UK Parliament

Parliament for Researchers - how to write for a parliamentary audience

UK Parliament
POST

# Parliament ≠ Government

UK Parliament

UK Government

- Commons, Lords and Monarch
- Holds Government to account
- Makes laws
- Enables the Government to raise and spend money

- Some MPs and some Peers, chosen by the Prime Minister
- Runs Government departments and public services
- Is accountable to Parliament

istock by Getty images

The parliamentary audience

- Parliamentarians and policy-makers are busy people

- Members do not necessarily have scientific or technical background on the topic

- Research is just one type of information that gets considered when making policy decisions - consider the impacts to people as well as the science

- MPs are elected to represent a particular constituency – can you connect the topic to local or regional areas that they are likely to be interested in?

Mental health impacts of COVID-19 on NHS staff

Overview
- NHS staff have experienced changes in their work patterns and roles during the pandemic that may affect their mental health and well-being.
- There are reports of burn-out, anxiety and depression, but also of staff thriving on greater team cohesion. The quality of evidence and research findings on the mental health impact are mixed.
- Supporting staff mental health is vital to sustaining capacity of the NHS workforce.
- Greater understanding is needed of the longer-term impacts on staff mental health and the needs of particular groups.
- Proposed ways to support staff include ensuring healthy working conditions, effective leadership and peer support.
- Some staff may require priority access to more intensive support from mental health services, such as psychological therapies.

Media headlines have predicted an increase in mental ill health among NHS staff during the COVID-19 pandemic. This POSTnote gives an overview of the scale and quality of current evidence on the mental health and well-being of NHS staff before and during the pandemic. It also discusses how staff are supported and the options for introducing other effective interventions as the pandemic continues.

Background
In the NHS, pre-pandemic reports indicated high levels of staff stress and burn-out.[1] The issue of NHS staff burn-out has also received recent attention in Parliament.[2,3] Burn-out from physical and mental exhaustion can increase the risk of mental ill health. It also impacts on patient care by reducing staff capacity for empathy and increasing their risk of making mistakes.[4] High levels of anxiety and depression were self-reported by NHS staff in the years prior to the pandemic.[5,6] From 2016 to 2019, the Health and Safety Executive estimated that work-related stress, anxiety or depression affected 2,120 health and social care workers per 100,000 (2.1%) compared with 1,380 per 100,000 (1.4%) across all occupations.[7] Mental ill health may also contribute to premature morbidity and mortality, exerting longer term impacts on the NHS workforce.[8] Therefore, supporting the mental health and well-being of NHS staff may help to sustain NHS workforce capacity and performance. A proactive approach to support can help staff

remain in employment and enhance the well-being of staff and their families.

It is unclear whether the mental health of NHS staff has significantly declined during the pandemic. However, in April 2020, sickness rates for NHS staff in England were at their highest in a decade. Whether this figure includes those shielding or self-isolating is not reported. The most common reasons for sickness absence were anxiety, stress, depression or another mental illness, reported by 20.9% of staff off sick.[9]

Research and funding
Current understanding of how the pandemic is affecting NHS staff is informed by surveys. Limitations of surveys are discussed in Box 1. Surveys conducted by the British Medical Association (BMA)[10] and Royal College of Nursing (RCN)[11] during the pandemic report that between 45% and 50% of doctors and nurses were concerned about their mental health. A number of other surveys of NHS staff have emerged,[12-?] including those funded by the UK's research bodies.[18-21] ...

What makes a good briefing?

Content: Does the briefing cover what you would expect it to?

Structure: Do the sections make sense and are they in the right order?

Accessibility: Is it easy to read ? Is it concise?

Impartiality: Is it politically and scientifically impartial? Are all statements balanced and objective?

Content – the '5 Ws 1 H' rule

A briefing should tell the reader:

- **What** is the key issue(s)?
- **Why** is it of interest to policymakers?
- **Who** are the main stakeholders? Who is affected? Who are your sources?
- **When** are the major impacts and policy decisions likely to happen?
- **Where** is this happening (e.g. local, national, international)? What regions are affected?
- **How** will the stakeholders be affected? What are the cost implications?

