

Bennett Institute
Policy Resources

Engaging with UK Parliament

A Guide for Academics

In partnership with the
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Introduction

There are many different routes and pathways for academics to engage with and potentially influence Government policy. This guide sets out a number of ways you can practically engage with the UK Government. Which route you take will depend on what your motives are for wanting to engage and what impacts, if any, you are hoping to achieve. This guide has been supported by the EPSRC so is aimed at researchers with expertise in engineering and science although the advice is equally applicable to any academic who may want to become more policy aware.

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Find out what Parliament is interested in

Time spent observing relevant political discourse and debate can provide valuable knowledge to ascertain what might be policy relevant and provide access to diverse networking opportunities - enabling you to make effective contributions to policy discourse with confidence. In short it can empower you to make the most of 'windows of opportunity'. Build links and networks and keep updated by following what relevant Parliament members are doing via their website or twitter feeds and sign up to Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST), Commons and Lords Library alerts. You'll read more about POST and the parliamentary libraries later on. You could also follow relevant political commentators Twitter accounts for a sometimes entertaining but insightful commentary on UK politics.

➤ *Get involved:*

There are a number of other different ways to find out what Parliament is interested in and to find out if there are alignments with your subject area. Keeping up to date with relevant political discourse can also open up potential avenues to engage with policy that you may not have considered:

1. Consult the [calendar](#) of scheduled business in Parliament particularly on a Friday when the website publishes the next week's debates or committee meetings for both the House of Commons and Lords.
2. Check out [Hansard](#) which is a searchable, verbatim report of what is said in Parliament debates, speeches, questions and answers. Each House of Parliament has its own publication. Commons Hansard includes proceedings in the Commons Chamber and Westminster Hall. Lords Hansard details proceedings in the Lords Chamber and Grand Committee.
3. Look at [Prime Ministers Questions](#). MPs can raise matters in the House of Commons on behalf of their constituents. They can do this by asking parliamentary questions, participating in debates or introducing legislation.

4. You could request an Early Day Motion. Early Day Motions are formal motions submitted for debate in the House of Commons, which allow MPs to draw attention to an event or cause and which MPs support by signing. Although few are actually debated they do allow MPs to draw attention to a particular point of view and can be used to demonstrate the level of parliamentary support. Look at [Early Day Motions](#) here to get a feel for the type of proposals that get debated [or find out more about how they work](#).
5. You may also want to start a [petition](#). Anyone can start a petition as long as they are a British citizen or UK resident. Petitions must call for a specific action from the UK Government or the House of Commons. Petitions must be about something that the Government or the House of Commons is responsible for. Petitions which reach 100,000 signatures are almost always debated in Parliament.

Engaging with a Member of Parliament or a Peer

Academic research can help Members of Parliament, (MP), and Peers to scrutinise government policy, debate pressing issues of the day, and pass laws. Research can also help MPs, Peers and their staff to answer queries from constituents or address issues in their local area. As MPs are elected by their constituents, within their electorate, they should have a vested interest in addressing their constituents concerns. Or it may be that there is an MP or Peer who has particular interests that resonate with your areas of expertise. Many MPs and some Peers also have staff working for them to help access academic research.

➤ *Get involved:*

1. You could contact your local MP or find MPs and Peers who may potentially be interested in your research and get in touch. This can be a good way to raise political awareness about your area of expertise that you think should be factored in to a particular policy decision. Have a clear objective in mind

when you make your approach – what do you want the outcome to be? And communicate as you would for any intelligent layperson. Find out more information on how to contact a MP or Peer here.

2. You can find out more about specific MPs' or Lords' interests and what Committees they might sit on by looking at their individual webpages. Most MPs also have their own websites where they list their interests or you can find out which Members have held debates or asked questions that may relate to your subject area at TheyWorkForYou.
3. The Campaign for Science and Engineering also provides a useful resource of MPs and Peers who have a background in science, technology, engineering, maths or medicine and details of Ministers with briefs that impact on UK science and engineering policy.

Engaging with a Committee

Much of the work of the House of Commons and the House of Lords takes place in Committees, made up of around 10 to 50 MPs or Lords. Different Committees have different roles ranging from offering advice, to producing reports and altering legislation. Committees examine issues in detail, from Government policy and proposed new laws, to wider topics like the economy. You can find out which Committees are currently seeking your views on issues that concern you and submit evidence for the Committee to consider when it produces a report on the issue. Committees seek to analyse the evidence base before them in order to present a balanced view and come to an unanimous report with clear policy recommendations¹. Committee teams in Westminster often have specialist staff with knowledge of the subject that the Committee scrutinises. All Committee enquiries that are currently accepting written submissions are listed here.

