

Performance overview

In 2014–15, the department successfully delivered its outcome: advisory and administrative support services to enable the Senate and senators to fulfil their representative and legislative functions.

In particular, the department:

- provided comprehensive, timely, high-quality and cost-effective support to senators, the Senate and committees, as well as prompt and accurate procedural advice and legislative support
- published a range of materials on the role and work of the Senate and the Parliament, and delivered effective education and information programs
- managed its staff in accordance with its enterprise agreement and provided learning and development opportunities to maintain the department's capabilities
- delivered its services in accordance with accountability requirements.

The department's result for the financial year was a deficit of \$1.2 million, reflecting the level of parliamentary activity, including in particular the requirement to support elevated levels of committee activity. The result also reflects the decline in appropriation through compounding efficiency dividends and the final salary increase for employees in accordance with the department's enterprise agreement and collective determination, which expired on 30 June 2015.

The Senate department continued to work with the other parliamentary departments to deliver its services, to improve support for the Parliament and the work of its members and to enhance the strategic direction of the parliamentary service. A focus of interdepartmental effort remains the implementation of a whole-of-parliament approach to ICT and the integration of the disparate business systems that support the work of the Houses and their committees. Another focus involved coordination of changed security arrangements in Parliament House, including the Australian Federal Police assuming command of security operations and the commencement of major capital works upgrades.

Performance indicators

The department reports against the performance indicators contained in its portfolio budget statements tabled in the Senate in May 2014. Those indicators have two dimensions, comprising an assessment of the demand for the department's services and an evaluation of the department's performance in delivering those services.

Demand for services

A constant in the department's planning and reporting has been the recognition that much of the demand for its services shifts in line with levels of Senate legislative and committee activity. Demand is overwhelmingly driven by the requirements of senators, and the decisions and activities of the Senate and its committees. Each year, significant factors include:

- the political dynamics of the Senate
- the number of days and hours, and distribution, of its sittings
- the legislative workload of the Senate
- the number of committees on which senators serve
- the number and complexity of committee inquiries.

Each of these is in turn affected by the electoral cycle. 2014–15 was the first full year of the 44th Parliament, with the new Senate meeting for the first time on 7 July 2014. The department's year began with orientation programs for 12 new senators, and the provision of support for a new President and Deputy President. The level of demand for advice, and the character of advice and support required, was affected by the election of the Senate's largest and most diverse cross-bench of date.

The Senate sat on 65 days, which is slightly more than the average for recent non-election years. The elevated levels of committee activity seen in the previous two parliaments were exceeded during the year, with large numbers of concurrent inquiries involving thousands of submissions and witnesses, record numbers of hearings, and more than 200 substantive reports. The need to support this activity saw a small increase in staff numbers in committee secretariats, and one-off funding to maintain a larger staff complement for 2015–16 was secured during the year.

The concentration of business on sitting days and the number of committees meeting at the same time create challenges for the provision of advice and effective support to senators. As in previous years, the workload was characterised by:

- peaks in demand for services—for example, to complete the legislative program before the end of a sitting period
- competing timetables—for example, to enable senators to participate in multiple committees hearing budget estimates
- tight deadlines—for example, to complete and report on committee inquiries.

The workload and demand for services for each office are set out in the relevant parts of this chapter.

Performance in delivering services

Evaluation of the department's performance is based upon the degree to which its services meet the requirements of the Senate and its committees, and senators, principally measured against criteria centred on:

- accuracy—frequently assessed by considering whether advice or documents were demonstrated to be inaccurate

- timeliness—particularly whether advice, documents or services were provided in time to meet the purpose for which they were sought
- satisfaction of senators (including committees of senators) with the advice, documents or other services provided—the assessment of which is considered further below.

The particular criteria which apply to the department, and to each office, are described in the department’s portfolio budget statements and in the performance summary tables contained in this chapter.

Satisfaction with services

The department monitors its performance through formal and informal channels, including letters, emails, phone calls, seminar evaluation forms and outputs from management information systems. Much of the department’s work involves contact with senators and their staff, presenting the most direct means of eliciting feedback about services and performance, and an avenue for addressing concerns as they are raised. As noted throughout this report, this direct feedback was positive across all service areas during the year, particularly in relation to core advisory and secretariat support roles. Senators’ comments about the department and its staff, placed on the public record during Senate and committee proceedings, constitute another valuable source of performance information. These comments continued to be overwhelmingly positive during 2014–15.

Senate committees also provide opportunities for senators and others to monitor the department’s performance. The Clerk and other officers appear at estimates hearings of the Finance and Public Administration Legislation Committee during each round of Senate estimates. This provides an important accountability mechanism by which senators may test advice provided by departmental officers and evaluate the department’s performance in a public forum. The Appropriations, Staffing and Security Committee also has a specific role in relation to the department’s appropriations as well as matters concerning the department’s structure, staffing and ICT and security arrangements. Quarterly reports on the department’s financial performance are provided to the President of the Senate and the Appropriations, Staffing and Security Committee.

Performance results

In this report the department’s activities are assessed using the indicators described in the portfolio budget statements. Table 1 summarises the department’s performance against these targets.

Additional performance indicators for each office are also described in the portfolio budget statements. The following sections of the report cover the activities of those offices in more detail. Each begins with a table which summarises the performance results for that office.

Table 1 Performance summary—Outcome 1

Outcome

Advisory and administrative support services to enable the Senate and senators to fulfil their representative and legislative duties.

Indicator	2014–15 results
QUALITY	
The degree of satisfaction of the President, Deputy President and senators, as expressed through formal and informal feedback mechanisms, with the accuracy, quality and timeliness of advice and support and the achievement of key tasks.	Feedback from the President, Deputy President, committee chairs, committee members and other senators continued to indicate high levels of satisfaction with the quality and timeliness of advice and the achievement of key tasks, consistent with the results of earlier years. All advices, documents and publications were of a high standard.
TIMELINESS	
Advice or material given at the request of a senator in time to be used for the purpose for which it was required. Key business documents for the Senate and its committees, including minutes, agendas, messages and schedules of amendments and reports, produced in accordance with predetermined requirements and the requirements of the Senate and its committees.	All business documents were produced and advices were given in accordance with predetermined requirements and agreed timeframes, in time to serve the purposes for which they were prepared.
QUANTITY (Workload)	
Number of sitting days on which the department would expect to support the Senate, on the basis of recent experience.	Estimated: 60 sitting days Actual: 65 sitting days
Support for committees in accordance with their requirements.	Sustained, elevated levels of committee activity – as evidenced by high numbers of committees, inquiries, submissions, hearings and reports – were supported
PRICE	
The total resourcing for the department*	Estimated: \$21.2 million Actual: \$21.9 million

* excluding departmental resources received free of charge from other Commonwealth agencies.

The *Public Governance, Performance and Accountability Act 2013* requires agencies to put in place new performance reporting arrangements from 2015–16. An internal audit exercise on performance measurement commenced during the year is expected to lead to revision of the department’s portfolio budget statements for the next reporting period, which will be reflected in future corporate plans. The exercise is expected to result in a schedule of significant services and outputs against which the department will report its performance in its next annual report.