The '5 Ws 1 H' rule applies to single studies too

- **Where** did the study take place? (e.g. Which country? In a lab or in the 'real world'?)

- **When** did the study take place? (e.g. What year? What season, if relevant?)

- **Who** took part in the study? (e.g. Who were the participants? What number of individuals were involved? How were they chosen?)

- **How**? (e.g. How were the measures taken in the study?)

- **What** were the results?

Example:
A 2019 survey of 2,000 women aged 25–40 in the UK found that 60% used social media at least once a day

When?   How?   Who?   Where?   What?

Structure: General

Past:

Background and context. What is the issue and how did we get here?

Present:

Explains the current situation

Future:

What are the challenges and opportunities? How could the present situation change?

Structure: General 2

Past:

Background and context. What is the issue and how did we get here?

Present:

Explains the current situation

Future:

What are the challenges and opportunities? How could the present situation change?
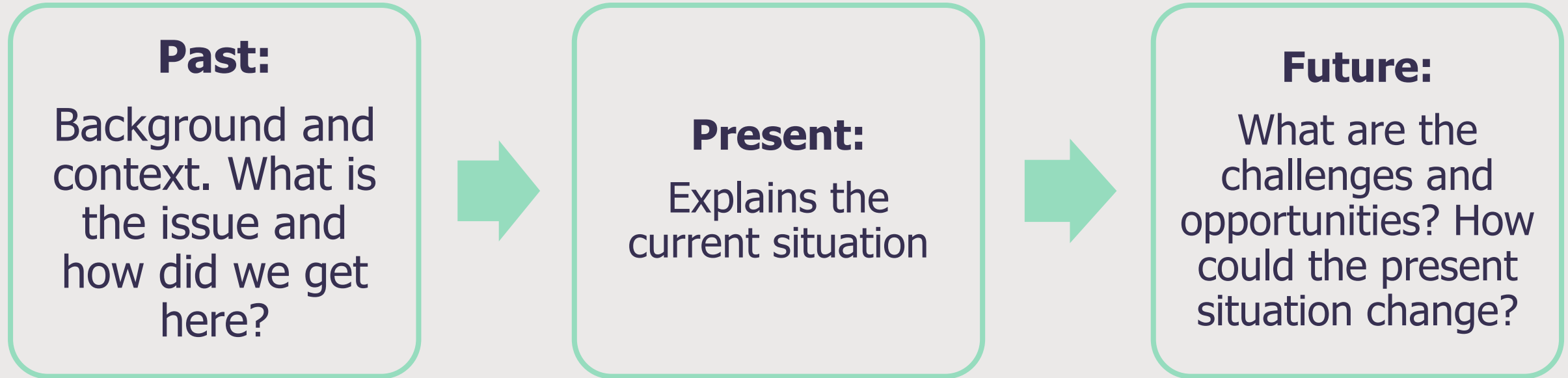
- Make it easy to scan by using **headings and sub-headings** to break up large blocks of text
- Start with an **overview** that outlines the key points of the briefing
- Use **figures, charts or diagrams** where suitable to help your briefing be more eye-catching and appealing

Structure: Summaries

Food Fraud POSTnote – May 2020

COVID-19 Rapid Response
Vaccines Update – Nov 2020

Structure: Summaries 2

Food Fraud POSTnote – May 2020

COVID-19 Rapid Response
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Structure: Summaries 3

Food Fraud POSTnote – May 2020

Overview
- Food fraud includes intentional adulteration and mislabelling of food for financial gain.
- It has a financial and reputational impact on businesses and may pose a health risk to consumers.
- Responsibility for preventing food fraud is spread between industry, local authorities, and government departments and agencies.
- Strategies to prevent food fraud include scientific analysis to test food authenticity, supply chain risk assessment and data-led strategies such as intelligence gathering.
- EU exit may affect UK access to food fraud intelligence networks.

