**Parliament for Researchers – how to engage with the UK Parliament**

**Online training session, 19th November 2020: transcript**

This training session was delivered by the UK Parliament’s Knowledge Exchange Unit. The main presenter is Naomi Saint, Knowledge Exchange Manager, UK Parliament. A recording of the session, the training slides, useful links and resources, plus other online training sessions from UK Parliament’s Knowledge Exchange Unit can be accessed through this link: <https://www.parliament.uk/get-involved/research-impact-at-the-uk-parliament/training-and-events/online-training-for-researchers/>

“Welcome, thank you so much for joining us this morning for Parliament for Researchers, our online training session today. I'm Naomi. I'm one of the Knowledge Exchange Managers here at Parliament. I'm part of the Knowledge Exchange Unit here at the UK Parliament. The role of the Knowledge Exchange Unit is to support and strengthen the exchange of information and expertise between Parliament and the research community. So we do that in a number of different ways. We run training, as you know. We provide lots of online resources.  We promote opportunities for researchers to work with Parliament. We run some academic fellowships. And really importantly, we are a point of contact for anyone from the research sector who would like to know more about and engage with Parliament.

OK, let’s get straight into it then. This is what I'm planning for us to cover today. We are going to be talking about what is Parliament, little bit of information about Parliament and Government and the devolved administrations. Then we're going to dive into who uses research at Parliament. We’ll talk about select committees, about Libraries, Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology, All Party Parliamentary Groups, MPS and Peers as well. And we will end by making sure you know what resources and support there is for you to work with Parliament.

So let's start with what is Parliament? Just a few basics for you. Parliament’s made up of the House of Commons, the House of Lords - and the Monarch is also a formal part of Parliament. So the House of Commons is where our MPs sit. The House of Lords is mainly appointed, and full of Peers, or Members of the House of Lords, from many different backgrounds, whether that's medicine, law, politics, charity work, local government, business, etc. And the monarch is a formal part of Parliament. She signs off every law that is passed, so she gives it Royal Assent. And she opens Parliament each year as well at State Opening. Her role is mainly ceremonial. So for the purposes of this morning and talking about how your research feeds into Parliament, she is not going to be your first port of call and we will leave her respectfully aside for the rest of the session and talk about the Commons and the Lords.

Let's talk about what Parliament does. So what does Parliament do? Represents the people. It's where our MPs go to represent the constituencies or the areas for which they have been elected. Checks and challenges the work of Government; scrutiny. So a lot of what we talk about this morning will be the scrutiny processes by which Parliament holds the Government. to account. Makes and changes laws; legislation. We're not going to talk too much about legislation today, but if you do have questions about the legislative process, please do get in touch with us and we can send you more information and talk you through how research feeds into legislation. Debates the important issues of the day, so MPs and Members of the House of Lords can raise a debate in Parliament and get a response from the Government. And checks and approves government spending, so the Government needs to get tax and budget proposals approved by Parliament before those can be enacted.

It's a good moment to just pause and think about what is the UK Government. Here is a very carefully worded sentence. It's the party or parties who can command the confidence of the House of Commons who form the Government. So it's all about that word “confidence”. The government needs to demonstrate that they have the confidence of a majority of our elected representatives. And that is what gives them the power or the mandate to be in Government. So that is the theory of it. It usually translates into having a majority of MPs in the House of Commons or being able to win votes in the House of Commons. And that is how the Government demonstrates they have the confidence of our elected representatives.

What does the Government do? Run public departments, so Government departments such as the Home Office, Department of Health and Social Care, Department for Work and Pensions, etc. And also public services like the NHS, of course. Proposes new laws to Parliament. And they are accountable to Parliament.

So this is just another way to look at it, the fact that Parliament and Government are not the same thing. Parliament is Westminster. It is all MPs, all Members of the House of Lords and the Monarch. Government is Whitehall - it’s just down the road.  It's some MPs, some Members of the House of Lords who've been chosen by the Prime Minister to be Ministers, to run government departments, decide on policies and spending for those government departments. And they are accountable back to Parliament. So they need to come to Parliament to explain and justify their decisions and their spending.

