

Engaging with Parliament: what is good Select Committee evidence?



*One way of trying to make an impact with one's research is to use it to provide evidence and information to one of Parliament's Select Committees. **Victoria Honour** offers some insight into how these committees and their inquiries work, and how academics can engage with them; including practical advice on how to structure and present written evidence, and information on what academic training and further resources are available.*

As academics we are encouraged to increase the impact of our work, in quantifiable ways. We strive to justify and validate our research, and rightly so, especially those of us who are publicly funded. There is a plethora of new science communication schemes aimed at helping academics increase their public engagement. But this is not merely a one-way road. Increasingly decision-making bodies and those in charge of public policy are reaching out for new sources of information and advice. Academics, with their in-depth knowledge and highly specialised fields, are ideally placed to offer up such advice.

The problem comes in the communication. In the past policymakers found it easier to hear from a select group of sources: "the usual (safe) suspects". Thankfully, this is no longer the case. The rise of social media makes disseminating calls for information and advice quicker and easier than ever before. There is, however, a substantial leap between knowing that those in charge of public policy want information, and actually getting around to providing them with meaningful information. Here, I hope to give some insight into providing evidence and information to Select Committees of the UK Parliament.

What are Select Committees and how do their inquiries work?

Select Committees are part of the parliamentary system in the House of Commons and the House of Lords. They are independent and used by Parliament to hold the Government to account by scrutinising the spending, policy, and administration of different departments. Inquiries are the main way in which committees operate. As part of each inquiry the "terms of reference" are announced; four or five key questions which set out its scope. A call for written evidence goes out with the terms of reference, while oral evidence is collected in public from panels of people who are questioned by the committee in order to gain an understanding of the key issues and the panellist's opinions on those issues.

During the inquiry, the committee may also go on informal "fact-finding" visits, to give themselves a greater appreciation of the area they are investigating. The final oral evidence session is normally the Minister (the Government MP or Peer running that area); this allows the committee to question the Government's position on everything they have heard during the course of the inquiry. To aid the inquiries when discussing sensitive information, all speech in parliamentary proceedings is covered by "parliamentary privilege", ensuring evidence received by a Select Committee is protected and cannot be used by the courts. Similarly, evidence given by a witness to a Committee should not be used to the disadvantage of that witness (e.g. a factory worker disciplined for giving evidence about conditions in their factory).

Once all evidence has been heard and read, the Chair's report is produced, discussed and agreed by the committee. The report summarises the evidence received, draws conclusions from such evidence and makes recommendations to Government. Once the report is published, the Government is obliged to respond to it within two months. Ultimately, such reports put pressure on the Government, which, while not required to act on recommendations, sometimes does; for example, the Environmental Audit Committee's [report](#) on microplastics helped bring forward a domestic ban on microbeads.

All current and past inquiries, their accepted written evidence, oral evidence transcripts and videos (if filmed), and final reports are available on the parliamentary website as a public record.

How should you engage with Select Committees?

Select Committees use a range of media to disseminate calls for evidences. Every Committee has an emailing list which you can [subscribe](#) to at any time, regardless of the inquiry they are running. They also use their Parliamentary website and [Twitter](#) to post inquiry updates and new calls for evidence. Select Committees want to hear from as many people as possible, regardless of specialisation. Submitting written evidence is a simple and quick way to potentially have an impact on policy and put your ideas on the public record.

Written evidence

Written evidence has to be specifically written for the inquiry in question. As long as it is accepted, all written evidence is published on the Select Committee's website. Parliament wants to hear from people at any level of expertise, from the leading professor in the field to the concerned citizen. You do not have to be able to answer all parts of the "terms of reference" – answer as many or as few of the points as you can. All published evidence is acknowledged in the final report, and if used in the report, the written evidence will be referenced.

Keep the written evidence to the word limit (3000 words), use numbered paragraphs and signpost further published evidence relevant to the terms of reference. Where relevant, make policy recommendations: what do you want the Government to do? What is the evidence for your recommendation? The overall tone should be pitched at the interested non-expert, so acronyms, jargon and politicised language should be avoided. Often it is helpful to the committee to include a short paragraph on your specialisations and background in the area, to give them context for your submission.

One way of structuring the evidence that often works well is to use the terms of reference as headings. Within each heading, I would recommend pulling out key topics (highlight in bold) and then write a short paragraph about each topic. This makes it very easy for the MPs and committee staff to digest and accumulate what your key points are. A bullet-point summary at the start is also highly valuable. Relevant graphs are helpful and nicely break up text. However, no one template fits all written evidence.

Oral evidence

Oral evidence allows the committee to drill down into particular aspects of an inquiry in more detail and often builds on the content of the written submissions. Select Committee inquiries work to very short timeframes. As such, if you specialise in a certain area, tell the committee in your written evidence. Often the written evidence submission helps direct the focus of the oral evidence sessions, so do submit written evidence.

Further sources of information

Further information can be found at the [Get Involved](#) section of the UK Parliament website along with each Select Committee's website. If you want to more actively engage, speak to the UK Parliament Outreach and Engagement Service who are more than happy to run Parliamentary information events at locations throughout the UK, alternatively there are contacts for arranging [regional events and workshops](#). For academics there is additional [academic training](#) and information on [Research Impact at the UK Parliament](#), which some may find beneficial.

This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Impact Blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [comments policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.

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