Structure: Summaries 4

- There are over 200 COVID-19 vaccines in development. 47 of these are currently being tested in people.

- The first-generation of COVID-19 vaccines is likely to be imperfect: it is unknown what type and duration of protection will be provided, or whether they will be able to generate a sufficient immune response in everyone (including the elderly).

- There are 11 vaccine candidates at the latest stage of clinical trials. The UK has secured early access to four of these candidates.

- Some vaccine candidates have already been approved for use in humans in China and Russia before the completion of Phase III trials. Data on safety and efficacy of these candidates are unknown. The UK is not actively pursuing any purchasing agreement of these candidates.

- The UK Government has invested in three other vaccine candidates (developed by Imperial College London, GSK/Sanofi Pasteur and Valneva) that are at earlier stages of development.

COVID-19 Rapid Response
Vaccines Update – Nov 2020

Structure: Boxes

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- Long lists of necessary (but quite boring) things
  e.g. definitions, legislation, "bodies", approaches in four nations

- Complex technical concepts

- Case studies

Box 2. Factors Affecting Fishing Yield
The yield of a fish stock depends on the stock size and status. This can be influenced by factors relating to the stock's biology, the fishing pressure applied to it, as well as wider environmental and human factors. Stock assessments focus on determining a number of key aspects:[40,41,62]
- **Fishing mortality**: rate of removal of fish from the stock by fishing.
- **Natural mortality**: number of fish dying due to natural processes such as predation or disease.
- **Recruitment**: number of young fish entering the fishery each year.
- **Spawning Stock Biomass**: total weight of all sexually mature fish in the stock.

Box 1. Cyber-Attacks on Ukraine's Power Network
The first confirmed instance of a disruptive cyber-attack on an electricity network occurred in Ukraine in 2015.[3] A cyber-attack on three power distribution companies caused a power outage that affected 225,000 customers.[29] Power was manually restored after a few hours, but all affected companies were still running reduced operations months later.[29] The attackers are thought to have used fraudulent emails to gain access to the target networks six months before the power outages, during which time they gained the security credentials and knowledge of the infrastructure needed to complete the attack.[30] During the outage, the attackers also overwhelmed the energy company's call centre with telephone traffic to obstruct communications during the incident response.[30] A more sophisticated attack caused another outage in 2016.[31-33] The Ukrainian security service has accused Russian security services of orchestrating both attacks.[30,34]

The Cambridge Centre for Risk Studies estimates that the immediate economic impact of a significant cyber-attack on a UK regional electricity distribution network would be £12-86bn, including consequent disruption to transport, digital communications and water supplies. They note that this represents an extreme example used for stress testing, not a prediction of what is imminent or probable.[35]

Box 1: Stalking and Harassment Legislation in the UK
England and Wales: Harassment was made a criminal offence under the Protection from Harassment Act (PfHA) 1997, which was subsequently amended by the Protection of Freedoms Act 2012 to include the crime of stalking.[2,11] Perpetrators can be charged with either harassment or stalking under this Act.[2] Neither of these crimes are specifically defined. The Act prohibits a course of conduct (two or more incidents) of any behaviours amounting to harassment or stalking (though exact behaviours are not defined).[2] Stalking and harassment with fear of violence have maximum penalties of 10 years' imprisonment.[2,12,13] Online stalking and harassment is covered by the PfHA and by other legislation (Box 2).
Northern Ireland: The Protection from Harassment Order (Northern Ireland) 1997 mirrors the wording of the PfHA relating to harassment but does not include amendments made by the 2012 Protections of Freedoms Act relating to stalking, meaning that stalking is not a distinct crime in Northern Ireland.[14] Sentences for harassment with fear of violence carry a maximum penalty of 7 years' imprisonment.[14]
Scotland: The legislation criminalising harassment in Scotland is also found in the PfHA 1997, which enables the subject to bring a civil claim for a non-harassment order, obliging a perpetrator to refrain from the harassment behaviour.[2] Stalking was made a criminal offence through Section 39 (Criminal Law) of the Criminal Justice & Licensing Act 2010.[2,15] Stalking and breaching a non-harassment order both have maximum sentences of 5 years' imprisonment.[2,12]

Accessibility

Anyone should be able to pick up your briefing, read it over a coffee and be able to explain what they read afterwards.