You might think I'm over egging this point a little bit of the difference between Parliament and Government, but it's really important for you as a researcher to understand, I think, the distinction between these institutions. Because you can work with both and one at a time, or both together, perhaps, but you might have a different hat on depending on which side of this slide you're working with. So if you are getting involved in the development of a new policy, if you are sitting on a working group for a government department, if you are looking at the practicalities of how a policy is being implemented, if perhaps you are looking at the proposal for a new piece of legislation. That's probably all working with Government. If you are looking at challenging the Government on something, looking at how is a policy actually working? Is it working? If you are looking at a piece of legislation that’s on its journey towards becoming a law, that is all going to be working with Parliament. So I think you could probably see that you might just have a different approach or a different role depending on if you're working with Government or Parliament.

So obviously we have a devolved context in the UK. In Northern Ireland we have the Northern Ireland Executive and the Northern Ireland Assembly. In Scotland we have the Scottish Government and the Scottish Parliament and in Wales we have the Welsh Government and Senedd Cymru, or the Welsh Parliament. So if you live or work in one of those devolved areas, you have an extra layer of representation and decision making between any more local government and the UK Parliament. So for example in Wales you have a member of the Senedd, you have members of the Scottish Parliament for areas in Scotland, etc. So some policy areas are devolved to those devolved administrations, and they tend to be things that can be regulated on or decided on more locally. So things like education, health, justice, agriculture, language, those kind of issues. And then there are some policy areas that are reserved to Westminster, and they tend to be things that affect the country as a whole, such as defence or foreign policy.

So I'm sure you've been sending in a lot of questions as I've been talking. We are going to go across to Laura to see if she can answer some of them. Laura, you've got a few minutes. Over to you.”

“Hello, thank you so much Naomi. OK so a couple of questions that we've had in so far. A question just around how you can find out a little bit more if there's any research services that support the work of the devolved legislatures. So yes, you can. They each have. So in Scotland for the Scottish Parliament, there's the Scottish Parliament Information Centre or SPICe. In the Welsh Parliament there’s Senedd Research, and in the Northern Ireland Assembly there's RAISE, so the Research and Information Service. And those are research services which support those devolved legislatures with research and information. And they all have really good websites where you can go and find out more. And that is all the questions we've had for now, so I'll pass back over to you Naomi.”

“Thank you so much, Laura. So now you've seen another face, you know that Laura is there answering your questions.

For now, we're going to dive back into who uses research in the UK Parliament. So a table has appeared on your screens which takes you through the different parts of Parliament that use research. We've got House of Commons select committees, House of Lords select committees, and some joint select committees as well, which have MPs and Members of the House of Lords sitting on them. Parts of the legislative process use research. The House of Commons Library and the House of Lords Library, and POST, which is the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology. So you have obviously spotted that some things are in green, meaning it's a House of Commons service. Some things are in red, meaning it's a House of Lords service, and then there are some purple boxes there as well, and those services are bicameral. That means that they work for and support both Houses of Parliament. So I'm going to give you a whistle stop tour through these. I suppose you could call them the more formal sides or processes at Parliament who use research.

But this floating box down the bottom is the more informal or political side of who uses research at Parliament . So we've got individual MPs and their researchers - a confusing job title, researchers for MPs are members of staff who work for that MP and support them to do their parliamentary work. Individual Peers and their researchers, again members of staff who work for those Members of the House of Lords. And All Party Parliamentary Groups or APPGs. And I'm going to tell you about those later in the session as well.

But for now I'm going to take you through these different parts of Parliament, how they use research and some tips on how you as a researcher can feed your research into these parts of Parliament.

We're going to start with select committees. You might have seen these on the TV. You might have attended some. You might never have heard of them before. So select committees; the role of them is to conduct inquiries into different aspects of the Government's work and produce reports which include recommendations for Government - how can Government change or improve what they are doing in a certain area. In the House of Commons there are departmental select committees, so there is a select committee for every Government department. There is an Education Select Committee, there is a Health and Social Care Select Committee, there is a Foreign Affairs Select Committee, etc. And then there are some extra ones as well, such as the Environmental Audit Committee which looks at the Government's environmental impact across all Departments. In the House of Lords, the committees are more cross cutting. So for example, there is a Science and Technology Committee in the House of Lords, there is a Constitution Committee, etc.

