

Working with Select Committees

A PRACTICAL GUIDE

What are Select Committees?

THE ROLE AND WORK OF SELECT COMMITTEES

Parliament is made up of the House of Commons, House of Lords and the monarchy. Parliamentary business takes place in both of the Houses and decisions made in one House generally have to be approved by the other.

The main functions of the UK Parliament are to:

- Check and challenge the work of the Government (scrutiny)
- Make and change laws (legislation)
- Debate the important issues of the day (debating)
- Check and approve Government spending (budget/taxes)

Select Committees are small groups of MPs and/or Lords who scrutinise the work of Government, looking at specific policy issues or legislation in detail.

Different committees have different roles, ranging from offering advice, to producing reports and altering legislation. They also examine and report on government policy, proposed new laws, and wider areas such as economic affairs.

There are Select Committees operating in both the House of Commons and the House of Lords – some are permanent and others temporary. There are also a few that operate across both Houses.

Select Committees undertake inquiries that consider the opinions and findings – written and/or oral – from a wide range of sources:

- academia
- commerce
- industry
- organisations and institutions
- MPs and parliamentarians
- the public

The recommendations and conclusions resulting from these inquiries are usually printed and made publicly available online. They normally require a response from the Government within 60 days. This could be in the form of direct publication (“Command Paper”) or as a memorandum that can be turned into a special report.

The findings from Select Committee inquiries may be incorporated into policy.

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE TWO HOUSES’ SELECT COMMITTEES

House of Commons Select Committees are established to “shadow” each of the governmental departments, examining three aspects: spending, policies and administration.

House of Lords Select Committees concentrate on six main areas: Europe, science, economics, communications, the UK constitution and international relations.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this document is to provide some guidance on submitting your research to the UK Parliament’s Select Committees.

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COMMONS SELECT COMMITTEES

There is a Commons Select Committee for each of the governmental departments, as well as some overarching ones such as the Environmental Audit Committee. Their role is to scrutinise policy and also the spending and administration of those departments.

Commons Select Committees are generally made up of 11 MPs in proportion to the party political balance in the Commons. The chair of the committee is voted for in parliament and then each party elects an MP to reside on the committee. Committees also employ clerks and can appoint specialist advisers (often academics) to assist their investigations.

Committee members select topics for investigation from a range of different sources, choosing subjects considered in need of government attention; these can stem from news items and topical issues to impending legislation. Anyone can make investigation suggestions to a committee or its members.

LORDS SELECT COMMITTEES

Lords Select Committees also investigate government activity, public policy and proposed laws. However they do not represent particular government departments. They focus on specialist subjects, taking advantage of the Lords' expertise and the greater amount of time available to them (compared with MPs) to examine issues.

There are currently six major Lords Select Committees:

- the **European Union Committee**
- the **Science and Technology Committee**
- the **Communications Committee**
- the **Constitution Committee**
- the **Economic Affairs Committee**
- the **International Relations Committee**

Ad hoc committees, such as the Committee on Digital Skills, are set up to consider issues outside of these main subject areas.

At the beginning of a new parliamentary session the six committees are re-appointed. Lords Select Committees normally comprise between 10 and 18 members that are appointed by the House of Lords.

Reports from Lords Select Committees are debated in the House of Lords, provoke discussion outside parliament and ultimately make recommendations to government.

JOINT SELECT COMMITTEES

Joint Committees share the powers and processes of Select Committees and comprise both MPs and Lords. There are permanent ones e.g. Human Rights, as well as temporary ones that are set up to tackle a particular issue.

Why should I submit my research to Select Committees?

Working with Select Committees is an excellent way of raising awareness about your research and generating impact. Reports by Select Committees are highly-respected sources of information and are often used to steer government debate in a particular direction.

The cross-party and subject-specific nature of these committees allows for thorough, thoughtful and reasoned recommendations, away from the party-biased, point-scoring approach of the debate chamber. Select Committees invite submissions from a range of sources and this offers a democratic and interdisciplinary platform for your research to be considered seriously.