This is really tough!

"It is estimated that a Western European dairy cow can produce around 117 kg of methane each year, which is roughly equivalent to driving 12,000 km in the average petrol car."

Accessibility Tips

The general principles we follow:

1. Say it with fewer words
2. Say it with less complex language
3. Use objective, precise language
4. Use the active voice where possible
5. Be consistent with language, punctuation and definitions
6. Jargon and acronyms: only use the essential ones and define them before discussing
7. Include handy facts and figures Parliamentarians can make use of

"It is estimated that a Western European dairy cow can produce around 117 kg of methane each year, which is roughly equivalent to driving 12,000 km in the average petrol car."

Writing in fewer words

'The speed of development of new DNA sequencing and analytical technologies is bringing down the price tag for whole genome sequencing at a vertiginous pace.'

↓

'DNA sequencing is getting faster and cheaper.'

Think about your audience!

'The bacterium is microscopic (10 microns wide)'.

$\downarrow$

'Each bacterium is roughly a fifth of the thickness of a sheet of paper and so cannot be seen with the human eye.'

Impartiality

Key principles:

- Cover the entire range of perspectives
- No opinions
- Attribute and reference
- Be clear about uncertainty

Image by Markus Trier from Pixabay

Presenting uncertainty

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- Include ranges and if relevant, the reason for the uncertainty

   "IPCC Assessments suggest that sea level could rise 0.26-0.77m by 2100 ... modelling cloud cover is a major source of uncertainty"

- If uncertainty exists due to lack of evidence, explain as much

   "There is insufficient scientific evidence to show conclusively whether mobile phones adversely affect human health"

- Be clear if there is some disagreement (or limitations of the research)