The way that these committees work is that they will decide on an aspect of the Government’s work that they would like to inquire into, and they will put out a call for evidence. Anyone can submit evidence to these inquiries. It's worth just pausing on the word “evidence” here, because it doesn't mean evidence as you might mean it as a researcher.  It doesn't mean evidence as we might use it in a court of law. Evidence for a select committee is any information submitted to the committee in response to an inquiry, in response to a call for evidence. So it could be a paper written by one or more researchers on a particular topic. It could be a report from a charity working in a particular area. It could be an email from an individual about their lived experience of a particular topic. It could be a submission from a lobbying company or from a business working in that particular area.  All of these are counted as evidence and they allow the committee to build up a picture of what is happening in that area on the ground.

So a lot of evidence is written, and then there are also oral evidence sessions which happen. You will see the members of the committee sitting in a horseshoe table and then the witnesses sitting on a straight table at the front answering questions from that committee. Another interesting aspect about select committees is that they often employ subject specialists to come and work with the committee as a specialist adviser. Sometimes these are on a permanent basis and sometimes it's just a short term contract for a particular inquiry. Often these specialists are academics or they are expert practitioners, and the point of that role is to make sure the committee is asking the right questions, make sure they're reaching the right people, make sure the evidence is looked at with an expert eye, make sure that the scope of the inquiry is correct. So it's a really interesting role, and it's often academics who are conducting that role.

OK, so how do you get involved with select committees? Here are some tips. The first thing to do, I would say, is to have a look at the list of select committees and follow any committees that you're interested in. If you're on Twitter, you can follow them on Twitter, or you can sign up for email alerts via the Parliament website so that then you will be notified every time there is a new inquiry from that committee, every time there's an opportunity to submit some evidence.

If you find relevant inquiries for your research area, you can submit some written evidence answering the questions that that committee has asked. You don't have to answer all the questions, but if you can answer one or more questions, then it's really worth submitting some evidence and you never know, that might lead to an invitation to come and give some oral evidence. There's not a hierarchy that oral evidence is better than written evidence. Written evidence is incredibly useful. Oral evidence allows the committee to explore the issues a bit further.

If you see any opportunities to be a special adviser, then it's a really fascinating role. We know lots of researchers who’ve done it and have really found it rewarding. And if you are interested, you can offer to host a visit for a select committee. Wouldn't be a physical visit at the moment, but often in normal times, select committees would go on visits. Or you could offer to give a private briefing, or perhaps set up a round table for a committee. If you've got a research centre or a lab or really interesting group of experts at your institution who could really speak to something the committee is working on, then by all means get in touch with the committee and offer to offer them, to host something a bit more informal - a briefing or round table or a visit for them.

We’re going to carry on to look at some other parts of Parliament that use research now and we're going to take a look at the House of Commons and House of Lords Libraries. So these are physical libraries in both the House of Commons and the House of Lords where you can borrow books, but actually their main purpose is to be an information and briefing service for MPs, Members of the House of Lords, committees, staff who work at Parliament. So they produce a really wide range of briefing material. If you're interested, you can have a look at dedicated websites. The House of Commons Library has a website, the House of Lords Library has a website where they publish a huge amount of the material that they have available.

An MP or a member of the House of Lords can contact the relevant Library and ask a question, ask for a briefing on a particular topic, so the Commons and Lords Library spend a lot of their time responding to questions from Members. And that could be anything from “can I have the unemployment numbers for my constituency?” “I'm about to go into a debate on fracking. Can you give me the latest research evidence around that?” “I'm looking at some legislation on animal cruelty. What are the current regulations on that?” Those are just some random examples I've made up to give you a sense of the really wide range of questions that could be thrown at these briefing services.

