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Continuity and change: experiences from the first four years of the Scottish Parliament Information Centre

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Introduction

My first reaction when asked to present a paper on the theme of “Building Continuous Innovation” on IFLA Research Day, was to wonder how you could build anything worthwhile and lasting when faced with the imperative of constant change. I even succumbed to the temptation to consult the Little Oxford Dictionary which sits on my desk to ‘unpack’ the title. The little OED defines ‘innovation’ as, “...*to bring in novelties; or to make changes*” and ‘continuous’ as *uninterrupted*. Presumably then, ‘continuous innovation’ in the context of parliamentary research means to constantly develop new services or continually change the services we provide or the way in which we deliver them.

Now, there is no doubt that parliamentary research and information services have to be responsive to new demands and to the ever increasing pace of change in technology, and that they should be proactive and innovative in finding ways to increase the range, relevance, accessibility and quality of the services they offer. A particular problem, however, is how to ensure that the changes introduced actually meet the needs of the service’s client-base and improve service provision. Just as important is the question of how to ensure stability and continuity in a service where change is a constant.

The answer to the first question turns out to be both simple – ask them! - and difficult – Members often don’t seem to know what they want until they want it.

This is understandable, it is not their role, after all, to think strategically about what services we should be providing and how we should be providing them, that's our job. More on this point later.

The answer to the second point is, I believe, that a high level of change and innovation is only possible if the research and information service is built on solid foundations and where its library and research specialists have a clear understanding of the needs of their client-group, a flexible approach to service delivery and a determination to provide a first class personalised service. By 'personalised' I mean a service which can be tailored for each individual user rather than simply offering off-the-peg solutions.

The remainder of this paper looks at how the Scottish Parliament Information Centre (SPICe) was set up, offers reflections on how the service has developed and changed over our first four years and makes some suggestions as to how other parliaments and assemblies with limited research and information services can provide good and personalised services for Members in the context of rising demand and expectations.

Solid foundations

From the beginning, SPICe was intended to be a modern and innovative service serving a Twenty-First Century Parliament. The need for a strong, well-resourced parliamentary research and information service was explicit in the [report](#) of the group set up to establish the guiding principles, organisational structure and working practices of the Parliament. This group, the Consultative Steering Group (CSG) comprised members from key civic organisations, academia and all of the main political parties in Scotland.

The CSG set out four guiding principles for the new Parliament aimed at creating an effective and accountable legislature which could answer the needs of all of the people of Scotland. The four principles are:

1. Power sharing (between the Parliament, the Scottish Executive and the people of Scotland)
2. Accountability
3. Accessibility, openness and participation
4. Equal opportunities.

The third principle most influences the work of the Parliament's Research and Information Group (RIG). The Parliament must be open, information must be readily available, and the public should be informed and given an active role in influencing the Parliament itself.

In this respect, the report stated that "*only well-informed [members] can contribute fully to the governance of Scotland.*" It went on to set 3 goals for the Parliament's research and information service:

- to ensure that all MSPs and staff of the Parliament have easy access to the information they need for the effective performance of their duties;

- to give effective support to MSPs and staff of the Parliament in their external information activities concerning the work of the Parliament;
- to respond courteously, promptly and accurately to all requests for information.

The CSG report emphasised the independence of the legislature from the executive and indicated that the core tasks for the parliament were to exert a high level of scrutiny of Executive policy and legislation. It was clear that the internal research and information service was intended to play an important part in the ability of the Parliament to achieve these tasks.

Of course, for those tasked with setting up the research and information service a number of choices still had to be made. As we all know, there are different ways in which research and information services can be delivered and no single model fits every parliament or assembly. The problem of which services to provide and how to provide them is particularly acute when starting from 'scratch' as there are no 'clients' to say what services or level of support is required. In such circumstances, it is necessary to make informed judgements, based on existing models and available experience to decide questions such as:

- the size and composition of the research and information service;
- the balance between providing access to electronic and hard copy resources
- the issue of whether researchers should be employed and, if so, how many, should they be generalists or subject specialists and what subjects should they cover?
- If no or few researchers are to be employed, how can the service "add value" to reference material?
- Should research services be provided to individual members only, parliamentary committees only or to both members and committees?
- Which services, if any, should be provided externally?

