

Clerk's Report

The 2019-20 financial year was a year of two very different parts. In the first part of the year the Parliamentary Service hosted a significant event at the precinct and another event 1,330 kilometres away.

The Queensland Parliament hosted the 50th Presiding Officers and Clerks' Conference (POCC) of the Australian and Pacific Regions from 9-11 July 2019. Mr Speaker welcomed 73 conference delegates and observers from 22 Australian and Pacific parliaments and from the UK House of Commons to the conference from the Commonwealth of Australia, Australian states and territories, New Zealand, the Autonomous Region of Bougainville, Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, Niue, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, the Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu.

This significant conference was followed by the Parliamentary Service preparing for and delivering, within a record short period of six weeks' notice, a regional sitting of Parliament in Townsville. The very first regional sitting of Parliament had taken place in Townsville in 2002, exactly 17 years earlier. A regional sitting last occurred in Mackay in 2011 and there had been many critical staff changes in the intervening years. Fortunately, as a result of excellent documentation of earlier regional sittings, careful planning and the dedication of staff from a number of areas, the regional parliament was successfully delivered despite the short timeframe.

Concurrent with these significant events, the Property and Facility Services area commenced a \$14m three year Critical Infrastructure Works Program for the 40 year old Parliamentary Annexe building.

This program of work focusses on three key infrastructure categories (fire, mechanical and electrical services). In the first year of the project over 174 aged air conditioning units, installed when the Annexe was first constructed, were replaced.

The Electorate Office team was also very busy with the relocation of 11 electorate offices and the refurbishment of one other during the year. Indeed, since the 2017 redistribution and election there have been 20 relocations and one refurbishment. Approximately 20% of the State's 97 electorate offices have either been relocated or refurbished this Parliament.

For some time it has been the strategy to open up Parliament's dining rooms and functions venues to the general public. The offerings of cooking classes, Chef's table dining experiences, high teas, lunch in the Strangers' Dining Room ('Sometimes Strangers') and spaces for private functions had considerable success and patronage in the early part of the financial year. Indeed, there were a large number of advanced bookings well into 2020.

And then the COVID-19 pandemic arose.

COVID-19 is a public health crisis, but it has had many other collateral effects on society, the workplace, the economy and government. The Parliament, its committees, electorate offices and the precinct were not immune to its effects.

From mid-March 2020, the Parliamentary Service starting putting in place a number of actions to safeguard the welfare of members, staff and visitors. On 12 March 2020, the Speaker approved a COVID-19 response plan. The purpose of the plan was to ensure that a structured and organised approach was adopted to develop, deliver and communicate decisions and strategies about the eventual local outbreak of COVID-19. From 13 March 2020, the Service started to implement remote work for staff not directly servicing the Assembly and its Committees. From 16 March 2020 public access to the precinct was significantly reduced. By 23 March 2020 access to the precinct was limited to pass holders and most staff were working remotely.

On 18 March 2020, advice was provided to Members and electorate staff regarding the general operation of electorate offices, particularly regarding public access to the offices and arrangements for vulnerable staff. By 23 March 2020, the Speaker and I directed that electorate offices be closed to physical access by the public and that constituency enquiries and issues be handled by electorate officers via email or phone, not by personal contact with constituents.

Although many of the Parliamentary Services commercial and public facing activities were curtailed during the period, the Service was keen to fully utilise its full-time staff and retain and support its casual staff. The parliamentary catering services switched its focus from commercial activities to assisting the community. During the lockdown period (and continuing) the parliamentary kitchens

prepared thousands of kilograms of food for those in need, supplying output to both the Wesley Mission and the Scarlett May Foundation. An internal air-tasker program was also established with some full-time and casual staff being tasked to complete tasks such as scanning, archiving and cleaning.

For the Legislative Assembly the pandemic resulted in the suspension of most sittings of the Assembly and its Committees from 19 March 2020 to late May 2020. The Assembly sat for only one day during this period on 22 April 2020 to introduce and pass the Appropriation (COVID-19) Bill 2020 and the COVID-19 Emergency Response Bill 2020. The pandemic meant that the published sitting calendar for the year was cancelled and re-issued. The results being that 2020 has to date had no formal 'budget', no budget week, no estimates process and a lower than average number of sitting days.

In April 2020, the Parliamentary Service began planning for a parliamentary sitting that could be held partly on the precinct and via video-conference (a hybrid model). The Assembly passed legislation and numerous special procedures to enable it to meet in a manner compliant with COVID-19 health directives. Whilst a hybrid model was installed and tested it was never actually utilised.

Whilst the Assembly was rarely sitting and Committees were rarely meeting from March through to June 2020, the demands from constituents for the services of electorate offices increased significantly. As a strategy to assist electorate staff with managing the high volume of COVID-19 related constituent enquiries, on 23 April 2020 the Service established a COVID-19 Research and Call Centre to assist with researching and drafting responses to constituent queries related to COVID-19. The service was operated by staff of the committee office with support from the Parliamentary Library. On request from electorate office staff, draft responses were prepared in response to constituent enquiries using primary source material. The research and call centre was well utilised, responding to 219 requests for assistance during the period. The vast majority of research requests related to movement restrictions, social distancing and business. Due to the easing of restrictions and a decline in demand, the centre ceased to operate on Friday 26 June 2020.

Effectively closing the precinct and electorate office to physical access by the public was unprecedented, but necessary in light of the apprehended health risks that existed in March 2020. However, by 8 May 2020, the low number of COVID-19 infections in Queensland and the actual and foreshadowed relaxation of restrictions, including the likely return of schools on 25 May 2020, meant that the Parliamentary Service commenced a gradual return of precinct staff back to the precinct. By 3 July 2020, all precinct staff had returned to the precinct for work largely as per normal, although within a COVID-19 safe plan that included staggered start and finish times and other safeguards to ensure hygiene and social distancing.

On 8 May 2020, revised restrictions for the operation of electorate offices came into operation which enabled physical public access to electorate offices. By 2 June 2020 electorate office restrictions were reduced again in line with the State-wide easing of restrictions.

As can be seen from the above, the 2019-20 financial year presented numerous challenges to the Parliamentary Service. However, staff demonstrated that the Service can be adaptive and innovative in response to such challenges.



Neil Laurie
Clerk of Parliament