

# Senate Finance and Public Administration Legislation Committee — Budget Estimates Hearing—May 2017

## Answers to Questions on Notice

### Parliamentary departments, Department of Parliamentary Services

Topic: **Library Funding**

Question: **32**

Hansard Reference: **p 119, 22 May 2017**

#### **Date set by the committee for the return of answer: 7 July 2017**

**Senator WONG:** What is been the trajectory of your resourcing?

**Dr Heriot:** I could provide a more elegant answer on notice. It has been a bumpy trajectory, I think, you could say. It has trended downwards for a number of years due to, I think, the compounding nature of efficiency dividends over the past 30-odd years. It had a kick north over the last couple of years when DPS got additional funding.

**Senator WONG:** I could give you some of the \$22 million for the PSS that—could you on notice, perhaps, give us a sense of the resourcing, the funding trajectory, including what is projected over the forwards? Are your ASLs separately identified in the PBS or are they just aggregated?

**Dr Heriot:** They are aggregated in the PBS, but they are identified in the resource agreement.

**Senator WONG:** Annual?

**Dr Heriot:** The annual resource agreement.

**Senator WONG:** Could you in the same answer give us that as well.

**Senator WONG:** And whatever you could give us that gives us some sense of unmet need. I do not know what your metrics are: how many requests, whether you have X number of requests from parliamentarians to be returned within X time frame—I am sure you have performance metrics, because you are a very good organisation. Are you able to give us some sense of unmet need—where you are not hitting the target or where it has dropped off because you have got been able to, or what you have had to divert as a result of that? That would be useful. Thank you, Chair.

#### **Answer**

##### *Library resourcing arrangements*

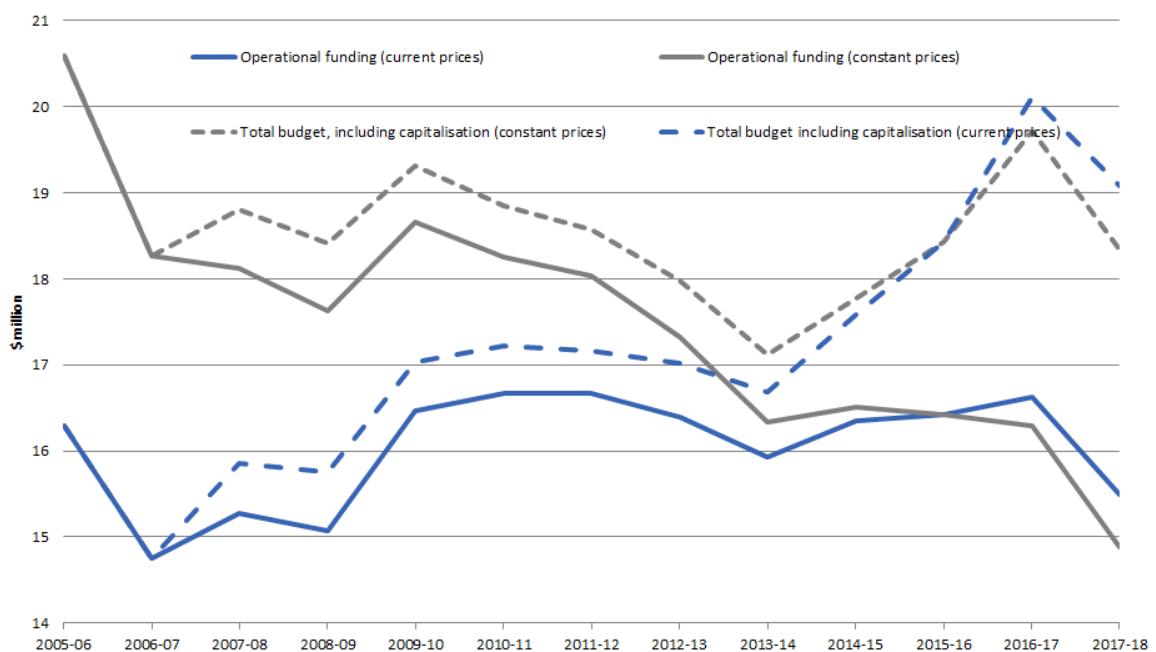
Under the *Parliamentary Service Act 1999* (section 38G), the Secretary DPS provides resources to the Parliamentary Librarian in accordance with an annual Resource Agreement. The agreement supports the independence of the Library and provides a greater degree of transparency about its resourcing and services than would otherwise be possible.

