**Parliament for Researchers – how to work with select committees**

**Online training session, 25th November 2020: transcript**

This training session was delivered by the UK Parliament’s Knowledge Exchange Unit. The presenter is Naomi Saint, Knowledge Exchange Manager, UK Parliament and the expert speaker is David Slater, Clerk of the Liaison Select Committee, House of Commons. 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/>

“So welcome to all of you joining us this afternoon for Parliament for Researchers - how to work with select committees. My name is Naomi. I am 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. We do that in a number of different ways. We run training, as you know, around how to work with Parliament as a researcher. We have plenty of online resources on those topics as well. We promote opportunities for researchers to work with Parliament, whether through our Twitter feed or through other networks that we have. We run some academic fellowships. And really importantly, we are a point of contact for anyone from the research community who would like to work with Parliament.

Joining us today, I'm really pleased to say that we've got David Slater who is Clerk of the Liaison Select Committee in the House of Commons, who's going to be sharing his expertise and experience around how you as a researcher can work with select committees.

This is what will be going through with you this afternoon, I'm just going to give a very quick rehash of Parliament and Government, and then I'm going to pass you over to our expert, David Slater who's going to take you through what are select committees, a bit on how they work, some tips on getting involved and also talk you through how to give good evidence to select committees. And we’ll leave you with where to find more resources and where to get more support. Hope that sounds what like what you signed up for.

Just to start with I just wanted to reiterate this Parliament and Government split to you before we get started on to select committees and that is because select committees are really one of the main ways that Parliament scrutinizes the work of Government. And that's why I thought it was really important for everyone to have that distinction in their head at the start of this session. So what is Parliament? We’ll just remind ourselves, Parliament is the House of Commons, our MPs, the House of Lords, Peers, and the Monarch as well. The role of Parliament is to hold Government to account, to make and pass laws, to enable the Government to raise and spend money.

And what is Government? It’s of course not the same as Parliament, it's different. It’s in a different place, it's in Whitehall rather than in Westminster. And Government is just some MPs, some Members of the House of Lords who’ve been chosen by the Prime Minister to be Ministers, to run Government departments, to run public services, and they are accountable back to Parliament.

So now I've refreshed your minds on what Parliament and Government are, I'm really pleased to introduce you to David. David, as I said, is Clerk of the Liaison Committee in the House of Commons at the moment. And I'm going to hand over to him to take us through what select committees are and some information on how you as a researcher get involved. David, thank you so much for joining us today and it's over to you.”

“Thanks very much Naomi and hello everybody. So what are select committees? So select committees are cross party committees of backbench MPs or Peers. So backbench means that they aren't from the Government and they don't lead for the main opposition party either. They conduct inquiries and they produced reports on a range of subject matters, so they might be the conduct of Government. It might be financial matters. It might be a policy area. It might be a matter of public controversy at the particular time. And their purpose is to hold Government to account, to scrutinize Government, to see if Government policies are working, and to make recommendations on what Government might do better.

The main way they operate is to invite written and oral evidence from witnesses and we'll talk more about what we mean by evidence in a little while. And as researchers the main way that you will probably interact with select committees is by submitting evidence. The other main way that researchers often interact with committees is as specialist advisors. So committees have their own staff, but sometimes they employ external experts as specialists in a particular field. So House of Commons select committees. So the House of Commons Committee system is primarily made up of committees shadowing each Government department, so there is a Treasury Select Committee, an Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Select Committee, Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee, and so on, for every Government department.

And their role is to scrutinize the expenditure, so the money, the policy and the way those departments are run. There are also some cross cutting committees, such as the Environmental Audit Committee that looks at environmental policy and sustainable development across the whole of Government, or the Public Accounts Committee that looks at the value for money of Government expenditure again across the whole of Government.

The members of House of Commons select committees are, as I say, backbench MPs. The chair of those committees since 2010 have been elected by the House of Commons as a whole on a cross party basis. The members of those committees are elected internally by their political parties. And the overall balance of the committees reflects the balance of the parties in the House. So you would expect a Government majority and a representation from the second and third opposition parties. And committees are staffed by small team of staff. They’re led by a clerk, and they also have policy specialists and administrative staff.

