Written evidence from the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST) - RIS0015

Background

1. The Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST) is the UK Parliament's in-house source of independent, balanced and accessible analysis of public policy issues related to science and technology. Its aim is to inform parliamentary debate, and to keep parliamentarians informed about emerging and current science and technology issues and their policy implications. Originally set up in 1989 to support the use of research evidence from the natural sciences, since 2013 POST has also had a focus on social science (supported by the Economic and Social Research Council). This ensures that POST has access to a wider set of research and can advise across the full spectrum of public policy issues.

2. POST was originally established as a charitable foundation. In 1992, the House of Commons Information Committee, supported by the House of Lords, recommended that Parliament should fund POST for three years, and a subsequent review in 1995 extended this for a further five years. In July 2000 the House of Commons Information Committee recommended that POST should be established as a permanent bicameral institution, funded by the two Houses, in a ratio of 70% (Commons) / 30% (Lords).

3. POST is staffed by a team consisting usually of a Director, eight advisers and two administrative staff. It is supported by around 25 short term doctoral and post-doctoral fellowships funded by external organisations such as research councils and learned societies annually. This constitutes in-kind funding of over £180,000 per year.

4. POST’s objectives, outputs and future work programme are overseen by a Board of 14 parliamentarians, (10 from the Commons and four from the Lords) and four representatives from the research community. Officials from both Houses also attend Board meetings.

5. The Lords Committee Office funds the Lords’ share of the POST budget: around £180,000 per annum. POST costs are split 70:30 between Commons and Lords. The Commons’ share of POST funding is met by the Participation and Research & Information Team. In addition, the Lords benefits from the POST fellowships mentioned in (3) and from the funding POST currently receives via its ESRC grant, to support its social sciences work (approx. £600,000 to cover the period October 2016-October 2019).

6. This submission sets out:
   a. The support provided by POST to Lords Committees since 2010.
b. Evidence to address one of the key questions in the Committee’s review of investigative and scrutiny committees: How can Committees add most value to the scrutiny work of the House of Lords as a second chamber? This section is divided into two sub-sections:
   i. The importance of evidence to effective scrutiny.
   ii. The use of evidence by Lords Committees - Evidence presented in this section is taken from a recent POST report into the use of research in the UK Parliament.\footnote{Kenny C, Rose D, Hobbs A, Tyler C & Blackstock J (2017) \textit{The role of research in the UK Parliament}, London, Houses of Parliament.}

c. Suggestions to strengthen evidence gathering and analysis in Lords committees – building on the findings from the above project and the support provided by POST to such committees. These suggestions include:
   i. Embedding evidence review processes into the start of select committee inquiries;
   ii. Training committee staff on conducting evidence reviews and judging between different types and sources of evidence;
   iii. Adapting guidance for specialist advisers and witnesses (including existing templates where available) to emphasise evidence reviews.

**Support provided to Lords Committees by POST since 2010**

7. POST’s work focuses on five main outputs:
   a. Four-page summaries of public policy issues based on reviews of the research literature and interviews with stakeholders from across academia, industry, government and the third sector; they are peer reviewed by external experts. (POSTnotes: 20-30 per year).
   b. Responsive policy briefings based on mini-literature reviews and peer review since 2013 (POSTbriefs: 5-10 per year).
   c. Events ranging from private meetings open to invited guests only and public seminars (1-2 per month during session).
   d. Support provided to other parliamentary teams, including committees (see below).

8. Since 2010, POST has provided 139 instances of support to 27 different Lords Committees. 11 of these committees (41%) were ad hoc committees.\footnote{Ad Hoc Committees include: Arctic; Artificial Intelligence; Citizenship and Citizen Engagement; Digital Skills; Equality Act 2010 and Disability; Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act; Affordable Childcare; Financial Exclusion; Licensing Act 2000; Sustainability of the NHS; and Social Mobility. Other Lords Committees supported include: Communications; Economic Affairs; EU Select Committee; EU Energy and Environment Sub-Committee; EU External Affairs Sub Committee; EU Home Affairs Sub-Committee; EU Internal Market Sub-Committee; International Relations; Liaison Committee; and the Science and Technology Committee. Joint committees supported include: Banking Standards; the British & Irish Parliamentary Assembly, Intelligence and}
training for staff working in the Lords committee office. Figure 1 shows how the level of support provided by POST to Lords committees since 2010. The dashed line indicates the point from which data about POST’s outputs was routinely, or systematically, collected. Before this date (2014), data is less reliable.

