Legislative science advice is a powerful tool, yet the majority of parliamentarians around the world don't have access to it


The Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST) has played an important role in UK politics, by providing horizon scanning research summaries to parliamentarians on emerging issues. Here, **Sarah Foxen** *and* **Chris Tyler** *discuss the challenges and opportunities faced in setting up services that put leading edge research in front of busy politicians and reflect on their work to help set up similar offices internationally.*

The world is flooded with information, and politicians are drowning in it. "Bombarded", "overloaded" and "inundated" are some of the words that UK politicians used when asked how they managed incoming information. Their position of power and ability to shape public policy make them a particularly appealing target, for those with information wishing to bring about a change. Politicians, many of whom don't feel confident appraising research evidence, now more than ever need help sifting the evidence that fills their inboxes daily.

Modern parliaments have two types of service that can help. The most common is a research service that on the one hand answers politicians' questions – such as "how many school children are in my local constituency?" or "how has the law on abortion changed over the years?" – and on the other provides briefs with background information and policy analysis for legislation, policy areas and topical issues. In the UK, this service is provided by the House of Commons and House of Lords Library research services.

The second kind is a proactive science advisory service that scans the political and technological horizon and provides summaries of rigorous research evidence. In the UK, this service is provided by the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST), the bridge between UK Parliament and the research community, which in recent months has briefed British politicians on wind power, fisheries, violent crime, 5G mobile networks, cancer treatments, food packaging waste and how to improve witness testimony in courts.

Globally, most parliaments have some form of research service, providing answers to questions that politicians ask. Bodies like POST, however, which provide answers to questions that politicians need to know, but didn't think to ask, are the exception. The official network of legislative science advice mechanisms comprises just 22 members; the majority of legislatures therefore do not have access to this critical service.

Nevertheless, there is growing international interest from legislatures and academics to bring legislative science advice, including in the social sciences, to their own nations. Doing this is not an easy task, as practitioners themselves report and over the past 18 months, POST and UCL's department of Science Technology Engineering and Public Policy (STEaPP) have been collaborating with partners in Spain, Mexico and Argentina to develop their own legislative science advice mechanisms, with support from the Economic and Social Research Council.

Through working with partners and participating in these projects, we have identified some key considerations for those wanting to create a legislative science advice mechanism. Here we share three key challenges and reflect on ways of overcoming them.

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Parliaments are unstable

No surprises here! Parliaments are not stable institutions and this instability can disrupt attempts to set up science advice offices. In the 18 months we have been collaborating with the citizen initiative #CienciaenelParlamento (Science in Parliament), which aims to make the case for a legislative science advice office in the Spanish Parliament, there has been a change in government two general elections. Committee structures and membership have changed, as have ministers in the executive. This has resulted in #CienciaenelParlamento, on more than one occasion, having to start from scratch.

The key to counteracting this instability has been to garner support from stakeholders in two domains. Firstly, in the political sphere, not just with one political wing, but across political divisions. By having a broad base of political support such swings can be mitigated. A double benefit is also that vibrancy in the political setting, can lead to vibrancy in the demand and supply of advice. The second domain is in civil society, researchers and the media. These spheres are less changeable than politics. #CienciaenelParlamento have been building networks and support among academics, the civil service and science funders, and have gained significant media coverage to raise awareness and support. This makes their proposition to politicians – that they can do their job better with proactive science advice – more potent.

Science advice is a specialist skill

Another challenge is that science advice requires a specific blend of expertise and experience. Science advisers need; to know how to find research and information and also how to evaluate it, to be able to synthesise information, and communicate it in a concise, accessible and impartial format. These are essential and rare skills. Advisers must also have knowledge of the policy world; of the way research and expertise feeds into both the policy-making process in the executive and policy shaping through scrutiny and legislation in the legislature.

Where can such people be found? Most of those working in legislative science advisory bodies around the world have some experience in academia *and* in policy; a rare find. In the face of this scarcity, capacity has to be built. But how do you do that? Our partners in Spain have been consulting with other legislative science advice offices (POST included). We have drawn on over 30 years of science advice experience in POST to work with them to build capacity in academic researchers, who already have some of the right skills, such as the ability to search academic databases, review literature and appraise research. POST has also been collaborating with the Argentine Congress, which has taken the approach to build capacity in legislative staff, who already have the relevant expertise; for example, knowledge of legislative and policy processes, and are familiar with engaging with policy documents. For the time being it is still a question of building capacity in those who already have many of the attributes, and learning from those with experience.

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Administrations are trying to cut costs

By no means unique to the UK is the desire in national administrations to cut the costs of administration. This brings about a paradox: how do you increase services while cutting costs in the legislature, or at least keeping them stable? There are various ways to do this; in some nations, such as Switzerland and Austria, science advice is provided by a national academy. Services are therefore funded differently and the cost is not felt by the administration. To finance the service in Spain, our partners are taking the same approach that POST took before it was funded by UK Parliament, and are seeking additional external funding from various stakeholders – principally from the research sector. In Argentina, Congress is taking a different approach and exploring the possibility of diversifying and honing skills in legislative staff and evolving current work streams, such that they are able to deliver science advice using existing structures.

These are just some of the challenges faced by countries wishing to establish science advisory systems for their legislatures. Others include the problem of how to balance political oversight and whether or not to make policy recommendations. However, simply being able to provide such information is an important first step. Democracy and its parliaments are too important to be left to guesswork. The world is changing fast and scientific and technical information is becoming more important. Science advisory mechanisms are needed to bring the most up to date knowledge to bear on parliamentary scrutiny and decision-making.

About the authors

Dr Sarah Foxen *is a Knowledge Exchange Manager in the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology, and is seconded there full time from UCL's Department of Science Technology Engineering and Public Policy. Her role includes training and supporting to engage with Parliament, and working with parliamentary colleagues to increase uptake of research. Sarah leads Parliament's input into the development of Research England's 2021 Research Excellence Framework and Knowledge Exchange Framework. She has been involved in a number of international legislative science advice capacity-building projects in Europe and Latin America.*

Dr Chris Tyler *is Director of Research and Policy in University College London's Department of Science, Technology, Engineering and Public Policy (UCL STEaPP), where he leads STEaPP's research and policy programming and explores how policy makers use scientific evidence, particularly within legislatures. Prior to joining STEaPP, Chris spent five years as Director of the UK's Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST) and before that was the first Executive Director of the Centre for Science and Policy (CSaP) at the University of Cambridge.*

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