In the House of Lords, the select committee system is much more cross cutting, so their major committees cut across different policy areas, looking across departmental boundaries. So the Science and Technology Committee, the Economic Affairs Committee, Communications and Digital Committee, European Union Committee, and so forth. The Lords are also set up ad hoc committees that exist for a finite period of time, so most committees last from one election to another. Ad hoc committees look at particular issue and then that's the end of their work, so they have committees on, for example, COVID-19, Democracy and Digital Technologies. And sometimes you'll get ad hoc committees set up between both Houses of Parliament to look at draft legislation, draft bills, draft laws. Again, as in the Commons, the members are backbench Peers. The chairs in the Lords are not elected by the House as a whole, but they have a very similar staffing structure to the Commons.

So the key thing for you as researchers if you want to interact with select committees, is how do they go about doing their work? Why might you want to get involved? So why might you want to get involved? Well, if a select committee is looking into a policy area that relates to your research, you might want to influence the committee's findings. You may have findings that will help them reach good policy recommendations. So this is an outline of how most committees conduct their inquiries, and I think it's important to say at the outset that the time scale that this process can take can vary very wildly. This entire process can take place in a couple of weeks, if it's a high profile issue of immediate public concern, or it can take place across months, or even in some cases years, if it's an issue which requires much deeper study over time.

But the broad process is that the committee chooses its inquiries, and it has complete reign to choose whatever inquiry it wants within its remit. And it announces a call for evidence. And this is basically a series of questions to the outside world, inviting views on issues that the committee feels are particularly important to their inquiry. So, for example, an inquiry into online, regulation of online companies might ask questions about how do we prevent harmful speech online, it might ask questions about how do we increase access to online facilities for people who have poor access to broadband, for example. There's a deadline to respond to that, in response to that call for evidence people submit written evidence, and we’ll talk more about that in a bit.

Then the committee will generally move on to take oral evidence, that's hearings. And if you’ve come across select committees before, that's probably what you think of. You think of the Prime Minister appearing before the committee I work for, the Liaison Committee, or Mike Ashley appearing before the Business Committee, or the Chancellor before the Treasury Committee. That's probably the first thing you think of, hearings with Members asking questions in a Q&A format of what we call witnesses.

Committees sometimes undertake visits. At the moment, obviously, that's somewhat impractical, but they may also undertake visits to see areas that are relevant to what they're looking at, and sometimes they will commission relevant research.

Once they've taken all the evidence they want, they will talk about their conclusions. They will often draft and agree and publish a report setting out recommendations to Government, or they may decide to continue the issue through correspondence or decide to take the work forward in another way. If they've published a report, the Government has two months in which they are obliged to respond to that report and respond to the recommendations made in it.

That may not be the end of the process. The committee might apply for a debate in whichever House of Parliament they are in, on their report. They might decide to do follow up correspondence. They might decide to do follow up reports. But that overall is the broad outline of an inquiry and for you as researchers the key places to get involved; primarily the written evidence stage, potentially leading to the oral evidence stage.

So how might you know what committees are up to? So all committees have a Twitter account and they will announce the inquiries they're working on. If they're looking for specialist advisors, if they're calling for written evidence, if they're holding evidence sessions, they will announce those things through their Twitter account. They will also announce them through email alerts on the parliamentary website and later on in the session we’ll be talking about how to find relevant committees on the website.

I've mentioned submitting evidence. I'll go back to that again shortly after the first round of questions, and I've mentioned applying to be a specialist adviser. So specialist advisors are there, not full time roles, so they are flexible roles designed to be done around other commitments. And for the most part special advisers tend to be academics or sometimes practitioners or sometimes retired civil servants in a field. And another option is to host a visit for a committee, if you're working in an area where seeing the research being done up close is really valuable.

So what's in it for you and what's in it for them? So what does academic research and researchers’ output provide to committees? Well, expertise is clearly the first aspect. We know researchers have a depth of knowledge into the issues that committees are looking at that is difficult to find elsewhere, outside academic institutions. The second is objectivity. So one of the really valuable things for good academic evidence is taking a step back from the various interest groups that might be involved in an inquiry and saying, what is the actual factual evidence here on this particular subject? So committees as you can imagine, many people have interests in the output of select committee inquiries, and that's perfectly sensible. But good academic evidence is focused on that objective ‘what is the evidence and where does that lead us?’. Which leads us onto the final point, recommendations. Committee inquiries aren't just about looking at the evidence, they’re about making recommendations to Government about making things better. And so committees look in their evidence for what are the priorities for change.