Your work will potentially receive attention from a group of MPs or members of the House of Lords (or occasionally both) who are devoting significant time and resources to considering an issue. Providing evidence to policymakers in this way is a great opportunity for researchers to influence current policy debates.

The committee's report based on the submissions will make a number of recommendations that the government must either accept or justify its decision not to. Evidence you submit – either in writing or in person – could be cited in the report and read by government ministers, and subsequently impact on policy and legislation. Submissions are therefore a tool to get your research in the public domain, in an official document that is widely read.

The Research Excellence Framework (REF) now places much emphasis on creating policy impact through higher education research. Submissions to Select Committees are a potential pathway to generating research impact: if your work is cited and subsequent recommendations are made, based on your research, these may be followed up by government.

Finally, working with Select Committees can help to build your reputation outside of academia. A written submission often leads to an invitation to give oral evidence at the Houses of Parliament. Evidence sessions provide an opportunity to engage with a broad range of individuals interested in the same topic area, and thus are a great way to widen your network.

How can I submit my research to Select Committees?

WAYS TO ENGAGE

There are several ways in which you can engage with Select Committees:

- Suggest topics for investigation
- Submit written evidence to an inquiry
- Provide oral evidence as an inquiry witness

WHERE TO START

Anyone can suggest topics for investigation to Select Committees. It can be helpful to build a relationship with an MP that resides on that committee – who is either your local MP or someone you know is interested in your research area.

The UK Parliamentary website provides details of all open calls for evidence:

<http://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/inquiries-a-z/current-open-calls-for-evidence/>

The website also features guidance material and previously published reports and responses, which may be helpful in considering your submission.

SUBMITTING WRITTEN EVIDENCE

HOW IT WORKS

Calls for evidence are often published at the same time as, or shortly after, an 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 selects to give oral evidence.

All submitted evidence is read by whichever member of the committee secretariat is leading on the inquiry. This may be a “committee specialist”, a committee clerk, or even a PhD student – all of whom will range in their knowledge of the subject or policy area being examined.

On the basis of what they have read, they will usually:

- Select who to invite to give oral evidence to the committee, in person
- Prepare briefing notes and suggested questions for MPs, for any oral evidence sessions
- Draft the final report (including suggestions for recommendations)

All written submissions are made available to the committee’s MPs. However, it is worth remembering that they are extremely busy people and are probably only likely to read about your submitted work in the digested ‘briefing notes’ format.

WHAT YOU NEED TO DO

Each call for evidence will typically provide a specific set of questions – ‘Terms of Reference’ (ToR) – that need to be addressed and a deadline for submission.

Select Committees aren’t able to accept as written evidence anything that has already been published elsewhere. It is therefore best to write an original submission if it is to have maximum effect. You can of course provide references for published work upon which your submission is based.

Use the ToRs as headings to structure your response. But note that you do not have to answer every question or section. Make sure your answers are clearly relevant to the ToRs – if you just shoe-horn chunks of your research into vaguely related headings, your submission will most likely be ignored.

Including an executive bullet point summary will aid the clerk in preparing the briefing notes and will ensure that your main points are given the best chance of being read.

Document specifications and instructions on how to submit your written evidence are usually included on the call for evidence page, or can be found here:

<http://www.parliament.uk/get-involved/have-your-say/take-part-in-committee-inquiries/commons-witness-guide/>

Once submitted, you should receive notification of receipt of your submission very quickly. All written evidence (and transcripts of oral evidence) are published on the committee’s webpage.

GOOD PRACTICES

• **Submit early (or at least by the deadline).** While committees will generally accept late submissions, they will usually decide quite early on (often before the deadline) who they want to call for oral evidence. The earlier the committee receives your submission, the more time they will have to read it thoroughly. It is also more likely to be used in any briefing materials, which they may start to prepare in advance of the deadline.