In the Scottish Parliament the key early decisions were that:

- The Information Centre would include a mix of both professional librarians and researchers;
- The emphasis would be on electronic resources whenever possible but with a small reference collection covering all devolved subject areas;
- Researchers would be recruited as subject specialists to help the Parliament to make an immediate impact in the main devolved areas;
- Researchers would work for committees but also for individual members and for the Parliament;
- There would be a budget for commissioning external research and consultancy where in-house resources were deemed inadequate.

The exact numbers and balance of library staff and researchers needed were difficult to gauge before the Service was fully up and running but at start-up there were in post 14 library staff and 9 research staff.

Putting principles into practice

There follows a brief introduction to SPICe and the later development of RIG, describing how our activities help to put the CSG principles into practice.

SPICe started with two professional library staff in October 1998. Both were on secondment from the House of Commons Library, and their remit was to staff and resource an Information Centre ready for the first meeting of the new Scottish Parliament in May 1999.

Newly appointed staff started to arrive at the end of February 1999 and, by the beginning of May that year, 23 staff were in post to provide the initial information service. Staff numbers grew with increased demand from Members of the Scottish Parliament (MSPs) to a maximum of 39. Then in mid-2001, discussions were held with a view to bringing together the internal information provision role of SPICe, and the Parliament's external facing information services. This was agreed, and RIG came into being in October 2001. Since then RIG has been working in three service teams: Research services, information services, and participation services though the first two retain the SPICe 'brand name'.

SPICe, therefore, was underpinned by a set of clear principles at both the political level and at the organisational level. Our first 'mission statement' reflected these principles. These were:

- to raise the standard of debate
- to sharpen the focus of scrutiny
- to improve the quality of the legislation
- to promote information and knowledge about the Parliament itself

Just as important was the establishment of a set of clear service standards to help inform our working practices allied to a flexible approach to meeting the needs of our Members. Perhaps the key element in all this was the recruitment of an enthusiastic and flexible staff of library and research specialists who were prepared to take on new tasks in unfamiliar areas, and to develop and deliver new services.

CHANGES AND INNOVATIONS

Staff numbers and roles

Research Service

The most significant change for the research service in our first year of operation was a 125% increase in our complement from 8 researchers to 18. This increase was a response to increasing demand for briefing from committees as they began to engage more fully with the Executive's

legislative programme and from MSPs as they found their feet and began questioning executive policy and legislation and proposing alternatives.

The increased size of the research service allowed us to group researchers into 4 subject-based teams each with 4 or 5 members. Each team covers a portfolio of loosely-related subjects. We now have a total of 20 researchers comprising 2 principal researchers, 8 senior researchers and 10 researchers. In addition, we have a senior research assessor who manages the commissioned research budget.

Europe

To fill an obvious knowledge gap and meet increasing demand for specialist support to our European and subject committees on European Union (EU) matters, we took advantage of a vacancy in our Justice team to appoint a European research specialist. This has proved very successful and has allowed the Parliament to engage more effectively with the EU and its institutions at a more 'upstream' point where policy is at the early stages of development rather than at the point it becomes legislation and beyond our ability to influence. The post-holder has also provided training on the EU to both research staff and to clerking staff and is in the process of setting up a comprehensive contacts database.

Budget Scrutiny

Another area we have sought to improve is the support we are able to offer to the Finance and other committees in their scrutiny of the Scottish budget. This has included recruiting an additional finance researcher and providing a series of well timed, well focussed briefings to actively identify scope for change to the budget, and so providing subject Committees with better tools to do their job.

Library/Information Service

On the library side the staff complement has also increased over this period though less dramatically from 14 to 19. Several new roles have been established to meet new demand or provide new or more focused services. These new posts include:

- Comparative Parliamentary Enquiries Officer – this post is currently occupied by a secondee from the UK House of Commons. Its purpose is to develop a database of contacts with other parliaments and assemblies and establish procedures to enable us to handle the increasing number of requests we get from Members for comparative information about other parliaments and countries. It also supports the VIP visits programme of the Parliament's External Liaison Unit by supplying relevant information on the visitors' countries.
- Current Awareness Librarian – about 18 months ago we established an electronic current awareness service (SCAN) which is available on our intranet. The job of the Current Awareness Librarian is to co-ordinate the material we put on this site. Researchers were involved in

designing the site and deciding what material should go on it and for providing weekly updates within their subject areas.

