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Oireachtais
Houses of the
Oireachtas

Communications Strategy 2017-2019

An Open Parliament for the People: informing and engaging the public



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Introduction

This strategy arises from and supports the Strategic Plan of the Houses of the Oireachtas Commission 2016-2018 – *A Parliament for the People*. The purpose of this Communications Strategy is to provide a framework for the institution of parliament and the Houses of the Oireachtas Service to work towards shaping an open and accessible parliament which informs and with which the public can easily engage.

Our intention is to develop further the concept of Open Parliament; to inform and engage with the public and to increase public knowledge and understanding of the work and value of our national parliament. We will continue to seek innovative and interactive ways of engaging with the public and we will promote a ‘digital first’ approach, combined with improved education tools and a proactive media stance. The delivery timeframe for this strategy is by year-end 2019.

The challenges we face

Over the years, the Houses of the Oireachtas have become more open and accessible. The public contact Members of the Dáil and Seanad to air their views and we welcome over 80,000 visitors to the parliament every year. These visitors typically come to meet Members, give evidence to committees, take part in tours or otherwise engage with the parliamentary process. Our social media platforms are well developed and Oireachtas TV is available to 99% of households in Ireland.

We know historically that public views about parliament, its Members and their work vary greatly. There are also mixed perceptions about the role of Members generally and within parliament and about their work and about the role of parliament.

In 2019 and within the life span of this strategy, our national parliament will be celebrating, commemorating and educating people about the work and the value of 100 years of successful parliamentary democracy. We have enjoyed the benefits of a stable parliamentary democracy in Ireland since the formation of an independent Irish parliament in 1919 – something that is often taken for granted.

Previous surveys tend to show average levels of understanding of the actual role of the Members of the Houses of the Oireachtas and of the Oireachtas itself. This could be due to a variety of factors, which would typically include:

- Low awareness in the public mind as to the difference between the role of government and the role of a parliament and the necessary differentiation between the two.
- The adversarial and political nature of parliament.
- A less than benign view of the public on the salaries and allowable expenses of Members, irrespective of any cuts.
- The competing demands brought about by the role of Members as both national legislators and local constituency politicians.
- A narrow focus in parts of the media on the adversarial and political rather than on factual information.

Other factors such as the nature of the party system and the numerical strength of the various parties and groups which are outside the control of parliament may also impinge on public understanding of the role and work of parliament.

Overall, however, Ireland has a vibrant political democracy which is of value to its citizens and gives stability, certainty and lasting benefit to all parts of Irish society. Year after year, the Members of the Houses of the Oireachtas debate and amend the laws affecting all Irish people, they debate and vote for the funding of the State and for projects that matter to Irish citizens; TDs and Senators receive and deal with many hundreds of witnesses before Committees, witnesses who are directly expressing and reflecting the views of a wider Irish society; the Houses of the Oireachtas interact with and inform the Irish people through an ever-increasing use of web and social media; Members continue to be an important point of contact for many people across every constituency and Seanad electorate in Ireland and the Houses comprise the Members voted in by their respective voting public and who serve at the will of that voting public.

Our Vision and Purpose

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An Open Parliament for the People: informing and engaging the public

This Communications Strategy supports the Houses of the Oireachtas Commission's Strategic Plan 2016-2018 and specifically Strategy 3 – "Promote Accessibility and Public Engagement". One of the key goals under that Strategic Plan is to achieve "An Open Parliament that strengthens its engagement with the people" with a desired outcome for *"A public that is well-informed and more engaged with its Parliament"*. This includes supporting the greater use of Irish in the Oireachtas across all platforms. On that basis our vision for this Communications Strategy is:

"An Open Parliament for the People: informing and engaging the public"

This overarching Communications Strategy sets out five supporting strategies to deliver on this outcome:

"A public that is well-informed and more engaged with its Parliament"

Media	Work proactively with print and broadcast media to promote the work of the Houses of the Oireachtas
Broadcasting	Develop Oireachtas TV from a start-up to a fully rounded parliamentary television channel
Web and social media	Build our communications capability through best practice use of web and social media
Education	Educate the next generation of voters on the role and work of the Houses of the Oireachtas
Branding, Marketing and Public events	Promote public understanding through direct engagement with the public

The public has varying needs and differing levels of access to technology so our methods of engagement must reflect that fact. It is our responsibility to use all available technologies to create, contribute to, maintain and protect our national democratic conversation and to keep it in good health.

