain additional resources

Our initial focus (2006-2007) was to develop and deliver research services to Members because we felt this would have the most impact on Members i.e. more impact than the much needed review of the print collections. This approach was successful. Members could see the difference in the range of information and research services available to them and the Commission and the Secretary General could see the result of the investment. The credibility we gained was probably a factor in our obtaining the funding (€2m) at the start of the economic downturn for the major collections project.

More recently we delivered high-quality research to support the Committees' new pre legislative scrutiny role, the credibility gained may have been a factor in receiving sanction for additional researchers to focus on pre legislative scrutiny work.

3. Be visible in the parliament's strategic plan

The L&RS has been visible in all of the Oireachtas strategic plans. In the current plan the L&RS is included under each of the three strategic priorities (enhancing services to parliament, enhancing services to members, enhancing Service capability), and has deliverables relating to each priority. We also contribute our expertise to a number of cross-Service initiatives and projects and this enhances our visibility throughout the Service.

4. Align your services with day-to-day parliamentary business

We scrutinise the weekly schedules of both Houses and of the Committees and we provide Members with proactive information/research in advance for as many items as possible. Our web presence also demonstrates our alignment with parliamentary business with its focus on Documents Laid before the Houses.

We review, analyse and improve our services on an ongoing basis to ensure they are fit-for-purpose and high quality. We use both internal and external peer review processes.

5. Work out how best to engage with Members...and keep engaging with them

We have sometimes found it challenging to navigate parliament's rules for engaging with Members, and sometimes the 'official' meetings are not that useful for meaningful engagement. We invite Members and their staff to our annual Learning at Work Days and this has given us useful insights about how our services are used. We make the most of the post-election period for engaging with Members particularly new Members and we also try to make the most of our day-to-day interaction with Members to obtain feedback on our services.

6. There is no perfect staffing structure

We have overhauled our staffing structure a number of times. Our current service line teams highlight the clear link between teams and outputs and this structure provides an answer to the 'what do all those people do?' type questions. It also allows staff to focus on the delivery and improvement of specific services. On the downside it gives staff less variety in their work so that needs to be managed.

7. Integration of librarians and researchers can work but needs to be nurtured

Our integrated service has worked because (for example) we have single strategic and business plans, budget and staff structure. There is a focus on cross-team service delivery. We have learned that it is important to invest time in communications and whole-of-section activities such as our knowledge sharing sessions and our Learning at Work Day which are elements of our Professional Development Programme.

8. Recruit the best and the brightest staff⁴

This is one of the first lessons I learned from reading June Verrier's papers on developing research services in the Australian parliament and it is a lesson that has stayed relevant throughout the last

⁴ Verrier, Dr J R, How to establish a parliamentary research service: does one size fit all? p.38 in The theory and practice of developing parliamentary information and research services: the experience of the Parliament of Australia, Department of Parliamentary Services, Parliamentary Library, 2004

nine years. Our high calibre staff produce high quality services for our users, and they are a key factor in how much we have achieved over the last nine years.

9. Stay connected: learn from parliamentary libraries but also from other libraries and research institutions

We have learned from other parliamentary libraries via IFLA, and particularly from participating in relevant parliamentary networks such as the Inter Parliamentary Research and Information Network and the European Centre for Parliamentary Research and Documentation.

However I think it is important not to become overly focussed on parliamentary peers, and L&RS staff also participate in and learn from other library and research networks.

Conclusion

The Library & Research Service began life as a 'Celtic Tiger' service with significant investment by the Houses of the Oireachtas Commission. We have survived the (hopefully) worst of the economic downturn by reducing costs while delivering relevant high-quality services.

I think we have become a trusted part of the parliamentary process. For example the parliamentary schedule includes links to our legislative briefing papers. I believe we have demonstrated that librarians and researchers can contribute to both the parliament and to the parliamentary administration.

The future of the Library & Research Service is difficult to forecast however as with the economy there are some 'green shoots'. For example we have recently received sanction to recruit an additional eight L&RS researchers to support the delivery of a new pre-legislative scrutiny service which part of the Dáil reform programme.

There are a number of future scenarios for the organisation of the L&RS and for the delivery of parliamentary information and research services. We need to remain open to change but we also need to examine different models against our core values of impartiality, client focus and excellence in service.