



# The Role of Research in the UK Parliament



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## Parliamentary representatives

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- Chris Clarke, Clerk, Journal Office, House of Lords (former member)
- Paul Evans, Clerk of Committees, House of Commons
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# 1. Executive summary

## 1.1 Context

In democratic societies, the policy landscape is largely driven by slowly shifting consensuses of values. The ultimate forum for the democratic articulation of these values is Parliament, where elected and appointed Members debate, legislate and scrutinise government business on topics that are widely varied and often rapidly evolving. Topics such as immigration, infrastructure, healthcare and welfare cannot be adequately addressed simply by using common sense, experience, precedent or ideological principles. They must be subject to consideration in the context of verifiable information.

Today, the importance of using rigorous evidence to inform public decision-making is widely accepted (OECD, 2015). However, while much is known about the use and influence of evidence in some institutional and topical contexts, there remain some important gaps. One largely overlooked arena of public decision-making essential to the healthy functioning of democracies is that of legislatures (Spruijt et al., 2014; Tyler, 2013b). Understanding how evidence is currently defined and used in these complex environments is critical for determining how it could more effectively be mobilised to support effective governance within our democratic societies.

## 1.2 The UK Parliament

The UK Parliament is currently composed of 650 Members of the House of Commons (MPs) and 802<sup>1</sup> eligible Members of the House of Lords (Peers<sup>2</sup>). Across both Houses, there are thus well over a thousand active politicians, spanning a wide range of personal interests, expertise and politics, and representing diverse constituencies.

Within this context, MPs and Peers work to uphold the central purpose of the legislative branch of a democratic government: reconciling the diverse and often conflicting interests of a society's constituent groups and communities through the democratic means of peaceful dialogue and compromise. They do so by performing the same core functions as most democratic legislatures around the world (detailed practices vary between countries): (i) to facilitate public deliberation over any and all matters of societal concern [debate]; (ii) to create legal and budgetary frameworks that guide how those matters should be addressed [legislation]; and (iii) to oversee programmes enacted by government [scrutiny]. Parliament is supported by roughly 3,500 staff appointed directly by Members (some are based in Westminster; others in constituencies) and 2,500 politically impartial officials.

<sup>1</sup> On 25 April 2017, prior to the dissolution of the 2015–17 parliament, the size of the House had increased to 836, of whom 802 Members were eligible to attend (House of Lords Library, 2017).

<sup>2</sup> The term 'Peer' is used as a shorthand to refer to all eligible members of the House of Lords, including Bishops. Not all members of the House of Lords are eligible to take part in the work of the House. Some are ineligible because they are a member of the judiciary; some are taking a leave of absence; some have retired. The number of eligible peers changes over time, but was 802 at the time of writing.



### 1.3 Project Overview

The partnership between ESRC, UCL STEaPP and POST has provided an invaluable foundation from which to begin systematically exploring evidence use in legislatures around the world. Since 2013, we have investigated how evidence is conceived and used within the UK Parliament. We were particularly interested in how ‘research evidence’ was used in Parliament, which we define as research compiled using a rigorous, systematic methodology that is often subjected to peer review.

This definition applies most particularly to academic research, which usually bears these hallmarks, but also more widely; for example, rigorous research can be produced by think-tanks, NGOs and other organisations. Thus it would be wrong to restrict ‘research evidence’ to material produced solely by academics (although we were particularly interested in this group). While we were interested in how ‘research evidence’ was used in Parliament, we were particularly concerned with how parliamentarians and their staff interpreted research, and how research in its broadest sense was used to support parliamentary work.

One of the purposes of the study was to inform the work of the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST) – a bicameral office within Parliament with the explicit remit to support and advance the use of research evidence. Detailed considerations from this report and potential actions for POST are outlined in a separate report, which has been submitted to the POST Board for consideration.

Throughout this project, we have employed surveys, interviews, participant observation and documentary analysis to examine how parliamentarians (MPs and Peers) and staff define and use research evidence, and to explore the diverse routes through which evidence is mobilised throughout Parliament. This has included four in-depth case studies; for these, participant observation, documentary analysis and interviews were conducted for two select committees (one in the Commons and one in the Lords) and two pieces of legislation as they passed through committee stage in both the Commons and the Lords.