Figure 1: Support provided to Lords Committees by POST since 2010

9. POST has provided six main types of support to Lords Committees since 2010 (see Table 1). Around half of this support (49%) has been providing advice on the focus of particular inquiries, relevant contacts or literature to consult, on technical issues such as carbon capture and storage, as well as reviewing briefing materials produced by committee staff. Just over a quarter (26%) of the support provided by POST has involved POST providing written or oral briefing materials to Lords Committees. Other support:
   a. 12% of the support provided by POST has been to provide contacts for relevant witnesses or specialist advisers;
   b. 7% was other types of support;
   c. 4% seconded staff (mainly PhD fellows on three-month placements);
   d. 4% training

Table 1: Types of work provided to Lords Committees since 2010

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<tr>
<th>Type of support</th>
<th>Examples of activities</th>
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| Advice          | Including advice on the focus of inquiries; explanations of technical issues; suggestions on lines of questioning/survey questions; and peer reviewing draft briefings and reports.  
- For example, in February 2017, POST provided advice on Security; and the National Security Strategy. |

3 This data has been collected by the author and is taken from information on the POST website, information saved onto POST’s shared drive and information provided by POST advisers on request.
to the Lords EU Home Affairs sub-committee for a one-off evidence session on the EU Data Protection Package (February 2017). This advice included peer reviewing a briefing note for Committee Members, providing background information on the Investigatory Powers Act, and summarising key findings and insights on how data is being used across lots of different sectors, and the policy issues that this raises.

### Briefing

Providing oral and written briefings on topics (these have been related to former/ongoing POSTnotes and on distinct topics, where this an evidence base, as requested). This category also includes drafting scoping notes for potential inquiries and drafting reports or sections of reports.


### Training

Organising and/or delivering (either in part or in full) of training sessions and/or seminars.

- Examples include: the Cross-House Research Methods, which aims to enable staff to develop a thorough understanding of the key concepts underpinning research methodology, in order to be able to critically appraise research and evidence from different sources and to apply these skills to finding and evaluating sources for written briefings and/or assessing written submissions. This course has been delivered to 27 members of House of Lords’ staff in 2014 and 2016 and is collaboratively administered with the Lords Committee Office, the Lords Library, the Commons Committee Office, and the Commons Library.

### Seconded fellows

Placing PhD students recruited through the POST fellowship schemes with other parliamentary teams and sections.

- For example, in September 2017, POST placed a fellow with the Lords Ad Hoc Committee on the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act for a period of three-months. This placement was funded by the

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4 Since 2010, POST has supported five committees in the House of Lords by drafting sections of the final committee reports. This includes: the Communications Committee in its Digital Switchover inquiry (Mar 2010); the Economic Affairs Committee on decibels and noise pollution for its inquiry on The Economic Impact on UK Energy Policy of Shale Gas and Oil (Apr 2014); the Ad Hoc Committee on Social Mobility in its inquiry into the transition from school to work for young people – POST drafted a separate report that was published alongside the Committee’s report analysing results from a survey with 650 people (Apr 2016); the EU British Irish Parliamentary Assembly in its inquiry into childhood obesity in the UK (Oct 2017); the EU sub-committee on Energy and Environment in its inquiry into Brexit: Energy Security (Dec 2017).

5 15 members of staff from the Lords Committee office and 12 members of staff from the Lords Library.
Natural Environment Research Council. Two former POST fellows are now Policy Analysts in the Lords Committee office working with the Science and Technology Committee and the Ad Hoc Committee on Artificial Intelligence.

<table>
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<th>Provided contacts</th>
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<tr>
<td>Providing details of contacts for potential witnesses, specialist advisers and seminar participants such as experts from academia, industry or government.</td>
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<td>• For example, in July 2016, POST provided staff on the EU British Irish Parliamentary Assembly (for which the staff is provided by the Lords Committee office) with a list of potential witnesses for oral evidence sessions on childhood obesity (in addition to a bespoke written briefing).</td>
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<th>Other support</th>
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<td>This category includes a range of support such as circulating calls for evidence to relevant stakeholders, conducting interviews/focus groups, organising and facilitating seminars and other events, and facilitating meetings with external stakeholders (for example horizon scanning sessions with the research councils)</td>
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<td>• For example, in April 2016, POST supported the Ad Hoc Committee on Social Mobility in its inquiry into the transition from school to work for young people. POST analysed over 600 responses to an online survey for 14–24 year-olds. POST presented the results orally to Committee Members and drafted a separate report that was published alongside the Committee’s report.</td>
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How can Committees add most value to the scrutiny work of the House of Lords as a second chamber?

The importance of evidence informing scrutiny

10. The first strategic objective in the House of Lords Business Plan 2017-18 is for the House of Lords Administration to “provide effective services to facilitate the work of the House.” The Business Plan states that the Administration will “strive continuously to improve our support for the work of the House: scrutinising legislation, holding the executive to account and debating public policy.”

