

INSTITUTE
FOR
GOVERNMENT

**BEING AN
EFFECTIVE
SELECT
COMMITTEE
MEMBER**



Being an effective select committee member

When you are elected as a select committee member – whether at the start of a parliament, or in a byelection for a committee seat part way through – you probably have a good idea why you want to be on the committee. If you are lucky your chair may take the time to talk to you about how they see your role on the committee, and your committee staff will be an invaluable source of practical information about procedure and practice. But who can tell you what can make the difference between being really effective and simply making up the numbers?

This publication draws together the views and ideas of people with experience of interacting with committees – MPs, ministers, civil servants, witnesses and external observers – on that very subject. It presents the observations and advice of the people who have gone before you, who have seen what works and the mistakes others have made. The material we present was gathered in the course of over 40 interviews and five workshops, conducted as part of an Institute for Government project on the impact of parliamentary committees on government.

Of course the approach you take to your committee work is a matter for you to decide, but this publication crystallises the experience of our interviewees to set out 12 key pointers to becoming an effective committee member. They are set out in the order you might expect to encounter them.



Know what outcomes you are trying to achieve

Before you even think about starting work, you need to have a clear idea of what you are trying to achieve. This applies to the overall direction of your committee as well as to specific inquiries.

In the last parliament some committees, including Defence, began by agreeing a broad framework for their activity. Some even issued a press release setting out what had been agreed. There was strong consensus among the committee members and staff we spoke to that this helped their committees to maintain a sense of common purpose – providing a guiding framework to which they could refer as new opportunities and challenges arose. Inevitably you will want that framework to retain flexibility so that you can respond to unforeseen issues and challenges.

Interviewees told us they thought select committees should aim to pursue a mixture of short-term tactical and longer-term strategic inquiries.

“Quick looks at very topical things are a part of the role of select committees. Parliament and the public want them to do that. It’s not going to be in-depth or as considered as your long-term study, but so what? But equally you do want some big long-term questions explored. So the committee on banking standards is a good example of that... I genuinely thought that it was a really innovative approach to somebody taking a thorny problem and handing it over to a bunch of parliamentarians to try and figure out. We should be doing more of that.”

[LIAM BYRNE MP, SHADOW MINISTER FOR UNIVERSITIES, SCIENCE AND SKILLS](#)

Deciding at the start of the parliament what you want your overall direction to be should help you, as a committee, to maintain an overall sense of focus as you make decisions about what individual inquiries to pursue.



Recognise your own unique contribution

Select committees offer an opportunity for members to utilise their individual skills and experience. Play to your strengths: recognise the knowledge and contacts you have that will be most useful to any given inquiry and ensure that your committee benefits from them. Your constituency work can often make a valuable contribution to committee inquiries.

“I think one of the wonderful things about the people on a select committee is each brings specialist skills. So if it was expenditure, there are certain members of the committee that I would listen to in terms of their analysis. It wouldn't be me. And I would trust their judgement. [And then you have] the back-up of the clerks, who have different specialist skills and knowledge.”

MADELEINE MOON MP, MEMBER OF THE DEFENCE COMMITTEE 2009–15

Chairs and committee members told us of their surprise that, despite having taken the trouble to be elected, some members showed a remarkable lack of commitment to their committee work.

Commitment means more than simply being present for the sessions you find of particular interest or for the few minutes when you have the floor to question a witness. Members told us that, to really understand the issues their committee was examining and the evidence base for what it might recommend, they needed to read the papers beforehand and be present for as much of each evidence session as possible.

“We have this extraordinary culture we all lapse into, I swore I wouldn't do it as a Member of Parliament and I started doing it within weeks, which is you go into meetings, listen for 30 seconds and go out again. Literally. You don't expect anyone else to speak for longer than a few minutes themselves. You don't listen.”

NICK HERBERT MP, FORMER MEMBER OF HOME AFFAIRS COMMITTEE AND HOME OFFICE MINISTER

Witnesses find it unsettling when committee members wander in and out and see it as lack of commitment on their part.



Understand the government department you're supposed to be scrutinising

Understanding the department you are supposed to be scrutinising is essential if your committee is going to make any sort of meaningful contribution to the way it develops policy, how it is administered or the way it spends money. Civil servants and ministers told us it was sometimes quite evident that committee members did not have even a basic level of knowledge of their department.

Invest time in building relationships with your department and seek to understand the main issues and challenges it faces. The civil servants we spoke to said they were keen, with the permission of ministers, to share this sort of thinking with committees.

“We had a day with the Work and Pensions Select Committee. It must have been shortly after the 2010 election. We invited them to the department, and most of the members came for most of the day. And it wasn't to 'capture' them; it was to share our broad analysis of the challenges and dynamics of our policy areas – what the labour market looked like, what pensions looked like in an ageing society – with slides and data. And we talked about ministers' priorities, what the stakeholders were saying, what voices were out there. And then to say, this is the context for the work we have under way.”