So what's in it for you as researchers? Well, impact with both the capital and lowercase ‘I’. This is an opportunity to bring your research into the sphere of public policy and potentially make a difference. It's an opportunity to get your research published in a different way than through the normal academic publishing routes. There's the potential to increase the profile of your institution and your own work. Academics I've worked with, who’ve submitted evidence to inquiries I've worked on in the past have led slots on the Today programme on the days reports have been published, for example. And finally parliamentary privilege. So committee inquiries may be on very contentious matters and to ensure that Members and committees can carry out their work without interference, evidence that is published by committees attract protection under parliamentary privilege from legal intimidation or legal consequences.

Yeah, and that brings me to the end of my first section. So Sarah, if you've got any questions?”

“Great to be with you all today. Fantastic presentation, really insightful for us. Thank you, David. I've got a few questions that have come in already. The first one which we like to put to you is whether reports or recommendations have to be agreed unanimously. And could you talk a bit about the decision making process around that?”

“Very happy to. Thank you Sarah. So the select committees wherever possible work by consensus. Their impact and their reputation works on the fact that they are cross party committees and they attempt wherever possible to reach consensus on their recommendations. Where that is not possible, there is a formal decision making process in the committee whereby a member of the committee can propose text to be considered. Other members can propose amendments, and the committee can, if necessary, vote to decide what the final outcome is. And if you look at a select committee report, if you go to the back you will find a page called formal minutes, and if there has been any of that formal voting that will appear there. However, it is rare. As I say most committees work by some consensus and for the most part in most committees to vote, ‘divisions’ as we call them, formal votes are extremely rare indeed.”

“Great, thanks David, that's really helpful. So a very closely related question next is really as a generalisation, what proportion of evidence and recommendations that are presented by select committees to the Government get a truly engaged response by the Government. So really does the government actually pay attention to select committee outputs or do they simply ignore those outputs and carry on as they would anyway?”

“That's a complex question that you could probably devote an entire seminar to. I think the answer is, the answer is twofold. The first is that a Government, what the Government says in its formal response is not always a reflection of what the Government actually does in response to a recommendation. Within two months the Government may or may not feel it can accept or reject a recommendation, so it may decide to give a holding response. And you may see further down the line that something that a committee recommended actually ends up being implemented by the Government, even though if you looked at the formal response, you might think “oh, the Government didn’t take that very seriously”. And for that reason it's a really hard question to answer what proportion have been implemented and what proportion haven't been implemented, so I think that's the first thing.

I think the second thing is, it depends, and there's no simple one size fits all answer. I would say that select committees have become much more influential over the last, well certainly over the last decade than previously and I would say that in the last five years, I've seen many more select committee recommendations being taken up than I did in my first ten years in the House, so I joined in 2006.”

“Fantastic, thanks very much David. This is a short question but I think everyone will really appreciate the answer because it's something that we definitely get asked a lot, which is could you possibly explain to us what on earth parliamentary privilege means please?”

“Yep. So parliamentary privilege is the protection offered to MPs and Peers to protect free speech in Parliament. I could go on, but the basic principle is that MPS and Peers and the evidence published by committees is protected from legal consequences in order to allow Members of Parliament to represent their constituents freely and fairly and without threat of reprisal.”

“Great, thanks very much David. We've got time for just a few more I think. These two are really closely related. First question is are there ways to increase the likelihood that someone from your organization will get called to provide oral evidence, and could you explain a bit more about who decides who is invited to give oral evidence?”

“Yep, so I'll answer the second one first. So the process of who decides who get to give oral evidence. So the committee staff will analyse written evidence received. They will analyse the relevant players in the subject area, some of whom may not have submitted evidence. They will generally make recommendations to the committee Chair and to the committee. Ultimately it's the committee's decision as to who they want to hear from.

In answer to the first, I think the easiest way is to submit really good written evidence, which we’ll come onto in a moment. Clearly having a profile in a field helps, but it isn't the only determinant.”

“Great, thanks so much for that David. And then I think we'll take this as the final question for now. If an academic submits evidence and a select committee decides to include it in its report, is there a feedback mechanism? Will that academic be alerted to the fact that their evidence has been used? How can they find out about how their research been used?”