Agreements for 2015-16, 2016-17 and 2017-18 include notional projections over the forward estimates for operational funding; however, actual funding (operational and capital) is negotiated afresh each year.

### *Trends in operational funding*

The Library’s budget, before and since the creation of DPS, has been subject to the compounding effect of efficiency dividends and other savings measures and increased employee and collection costs. The impact of this has been discussed in the Parliamentary Librarian’s annual reports (2012-13, 2013-14 and 2014-15). However, the provision of additional funding for DPS in the 2014-15 Budget enabled the Library’s budget to be stabilised; and this has been sustained in subsequent resource agreements, including that the Presiding Officers recently approved for 2017-18.

**Parliamentary Library resourcing 2005–06 to 2017–18**

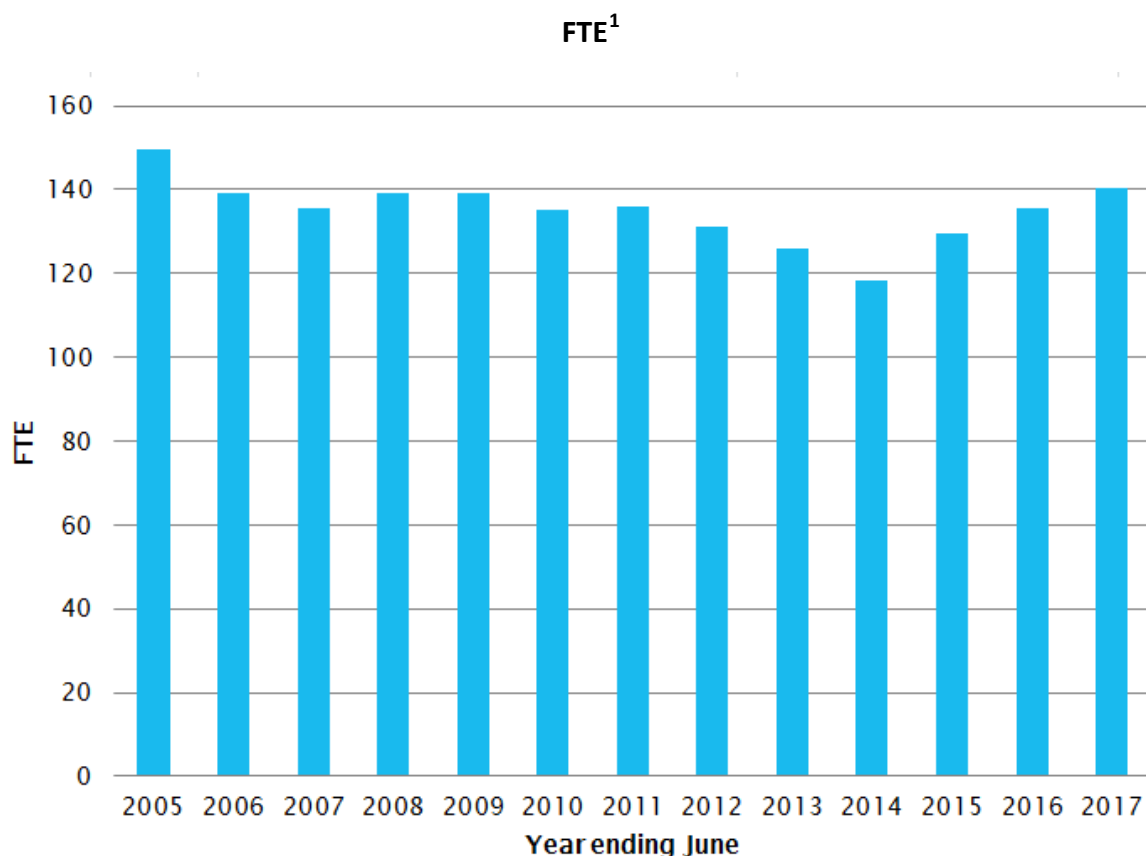


Constant prices are expressed in June 2016 prices using the CPI. Index number for June 2017 based on Treasury forecasts.

(Note: the graph above shows a decrease in the Library’s operational funding for 2017-18 compared to the previous financial year. The net impact on the Library’s core budget is minimal (-\$261,317), with the reduction in operational funds being offset by an associated increase in capital funding—the consequence of a change to the accounting treatment of aspects of the Library’s collection. The total budget for 2017-18 also reflects the completion of the first and most expensive stage of the Parliamentary Papers digitisation project, which was allocated funding of \$1.2 million in 2016-17, reducing to \$0.323 in 2017-18.)