11. Effective scrutiny is one of the critical measures for a well-functioning Parliament. “Good evidence is the backbone of good scrutiny”. Scrutiny might be boiled down as amounting to asking the right questions of the right people but a critical element of this is equipping

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6 Hammond E (2017) Good evidence is the backbone of good scrutiny. The Centre for Public Scrutiny 16 May [Accessed 19 February 2018]
Members with the right information to be able to do this. Without it, making effective recommendations is impossible.\(^7\)

12. In 2017, the Lords Constitution Committee, in its inquiry into the legislative process,\(^8\) “welcome[d] the fact that the process of policy development within Government now includes embedded mechanisms that place an emphasis on gathering and evaluating evidence.” The Committee’s report acknowledged that

“The evidence underlying government policies should normally be accessible for scrutiny by outside organisations—this is clearly not always the case at present. We also recognise, however, that there are situations in which evidence will not be available on which to base necessary policy choices: in such situations, the Government should make clear how it intends to develop an appropriate evidence base and when it intends to review the policy in light of that evidence. We recommend that the Government should routinely publish the evidence base for legislative or policy proposals. If a robust evidence base is not available, the Government should explain why it is nevertheless appropriate to proceed.”

13. In a Parliamentary context, the term ‘evidence’ can refer to many different types of information and can take a variety of formats. There are important distinctions in the extent to which "evidence" is tested and validated --- as in academia and the law. In its narrow sense, Parliamentary "evidence" (such as that submitted to a parliamentary committee) has no such quality control. Rather, to be treated as evidence it has to have been written exclusively for the committee and not previously published elsewhere. That is no proof of its accuracy or veracity.

14. Research evidence has a number of attributes that often make it more reliable, trustworthy and valuable compared with other types of evidence since it is associated with a robust, systematic methodology, which is often peer-reviewed, which enables the reader to judge the way the work was done.\(^9,10\) This definition perhaps applies most particularly to academic research, which usually bears these hallmarks.

**Evidence gathering and analysis in Lords select and legislative committees: Findings from a recent POST study**

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\(^9\) Richards D (2003) Not all evidence is created equal – so what is good evidence? Evidence Based Dentistry. 4, 17–18. doi:10.1038/sj.ebd.6400160

15. A recent report published by POST\textsuperscript{11} shed light on the evidence gathering and analysis processes of select and legislative committees in the Lords as well as the practices of staff from across the Lords committee office. This report involved 157 people from across Parliament. 27 participants were from the House of Lords (16 were Members of the House of Lords, 11 were members of staff from the Lords committee office\textsuperscript{12}). A draft version of the report was subject to two rounds of peer review by external members of the Steering Group\textsuperscript{13} and management from the Lords Committee Office, Lords Library, Commons Committee Office, and Commons Library.

16. The report also presents the findings from a case study into the Lords Ad Hoc Committee on National Policy for the Built Environment. This case study involved: shadowing the Committee for three months (observation of public and private meetings, including one Committee visit); interviews with seven Committee Members; and access to private briefing documents produced by Committee staff (for example, briefings produced for Committee Members in advance of oral evidence sessions).\textsuperscript{7}

17. POST’s report found that:
   a. Academic research formed a minority of submissions to the Lords Ad Hoc Committee on National Policy for the Built Environment (16% of written evidence submissions referred to academic research; 9% of oral evidence witnesses to the committee were from Higher Education Institutions).
   b. Nearly three-quarters of the evidence received by the Committee (73%) referred to research. However, a significant proportion of this was unclear about the type of research being referred to and its source (44% of the submissions that referred to research was unclear about the type of research being referred to and more than 25% was unclear about the source of this research). This makes it difficult for committee staff and members to assess the quality and strength on which submission claims are made.
   c. Staff and Members on the Lords Ad Hoc Committee on National Policy for the Built Environment (NPBE) faced a number of

\textsuperscript{12} An additional 23 members of staff completed the survey anonymously.
\textsuperscript{13} Members of the Steering Group that reviewed the draft report were: Dr Adam Cooper, Lecturer in Social Science and Public Policy, Department of Science, Technology, Engineering and Public Policy, UCL; Professor Emma Crewe, Professorial Research Associate, Anthropology Department, SOAS; Barbara Doig, AcSS, Independent Consultant; Margaret Macadam, Senior Evaluation Manager, Evaluation Strategy and Analysis team, Economic and Social Research Council; Professor Sandra Nutley, Director of the Research Unit for Research Utilisation, University of St Andrews; and Professor Meg Russell, Director of the Constitution Unit, UCL.
challenges in gathering and analysing evidence as part of its inquiry. These included:

i. Dealing with the large quantity of evidence received by the Committee (192 pieces of written evidence and 58 oral evidence witnesses). A combined volume of all of the written and oral evidence that the Committee had received was produced and numbered 1,964 pages.

ii. Limited time available to process the 192 written evidence submissions alongside, and in parallel to, preparing for oral evidence sessions (58 individuals gave oral evidence with the Committee holding 25 sessions). In addition, the Committee went on two visits. The final evidence session took place on 17th December 2015 and the report was published on 19th February 2016.

iii. Gathering evidence on all aspects of the inquiry’s scope, which covered planning, governance issues, sustainability, health and wellbeing, capacity and training.