“Yep, so the committee when it agrees and publishes a report will send that report out under embargo, so it will go out before it's being published and it will go out to the media. But it will also go to anybody who submitted evidence to that inquiry and whose evidence was used. So if you've submitted evidence you will see that report before it's published to the wider world so that you can be ready to deal, field media inquiries, to be ready for that release basically. If you've been heavily involved in the inquiry, there's often quite a dialogue going on between you and the committee staff. and I think one of the key messages I'd like to get across is if you're interested in submitting to an inquiry but not quite sure, do ring up committee staff and sort of say “this is my area or field of research, is this what the Committee is interested in?”

On that note, I'm going to move on to the next section of my presentation. Here we go. So what is evidence, what is good evidence? And also I'm going to address that question of how do you get called to give evidence in a little bit more depth.

So what do we mean by evidence? Well written evidence is simply a written submission in response to a call for evidence from a committee, and oral evidence is simply a spoken contribution at a formal committee hearing. Now, committees do informal events as well. They do roundtables. They do public engagement events and so forth. But for us evidence is something spoken at a formal hearing in front of the committee. Evidence is published online unless you request otherwise and the committee agrees. And it's important to note that once you submit something to the committee, it is for the committee to decide what to do with it. And it must be original, so it needs to be a document produced for the committee itself. It can't simply be a journal article from somewhere else. Now if you have something like that and you want to draw the committee's attention to it by all means you can reference it, hyperlink it in your submission or you can simply send it to the committee staff and say you might be interested to know about this article that I wrote.

So what is good written evidence? I said earlier one of the single best ways to get called to give oral evidence to submit good written evidence. So what is good written evidence? Concise and relevant, I think, are the two key points here. So the biggest select committee inquiry attract hundreds of submissions and keeping to the word limit of three thousand words or less, but not feeling that you need to hit that word limit if you don't need to, is really important. The more power, the more punchy the points are, the more concisely put the points are, the more impact they're going to have on the people at the other end who are reading and analysing the results. Do include a summary of the key points at the start. Use the terms of reference to focus what you're saying on what the committees has asked for, and what the committee is interested in.

And as I say, if you're at all unsure, feel free to talk to the committee staff to get a better sense of what they actually are looking for, the committee is actually looking for. Don't feel you need to respond to every single question. Your expertise may be in one particular area related to the inquiry. Don't feel you need to speak out on others. At the same time, don't feel compelled to only comment on the very specific issue that you research, for example. You may have broader insights that go beyond your specialist research that are relevant to the rest of it, so don't feel constrained but at the same time, don't feel obliged to comment on everything.

Make recommendations, so I covered this earlier. Committees aren't just looking for the evidence on where the issues are, they're also looking for potential recommendations to make for Government. Don’t just call for more research. Committees do make recommendations for more research, but fundamentally they aren't funding bodies. They’re making recommendations to Government on policy, and they're interested in what the research is, primarily interested in what the research says.

Now, of course, that doesn't mean that you shouldn't be honest about the limitations of that research. Write for an interested non expert. So avoiding acronyms, avoiding jargon. You are writing fundamentally for people who know a bit about the policy area, who are interested in the policy area, but will not have the level of specialist knowledge or are unlikely to have the level of specialist knowledge that you do. And the final one is remember that you're writing for a political environment and that some of the terminology used may have meanings in a political context that you may wish to try and avoid. Try to make it - you want it to appear objective.

So what is good oral evidence? Just to add in terms of how to get called for oral evidence, I think the other thing I would say is following the policy debate and being engaged with the policy debate in other ways. So I won't talk about, there are things like All Party Parliamentary Groups, things like that. If you're involved on multiple levels and you have a profile amongst MPs and Peers and they know your name, that is also something that helps when they're thinking about who to choose to call.

What's good oral evidence? Being concise and relevant, again, sticking to the questions you've been asked, and not feeling you have to answer every single question are two quite good pieces of advice. Be engaging, so MPs, particularly MPs, are interested in hearing how this affects real people, their constituents, people who are influenced by Government policy. So talking in terms of real concrete effects on real people or real things rather than talking in the abstract is really powerful when talking to a committee. Highlighting your calls for action, highlighting them in the context of the evidence, and prioritizing them. Committees may not be able to recommend absolutely everything, so what's the most important?