At the end of this strategy period, we would like the wider public to consider the Oireachtas to be the authentic voice debating matters of interest to citizens and for them to be able to see, hear and comment on that debate as part of a wider democratic process of shaping our national laws and policies. This can only happen if we develop open lines of communication; if we invest in the Oireachtas TV channel and our live web streams as the primary unfiltered coverage of the Houses and, in particular, its committees; if we provide the services and information required and expected of us through our web site; if our social media output is valid and relevant and if our relationship with our media partners is considered reliable and trustworthy.

Media

Work proactively with print and broadcast media to promote the work of the Houses of the Oireachtas

Traditional media

Despite technological changes in the dissemination of news, traditional print and broadcast media will, over the medium term, remain the primary means by which the public receive news and are informed about parliament, politics and public affairs. Traditional media will continue to be one of the key links between the Houses of the Oireachtas and the public.

We will remain proactive in working with traditional media, both national and local, by providing access to the parliament and its activities. We will provide timely and accurate information on the work of the Houses and its Members through clear written content from the Houses generally and its Committees, along with audio and visual records of proceedings. We will robustly engage with the media to promote the work of the Houses of the Oireachtas.

Access

Media access is a basic function of any parliamentary communications strategy, providing a bridge between the parliament and people. We will:

- Review our media access protocols to ensure they are fast and effective.
- Review our filming and interview locations policies consistent with parliamentary and security needs.

Facilities

The vast majority of modern parliaments have a dedicated media facility that accommodates major media events (e.g. report launches, press conferences etc.), together with dedicated interview and broadcasting zones. With this in mind, we will:

- Seek to create a media space within the overall Leinster House complex, comprising a press conference room, adjacent interview portals and an indoor piece-to-camera interview site. This would bring the Irish Parliament complex into line with international standards.
- Continue to offer spokespersons to print and broadcast media who can give timely, informed and accurate information on the relevant issues.

- Provide clear, accessible and relevant information about the Oireachtas, about how parliament works and how it is administered.
- Answer all media queries in a prompt manner and be consistent in the messages we communicate.
- Robustly and promptly challenge inaccurate, misleading, unbalanced or misinformed media coverage of parliament.
- Support and advise all Members in the communication of their parliamentary work to the media.
- Continue our service for the provision of weekly local radio and local newspaper reports.
- Provide the media with access to our audio and visual records of the proceedings, so that they may disseminate and syndicate our content.

Broadcasting

Develop Oireachtas TV from a start-up to a fully rounded parliamentary television channel

Oireachtas TV

We have been broadcasting the proceedings of the Houses of the Oireachtas for over 25 years. This remains our core broadcasting function. In recent years, however, and building on past strategies, the Broadcasting Unit has made great strides, notably with the successful launch of the Oireachtas TV channel in 2014. The success of the channel has led to it becoming available on multiple platforms, including Sky, Virgin Media, Eir, Vodafone and, since June of 2016, on Saorview. This means that Oireachtas TV is now available to 99% of the households in Ireland.

The increased availability of the channel means that it is now necessary to grow it from a start-up to a fully rounded parliamentary television channel. The technical innovations needed to do so will not only give consumers of the channel an enhanced viewing experience, but will lead to an improvement in standards across our core functions – the televising and streaming of all proceedings of the Houses of the Oireachtas.

Content

Given the 24 hour nature of television platforms, one of our key objectives is to provide ancillary programming content to supplement the televising of proceedings. 2016 has been a landmark year for production within the Broadcasting Unit, with in-house content being rolled out, including programming of set-piece parliamentary events, such as the first day of the 32nd Dáil, the election of the Ceann Comhairle by secret ballot, the nomination of the Taoiseach and Budget Day. All of these events are built on the core principle of Open Parliament and bringing our viewers inside the democratic process.

As well as these large scale outside broadcast productions, we have initiated a series of programmes, including Oireachtas TV Debates and Leinster House Historical Talks which have contributed greatly to our schedule. There is huge scope to increase and improve our in-house programming for the upcoming years. We have also begun to support applications to the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland (BAI) Sound and Vision Funding Scheme, which allows us to access the very best talent in the independent production sector in Ireland so that we can begin scheduling bespoke, high-end documentaries and series. Over the period of this strategy, we will develop our programming content, particularly in the lead up to the one hundredth anniversary of 2019, thus contributing to and complementing the formal programme for commemoration.