RICHARD HEATON, PERMANENT SECRETARY, CABINET OFFICE

If you want to be effective, it pays to ensure you are well briefed on the policy priorities and challenges of the department. The issues and challenges facing your department will constantly shift, so you will need to stay up to date with the changing landscape and make sure your knowledge evolves too.

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Know the policy context

Complement your departmental knowledge with external expertise about the policy areas for which your department is responsible. This expertise can help you to identify the right subjects for inquiry and the right questions to ask.

“Committees have a potentially important role to play by ensuring that the views of civil society organisations with different perspectives on how public policy objectives can be achieved, are factored into departmental policymaking.”

SIR IAN ANDREWS, TRANSPARENCY INTERNATIONAL AND FORMER MINISTRY OF DEFENCE CIVIL SERVANT

Being well informed will also earn you the respect of those with whom you interact, which will mean they are more likely to engage with your inquiries and listen to your conclusions.

“Stephen Dorrell, the Chair of the Health Committee, was almost universally respected in health from literally the nurse to the chief executive. And I think primarily it was because he did get out and about and made an effort to understand what was going on. So I think when he was then chairing that committee there was always a view that he was speaking with knowledge. So there wasn’t the grandstanding that some others do.”

HEALTH SECTOR INTERVIEWEE

Ensure that you get a range of perspectives on the challenges and opportunities facing the department from across civil society. Horizon scanning and setting the agenda can be important roles for committees. Several of our interviewees questioned why committees did not make more of this strength.



Decide what impact you want your inquiry to have

Inevitably you and your colleagues may have different motivations for embarking on a particular inquiry. These may include a multitude of personal, constituency, party and parliamentary goals alongside (or instead of) that of making government more effective.

But different methods of inquiry are appropriate for achieving different sorts of impact. One inquiry cannot be all things to all members – and some goals will be mutually incompatible. It is important for committees to recognise and make conscious decisions about the trade-offs involved in different approaches to inquiries. For instance, if the objective is to conduct a rapid inquiry within the timeframe of media response to an issue, there is likely to be a negative effect on the extent and quality of the evidence that is gathered. To stand the best chance of being effective, committees need to be clear about what impact they are trying to achieve before they design their inquiries accordingly.

One witness told us of his perception that members had used evidence sessions to pursue party political goals rather than being actually interested in finding out what he could tell them. It seems this undermined his sense of the seriousness of their inquiry.

“It feels party political. You’ll have one member grandstanding ... [with the objective] ‘I’m going to say that because I’m going to show that I am supportive of government policy around this area’. And then you’ve got the other side doing the complete opposite. And you just think, ‘We’re just being used as an opportunity for them to say what they want to say from a political perspective’ as opposed to actually being genuinely interested in what we are saying, what we are doing ... that’s just a secondary thing, it’s what it feels like.”

STEVE WHITE, CHAIR, POLICE FEDERATION OF ENGLAND AND WALES

A party political jibe in the course of an evidence session might play well with your party colleagues but may also have a detrimental effect on the impact your committee can have. Most people agree that select committees are at their most effective when they present a cross-party consensus. Evidence of party political division makes it much easier for the government to dismiss your committee’s recommendations.



Think about what evidence you need

The depth and breadth of evidence you and your fellow members collect will have a significant impact on the quality of your analysis and value of your recommendations. Work with your committee staff to ensure you hear from all the key players but also think about any unusual angles or unheard voices you could bring out.

Prior to an evidence session, staff will prepare a brief of suggested questions based on your witnesses' background and expertise. These are only suggestions, so do pursue your own vein of questioning if you think it could enhance the inquiry.

“Too many of the select committee members pitch up for parts of the sittings, read out the questions which the clerk has given them almost with their fingers underneath the questions. It’s an embarrassment. If you’re an effective minister, select committees prove no challenge at all.”

NICK HERBERT MP, FORMER MEMBER OF HOME AFFAIRS COMMITTEE AND HOME OFFICE MINISTER

But be aware that every witness will have been invited because they have a specific area of knowledge or experience to contribute to the inquiry. The questions in the brief will be designed to draw that out. If all members simply ask their own questions, you may risk missing out on areas of valuable expertise.

“[Committee members] tend, if not robustly chaired, to kind of go off track a bit. And I suppose I’ve been conscious that when the staff are putting the reports together, they’re quite often hanging more on the written evidence and written submissions than what they’re getting from the oral session simply because they’ve kind of gone off and played with the fairies for a little while.”