During the course of this study, 157 people were surveyed and/or interviewed, across three main categories (see Table 1 for full breakdown of people involved):

- **MP and Peers** [hereafter ‘parliamentarians’<sup>3</sup>] ‘balance a number of commitments in Parliament, including scrutinising legislation, examining government policy, questioning ministers or raising issues of importance to the public. For MPs, this also includes responding to constituents’ enquiries.
- **Members’ staff** are employed by MPs with resources allocated by Parliament to support their work. Staff numbers and where they are located (constituency or Westminster) varies between MPs. Work varies and can include preparing materials for debates, drafting questions and amendments to Bills, managing casework and general office work.<sup>4</sup>
- **Parliamentary staff** are employed directly by the House of Commons or the House of Lords to ensure that Parliamentarians have access to the impartial and non-technical but authoritative information and research they need.

<sup>3</sup> There are important distinctions between the roles of MPs and Peers. For the purposes of this report, however, we frequently treat them as a single category – ‘parliamentarians’ – and identify distinctions only where relevant for our findings.

<sup>4</sup> Peers do not receive any funding to employ staff, but may still employ their own researchers through other means. Peers’ researchers were outside the scope of this project.

## 1.4 Key Findings

### 1.4.1 Definition of research and evidence in Parliament

We were initially interested in how research evidence, such as (but not limited to) academic research, was used in Parliament (see Section 2.1). Yet, it quickly became clear that the term 'research' is broadly interpreted by people in Parliament, so we had to move beyond a narrow definition of 'research evidence', which would only include information produced in a rigorous, systematic manner. Rather, our interviews and survey responses illustrated that Parliament is interested in knowledge of all types: practical, tacit, empirical and theoretical (see following summary on 'Types and sources of research').

In line with the study's original intention, we have been able to learn lessons for how to present academically-derived research evidence to Parliament. In addition, the decision to embrace Parliament's wider definition of research has important implications; for example, to those outside the higher education community who should be reassured that research of all kinds is welcome in Parliament.

A key finding of this project was the fact that people in Parliament generally did not distinguish between different types of research. This is important in a number of ways; firstly, it suggests that there is limited knowledge of the methodologies associated with different types of research, which may affect the rigour of interpretation. Secondly, it makes it difficult to separate out when respondents were talking about 'research evidence' as opposed to 'other research'. Where we investigate how research feeds into Parliament, and the factors affecting this, we therefore refer to research in a broad sense, identifying messages for the 'research evidence' community (e.g. the higher education sector) where we can.

### 1.4.2 Usefulness of research in Parliament

We asked 11 MPs, 24 MPs' staff and 50 parliamentary staff to determine the extent to which research was useful in their work. (Peers did not take part in the survey.) Nearly all respondents (83/85) strongly agreed or agreed that research was useful to them in their parliamentary work. Thus, at the very least we can infer that research in its broadest sense is useful for parliamentary work, although it is used for many different purposes (see below).

### 1.4.3 Types and sources of research used in Parliament

Several different types of research were used by people in Parliament and interviewees reflected on the merits of each. In our survey, 94 people answered a question about the types of research that they used most often in their work, and usage varied between roles. MPs and MPs' staff selected statistics most frequently. In contrast, Parliamentary staff selected expert opinion most frequently. Parliamentary staff also said that they drew on a broader range of types of research than MPs or MPs' staff. Overall, the fewest types of research were referred to by MPs.

Sources of research were similarly diverse, including the parliamentary libraries, external organisations, individuals, government departments and academia. The case studies of the scrutinising and legislative committees illustrated that not-for-profit organisations, particularly charities, dominated the submitted written and oral evidence. As a source of evidence for select committees and public bill committees, the higher education sector (most likely to submit 'research evidence' as defined here) was represented much less well.

Research fed into Parliament in a variety of ways, including through formal or informal avenues associated with select committees and public bill committees, unsolicited mail, personal contacts, mailing lists and through active searching.