Programming guides

It is essential that we provide all citizens with easy access to our programmes and to information about the Oireachtas television channel. We are initiating a development of our scheduling process, which will feed into a re-vamped Electronic Programme Guide (EPG). This will be available on all platforms including Saorview. Future features will include record and series link functions on players.

Sign language and subtitling

We have also begun the process of providing more signed and subtitled programmes (including proceedings of the Houses) as an interactive option on the red button.

Facilities and new technologies

To continue such technical innovations, we will need to improve the facilities within the Broadcasting Unit and to invest in our infrastructure and in new technologies.

Archiving of the proceedings

The launch of the new Oireachtas website offers us new opportunities for partnership with our web team. In cooperation with them, we will investigate solutions to allow all users of the website browse the visual archives of the Houses of the Oireachtas with a user-friendly and effective search and play function.

This will proceed as we continue the process of future-proofing this archive, which is the largest project we are currently developing. Safe-guarding this archive on a reliable and cost-effective format is one of our biggest challenges but one we are confident we can achieve within the life of this strategy.

Our broadcasting strategy will comprise the following elements:

- Live outside broadcasts and wrap around programming of all key parliamentary events, in keeping with the Open Parliament ethos.
- Developing a strong schedule of ancillary programming to supplement our schedule, by nurturing in-house talent and utilising the BAI Sound and Vision Scheme to partner with the best independent Irish producers.
- Facilitating greater access for all viewers by developing our EPG and schedule, with record and series link functions and providing signed and subtitled content on the interactive button.

- In partnership with our web team, facilitating access by all users to the visual archive of the Houses of the Oireachtas, whilst continuing to safeguard that archive into the future.
- Improving and refurbishing the technical facilities within the Broadcasting Unit to achieve the goals above.
- Using these technical innovations to enhance our core service – the televising of proceedings.

Web and Social Media

Build our communications capability through best practice use of web and social media

Web and social media are intrinsically and intuitively linked. Eighty-five percent of Irish households have access to the Internet at home and 67% of people in Ireland use the internet every day (CSO 2015). Clearly as every day passes, technology becomes more and more integrated into the everyday lives of Irish citizens. The Internet and social media are now basic communication tools for all organisations, particularly for those seeking to engage actively with their audience. The Houses of the Oireachtas play a pivotal role in the functioning of Ireland's democratic processes. The information we produce and publish underpins the working of democracy in Ireland. Given this fact, we have a responsibility to ensure our information is clearly and speedily made available to all Irish citizens. The Internet and social media tools can help us to communicate effectively with Irish citizens and it is vital that we leverage the benefits they offer right now and into the future.

With this in mind, the Houses of the Oireachtas has a clear and ambitious web and social media strategy. Through it we will seek to implement processes and tools that allow us to genuinely reach out, inform and engage with people about the work of our national parliament and to create value from our data. The strategy is based on six core principles of user-centred design, efficient content management, open data, accessibility and compliance, building our use of social media, ongoing audience engagement and the creation of an Oireachtas "voice". These principles and the key actions to support them are set out below and will come into play as we deliver our new web site in April 2017 and as this strategy unfolds.

User-centred Design

We will implement a user-centred approach to all our web development work to ensure that what we do meets the needs of our audience. Clear information design and visual design will be important aspects of this work. We will:

- Devise and implement an intuitive information architecture (IA) for the Oireachtas.ie website, specifically based on the findings and recommendations of user research, and tested with users. We will continue to involve and consult users in all our web development work as we move forward ensuring users' needs are at the core of our web development work.

Efficient Content Management

We will put a single content management system in place that will allow us to deliver and operate a high quality, parliamentary digital publishing platform. We will:

- Procure/adopt the content management tools and systems that enable us to implement a high quality, parliamentary digital publishing platform. Streamlining content management processes will be a core part of this activity.
- Collaborate with relevant sections across the organisation to ensure multi-disciplinary teams are involved in our web development and content publishing activities.
- Collaborate with relevant sections across the organisation to implement enterprise-wide efficiencies in how regularly-produced parliamentary data can be managed and published on the website in a timely manner.