But they also produce, kind of, more general briefings that can be used by any MP, any Member of the House of Lords from any party on particular business, that's happening in Parliament right now. For pieces of legislation that are going through Parliament there will be a briefing from the House of Commons Library on those. Debates that are coming up in the House of Lords or the House of Commons, there will be a kind of debate pack of briefing information available from the Libraries.

The Commons Library has about 80 subject specialists working there who produce briefings on their particular subject area. The Lords Library, the staff there are a bit more generalist in terms of pulling briefings together. As I said, the purpose of the Libraries is really to be reactive and responsive to questions from Members. What is happening right now in Parliament? What is happening in current affairs right now that MPs and Lords are going to need to be scrutinizing? What do they need briefing on at the moment?

So it would be great if they were aware of your research and using your research in this briefing material they produce. You can introduce yourself to the libraries by contacting this email address – papers@parliament.uk. You can put this is for the attention of a particular subject specialist if you want to. No more than about 250 words, just “this is who I am, this is my research area. I'd be very pleased to tell you more or help out with briefings in the future.” So we've got the House of Commons and House of Lords Libraries.

We also have POST, which is the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology. POST has four sections, one of which is Social Science. There's also Energy and Environment, Digital Science and IT, and Biological Science and Health. So POST covers a really wide range of areas and it works in a really interdisciplinary way.  I would say POST is the closest bridge between research and Parliament, and the aim of POST is to make sure the best available research evidence is feeding in to Parliament.  And they do this in a number of different ways.

One of the main products of POST is something called a POSTnote. This is a four page briefing on a particular topic and it's a bit more horizon scanning than the work of the Commons and Lords Libraries. It's looking at what are the next big detailed topics that are going to be coming across the parliamentary agenda in the next year or so, and what are MPS and Peers going to need a really robust evidence synthesis or evidence briefing on in the next year or so. These POSTnotes take about three months to produce. They’re based on a literature review, interviews with 20 to 30 stakeholders and they are peer reviewed before publication as well, so they are impartial pretty meaty, evidence briefings for MPs and Lords.

POST is also reactive to what's happening right now by publishing a lot of POSTbriefs, which is advice and evidence syntheses on particular topics. There is a huge amount of material from POST around COVID-19 on the POST website at the moment, if you're interested in having a look at topical material from POST.

POST also run events which bring together MPs, Members of the House of Lords, experts, stakeholders.  There's a series around migration happening at the moment, for example, from POST. It's where we're based, so lots of knowledge exchange with the research sector from POST as well.

And finally, POST run academic fellowships. So there is a whole programme of PhD fellowships for PhD students to come and work with POST or with another team at Parliament via POST, for three months, which is a really interesting opportunity. They’re funded by various research councils and other funders as well.

So how do you get involved with POST? I would really recommend signing up to the POST mailing list, or if you're on Twitter, follow POST on Twitter. This means that when POST announces the next topics that they're going to be writing briefings on, you'll get that alert and you can just have a look and see whether it's something that you have evidence that could feed into, or whether you'd like to contribute to that POSTnote, that briefing.

If you do see a POSTnote being written that you think would be relevant to you, it will always have the name of the author attached to the title of that, or you can get in touch with any of the POST team and they'll put you in touch with the right person and you can offer to contribute, either by perhaps saying you’re happy to be interviewed, perhaps just sending in a bit of evidence that you have, or you could peer review it before it's published as well. So there's a few different ways to get involved with the production of these research briefings. If you want to propose a topic for a POSTnote, if you think there is an issue which needs one of these four page briefings being written on it in the next year or so, then get in touch with the POST team and suggest that as a topic and that will inform the thinking of the staff at POST when they are deciding on what issues to put before their Board to decide on what they are writing about.

And if you see any events coming up that would be of interest for you to attend to get information and potentially to virtually meet MPs and Peers and other stakeholders, then please do attend those events. And of course, apply for a fellowship. If you see a PhD or an academic fellowship beyond PhD, an opportunity that is relevant to you, then we’d really welcome applications, and there's plenty of information about those on the POST website.