### *Trends in staff levels*

Staffing costs account for the majority of the Library's budget, with remaining funds largely spent on the collection. The graph below shows the Library's actual FTE figure as at 30 June for each financial year, except for 2016-17 where the figure is at 31 May. The increase in FTE from 2014-15 reflects both: new (capitalised) contract positions in Library Collections and Databases Branch working on digitisation projects; and the provision of additional operational funding from 2014-15 to enable the Library to address capacity gaps in its core services, particularly in Research Branch.



2017 figure is at 31 May

### *Trends in client demand*

To assess impact, these changes in operational funding and staffing need to be seen in the context of trends in the demands on the Library's resources. These may be grouped under three headings:

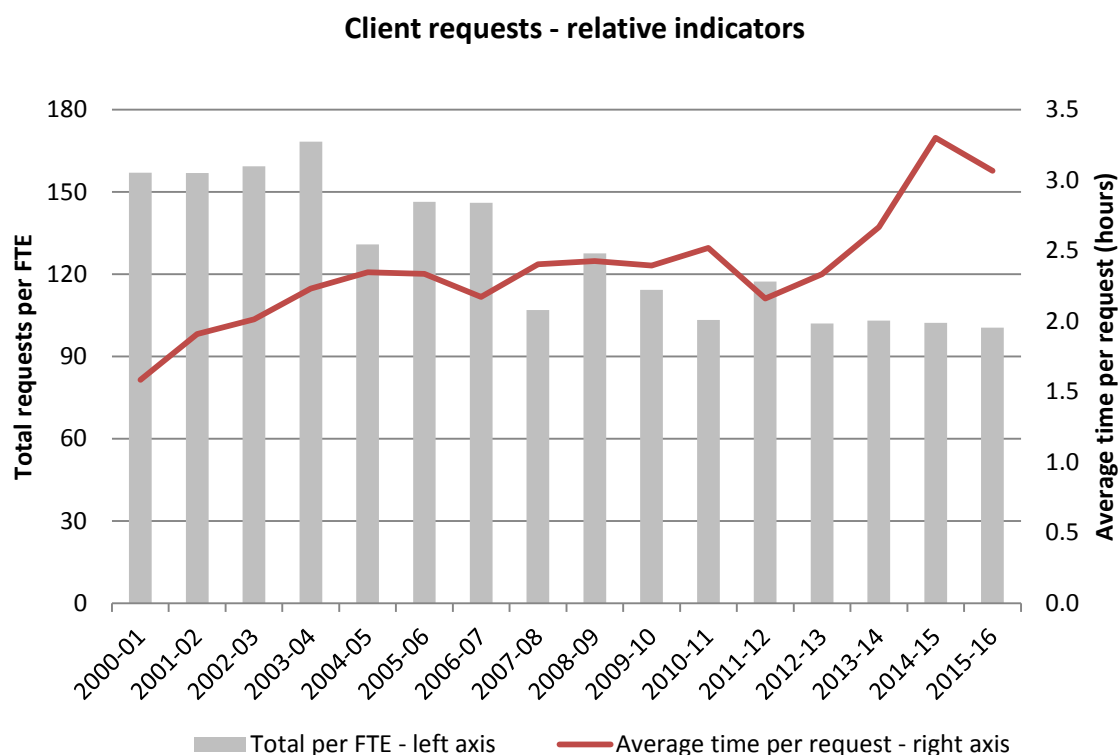
Changing nature of client requests: Over this period, Library data point to a shift in the type of requests from parliamentarians. This reflects in part clients' use of the internet for straightforward queries and also the amount of curated 'self-help' information available via the Library's client service portal. The consequence is that a greater proportion of client requests are now at the more difficult or complex end of the continuum. This is supported