SELECT COMMITTEE SPECIAL ADVISER



Get the best out of witnesses

Not all witnesses are the same – some are experts, some practitioners, some decision-makers to be formally held to account. You should think about the reason each witness is appearing before the committee, adapt your style accordingly and take account of the information to which they are privy. Give credit to those who are open and straightforward with you.

“If you’re really smart you won’t choose to be adversarial or inquisitorial, you will flex your style according to the issue. But if you just do one – if you’re just adversarial they will become defensive and if you’re just inquisitorial they will become complacent. So you need to flex your style according to the issue.”

[SELECT COMMITTEE WITNESS](#)

Interviewees told us that the most impressive members were those who actually listened to the answers that witnesses gave and then used follow-up questions to probe and drill down into those answers. Absorb as much information as possible prior to an evidence session so that you can hold your own in questioning your witness. Witnesses will quickly sense any gaps in your knowledge. Be prepared for them to test you.

“The better witnesses are quite good at probing your knowledge. When you ask a question they will say, ‘That’s interesting. Can you remind me of that exact quote you just reflected?’ And they are basically testing whether you know what you’re talking about.”

[JULIAN HUPPERT, FORMER MP AND HOME AFFAIRS COMMITTEE MEMBER](#)

In the previous parliament, some committees benefited from external training to develop their questioning techniques.

“One of the best sessions I ever had was in the last parliament ... when we had somebody in to teach us about how to prepare and ask questions. I found that very interesting and it related back to the training I’d had on interview techniques in industry.”

[JOHN THURSO, FORMER MP AND CHAIR OF FINANCE AND SERVICES COMMITTEE](#)



Design your outputs for impact

The main outputs of a committee are usually its reports. These typically rehearse all the evidence a committee has received, draw conclusions and make recommendations. But different sorts of report may be appropriate depending on the audience you are trying to reach and what you are trying to tell them. For example, committees have experimented with shorter reports and easy-read versions.

But you should remember that simply producing a report does not guarantee anyone will read it, let alone act on its recommendations. Consider how to frame your recommendations to increase the chance that your committee will achieve its intended impacts.

“There are clearly not 165 things that are important, actually there are probably five things that are important. And to actually come down and say, ‘These are the five things that we need to change’. I think you are likely to have more impact with that kind of way of doing it.”

[SELECT COMMITTEE WITNESS](#)

Recommendations need to be clear, implementable and financially realistic.

“They seem to live in a resource unconstrained world, and that’s a problem. I think pretty much every time I’ve been before them, they say ‘Well why don’t you do more on that?’ And then the answer is ‘Because in the end I’ve got a limited amount of money and I have to prioritise’.”

[JON THOMPSON, PERMANENT UNDER-SECRETARY, MINISTRY OF DEFENCE](#)

In the last parliament some committees also thought creatively about different sorts of output to support their reports. For example the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs committee produced a short film to accompany the publication of its report on Primates as Pets. In some cases a report may not be necessary. Evidence sessions themselves can create the impact you are trying to achieve. Meetings and seminars may be a more effective way of disseminating your findings.

**“Recommendations
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Follow up and evaluate what you have achieved

Don't think of a report as the end of the inquiry process. If you want your conclusions and recommendations to have impact you need to think about how to disseminate your findings to those who may not read a report. Unfortunately that may include civil servants and ministers in the department you are scrutinising.

Regular follow up with the government will maintain the pressure for them to respond to your recommendations. If you forget about your recommendations, so will everyone else.

"We regularly did follow up and that was because that was one of the complaints about the previous committee – that we weren't doing follow up enough. When I became the chairman, the committee members said, 'And we never follow up what we do'. Well that was something that we decided then to put right ... in this parliament, we have every six months gone back over our previous reports and written letters to the department to say, 'Where are we on this?' And so I think the follow-up system has become embedded in the way the committee works, and that's good."

JAMES ARBUTHNOT, FORMER MP AND CHAIR OF DEFENCE COMMITTEE

There is an important distinction between implementation of your individual recommendations and achieving the overall outcomes that you want to see. Sometimes even if the government accepts your argument and makes the change you called for, it will not actually lead to the outcome you envisaged. So you need to stay focused on the outcomes and ask yourself if they are being realised.

One example we heard was about the role played by the Home Affairs Committee in the abolition of the UK Border Agency:

“The abolition of the UKBA [UK Border Agency] ... [is] a possible vehicle to achieve the result you want, which is improved Home Office visas and immigration operation. But it’s a mistake to regard that as a result in its own right. So it’s an impact but it’s not necessarily a good impact. I also think that that has been achieved at the expense of some pretty serious damage to morale within the organisation.”

