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The Judges' Library, Dublin

Abstract: Joseph Donnelly's article describes the Judges' Library and its role, and some of the issues relating to the library's users, collection, staff activities and use of print and digital material.
Keywords: Courts Service; government; information services; Ireland

The Judges' Library

The Judges' Library is part of the Courts Service, the state's independent body set up to manage the courts and provide support services to the judiciary and to users of the courts. Before Nov 1999, the courts had been administered by the Department of Justice, Equality & Law Reform. The Judges' Library serves judges at all levels of jurisdiction in Ireland, and the staff of the Courts Service, including offices such as the Examiner, the General Solicitor for Minors and Wards of Court, the Official Assignee in Bankruptcy, Probate, and Wards of Court. Unlike some judicial libraries in other countries, it does not cater directly for lawyers or for lay litigants.

The library provides access to subscription-based online databases, as well as a large hard-copy collection. Most of this relates to the laws of Ireland, England and Wales, and the EU, with some material on other countries. There is also a small non-law section with books on areas such as literature, leisure, travel, sociology and management. Items are also obtained on document supply or inter-library loan, through informal co-operation and through formal arrangements with Trinity College Dublin's Information Service and the Institute of Advanced Legal Studies in London. The Judges' Library has also received enormous assistance from libraries in many jurisdictions, notably the UK, Australia and New Zealand. Because all courts are served, publications on all branches of law are of potential interest. Over the past three decades there has been an enormous growth in Irish legal publishing and in recent years the number of judges has increased substantially. However, since the recession, the library budget has been cut drastically, and faces further serious reductions in coming years.

The Library also supplies judges and some offices with "Chambers Collections" – books that are needed on an everyday basis. Apart from a very few core titles, the library does not supply a standard set of works for judges of each court, as some judicial libraries do, but lets the judges request the books of their choice, within the limits of an annual allowance.

Many judicial systems have a number of distinct libraries serving the various courts and catering for different geographical areas. However, apart from chambers collections, and a small, unstaffed, collection in the new Criminal Courts Complex, there is only one Judges' Library. It occupies three quarters of the second floor of Áras Uí Dhálaigh, the redbrick office block beside the Four Courts – the rest of the floor is occupied by the Judicial Research Assistants and Judicial Fellows, with whom the Library works very closely. The library's move to its current location (planning, design of the new space and facilities, and re-organisation of the collection) was documented in an article in issue No.16 of GLINT, the newsletter of the Government Libraries Section of the Library Association of Ireland (LAI)[1]. Providing a service to our many users scattered around the country is achieved through small chambers collections for each judge, by our online subscriptions, and by telephone, email and fax.

The team currently comprises a Librarian, an Assistant Librarian and two support staff. In addition to the usual work necessary to the identification, evaluation, acquisition, organisation, storage, retrieval, presentation and dissemination of appropriate information resources in printed and electronic formats, our role includes offering training and assistance to library users in exploiting the collection, including some overseas visitors on training programmes. Copyright law is an area in which librarians must keep abreast of developments, and meticulous attention is also directed to negotiating terms of licences for electronic resources: content, search and other features, price, termination-formalities, modes of access (individual or shared accounts, IP addresses, etc.), categories of users covered, and the many terms defining activities that are and are not permitted. Staff training is emphasised, and continuing professional development is incorporated through attending relevant conferences or courses and participating actively in professional bodies including BIALL and the LAI (Library Association of Ireland). This includes networking, as well as giving and receiving training sessions and organising more complex events, such as the long-running series of seminars alternately hosted by government librarians in Ireland and Northern Ireland – for an example see a summary of the seminar on Publishing Government e-Information in issue No.17 of GLINT[1].

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Alma Crosby, Frances Keaney and Joe Donnelly in the Judges' Library

The fact that the library serves staff as well as judges (who are not "employees"), and a few others who are not strictly staff, has implications for licensing of online databases, which have to be negotiated so as to ensure, wherever possible and appropriate, that all groups are covered. Many judges are very keen users of electronic sources, with all the advantages of digital content in terms of searching, hyper-linking, copying quotations, space-saving, speed of updates and so forth. Nevertheless, print publications continue to have value. Many readers have a preference for them, especially for extended reading (or indeed a quick look while also listening to counsel). Another advantage of print is the fact that if the purchase is discontinued, at least the previous volumes remain in the collection, whereas with electronic subscriptions the entire content usually disappears. Apart from the fact that some electronic primary sources are not authoritative, a total reliance on digital subscriptions can leave a library very vulnerable if the electronic service ceases or its content changes, if shrinking budgets or rising prices force a cancellation, or if the licence terms become unreasonable. Finally, apart from the general law of copyright, print acquisitions have no contractual terms restricting who may use them or how, as electronic sources have.

Footnote

[1]GLINT is freely available online at the Government Libraries Section of the Library Association of Ireland website http://www2.libraryassociation.ie/sections-and-groups/government-libraries-section/glint-newsletter/

Biography

Joseph Donnelly completed a law degree in Trinity College Dublin and qualified in librarianship in University College Dublin (UCD). He is Librarian in The Judges' Library, and previously worked in the Libraries of The Linguistics Institute, Dublin Public Libraries, and UCD. He lectured and taught for several years in UCD's Department of Library & Information Studies. He is also actively involved in the Library Association of Ireland.

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