#### **1.4.4 Purpose of research use in Parliament**

The purpose of research use was similarly varied and differed by respondent type. Research was used in the following ways:

- To support effective scrutiny and to inform policy – in other words, using research to hold the Government to account, to scrutinise legislation (suggesting amendments if necessary) or departmental policy, or to inform the work of select committees (e.g. questioning committee witnesses or using submitted evidence to inform their work).
- To provide background knowledge – a vital part of being able to scrutinise policy and inform suggested changes to policy or legislation. Research was used to provide useful background knowledge, for example to a parliamentary debate or select committee work.
- To inform opinions – research was a useful part in enabling MPs and staff to form views about an issue.
- To substantiate pre-existing views or hypotheses – research was used as supporting evidence for a particular view, sometimes one already held.
- To provide balance – research was useful for presenting the view from two different sides of the debate, for example as part of parliamentary debate or committee scrutiny.
- To provide credibility and enhance public image – research was used to enhance the credibility of arguments put forward by MPs, for example in Commons debates. This would have the secondary effect of enhancing public image if constituents felt that their MP was well-informed.
- To score political points – research was used politically to highlight areas of weakness in an opponent's argument.

#### **1.4.5 Factors affecting the use of research in Parliament**

Several factors influenced the ability of people in Parliament to use research, and many of them were inter-linked. In our survey, 88 people answered a question that asked them to rank factors that were important in deciding whether to read or use a piece of research. Overall, the credibility of the source was ranked as the most important factor in helping respondents to decide whether to read or use a piece of research, followed by the relevance of the research. Also influential were time, ease of use and ease of sourcing, as well as a range of other factors; but it is important to note that answers varied by respondent type. Interviewees reflected on several other factors that influenced research, including the specific parliamentary processes associated with select committees and public bill committees. Lack of time constrained research use for all groups, but particularly for MPs.

Challenges to the use of academic sources of research evidence were raised by interview respondents, including lack of accessibility, poor presentation and communication, and limited relevance.

#### **1.4.6 Next steps**

In identifying and discussing the factors that promote or restrict the use of research in Parliament, interviewees volunteered a series of suggestions to improve the use of research evidence in Parliament. These suggestions have implications for a variety of audiences, including the research community, research advisory bodies such as POST, and Parliament itself. We reflect on specific messages targeted towards different audiences.

## Higher education sector

Our findings suggest that academic research is not cutting through; for example, the voluntary sector outperforms the higher education sector in terms of written and oral evidence submissions to committees in Parliament. Academic research was criticised for being submitted too late (or not at all) to be influential in parliamentary processes. Academic sources of research were also criticised for being poorly presented with overly technical jargon, and hence for taking too much time to digest. Underlying these problems is a limited understanding among academics of how Parliament operates. Four broad areas for improvement were raised by interviewees:

- *Better communication and presentation of research*, including a role for POST and other knowledge brokers such as the parliamentary libraries in working with academics.
- *Understanding of, and engagement in, parliamentary processes*. Members of the research community would benefit from closer engagement with and a better understanding of how Parliament works. As a result of the project's findings, POST is developing a web hub for academic researchers, which will provide guidance and information for researchers on many of the points above, as well as case studies of academics who have worked with Parliament and video interviews with parliamentary staff.
- *Provision of relevant research*. On the one hand, Parliament could communicate research needs better to the academic community, but academics could also take steps to build relationships with key individuals and knowledge brokers, such as POST and the parliamentary libraries, in order to identify relevant needs.
- *Enhance credibility*. Parliamentarians and their staff ranked credibility as the most important factor determining research use, although the method of determining credibility was unclear. Academics thus need to continue to display rigour and integrity, and focus on building a reputable name for themselves.