   "The majority of studies show X, but some research indicates Y."
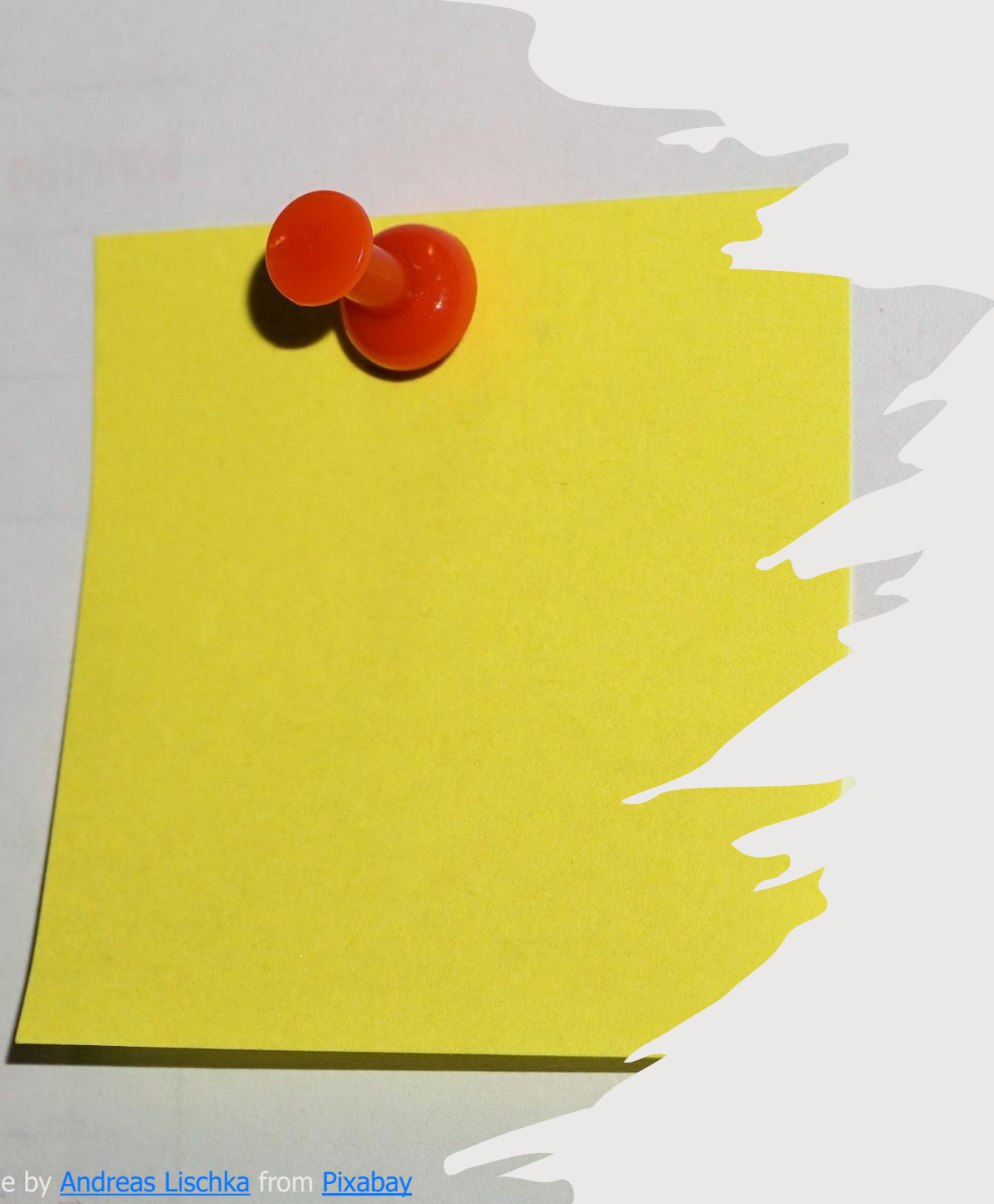
Don't forget!

- Make sure your briefing is dated
- Provide contact details for people who might want to get in touch

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Questions?

Who uses research in the UK Parliament?

House of Commons select committees	House of Lords select committees

Joint select committees

Legislation

House of Commons Library	House of Lords Library

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Individual MPs and their researchers	Individual Peers and their researchers

All Party Parliamentary Groups

Research and information teams

- POST (Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology)
  - Bridges research and policy to ensure that the best available research evidence feeds into Parliament
  - Horizon scanning briefings (POSTnotes), events, fellowships

- House of Commons and House of Lords Libraries
  - Impartial information and briefing services for MPs and Peers
  - Reactive and responsive to questions from Members, business in each House and current affairs

All Party Parliamentary Groups (APPGs)

- Informal groups of MPs and Peers focused on subjects or countries

- Some meet regularly, hold events, produce reports and run inquiries

- Allow Members to:
  - develop their knowledge
  - meet other interested Members
  - show their interest
  - raise awareness on a topic

Full register of groups available on www.parliament.uk

Targeting your research at Parliament

- Do:
  - Send a well-written briefing to any Research and Information team – for the attention of the subject specialist, with an offer to contribute as needed
  - Identify APPGs or individual Members with an interest, and send a well-written briefing with an offer to support any work they are doing in this area

- Don't:
  - Send a paper with no context
  - Send a briefing to all MPs or all Peers
  - Send a paper to a select committee – unless you have written to submit as written evidence

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More questions?

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Where to start?

- Write 1 sentence: "What is your key finding or key point from your research which you'd like parliament to know?"

- Then write 1 sentence: "So what? What should happen next or because of this?"

More resources and support

Online resources and 'how to' guides:
www.parliament.uk/research-impact

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