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<sup>1</sup> including staff on leave, secondment and inoperative staff.

by more anecdotal data from Library staff. Research queries are increasingly complex, taking longer to complete and often requiring considerable work across disciplines and sections to answer. There also seems to be a trend towards requests requiring comparative analysis across jurisdictions (within Australia and internationally), and as well as consideration of international law, practices and standards.

This is reflected in Library data that shows an overall decline in the number of completed client requests of 36 per cent per FTE between the financial years 2000–01 and 2015–16. However, while year-to-year outcomes vary, over the same period there has been an increase overall in the average amount of time spent on individual requests. Between 2000–01 and 2015–16, the average time spent on client requests per FTE has almost doubled.



Rising tempo of parliamentary work: while more difficult to quantify, the Library’s work also reflects the rising tempo of the Parliament and its parliamentarians. This is evident in the number of bills introduced and the speed with which they are often debated, as well as the number of committee inquiries. This emerges as a trend towards requests that are both urgent and complex.

Rising costs: although of lesser impact, the cost of the Library’s collections has been increasing at around seven per cent each year, exacerbated by fluctuations in the value of the Australian dollar, both of which affect the Library’s purchasing power.

*Impacts and assessing unmet demand*

These pressures necessarily have had an impact on client services though every effort has been made to minimise this.

The 2015 evaluation of Library service found high levels of satisfaction (93%) with Library services among Senators, Members and their staff. Maintaining such high levels of satisfaction is a significant achievement. However the evaluator also found that behind the positive satisfaction ratings there were 'indications that the impacts of past budget cuts have been felt by all client groups'.<sup>2</sup> Ratings for proactivity, for quality and consistency of service had declined since the 2012 evaluation, and timeliness was also raised as an issue.

In regard to timeliness, in 2011-12 the Library's target was reduced from 95 to 90 per cent for responses to individual client requests in recognition of the reduction in staff numbers.

Unmet demand is difficult to assess but is evident in the constant trade-off between timeliness and quality (or perhaps better expressed as 'thoroughness' or 'depth').

Researchers will wherever possible provide an answer in the time required, but may not have the time to provide an answer which is as comprehensive as the client might wish.

Second, the Library is aware of a degree of 'thinness' in elements of its capability.

Researchers have to cover broader areas of subject matter and cannot necessarily specialise to the same degree as was the case in previous years. (This is also affected by generational change associated with the age profile of the workforce.) Similarly, the absence of a single research specialist on recreation or sick leave can leave a large capability gap.

The combination of both factors has an impact on the capacity of the Library to support parliamentarians through the detailed research needed, for example, to analyse complex legislation or to track funding programs across agencies, or budgets.

Finally, there is a noticeable 'expert effect' in patterns of client demand: when we recruit a new specialist, we tend to see a corresponding increase in the number of client requests on that topic. Unfortunately of course, the reverse is also true: when a particular specialist departs, clients tend to stop asking us about that topic.

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<sup>2</sup> Uncommon Knowledge, Australian Parliamentary Library client service evaluation 2015, p 48.