## Parliament

Our findings suggest that thought is needed on how to communicate to parliamentarians and their staff what research evidence is, and how other forms of 'research' might differ from a methodological point of view. While there was some understanding that academic or science-based research evidence is often more robustly generated than other forms of knowledge, the importance of a rigorous evidence-base was not always appreciated. Credibility was deemed important, but the method for determining it was not always clear, and it appeared that limited evidence appraisal was conducted. This provides an opportunity for key knowledge brokers, such as POST and the libraries. Consideration should be given to providing training for parliamentarians and their staff on how to source and appraise research, offering simple tips on how to distinguish between robustly compiled evidence and other forms of information.

The nature of such training might differ between roles; for example, it might be more detailed for parliamentary staff and MPs' staff, people who this project found were important for sourcing and using research. Since MPs generally relied upon staff to source research, in part because of tight parliamentary schedules, training for this audience could be different. Such training might provide a list of key questions for MPs to ask staff about the research that they are sourcing on their behalf – skills that would also be useful when questioning select committee witnesses and in parliamentary debate.

This study also provides insight on some examples where the use of research evidence in Parliament is being hampered by the parliamentary processes themselves. Two examples are worth mentioning, not least because they have been touched on in previous work, and corroborated and expanded upon in this study.

The first is the fact that select committees do not receive 'written evidence' from a balanced cross-section of potential providers. Although some effort is made to avoid 'the usual suspects', the government and the not-for-profit sector often dominate submissions and the higher education sector is usually underrepresented.

This problem is compounded by the fact that constraints of time and capacity often mean that there is not 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. The second example is the way that expert witnesses are selected to speak before public bill committees.

The selection of witnesses by the usual channels (whips and party leadership) can mean that witnesses serve political purposes, rather than providing a balanced and nuanced commentary on the evidence relating to the legislation. Addressing these concerns will require pragmatic, informed choices about how to treat research evidence within formal parliamentary procedures.

### Future research

This study examined only the parliamentary demand-side of the research-to-use ecosystem. Equally important are the supply-side researchers and the many intermediaries who translate research for parliamentary use. These actors operate in a complex environment shaped by (and shaping) political and funding priorities. Our analysis of the impact case studies from the 2014 REF (which was conducted in parallel with this study) shows that Parliament is thought (by the submitting academics) to be an important beneficiary of research, with 20% of cases claiming substantive engagement with Parliament (Kenny, 2015). Further research on the supply-side of research would be instructive.

There is also much to gain from expanding the research model used in this project to explore the use of evidence in other legislatures, further filling the gap in literature on evidence use in legislatures. While we noted that some studies have looked at research use in legislatures in various countries, it is a relatively unexplored topic. Research on 'civic epistemologies' (Jasanoff, 2005) has illustrated that evidentiary standards, science advisory structures, methods of policy reasoning and institutional arrangements for public decision-making vary markedly between countries (Miller, 2008). Thus, although the UK example illustrates the need for further study elsewhere, the particularities of the UK Parliament restrict its wide relevance. Further research could investigate how legislatures in Europe and elsewhere define and use research, as part of a programme of research aimed at guiding science advisory structures in different settings.

## 2. Project aims

### 2.1 Research focus

Despite the widespread rejection of a linear relationship between research and policy (Radaelli, 1995; Juntti et al., 2009; Owens, 2015), it is clear that research can be an influential factor in decision-making. Indeed, it is now widely accepted (OECD, 2015) that science (in its broadest sense) “is necessary for making sound policy decisions in modern societies” (Jasanoff, 2011; 20).

This project set out to explore the use of research in Parliament, focusing particularly on ‘research evidence’. This term has been used in several studies (e.g. Alliance for Useful Evidence, 2016; Lavis et al., 2009; Orton et al., 2011). Citing a definition from a report on evidence and social care (Frost et al., 2006), the Alliance for Useful Evidence (2016) characterises ‘research evidence’ as evidence originating from published research articles or unpublished sources, such as internally conducted evaluations. They note that ‘research evidence’ is set apart from other forms of research by its relevance, rigour and independence since it is associated with a robust, systematic methodology, which is often peer-reviewed. This definition perhaps applies most particularly to academic research, which usually bears these hallmarks, but it does also have wider relevance; for example, rigorous research can be produced by think-tanks, NGOs and other organisations. We thus use the term ‘research evidence’ to refer to research produced by any individual or organisation in a rigorous, systematic way, which has made use of peer review.