- Parliamentary Information Officer – among other tasks, this role recognises the importance of acquiring, organising, and utilising the publications of the Scottish Parliament, and of other legislative bodies. The post also has a role both internally and externally in promoting the Parliament’s publications and providing training in their use.
- Electronic Resources Librarian – this post recognises the importance of electronic sources in our type of library and the duties of the post-holder include assessing the value of electronic and web based information resources to the Parliament, providing access to these through the intranet, monitoring use, and offering training when required; maintaining SPICe’s enquiry and MSP biography database (Scottish Parliamentary Profiles); constantly monitoring new developments in electronic information services provision, and ensuring that relevant developments are made available to all users.

Over this period, the Information Service has taken on a higher profile including assuming several Parliament-wide roles such as:

- Managing the Parliament’s print contract;
- Assuming editorship of the Parliament’s Website and intranet;
- Producing the Parliament Calendar of Events; and,
- Production of the Parliament’s annual statistics volume.

Service Innovations

As a new organisation our services are continually developing and expanding. It is important for us to review our service provision regularly and build upon our existing services to provide information that will enable the Parliament to work more effectively. This section of the paper looks at some of the changes and service innovations we have developed over the last 4 years.

Current awareness network

One of the main functions for SPICe staff within the research and information group is to answer enquiries from MSPs, their staff and staff of the Parliament. These can range from in-depth research enquiries on devolved matters to quick reference enquiries on almost anything. In February 2002, we launched SCAN, the SPICe Current Awareness Network, with the intention of providing our users with the resources to research their own questions and at the same time pre-empting a number of enquires we receive. SCAN contains a “material for debates” section which contains all documents relevant to debates taking place in the plenary sessions of the Parliament. This page is updated on a rolling basis while the rest is updated weekly (during sitting time). The key features of SCAN are:

- subject pages providing a one-stop-shop for core resources, current issues and websites

- one key source for material and resources relating to forthcoming parliamentary debates including SPICe briefings
- information relating to new titles and documents available in the information centre.

Monthly statistics have shown a steady increase in usage of SCAN but have also highlighted the constant need for promotion of the service. Consequently further training and demonstration events are in the pipeline.

Client Liaison Programme

We have launched a new client liaison programme aimed at developing closer links between RIG staff and MSPs and at assessing user satisfaction. The programme is theme-based and involves holding interviews with Members to highlight our services, get feedback and identify any unmet research and information needs they may have. The programme was launched at a recent open evening for MSPs and their staff and the first round (or theme) was aimed at getting accurate biographic information on new MSPs to be placed on the Parliament's website.

Quality assurance

A concern we have had for some time is how to maintain and improve the quality of our outputs in the face of rising demand and short timescales. Last year we produced detailed guidance on writing research briefings and established a more robust peer review process for our research briefings and enquiry responses. We are also in the process of developing a more comprehensive training plan for researchers aimed at ensuring greater consistency in the standard and quality of our outputs. The guidance we have produced to-date has already helped improve consistency in the appearance of our briefings and, together with the peer review process, has contributed to higher quality products. The guidance on writing briefings is currently being reviewed in the light of experience over the last 12 months.

The project to raise quality levels is a good example of effective cross-working between our Research and Information services in that staff from the information Service proof check the majority of our briefings for sense and grammar, and have been instrumental in improving our writing style and, in particular, the way in which we cite references.

Statistics and GIS

We are working with the Northern Ireland Assembly to improve the way we deliver statistics to our Members, particularly census statistics, and we have commissioned a small pilot intranet-mounted Geographic Information System (GIS) project to explore whether it's feasible to develop an in-house intranet or internet-based geographical statistical resource. We are also liaising with the other United Kingdom parliaments and assemblies on the development of GIS

A product of this project is a "Statistical Portal" which brings together in one place a wide range of statistical resources from the Web and combines this with an easy to use intranet mounted front end. The portal can be accessed:

- **By subject theme:** Crime & Justice; Education Enterprise; Equal Opportunities; Health & Care; Homelessness; Housing; Lifelong Learning; Social Inclusion; and Transport
- **by geographical area:** SPICe Area Profiles (2001 Census data); Link to Neighbourhood Statistics; Link to SCROL Census data; Interactive mapping (Geowise link to be added)
- **Links to statistical sources**