Showing respect for members of the Committee, of course. And feel free to follow up in writing. There's no problem saying “that’s a really difficult question to answer now, I'll need to get back to you or I need to check that or I need to consult my colleague whose area of expertise this is.” So those the key tips for good oral evidence and written evidence. And any another round of questions?”

“Yeah, that's great. Thanks so much for that David. Again, that was really, really helpful and great to have these clear tips and pointers in how it's helpful for academics to shape and communicate their findings. We’ve had some more questions. The first one is are members of the committee expected to read written responses in full, or are they presented with a summary by the Committee staff?”

“So the answer is both. They have them all in full and they will have summary and briefing from the committee staff and it's a personal decision on which they choose to do.”

“Great, thank you. Next question, which I think is a point of clarification. I think it's when you were talking about original publication. You said their submission needs to be original, so in terms of original evidence submission, do you mean the written words or the findings? They say, for example I've published the results of my research in an academic journal. If I rewrite my findings in a way the select committee would understand and reference my published journal article, would that still be considered original?”

“Yes, it absolutely would. Yes, to be clear, original in this context means something that is written specifically for the committee, and the vast majority of academic evidence is precisely that. It's research findings that have been published elsewhere, written in a way that's accessible for a policy audience.”

“Fantastic, thank you. We've also had another question which is whether committees open up forms of engagement to other public audiences, so not just academics but do select committees work with different members of society as well?”

“Yes, very much so. The select committees work with a wide range of interested people and parties. So as you would expect interest groups and lobby groups - think about CBI, TUC, whatever field you work in - submits select committee evidence on a regular basis, NGOs. Public engagement, direct engagement with the public, is something that select committees have done much more over the last ten years and particularly the last five years. So that may involve online forums where members of the public or members of a particular group can participate. It may involve focus groups, it may involve online surveys. But that is something, as I say, that committees have been doing much, much more of in recent years.”

“Fantastic thank you, that's great to hear. And we’ll take this as the final question before moving on and so the final question is how much of the science behind the recommendations are the committees interested in seeing? So our participant says this is very important for us. Or is there an implicit trust in us to produce the evidence for them?”

“I think that's a very good question. I think it will depend on the subject matter, and I think it would depend on the nature of inquiry, and I think it depends on the committee. As part of the analysis process, committee staff will look at the credibility of sources. I think the key thing is that committees are interested in the policy outcomes, and I think the extent to which they're interested in the science behind those outcomes will depend on how closely the two are linked. So if you look on the Science and Technology Committee inquiries into COVID at the moment, they are very, very interested in the science behind the different approaches to managing COVID because that is so integral to what is being discussed. So I think that's a broad brush answer, but I think the answer is it depends.”

“David, thank you so much for sharing all your expertise with us, dealing with all those fantastic questions, thank you so much.

What I wanted to leave you with is a reassurance that we've thrown a lot of information at you. We know that it can be a bit daunting to try and get involved with Parliament. But as well as hopefully giving you a bit of information about how committees work and encouraged you that committees would really like to hear from you, there is also plenty of other support for you here at Parliament. We have a lot of online resources, some ‘how to’ guides on our web hub for researchers, so that's parliament.uk/research-impact. On there, on the how to guide page particularly, you will find a guide to giving written evidence to both House of Commons and House of Lords Select committees so you can go and revisit that and look into it in a bit more detail, as well as some more, some broader information about how to engage with different parts of Parliament.

If you are on Twitter, do follow us. We are @UKParl\_Research. We put on there every single call for evidence from any select committee at Parliament that we can find. So it's a good one stop shop to have a look at what's going on, but don't forget you've always got that link to all the currently open calls for evidence page. So if you're not on Twitter or you don't regularly check it you can just check in on that page occasionally. You can also sign up for email alerts from the Parliament website and you've also got a dedicated Knowledge Exchange Unit here. That's myself. It's Sarah who you've met, who's been keeping an eye on it, asking your questions. And our colleague, Laura as well. That email address keu@parliament.uk, that is us behind that email address. Feel free to send in any questions or any queries that you have. We’re really grateful for you joining us this afternoon and I hope that you found it useful.”