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Within the wide scope of how ‘research evidence’ is used in Parliament, we were particularly concerned with how parliamentarians and their staff interpreted research, and how research in its broadest sense was used to support parliamentary work. It quickly became clear that research was interpreted broadly by people in Parliament, moving beyond a narrow definition of ‘research evidence’, which would only include information produced in a rigorous, systematic manner. Rather, our interviews and survey responses illustrated that people working in Parliament are interested in knowledge of all types: practical, tacit, empirical and theoretical (see summary on ‘Types and sources of research’ below).

While we have still been able to learn lessons for how to present academically-derived research evidence to Parliament, it is important to recognise that research is interpreted broadly in Parliament. This finding, for example, gives confidence to those outside the higher education community that research of all kinds is welcome in Parliament, a key part of the democratisation of knowledge.

A key point elaborated in this project was the fact that people in Parliament generally did not distinguish between different types of research. This is an important point in many ways; firstly, it suggests that there is limited knowledge of the methodologies associated with different types of research, which may affect the rigour of outcomes. Secondly, it makes it difficult to separate out in the report the times when respondents were talking about ‘research evidence’ as opposed to ‘other research’. Where we investigate how research feeds into Parliament, and the factors affecting this, we therefore refer to research in a broad sense, identifying messages for the ‘research evidence’ community (e.g. higher education sector) where we can.

As such, this report considers:

- how research is defined in Parliament
- how research feeds into Parliament
- the factors (processes, mechanisms and cultures) shaping the use of research in Parliament.



Volume Two of this report provides appendices to this report. These include appendices related to the methodology, a selection of themed interview quotations used to support extracts used in this report and a detailed account of the four case studies. Where we henceforth signpost appendices, each can be found in Volume Two.

One of the purposes of the study was to inform the work of a bicameral office within Parliament with an explicit remit to support and advance the use of research evidence. Detailed considerations from this report and potential actions for POST are outlined in a separate report, which has been submitted to the POST Board for consideration.

## 2.2 Background

The UK Parliament performs an important democratic function in making new laws, debating the issues of the day, and holding the UK Government to account. While the government-of-the-day usually generates policies with assistance from the Civil Service, it is Parliament that tends to scrutinise these policies, or the legislation that results. Thus, on the whole Parliament does not make policy, but rather tries to make the Government's policy better. In undertaking these roles, MPs and Peers, as well as the staff that support them, can draw upon many sources of information and research (Davies, 2004).

While the research community has investigated the use of evidence in a wide range of policy environments, the specific arena of legislatures has tended to be overlooked (Geddes et al., 2017; Kenny et al., 2017; Tyler, 2013b). Thus, although there are many studies highlighting the complexity of research-policy interfaces (e.g. Cairney, 2016; Juntti et al., 2009; Nutley et al., 2007; Owens, 2015; Rose, 2014a) and several papers that provide insight for those seeking to overcome barriers to research use (e.g. Cairney et al., 2017; Oliver et al., 2014; Rose et al., 2017; see also Tyler, 2013a), their relevance to legislatures is largely unexplored. Many of these papers focus on government policy or on providing a detailed examination of research use in executives (e.g. Cherney et al., 2015; Talbot and Talbot, 2014; van der Arend, 2014).

Relatively little scholarship has focused on research use in parliaments around the world, including the UK. Interesting insights are provided by those few scholars who have addressed research-policy interfaces in legislatures. In a US context, Dodson et al., (2015) found that state legislators favoured statistics when working on health-related issues, and noted the influence of external lobbying groups on policy (see also Hastie and Kothari [2009] for the influence of Canadian tobacco lobbyists on legislation). Internal groups to parliaments, such as political parties and networks such as caucuses in the US Congress and intergroups in the European Parliament, can also help to bridge the gap between research and policy (Ringe et al., 2013). Also useful in bridging the gap are links between researchers and policy-makers, as noted in the context of developing countries (Datta and Jones, 2011), and the ability to link evidence supply and demand (Canadian Library of Parliament, 2009).