Advisers database

Our committees have the option to appoint expert advisers to aid them in their inquiry or legislative scrutiny work. In the early days, as SPICe provided the only subject experts in the Parliament, it was to us that committee clerks turned to recommend expert advisers. However, in the spirit of Equal Opportunities and to widen the base of experts available to the Parliament, we have worked closely with our clerking colleagues to develop a database of committee advisers and to produce guidance on its use and on the respective roles of research and clerking staff in the adviser appointment process. Individuals and organisations can register on the database through our website. There are now around 360 individuals and organisations registered on the database as potential advisers.

Collection development

We are building up a robust collection management policy based on the known needs of the Parliament, rather than, as at first, on perceived needs. We are increasing the availability of electronic sources via intranet, including e-journals service, legal and subject based databases (eg. Westlaw, International Bibliography of the Social Sciences). We are also in the process of letting a contract for the supply of stock to the Parliament, where we are taking the lead in a process involving the Scottish Executive and some of its agencies.

WEB and intranet

We now have full editorial control of our Web site and intranet. The Web/SPEIR Editor implements the Internet/Intranet Editorial Board's agreed recommendations in conjunction with the Web/Intranet team.

Print Contract management

This is a new Post in Information Services and the post-holder has responsibility for managing the Parliament's print contract – dealing with the contractors (TSO), customers of the service, standards and all budgeting issues.

Calendar of Events

Information services designed and successfully piloted a new Parliamentary Calendar of Events on our intranet. The demand for this came from MSPs and it aims to cover all events, official business, Cross Party Group meetings, official visitors, school visits and so on. We will be taking the project forward in September.

CD ROM of Parliamentary Business

Our indexers are adding POLIS indexing terms to the first edition of the CD ROM of parliamentary proceedings. The 1st year of the 1st session is almost completed and should be released later this year.

SCAN/Calendar of Events

We will be among the first in the Parliament to make changes directly to the intranet pages, rather than these being done by IT. This will enable us to update SCAN and the Calendar of Events as often as needed, rather than having to work to an IT imposed timetable. We are already converting Research briefings into .pdf files for intranet/web use.

Training

We are offering, again as part of the client liaison programme mentioned earlier, training in web, intranet, SCAN and electronic database use, to MSPs, their staff and the Parliament's staff. This is a flexible programme to suit client needs, either one to one or in small groups. The push this year will be towards ensuring local office staff have access to and can use the services already available to those based in Parliament HQ.

Enquiry handling

For quite a while we have realised that our enquiry service could be improved by enquiries being dealt with in a more integrated fashion across RIG. We have set up a project team to look at current processes and suggest alternatives.

Science Information Service

In association with the Royal Society of Edinburgh, the Royal Society of Chemistry, the Institute of Physics and the University of Edinburgh, we have established a Science Information Service which is designed to give MSPs access to impartial advice across the whole range of science, technology and engineering subjects. This Service will be launched in September and will run as a pilot scheme for 1 year. Briefly, the Service involves over 50 topic co-ordinators, who are themselves prominent scientists, passing on enquiries from Members and committees to recognised experts. SPICe will act as one of two portals for the service

Inter Parliamentary Research Network

Researchers from the Scottish Parliament were instrumental in establishing an Inter Parliamentary Research Network (IPRN) involving parliamentary researchers from the Scotland Parliament, the Northern Ireland Assembly, the National Assembly for Wales, the UK Parliament and the Irish Dáil. The IPRN had its first meeting in the Scottish Parliament in July 2002 and its first conference in the NIA in August 2002. The aim of the IPRN is to share resources, experience and information. We believe that it is important that small parliaments look to achieve economies of scale and share experiences by working with colleagues in similar organisations.

LESSONS

So what lessons have emerged from our first four years that might be useful to other parliaments and assemblies with a limited number of researchers and professional library staff?