¹

https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/polopoly_fs/1.658541!/file/RecipeForImpact.pdf

Select Committees

Select Committees work in both the House of Commons and the House of Lords. They are small groups of cross-party MPs and Peers that scrutinise different areas of Government. Select Committees use research to carry out inquiries on different topics, write reports and make recommendations to the Government. They check and report on areas ranging from the work of Government Departments to economic affairs. The results of these inquiries are public and many require a response from the Government. House of Commons Select Committees are largely concerned with examining the work of Government Departments in three aspects: spending, policies and administrations. There are Commons Select Committees for each of the Government Departments as well as some overarching ones such as the Environmental Audit Committee. Committees in the House of Lords concentrate on six main areas: Europe, science, economics, communications, the UK constitution and international relations. Although Lords Select Committees also investigate Government activity they differ from the Commons as they do not represent particular Government Departments rather they focus on specialist subjects taking advantage of the Lords' expertise and the greater amount of time available to them, (compared to MPs), to examine particular topics in more detail.

Why should I get involved with a Select Committee?

Select Committees invite submissions from a range of sources and providing your academic expertise in this way can be a good opportunity to influence current policy debates. Committee reports based on submissions make a number of recommendations that the Government must either accept or justify its decision not to. Government will normally make a response to a Select Committee report within two months of the publication of the report. Evidence you submit either in writing or orally could be cited in the report and read by Government Ministers and subsequently impact on policy and legislation. Working with a Select Committee

can therefore be an important way of raising awareness about your research and generating impact particularly because Committees generally conduct their inquiries over long periods of time they can be a good way to influence in a substantive way. Committees are also cross-party which means members do not have to follow party lines and this can foster a more collaborative and investigative ethos.

When a Select Committee conducts an inquiry it will often invite written evidence from interested parties. A call for evidence is often published at the same time as, or shortly after, the inquiry is announced. The Committee will use this written evidence to help shape their inquiry and it may influence the choice of witnesses the Committee calls to appear before them during the oral evidence stage. Oral evidence usually takes place in public in one of the Commons Committee rooms. If you get invited to give oral evidence at the Houses of Parliament you'll have an opportunity to engage with a broad range of individuals and thus widen your network. Below you'll find out about all the different ways you can engage with a Select Committee be it by submitting written or oral evidence, putting yourself forward to be a special advisor or suggesting a topic for future consideration.

➤ *Get involved:*

1. Find out which Houses' Select Committee is of interest to you and your work either in the House of Commons or the House of Lords. You can sign up to get updates and alerts of relevance. There are numerous ones that might appeal to a scientist or engineer including the following but not exhaustive to:
 - Science and Technology Committee;
 - Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee;
 - Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee;
 - Environmental Audit Committee;
 - Transport Committee and;
 - in the House of Lords either the Select Committee on Artificial Intelligence or the Economic Affairs Committee.
2. You can submit written evidence to a Select Committee. Detailed guidance on how to

submit written and oral evidence to House of Commons and House of Lords Select Committees is available here: [House of Commons Select Committee evidence](#) and [House of Lords Select Committee evidence](#). Also [Parliamentary TV broadcasts Select Committee hearings](#) and watching a committee session is a good way to get a sense of how a hearing proceeds and the sort of questions that get asked.

3. Also have a look at these top tips on how to write good Select Committee evidence. The overall tone should be pitched at the interested non-expert and be clear and succinct. Show clearly how your response relates to the questions being asked – your evidence is more likely to be included in any briefing and quoted in a final report if it's directly relevant. It's also useful to know that the earlier the Committee receives your submission the more time they will have to read it thoroughly so submit evidence early if you can. You could also familiarise yourself with past submissions made by credible organisations or your relevant Society to get a feel for what a well written submission looks like. You may want to consider joining forces with a relevant knowledge broker such as a NGO or think tank. It may sometimes be easier to feed through an existing body. Finally, note that Select Committees aren't able to accept as written evidence anything that has already been published elsewhere – you can of course provide references though for published work upon which your submission may be based.
4. You can also apply to be a specialist adviser of a Select Committee. Select Committees can appoint a special advisor, who is often an academic, to provide expert advice. Advisers support the clerk of a Committee, the head of the Committee's staff, and are either appointed generally or to assist with particular inquiries. Open calls for special advisers are advertised in various places including the [House of Commons vacancy pages](#) or on a particular select committee website or twitter feed.

5. You could inform a relevant committee about you, your research and area of expertise and even suggest topics for future inquiries. Select committees are often on the look-for future subjects of enquiry and draw these from a range of sources including current research. First, it can be helpful to build a relationship with an MP that resides on a Committee of interest who is either your MP or someone you know who is interested in your subject area. As each Select Committee has its own page on Parliament website, (House of Commons or House of Lords) and you can find out information about past and upcoming enquiries and get a sense of the range of topics that are discussed.

Joint Committees

Joint Committees are committees consisting of MPs and Members of the Lords. They have similar powers to other Select Committees. Some are set up on a permanent basis, like the Joint Committee on Human Rights. Other appointments are for specific purposes, such as examining draft proposals for Bills on subjects ranging from modern slavery to stem cell research.

➤ *Get involved:*

1. You can find out further details about the work of Joint Committees and ways to engage [here](#):

Public Bill Committees

After the second reading of a Bill, it is often referred to a Public Bill Committee for further scrutiny. The Committee may choose to receive written and oral evidence from external organisations, including academics, in the same way as Select Committees do as part of their consideration of the Bill. Academic evidence can support the scrutiny of a Bill by increasing MPs' knowledge and understanding of it.