18. In dealing with these challenges, the Committee’s staff relied significantly on the evidence that was submitted to the Committee, which was described as one Committee Member as “commentary pieces focusing on aesthetic aspects” (Peer, interview 49) with another Committee Member saying that most of the evidence the Committee received drew upon case studies and practical experience (Peer interview 28).

a. Select Committees such as the NPBE Committee do not generally draw on material outside of that which they receive as evidence. Unlike Committees in the Commons, Lords Committees do not have access to a budget in which to commission their own research. Although the Committee staff did undertake their own research and references to this were included in the briefings they provided to Committee members in advance of oral evidence sessions, the briefings they provided were based principally on the written evidence with some exceptions.

19. The approach of relying on the evidence that is submitted carries with it a number of risks.

a. Committees base their analysis and recommendations on the views of those with the time, resources and inclination to submit evidence rather than the best available evidence (which includes, but is not limited to, research).

b. A number of studies, including but not limited to the POST study, have demonstrated that select committees do not receive ‘written evidence’ from a balanced cross-section of potential providers: the government and the not-for-profit sector often dominate submissions and the higher education sector is usually underrepresented.\textsuperscript{14,15} When compounded with time and capacity
constraints, this often means that committee staff do not have enough time to do a thorough review of the literature, which leaves select committees heavily dependent on the evidence that they receive through formal processes.

c. This had a tangible impact on the NPBE inquiry. A number of relevant studies related to one aspect of the inquiry’s focus (the impact of the built environment upon people’s mental and physical health) were not included in the evidence base considered by the Committee. It was clear that Committee staff saw research as being relevant to the inquiry and were aware of some research outside of that submitted as evidence. However, the fact that the research identified about the relationship between the built environment and health did not feed into the Committee may suggest that the Committee were not aware of this type of research (in this case systematic reviews) or, that they were unable to find it.

d. Interviews with four committee members highlighted the value they place on the information and briefings provided to them by committee staff and the specialist adviser. It was unclear from these interviews as to whether members understood that the briefings were based predominantly on written evidence submissions (as is usual committee practice). For example, comparing the quotes below, the first quote may suggest that information provided by committee staff are based upon a wider literature review, whilst the second quote shows that this member is aware that it is not.

“I have the sense that the clerks have read the relevant research and filtered it to the committee. I certainly don’t feel deprived of research” (interviewee 27, Peer).

“Currently we receive briefings from committee staff that review the written evidence received or observations put forward in the written evidence, for example the TCPA reports x, y and z. We’ve not tasked the staff to produce a major piece of research. I, personally, would like them to provide an outline of what is known from existing research on the topics, ideally with the quality of such research to be assessed so that I know whether they are worth looking


at. It’s also important that the research is relevant to what we’re looking at. Reliability and quality of research is key” (interviewee 26, Peer; see also interviewee 30 and 49 both Peers).

**Strengthening the evidence gathering and analysis processes in Lords select committees**

20. One way to strengthen the evidence gathering and analysis of Lords committees is to embed an evidence review at the start of select committee inquiries.

a. POST has good links with organisations such as the Alliance for Useful Evidence, What Works Centres and others that undertake syntheses of evidence to inform decision-making at national and local levels. POST could act as a broker to facilitate better links between Lords committee staff and these organisations to pilot different approaches to ensuring evidence reviews feed into inquiries in the most effective and appropriate manner.

b. POST could collaborate with external organisations and individuals to pilot training for committee staff on conducting rapid evidence reviews and adapt this for suitability to parliamentary context. This could offer simple tips on how to distinguish between robustly compiled evidence and other forms of information including assessing both written and oral evidence and research.

c. POST could work with colleagues in the Lords Committee Office to develop guidance for committee staff on presenting and weighting findings from research, including outlining where disagreements occur and how such differences could be interpreted. Such guidance and resources could include an outline of the value of evidence syntheses to parliamentary scrutiny and could be incorporated into induction and professional development processes.

d. POST could work with colleagues in the Lords Committee office to:
   i. Adapt guidance for select committee witnesses and specialist advisers to emphasise evidence syntheses.
   ii. Develop existing templates and guidance to include advice on evidence syntheses – where to find them, how to interpret them and asking effective questions about the underlying evidence base of experts and witnesses.

21. POST would be happy to discuss any of these proposals further with Committee Members or staff if helpful.

**16 March 2018**