Maximise your staff and material resources

First of all, with a small research and information service, the whole is definitely greater than the sum of its parts. It is important, therefore, to develop working practices that assist joint working, maximise use of resources and the value of your output to your members. For example:

- Make sure staff from the different parts of the research and information service work together. Develop joint projects for them to work on so that they understand each others specialisms and what each can contribute to a joint venture. Our current awareness project and peer review process are examples of successful joint working;
- Make sure that you add value to existing materials. If you get a reputation for simply being able to pull reference material off a shelf and present it in its raw state you have not differentiated yourselves from a personal assistant to a Member;
- Encourage staff to be bold. In other words stretch them to use their specialisms to go beyond what's on the page and to customise the information for the user but not to the point where you lose political impartiality;
- Make sure that staff and others are clear on services you will and won't provide; publish guidance on this setting out your service standards but don't lose the need for a flexible response to clients needs;
- Make sure that what you do is as closely connected to the business of the Parliament as possible. The 'Material for Debates' section of our current awareness service is an example of making information on up-coming plenary business available in an accessible format as early as possible;
- Make sure that you have a physical visible presence as close to Members as possible – this could be an enquiry desk temporarily located outside the Debating Chamber. It could be a display stand in the cafeteria or it could be a leaflet stand in the bar. Wherever Members are they should be able to think of your service!
- Make good contacts with other organisations so that you can supply material from them quickly without having to acquire it, process it and maintain it on the off chance of somebody asking for it. It is also important to establish good working relationships across the Parliament, getting the Service and its role recognised as the guardians and providers of information required by the Parliament.

- Act as a gateway, don't attempt to do everything yourself. Trade on the Parliament's reputation or democratic position to encourage other people to contribute to the process. In other words make yourself an access point for experts to channel their views and information towards Members. In this way you can add external expertise to your own and make it work for the Parliament without incurring significant costs, or in some cases any cost at all. The Science Information Service we have developed in partnership with the scientific community in Scotland is an example of this.
- Ensure that you assess all your services constantly to consider their relevance and the level of staff input required. For example, we conducted a journals survey, resulting in a reduction in the number of print subscriptions and an increase in the number of e-journals taken. It also resulted in far less marking in/shelving and weeding work for junior staff, and saved considerable space.

Developing Electronic Services in parallel with customised research and information services

With a small research and library staff, it is also important to develop your electronic resources in tandem with providing a customised research and information service

- Make sure you enable Members and their staff to use the electronic services – this might mean offering training to Members and their staff in the use of the intranet, on-line and other electronic sources. The electronic service should free up time for you to spend on the customised enquiries.
- Ask the users what they most need and make sure that you are the one who can provide it. For example if people want guidance on which search engine to use, get your staff to produce evaluations of the search engines and share those with your clients
- Make sure that you do personalise or customise your service. The question you should ask yourself when looking at your product is, if somebody else could do the same, why should they get this from me? The answer to this would usually be: make the extra effort to point out which bit is relevant. For example simply highlighting the relevant paragraph on a photocopied page is better than handing out the photocopied page unadorned; offering to summarise several pieces of work from different sources is even better.
- Go the extra mile. The key phrase for what we provide is a *personalised* service.

Have we got it right?

Getting feedback from Members and their staff on our products is not easy: Members surveys, Open days, client liaison programmes, tear-off 'satisfaction' slips and other forms of personal contact eg with 'key' Members

are all ways of addressing the problem. Each method has some benefits and each has some limitations.

A recent Members' survey in the Scottish Parliament highlighted fairly high levels of use and satisfaction with the services provided by all 3 of RIG's teams. For example: 96% of MSPs said they used SPICe Briefings with 14% using these daily and 59%, at least once a month; 79% were satisfied with the format, structure and accuracy of these briefings with 75% satisfied with the comprehensiveness of the briefings. Similar satisfaction levels were recorded against SPICe's enquiry service and even higher rates against the services to the public provided by our Participation Services team. The most disappointing finding was that 31% of MSPs and 44% of their staff never used our electronic current awareness service.

Such surveys are good at assessing satisfaction with current service provision but are less good at getting users to tell you whether we have got our priorities right or in identifying significant gaps or unmet need. Our client liaison programme is at an early stage but we have hopes that it will encourage greater use of our services and provide greater insight into the needs of our Members.

So, we don't know if we have got it all right but we do know that our services are used and valued by a majority of Members and their staff. However, we have no intention of resting on our laurels and we will continue to seek ways of improving our services in innovative ways.