[SELECT COMMITTEE STAKEHOLDER](#)

Very few committees take the time to engage in self-evaluation. This is a big mistake. Feedback from witnesses, civil servants, ministers and other committee interlocutors could be invaluable in helping your committee to understand what impact it is having and how to increase it.



Engage with the public

Most committee members have a strong sense that they are conducting scrutiny at least partly on behalf of the public, asking the questions that their constituents would want asked.

“I explained that actually I was elected by the public who pay his salary to ask the questions that they needed asking; to ask questions in the way that a) they understood the question; and b) they understood the answer. And therefore, he had the responsibility to provide an answer to my questions in a way that not only I understood [but] the man on the street understood.”

MADELEINE MOON MP, MEMBER OF THE DEFENCE COMMITTEE 2009–15

In this way committees can make a contribution to public understanding of issues.

“It’s a matter of contributing to the public debate, trying to take it that bit further forward, trying to explain issues that may not have been part of the public discourse. Much of the discourse is set by the media. And that often is not a very comprehensive, wide-ranging or deep discussion. And I think there’s a role for Parliament in getting a better understanding of the issues concerned that the select committee is investigating. Often just being able to shed light on it and inform the public.”

ANDY LOVE, FORMER MP AND MEMBER OF THE TREASURY COMMITTEE

But it is wrong to assume that if your committee produces a report, the public will know about it. In our digital media age it is harder and harder for committees to ensure that their voices are heard amid the clamour of other commentators and experts. Committees need to expend energy on finding effective, perhaps innovative ways to engage the public at all stages of their inquiries.

That means ensuring that the evidence sessions and reports are relevant and user-friendly. It also means making the inquiry process accessible. In the last parliament committees experimented with lots of ways of engaging the public: getting out of Westminster to take evidence around the country; using traditional media, such as radio phone-ins; and social media tools to collect views via web forums, ideas for questions via Twitter, and blogging on relevant issues.



Use the media appropriately

Media attention should not be seen as an end in itself. Some of the most damning criticism we heard from interviewees outside Parliament related to occasions when select committee members were seen to have pursued media attention for its own sake, or to raise their personal profile, rather than to publicise the issue they were examining.

Politics will always play a role in committee work but party political views are best expressed in the context of the evidence rather than through grandstanding. As a constituency MP you will often be able to use the media to explore how issues which arise via committee work play out in local circumstances.

You need to be clear about what you are trying to achieve when you seek media attention for your committee's work, and think about your strategy for doing so. There are two main types of impact which committees can achieve through the media. The first is awareness raising – using a committee's position within our democratic system of government to highlight issues and concerns. The media is absolutely necessary to achieving this sort of impact.

“Producing words on paper that nobody knows about, you might as well have not produced them.”

JAMES ARBUTHNOT, FORMER MP AND CHAIR OF DEFENCE COMMITTEE

The second type of impact which committees can achieve through the media involves putting pressure on accountability relationships, that is increasing the pressure on government and others to act by using publicity as a tool for embarrassment.

“The government is more likely to respond to something that has a background of pressure put on the government from publicity.”

JAMES ARBUTHNOT, FORMER MP AND CHAIR OF DEFENCE COMMITTEE

It can be tempting to exaggerate committee findings to secure a headline, but doing so risks undermining the impact of your more considered conclusions and makes it difficult for you to prioritise the most important issues.



Make best use of available resources

Committees are tackling an enormous scrutiny challenge on a relatively limited budget. Make sure your committee takes full advantage of the resources available to it: specialist advisers; the Scrutiny Unit; the House of Commons Library; the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology; the National Audit Office (NAO) and other external bodies; and the committee office budgets for research and travel.

“The NAO provides incredibly powerful data and analysis, sometimes good and sometimes less good. But it provides you with a database which means our own reports are grounded in facts. That can make our reports more powerful than those of committees who base their findings on oral evidence.”

MARGARET HODGE MP, FORMER CHAIR OF PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMITTEE

Invest time in understanding the role of your committee team – clerks, committee specialists, inquiry managers and administrative staff. They are there to support the entire committee and not just the chair. Make use of their institutional memory and expertise to enhance your own contribution to the committee’s priorities.

“Our staff really value interaction with all members of a committee. By getting to know the team well, members can help them to ensure the briefing and support they are given matches their needs. Committee teams are now usually co-located with expert researchers in the Library working in similar fields, allowing members to tap into a hub of expertise at a single point of contact.”

DR JOHN BENDER, CLERK ASSISTANT AND DIRECTOR GENERAL, CHAMBER AND COMMITTEE SERVICES

Conclusion

Your role as a select committee member is only one of the many hats you will wear as a Member of Parliament. Like all your other commitments it will be squeezed into less time than you would like. We hope the collective wisdom captured here will enable you to make best use of the time you devote to your committee work and ensure that you are as effective as you can possibly be.

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