• **Provide relevant and readable answers.** Think brevity and clarity. If you can explain your ideas clearly and succinctly – and show clearly how they apply to the questions being asked – they are much more likely to be included in any briefing and to be quoted in the final report. You don’t need to explain your research project or methodology – just give the findings and recommendations.

• **Write for an intelligent layperson.** Imagine an intelligent and interested MP is reading your submission; they have 10 minutes to read it and all they know about the subject is what they have read in the news. Avoid jargon where possible, spell out acronyms etc.

• **Provide recommendations that are SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-Oriented).** 95% of the submissions are very good at saying what the Government was/is doing wrong, but only 5% actually suggest what Government should do instead. Committees are ultimately looking to make recommendations, so if you can give them some ideas for what these might be, this will vastly increase your chances of (a) being called to give oral evidence (b) being cited in the final report and (c) actually having an impact on policy.

PROVIDING ORAL EVIDENCE

HOW IT WORKS

Some of those providing written evidence will be invited to provide oral evidence where members of the committee will question them further. If you are invited to give oral evidence, committee clerks will be in touch with meeting details, including information about other invited witnesses and the likely line of questioning.

The focus of the evidence session is on the committee putting questions to witnesses. In special circumstances, it may be appropriate for witnesses to make an opening statement before questioning commences, but committees usually prefer to get questioning underway immediately.

Giving oral evidence to Parliament is generally a public process – press representatives may be present, proceedings are transcribed and later published online. Sessions are also usually broadcast live on <http://www.parliamentlive.tv/>

WHAT YOU NEED TO DO

If you are especially keen to give oral evidence, you should call up the committee and speak to whichever member of staff is leading the inquiry as soon as possible after the launch of an inquiry. You can ask them what they think the committee is especially interested in doing with the inquiry and obviously promote yourself as an expert in the area. It will be too late if you wait until the deadline for written submissions.

GOOD PRACTICES

- **Arrive in good time.** Make sure you know where you're going and give yourself plenty of time. Security procedures can be slow, and rooms difficult to find, so factor this in to your schedule on the day.
- **Be prepared.** Giving oral evidence to a panel of (potentially disinterested) politicians can be daunting. Take your notes and try, in advance, to summarise the key points you want to make in one or two sentences.

- **Keep to your brief.** Try to identify 2-3 simple core messages and stick to them. Don't allow yourself to be drawn into giving partisan statements or being labelled as pro-/anti- xyz. Focus on your research, and remain independent and neutral.
- **Make your points memorable.** Providing answers consistent with the main points of your written evidence (which you've hopefully highlighted in an executive bullet point summary) will not only help to reinforce your key messages, but will enable the committee to link back to your written work, and include references to it in their report.
- **Seize the opportunity for networking and raising awareness of your work.** It is well worth building relationships with committee members (as well as staff!), as a means to suggesting ideas or specific questions for future inquiries. If your response to the ToR is that they aren't asking the right question, it means you should have worked harder to influence thinking as the inquiry was being developed!

How can Policy@Sussex help?

Whether you're looking to make contact with a specific Select Committee member, or interested in submitting written/oral evidence, the Policy@Sussex team can offer expert guidance and support.

We can:

- Monitor and provide information on upcoming inquiries and policy-related activities related to your research
- Guide you through the process of submitting written and/or oral evidence
- Help to draft, review, format and edit written submissions
- Co-ordinate joint submissions
- Help you to identify key stakeholders and frame an engagement approach

Resources

The website www.parliament.uk has lots of very useful information about the work of Select Committees. Complete lists of each type of Select Committee can be found on the following web pages.

COMMONS SELECT COMMITTEES:

<http://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/>

LORDS SELECT COMMITTEES:

<http://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/lords-select/>

JOINT SELECT COMMITTEES:

<http://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/joint-select/>

OTHER COMMITTEES:

<http://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/other-committees/>