➤ *Get involved:*

1. Submit written evidence and let MPs and/or Peers know about your relevant research or

evidence. You can find guidance on how to submit evidence.

Engaging with an All-Party Parliamentary Groups (APPG)

APPGs are informal cross-party groups that have no official status within Parliament. They are run by and for Members of the Commons and Lords, though many choose to involve individuals and organisations from outside Parliament in their administration and activities. APPGs cover a diverse range of subjects and are established for a variety of purposes. They provide an opportunity for parliamentarians to engage with individuals and organisations outside Parliament who share an interest in the subject matter of their group. As APPGs have no fixed reporting timeframes members are able to consider issues at length and in more detail than for example a Select Committee. However, they are more informal than Select Committees and do not have their powers to summon witnesses or make specific recommendations. APPGs also vary in their scope but the most active will hold regular meetings on specific issues which it may be possible to attend or speak at.

➤ *Get involved:*

1. You can get in touch with an APPG that might be relevant to your area of expertise and let them know about you and your research. Your first step might be to provide a short written briefing either in response to a specific call for submissions or you could suggest a topic for future consideration. The best contacts are the Secretariat or Chair of a relevant APPG.
2. APPGs that may be of interest to science and engineering academics include, but are not exhaustive to, the following:
 - All-Party Parliamentary Climate Change Group whose purpose is to inform the climate change discussion between parliamentarians, business leaders, NGOs and academics and to accelerate action to address it;
 - All-Party Parliamentary Environment Group whose purpose is to raise awareness of environmental issues in

both Houses of Parliament. Contact: rbines@apeg.co.uk;

- All-Party Parliamentary Engineering Group whose purpose is to enable contact with parliamentarians and the engineering profession but with a special emphasis on young engineers;
- Parliamentary and Scientific Committee, (an All-Party Parliamentary Group), which aims to be a primary focus for scientific and technological issues, providing a long-term liaison between parliamentarians and scientific bodies, science-based industry and the academic world.

Engaging with Parliamentary Libraries

Parliamentary libraries are considered to be an important source of research for parliamentarians². They provide impartial information and research services for MPs, peers and their staff in support of their parliamentary duties including the production of publicly available research briefings. The research work conducted by library staff tends to be fast-paced and driven by the short to medium term work of Parliament. House of Commons and Lords Libraries staff may draw on academic research when drafting briefing and debate packs for Parliament or when responding to an enquiry from a Member of Parliament. Library staff may also seek academic researchers to peer review their briefings. Both libraries provide independent and impartial information and advice to MPs and Peers of all parties and their staff. The libraries utilise journal articles more than other parts of Parliament but, due to journal paywalls, appreciate copies of relevant articles sent to them direct.

➤ *Get involved:*

1. You can familiarise yourself with the work of the House of Commons and Lords Libraries and identify the relevant people to engage with and inform.

² Kenny, C., Rose, D.C., Hobbs, a., Tyler, C. & Blackstock, J. (2017) *The Role of Research in the UK Parliament Volume One*. London, UK, Houses of Parliament

Engaging with the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology

The Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology, (POST), is Parliament's in-house source of independent, balanced and accessible analysis of public-policy issues related to science and technology. Their briefings cover the areas of biology and health, energy and the environment, physical sciences and computing. POST aims to provide additional expertise of a more specialist or technical nature in comparison to library staff so differ from parliamentary libraries by being more likely to assess scientific evidence in order to provide a more authoritative 'scientific' consensus³. POST hold seminars and events for UK Parliament and the public and facilitate knowledge exchange between Parliament and research communities.

POST also produce informative policy briefings. The POSTnote is a four page research briefing that reviews the current research landscape in emerging areas of public policy. Keeping an eye on these can help you foresee a potential 'window of opportunity' to engage. POST also produce POSTbriefs that are produced rapidly in response to major developments in current affairs or to support Select Committee inquiries. All POST briefings are also reviewed by external experts. POST staff proactively search for academic research and welcome academics to get in touch. POST has also formed a Knowledge Exchange Unit with provides information, advice and a point of contact at UK Parliament for the research community.

➤ *Get involved:*

1. You can contact [POST](#) and let them know about you and your research. You could even propose a POSTnote, contribute to one or offer to review one.
2. Sign up to POST twitter [@POST_UK](#) to keep up to date with what's coming up.
3. Contact the Knowledge Exchange unit: Sarah Foxen (foxens@parliament.uk) or Naomi Saint (saintn@parliament.uk)

³ https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/polopoly_fs/1.658541!/file/RecipeForImpact.pdf

and/or follow the Unit on Twitter [@UKParl_Research](#) to hear about other opportunities to engage with UK Parliament.

4. POST runs several [fellowship schemes](#) with Research Councils, learned societies and charities. Through these schemes, academics are sponsored to spend time working in Parliament. Some fellowships are also open to post-doctoral researchers in academia and industry.

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