Open Data

We will strive to publish our day-to-day business data openly by default for others to reuse. Inherent in this will be the requirement to implement a digital first approach with regard to our data. We will:

- Review how our parliamentary information (data) is described and adopt appropriate standards for our various data streams in terms of metadata schema, ontologies, etc.
- Publish and share much of our core parliamentary data in structured, open formats via Application Programming Interfaces (APIs) (e.g., Debates, Bills metadata, Member Profiles) in line with Open Data Initiative. Open licensing will be adopted where possible.
- Encourage the reuse and interrogation of our data by others with the skills and interest to build new, innovative applications that benefit society.
- Collaborate with staff to devise efficiencies in how core parliamentary data can be managed and output (e.g., write-once, reuse many times).

Accessibility and Compliance

We will meet all our obligations with regard to accessibility and Irish language publications on Oireachtas.ie. Inherent in this goal is the need to ensure that Oireachtas.ie becomes a fully responsive, adaptable website. We will:

- Ensure that our website is accessible to all users regardless of their abilities or the tools/platforms they use to engage.
- Comply with all national requirements and recommendations regarding accessibility and language support.

Building our Use of Social Media

Over 67% of Irish people have a *Facebook* account, while 25% are active on *Twitter* (Ipsos MRBI October 2016). Social media has the ability to go beyond the provision of information. It provides an opportunity to nurture the provision of information into genuine understanding of and participation in the political conversation. It contributes towards our efforts to encourage more substantive public engagement.

Social media offers direct access to citizens, unmediated by the media or political parties; more direct access to a younger audience; the ability to react more quickly to news and events; and the opportunity to target more specific issues and audiences. Essentially, social media offers considerable scope in terms of actual citizen participation.

In a fast changing information environment, we need to focus resources on developing our internal capability to harness new technologies. We will:

- Strengthen our social media team.
- Further invest in staff training, making sure that all staff move with the ever-changing digital marketing and social media world.
- Further invest in new technologies to allow a streamlined flow of work, supported by the Oireachtas ICT Unit.

Ongoing Audience Engagement

The majority of online postings by parliaments around the world tend to focus mainly on parliamentary activity. We must continue through social media and other channels to seek as much public engagement as possible as a means of deepening the overall understanding of what parliament is and how the public can get involved.

We will ensure that our website and social media tools become an enabler for all sections of the Houses of the Oireachtas to fulfil their business priorities and to actively engage with our audiences. We will:

- Implement efficiencies in how content published on *www.oireachtas.ie* can be concurrently pushed to Facebook and Twitter. This will allow us to communicate the breadth of activity taking place within the Houses on a particular day.
- Develop a social media policy that looks to leverage the power of Facebook and Twitter to reach traditionally hard-to-reach users.
- Fully commit to utilising the four main social media platforms:
 - ▶ Facebook: publish content, create event notices, live stream, publish photos and video.
 - ▶ Twitter: instant access to Oireachtas news, use as a portal to our content, highlight the services open to the public.
 - ▶ Instagram: highlight the historical and architectural aspects of Leinster House, a softer use of the main stream social media platform.
 - ▶ LinkedIn: publish the business of the Houses and Committees, use for the advertisement of jobs open to the public in conjunction with *www.publicjobs.ie*.

In addition, we will strive to expand our reach by further developing our “plain English” editorial policy and developing the Oireachtas “voice”. Social media tools, such as Facebook and Twitter, present ideal environments to develop our voice on a day-to-day basis. We will endeavour to carry this through to all parliamentary information packaged for public consumption on *Oireachtas.ie*.

We will:

- Develop clear editorial guidelines (including a style guide) to assist with consistent writing standards across the organisation, including writing for web and social media.

Education

Educate the next generation of voters on the role and work of the Houses of the Oireachtas

Informing

Educating the next generation of voters has been a policy of the Houses of the Oireachtas Commission for a number of years and we look forward to continuing and growing our efforts during the lifetime of this strategy. We recognise the need for an increased understanding of the role of elected representatives, the legislative functions of the Oireachtas and ultimately, the benefit of active citizenship and voter participation. With the recent introduction of the new *Politics and Society* subject at Leaving Certificate level, and with the increased level of interest that the 2019 Centenary will bring we believe there is an opportunity to educate the next generation of voters on the role of parliament.

