

Performance overview

In 2012–13, 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
- implemented a new enterprise agreement with its employees and revised a range of departmental policies and procedures
- implemented a staffing budget cap, in response to increased efficiency dividends, and made consequential changes to work practices in some areas.

The Senate department also 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 this work has been developing a whole-of-parliament approach to ICT and redeveloping the systems that produce and manage key information resources of both Houses and their committees.

Factors influencing performance

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

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

In 2012–13, the Senate met on 56 sitting days (62 in 2011–12), slightly fewer than the average for recent non–election years. The workload of committees continued at elevated levels, including through a requirement to support a greater number of joint committees. 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 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.

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

- 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

For many years one of the department’s principal means of evaluating its performance has been a formal survey of senators’ satisfaction with the services it provides. That survey was last conducted in 2011 and revealed high levels of satisfaction among senators, both with specific services

and with the department's services overall, consistent with reported results from previous years. The survey was discontinued this year, partly as a cost-saving measure but mainly because of its declining value as an evaluation tool: fewer senators were electing to complete the survey themselves, and it was eliciting only very general comments.

By contrast, much of the department's work involves contact with senators and their staff, presenting a more direct means of eliciting feedback about services and performance, and a more immediate avenue for addressing concerns as they are raised. As is noted throughout this report, this direct feedback was positive across all service areas during the year.

The department also continues to note and attend to concerns raised elsewhere – for instance, during the department's appearances before Senate estimates hearings and through the Senate's Appropriations and Staffing Committee.

Senators' comments about the department and its performance, made during proceedings, including comments made by senators in valedictory speeches or when a committee's report is tabled or debated, are another form of performance information. In 2012–13, 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.

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.

In the small number of cases where questions or complaints about services were received, they were handled promptly and generally resolved. The department also sought to engage directly with senators about administrative changes, particularly where measures were likely to affect services to them. The department adjusted its approach on the basis of such discussions, for instance in relation to a proposal to reduce reliance on printed materials in the Senate chamber.

Performance results

In this report the department's activities are assessed using the indicators for quality, timeliness and quantity 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	2012–13 results
<p>Quality</p> <p>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.</p>	<p>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 earlier senators' surveys.</p> <p>All advices, documents and publications were of a high standard.</p>
<p>Timeliness</p> <p>Advice or material given at the request of a senator in time to be used for the purpose for which it was required.</p> <p>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.</p>	<p>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.</p>
<p>Quantity</p> <p>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.</p>	<p>Estimated: 60 sitting days</p> <p>Result: 56 sitting days</p>
<p>Price</p> <p>The total resourcing for the department*</p>	<p>Estimated: \$21.9 million</p> <p>Result: \$20.4 million</p>

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