I'm throwing lots of information at you. I'm sure you remember back to those slides where there was a big box at the top and then a floating box at the bottom, which was that more informal or political side of who uses research at Parliament. I just want to give you a couple of bits of information about those more political side of who uses research, and then we're going to go back over to Laura for some more questions being answered.

So APPGs, All Party Parliamentary Groups. These are informal groups of MPs and Members of the House of Lords, set up by the Members, for those Members.  There's one for nearly every country in the world, and there is a huge range of subject groups, from asthma to veterans. Really worth having a look at the A-Z list of APPGs to get a sense of the scope of them. If you'd like an analogy, APPGs to Parliament are a little bit like student societies to a university. So they’re set up by the Members for the Members on whatever topics those Members would like to have a group about.

The groups are all different because they are run informally by Members. So some of them meet very regularly - they hold events, they do a huge amount of campaigning work about particular topics, they hold inquiries, they produce reports. Some of them are more informal, and don't meet as often as that. The point of these groups is to allow MPs and Peers to develop their knowledge about a particular topic, meet other members who are interested, and show that they are interested in that particular topic as well.

There are two ways I'd suggest that you can use APPGs as a researcher. One of them is to take a look at the A-Z list of APPGs.  So take a look at the list of APPGs. See if you can identify one or two that are of relevance to your own research area and get in touch with them. Ask if you can brief them on your research. Ask if there are any activities going on that you can contribute to. Ask if you can join their mailing list if they have one, that kind of thing. The other way you can use them is if you've identified a group on a topic relevant to your research expertise, have a look at the members of that group. That will tell you MPs and Members of the House of Lords who are potentially interested in the topic on which you research. And you can get in touch with them directly and say “I know you are a member of this APPG, therefore would you be interested in having a look at my research or working with me on something”.

So if you do get in touch with an individual MP or Member of the House of Lords, what could they do? I just want to give you a sense of the different tools that MPs and Lords have to raise issues and conduct business at Parliament. So the first thing is Parliamentary Questions. MPs and Lords can ask a question to the Government. It could be an oral question in the Chamber or it could be a written question asking for information on a particular topic from the Government - challenging the Government, asking the Government when something's happening or why something isn't happening. Debates are also another tool for MPs and Lords. They can raise an issue for a debate - a chance for a more extended conversation with a Government minister about a particular topic. MPs and Lords are often conducting legislative work, particularly Members of the House of Lords. Of course they might be on a select committee as well, so conducting select committee work. Always worth looking at who the members of a relevant select committee are, so you've got a sense of which MPs might have an added interest in a particular topic. And Early Day Motions are a kind of informal way for MPs to show their opinion on a particular topic.

I'm sure you've been asking loads of questions, so we're going to go over to Laura to see if she can answer any of them in three or four minutes. So, Laura, over to you.”

“Hello Naomi, thank you very much and thank you for all the fantastic questions we've had. I'm just going to cover as many as I can now.  So the first one - is all evidence to a select committee considered and published? So yes, all evidence to a select committee is considered and yes, in almost all cases it is published with your name and your organisation name as well. However, if you would like to make an anonymous or confidential submission, you can request that of the committee and they will consider that. So I hope that answers your question about select committees publishing evidence.

We had another really good question, about select committee evidence, which was - do you have any examples to show us of what form evidence might take, that's been submitted to a committee? So just referring back to the last answer, yes, you can see what's been submitted to different committee inquiries online, so that's a really good way to kind of familiarize yourself with the sorts of evidence that is submitted to committees for their inquiries.  However we also have put together some guides on this in terms of putting together evidence for select committee inquiries in the House of Lords, and also in the House of Commons as well, and that kind of gives best practice on suggested length, format and key things to consider.

We also had a great question around how you can find the select committee that you'd like to find out more about on Twitter. Not all of the select committees have Twitter accounts, but many of them do. So I think the best way to find it if it doesn't show up on a quick Twitter search, is a search for Googling the name of the Committee, and the word “Twitter”, and hopefully that will bring that up for you.

