



Houses of the Oireachtas Service

Opening Statement to the Committee of Public Accounts

12 January 2012

Chairman, thank you.

On my last appearance before this Committee in 2007, I was able to state with confidence that under the Houses of the Oireachtas Commission, the parliamentary services supporting the Houses and their Committees had come a long way, as indeed they had. Now given the current state of public finances, our focus on basic cost control has become far more dominant. The challenges presented are also an opportunity to find ways of maintaining and improving services to Parliament and its Members.

In the briefing document, we have outlined the role of the Commission and the good stewardship in managing the finances and resources. In summary, the conclusion drawn is that our overall expenditure has gone back in real terms to where it was pre-Commission in 2003, with the effect of the Civil Service moratorium having been to claw back almost half of the additional staff resources we gained following the establishment of the Commission. It is also important to point out that we are a comparatively simple organisation expenditure-wise: 92% of our budget in 2011 went on non-discretionary items.

While overall expenditure has been reduced – some externally through the budget cuts by the Minister for Finance in 2010 – it is always measured so as to be consistent with the constitutional obligations of the Houses. In any event, most of the reductions have been made to the administrative area which is exemplified by the fact that the discretionary element of the budget has gone down from 7-9% to 3.8%.

One of the biggest challenges we face is striking the right balance between cost cutting and supporting the Parliament and its Members. Given the progress to date on meeting resource targets set centrally, a strong argument can be made that the Commission and Service have done enough – as to do more runs the serious risk of impairing the functions of Parliament.

Managing “to do better with less” has become a catchcry for achieving efficiencies, in particular under the Croke Park Agreement and we have outlined many examples in our briefing document. Not only has the Service coped with the effects of the moratorium, we are proactively reviewing how we do our work, undertaking a number of Business Process and Value-For-Money Reviews across a range of operational areas.

It should be noted, however, doing more with less is happening at a time of significantly increased outputs in this Dáil – for example, sitting hours increased by 12% and sittings by 30% when you compare the second half of 2011 against the previous two years.

In the Annual Report, a number of international comparisons are made with other Parliaments and while there may be little appetite or indeed scope to provide additional resources, it is worth noting that the resources to Members and Parliament are generally below average.

One of the significant changes made since my last appearance is in respect of the Members' allowances, with the introduction of a single allowance standardised system, including attendance recording and random sample audit for the first time.

Notwithstanding these improvements in transparency, Members' allowances receive much attention and remain a perceived reputational risk for Members. Other jurisdictions have taken more radical measures in terms of how the system is managed and the review of the scheme to take place this year may look into this issue.

The new scheme provided for an independent audit of Members, selected independently on a random basis. The auditors have now reported on the first audit and all was in order with only one minor issue in respect of a small sum for a former Member, which has now been refunded. The report reflects well, not alone on the Members concerned, but on the viability of the scheme itself. The auditors also made some recommendations on various categories under the audit and these will be examined in the context of the review of the scheme.

The challenges outlined in the briefing document are all very important. An equally important event which underpins these challenges is that 2012 sees the end of the triennial cycle and is the year when the Houses of the Oireachtas legislation, which sets the budget for 2013-15, will have to be passed.

In the current climate while the need for an even more efficient and effective Oireachtas Service to support Parliament has become crucial, the need for an effective Parliament is greater than ever in recent history. The Chairman of each House in their capacity as Chairman and Vice-Chairman of the Commission summed it up in the introduction of the Annual Report "We are committed to providing a Parliament fit for purpose in dealing with and overcoming the challenges we, the people of this country face at this point in time..... In these difficult times, parliamentary oversight and scrutiny are now more important than ever".