Outreach

Much work has been done in the area of education through the years, including a successful national outreach programme and through our online programme. This bilingual online education programme was launched in 2015 and is available as a free educational resource to teachers, students and others who wish to learn about our parliamentary system. Feedback from more than 100 teachers at the launch of the online resource, www.education.oireachtas.ie, indicated that the programme provided important educational content for use in the classroom. In 2015, our online portal saw almost 3,500 visits and 8,000 page views with visitors spending up to 45 minutes browsing the bilingual content. Over 80% of these visitors were new visitors with the remaining 20% returning. In broadening the provision of Parliamentary education, we must also recognise our role in supporting educators around the country. We will:

- Seek a new dedicated position of Parliamentary Education Officer. He/she will coordinate and implement an action plan to deliver a joined-up, long term effective strategy for delivering education, information and public engagement.
- Through active social media engagement, advertising and strategic partnerships with educational groups, we will promote our education content to students, teachers and interested members of the public.

- Review the outreach programme, where educational facilitators conducted a half-day learning programme in schools around the country, with a view to finding an efficient and viable model that assures value for money.
- Work, with the Superintendent's Section, to improve the overall tour experience for school groups accessing Leinster House.
- Revisit the long term goal of providing a fit-for-purpose educational and visitor space within the Leinster House complex.
- Engage with representative bodies for teachers to examine how we can assist them in their role, directly by initiating tailored tours that explain the history and function of parliament and also the measures which we have taken to assist them in their duty.
- Seek to develop a programme with the Department of Education and the Teaching Council, based in Leinster House, which would count towards the professional development of teachers.

Branding, Marketing and Public events

Promote public understanding through direct engagement with the public

Public events

Public events and the Leinster House visitor experience form a key facet of this Strategy. It is important that we continue to ensure that the Parliament is open to visitors to attend proceedings including committee hearings and take a tour of one of Ireland's most historic and symbolic buildings. We believe that public understanding and trust can be rebuilt through direct engagement. Direct engagement – through outreach, events, social media, a TV channel, a hugely popular visitor experience and an extensive website – will be central to our task of improving public interest and confidence in parliament.

Over the past number of years, the Houses of the Oireachtas Service initiated successful events including Family Day and participation in Culture Night and Open House. The National Bravery Awards, held in conjunction with the Department of Justice, is an annual event that attracts considerable interest from not simply the political media – our usual stakeholders – but from other, non-political outlets and crucially, the wider public.

In 2016, we opened an exhibition of the busts of the 1916 signatories (normally kept in the Dáil chamber) to the public, allowing them to view these important pieces of art work. As we approach commemorations around 2018 (one hundred years of women's suffrage) and 2019 (one hundred years since the first sitting of Dáil Éireann), we are acutely aware of the store of significant historical artefacts and documents connected to the Houses that may be exhibited to the public. We will:

- Continue with our well-publicised public events.
- Seek a dedicated exhibition space within Leinster House.
- Make sure that walk-up tours of the building are adapted to include any exhibitions.

Our public events planning will take into account and may be limited by the planned restoration of Georgian Leinster House in the period to end 2018.

Branding and marketing

The communications service is one of the few external-facing functions within the Oireachtas. It is vital that we protect our corporate identity by managing it carefully and thus helping our identity to grow in value. The Houses of the Oireachtas is associated with two main visual images: Leinster House itself and our unique harp symbol.

Our corporate identity must not be diluted by fragmentation in the form of various colours, names and logos. As we continue to invest in our digital presence, it becomes more important that our branding guidelines be revised in order to ground them in the digital experience. We will:

- Seek a systemic and coordinated commitment to using the correct logo and colours across all parts of the Oireachtas Service, both internal and external. This will allow the Service to continue to project its name and identity across all mediums.
- Revise our branding guidelines and implement them across all areas of the organisation, encompassing both print and digital.
- Explore the possibility of establishing a dedicated in-house Publishing Unit, which will include a Graphic Designer. This would allow the Houses of the Oireachtas Service to ensure that all material, both print and digital, for internal and external use, complies with our branding guidelines.

Measurement

This is a high level strategy document supported by appropriate business unit plans. These, in turn, are reflected in the Houses of the Oireachtas Corporate Business Plan. There are specific deliverables within this strategy which will be monitored and delivered over the life time of the strategy.

In this strategy we are seeking three additional measures which will require additional space within the complex i.e. for media, exhibitions and for educational purposes and we are acutely aware that this must be achieved under the forthcoming accommodation strategy under preparation and on which we will be dependent.

Over the years, we have conducted research in relation to the level of understanding and perceptions held by the public of the Houses of the Oireachtas and its Members and the work done by both. We will continue to actively research and measure sentiment in respect of the desired outcomes set out in this strategy and to take action where necessary on foot of that evidence in keeping with best practice internationally.

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