



Performance overview

In 2011–12, the department successfully delivered its outcome: advisory and administrative support services to enable the Senate and senators to fulfil their representative and legislative duties. In particular, the department:

- provided comprehensive, timely, high-quality and cost-effective support to senators, the Senate chamber and committees, as well as prompt and accurate procedural advice and legislative support
- organised a successful changeover of the Senate as 12 retiring senators finished their terms on 30 June and were replaced by 12 new senators in time for the first sitting of the new Senate on 4 July
- published a range of materials on the work of the Senate and the Parliament
- produced and delivered effective education and information programs
- finalised the implementation of recommendations of the structural review of 2010, in particular the establishment of the Senate Public Information Office
- continued to review and revise a range of departmental policies and procedures.

This overview of performance in 2011–12 summarises the key factors, events and trends that influenced the department’s progress towards its outcome; the degree of satisfaction expressed by senators and others who used the department’s services; and the department’s results against key performance indicators.

The following chapters in the ‘Report on performance’ cover the role and performance of each of the department’s five offices in more detail. The department’s financial performance in 2011–12 is detailed in the ‘Financial statements’ chapter and the summary of resources tables in appendix 1.

Factors influencing performance

Demand for the department’s services is substantially driven by the requirements of senators, the Senate chamber and committees. Each year, significant factors include:

- the political composition of the Senate
- the number of days and hours, and distribution, of the sittings of the Senate
- the legislative workload of the Senate
- the Senate committee structure, and the workload of committees
- the point in the election cycle.

The number of sitting days in 2011–12 increased to 62, (from 37 in 2010–11). This increase in sitting days reflects a return to a full sitting pattern following the election in 2010. 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 department applied a range of strategies to address these factors and maintain consistently high levels of performance, including:

- use of information technology
- tactical deployment of ongoing and non-ongoing staff to areas of greatest need
- effective communication with senators, ministers and their staff, staff of other departments and members of the public.

Demand for the department’s research and education services was also similar to that in 2010–11. The programs delivered by the Parliamentary Education Office continued to operate at near capacity. Some success was achieved in encouraging schools to schedule their visits outside peak times.

The department works with the other parliamentary departments—in particular, the Department of Parliamentary Services—to deliver its full range of support services to the Senate, committees, senators and departmental staff and to ensure that the interests of the Department of the Senate are represented in the development and implementation of parliament-wide policies and projects.

Satisfaction with services

The principal medium for formally evaluating the services of the department is the biennial survey of senators' satisfaction. As discussed in last year's annual report, the survey conducted between February and May 2011 generally revealed high levels of satisfaction among senators, both with specific services and with the department's services overall.

Much of the department's work involves direct contact with senators and their staff. This presents an ongoing opportunity to receive informal feedback about services. Across the department, this feedback was positive in 2011–12. In the small number of cases where questions or complaints about services were received, they were handled promptly and generally resolved.

Senators' comments about the department and its performance, made during proceedings, including comments made at the conclusion of senators' terms in valedictory speeches or when a committee's report is tabled or debated, are another form of performance information. In 2011–12, senators were again positive in their comments on the performance of departmental staff and committee secretariats, in particular. Informal feedback from witnesses also indicated satisfaction with their dealings with secretariat staff.

To ensure that high levels of service are maintained and that there are no areas of major concern, the department also monitors its performance through other formal and informal channels such as letters, emails, phone calls, seminar evaluation forms and outputs from various management information systems. This continuous performance monitoring assists the department to make timely and responsive adjustments to its service delivery. High levels of positive feedback were received in 2011–12.

Performance summary

The department's performance in achieving its outcome is assessed using indicators for quality, timeliness and quantity, as defined in the portfolio budget statements.

The performance summary in table 1 shows the department's performance against its targets over the past three reporting periods. Each office's report on performance begins with a similar table, setting out the performance of that office against its targets for 2011–12.

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.	
2011–12 results	
Quality <i>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.</i>	Feedback from the President, Deputy President, committee chairs, committee members and other senators indicated high levels of satisfaction with the quality and timeliness of advice and the achievement of key tasks, consistent with the results of the 2011 senators' survey. All advices, documents and publications were of a high standard.
Timeliness <i>Advice or material was provided on request to senators in time to be used for the required purpose. 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.</i>	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 <i>Number of sitting days on which the department would expect to support the Senate, on the basis of recent experience, and support for committees in accordance with their requirements.</i>	Indicator: 65 sitting days Result: 37 sitting days ^a
Price <i>The total resourcing for the department^b</i>	Indicator: 60 sitting days Result: 62 sitting days Estimated: \$21.8 million Result: \$22.3 million ^c
	Estimated: \$21.5 million Result: \$21.3 million

a These figures do not reflect any 'hidden' sitting days (where business on one day was carried on to the next after an overnight suspension). There was one hidden sitting day in 2010–11.

b These figures do not include departmental resources received free of charge from other Commonwealth agencies.

c Note that \$330,000 was received in appropriation for a new committee but the revenue was recognised in the previous year.