And finally a great question about the Library – so how do we find out who the subject specialists in the Library are, and what their specialisms are? So I think a really good way of doing this is to look through the briefings that have been published on the Library websites and if you look for briefings in the area in which you are interested the Library authors or specialist will be listed on the briefing itself so you'll be able to see who wrote that briefing and therefore who the relevant specialist is. So thank you for your questions and back over to you Naomi.”

“Thank you so much Laura. Loads of information in a really succinct way, so thank you. So we've got 5 minutes left.

I wanted to leave you with a bit of a summary of the key points about getting involved that we've talked about today, and also where you can find more support and more resources after this session. So first of all getting involved with select committees – here are your top tips. Look out for relevant select committee inquiries. How are you going to find them? You can follow select committees on Twitter if you're on Twitter, and Laura's just given you a little bit of advice on how to find their Twitter feeds. If you're not on Twitter or if you prefer, you can sign up for email alerts on the Parliament website on issues that you're interested in, and that will make sure that when there is a new select committee inquiry on a particular topic, it lands on your Twitter feed, it lands in your inbox, and you can have a quick look and see if it's something that you want to respond to, and if you do, you can submit evidence. And again we have got some advice about how to submit written evidence. You could also offer to host a visit or a briefing for a select committee. As I mentioned earlier, if there's a topic they are inquiring into and you feel you or your institution has got some really good input to give them, get in touch with the clerk of the committee and offer to host a visit or a briefing.

If you'd like to offer your expertise to the Commons and Lords Libraries, remember they are providing that kind of reactive advice and reactive briefings to MPs and Members of the House of Lords to the questions they're asking, to what's going on in Parliament this week and next week, to what's going on in current affairs. If you'd like to offer your expertise to those kind of briefings you've got that papers@parliament.uk email address to send a quick intro to.

You can work with POST - it’s a really good way to dip your toe into the water of working with Parliament, because POST is a really close link between research and Parliament. If there is a briefing that POST is writing a POSTnote that you feel you could contribute to, then just get in touch with the author and ask how to be involved. If you'd like to suggest a topic for POST to write a research briefing on, then again you just get in touch with POST and suggest that, and it will be passed to the relevant colleague at POST there.  And if you see any fellowship opportunities coming from POST, that's for PhD students and there’s also a few for academics beyond PhD. If you see fellowship opportunities coming out of POST, it's a fab opportunity. Please do apply if it's something you're interested in.

And finally, you could develop relationships with some individual members – some individual MPs and Members of the House of Lords. How are you going to find them? Take a look at the list of All Party Parliamentary Groups. Remember, there's lots of subject groups, there’s groups for lots of different countries around the world. If you can identify any APPGs relevant to your research, get in touch with that group asking how to be involved or have a look at the members of that group to give you an idea of which MPs, which Members of the House of Lords might be interested in your research.  So those are your top tips for getting involved with Parliament.

Might feel like we've thrown a lot of information that you in 45 minutes and it feels a little bit overwhelming. Please don't worry, you don't have to do this by yourself. There is a lot of information and lots of online resources on our web hub for researchers, the address of which is on your screen now - parliament.uk/research-impact. That link will take you to our pages about why get involved with Parliament, how to do it, how to get in touch with different parts of Parliament, some how to guides including written evidence for select committees and writing a policy briefing and lots of things like that. And some stories from researchers who've done it and how they did it. So really worth exploring those pages if you haven't already.

If you are on Twitter, please follow us on @UKParl\_Research. That is me and Laura and Sarah sitting behind that Twitter feed, and we put on there every opportunity we can find for you as a researcher to work with Parliament - whether that's a select committee inquiry, a job as a special adviser, an event, some training, useful resources, whatever we think will help you to work with Parliament goes onto that Twitter feed.  And of course you've got us here - myself and Laura and Sarah as your Knowledge Exchange Unit to give you advice and to work with you and your institution to get that research into Parliament. You can reach us on keu - Knowledge Exchange Unit - keu@parliament.uk, so please feel free to get in touch with us if you have more questions or you'd like some more advice.

Thank you so much for joining us today and I hope that you found it useful.”