A lack of research use in legislatures has also been noted. A study by Gollust et al., (2014) in Minnesota found that less than half of legislative materials cited evidence in discussions around obesity-related Bills (also Kite et al., 2014). Other work has identified barriers to the use of science and technology in legislatures, including in a detailed study of the Ugandan Parliament (Nath, 2011).

In the UK, one study by Geddes et al., (2017) identifies various barriers preventing the use of academic research in the UK Parliament. Based on a workshop held with eight parliamentary staff, they find several barriers to the optimal use of research, including time constraints and poor presentation. The study noted that, after government sources, charities and not-for-profit organisations were the largest contributors of evidence to select committees (also Berry and Kippin, 2014; Turnpenny et al., 2013). Padilla and Hobbs (2013) also identified a series of challenges for and made various suggestions to improve its work linking science and policy in Parliament. Other useful studies include Begley et al., (2015) who found limited use of evidence in parliamentary scrutiny of the National Minimum Wage Act 1998 and the *Academies Act 2010*; while Bates et al., (2014) found that academic sources were useful in scrutiny of the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 2008 (also Kettell, 2010). Crewe (2017) has pioneered ethnographic approaches to the study of MPs and Peers at work, providing interesting insights into the culture and practice of parliamentary decision-making. One of Crewe's previous studies (2015) had similarly identified that non-governmental organisations could be influential in drafting and supporting amendments to legislation.

The lack of attention placed on legislatures is a significant shortcoming of existing literature on research-policy interfaces, particularly in the light of studies that show the important policy-making role of the UK Parliament. Russell and Cowley (2016), for example, show that the UK Parliament has a significant role to play in shaping policy. Various parliamentary processes shape policy, including select committee scrutiny and public bill committee debate. (Fisher, 2015; Hindmoor et al., 2009; Turnpenny et al., 2013; White, 2015, 2016). Benton and Russell (2013), for example, were able to identify several occasions where a select committee inquiry had changed existing policy. Furthermore, Thompson (2013, 2014, 2016) argues that the role of public bill committees has also been overlooked. Thompson (2014) found that the inclusion of written and oral evidence sessions in these committees could stimulate substantive changes to government Bills.

Brazier et al., (2008) explored factors affecting the passage of legislation. Based on five case studies and 80 interviews of MPs, Peers, Ministers, government and parliamentary officials, they found that scrutiny did influence legislation. Lastly, Goodwin and Bates (2015) noted that the UK Parliament could play a significant role in agenda-setting using a case study of the *Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 2008*. They found that parliamentarians who engaged at an early agenda-setting stage helped to shape the course of the legislation, in contrast to those who participated at a later decision-making phase (when the legislation had, to some extent, already been shaped).

## 2.3 Understanding parliamentary processes and the people involved

The research design took into account the variety of people involved in parliamentary work, and the different processes in which they operate. Throughout this report, we refer to various people and processes, and a brief explanation of the most prominent of these is below. As parliamentarians play roles in multiple group processes simultaneously (e.g. House debates; select committees; public bill committees), they (and the staff supporting them) are routinely *exposed* to research from across these different processes. As individuals also perform a variety of roles, research evidence can be *used* differently by people in different settings (e.g. individual constituency work versus select committee work). Where this occurs, we try to highlight it.

### Individual roles:

- **MP and Peers**<sup>5</sup> [hereafter 'parliamentarians'<sup>6</sup> when jointly referred to] have multiple roles (e.g. committee positions; debate in the Houses; constituency engagement [for MPs]), with many conflicting demands on their time – they debate, scrutinise and legislate on a wide range of evolving issues on any given day.
- **Members' staff** are employed by MPs with resources allocated by Parliament to support their work. MPs typically employ three or four staff (some of whom work in Westminster; others in constituencies). Peers may employ staff out of their own funds, but are not given a budget to do so. These staff are politically partisan.
- **Parliamentary staff** are employed directly by the House of Commons or the House of Lords (or both) to manage the operations of Parliament and to provide parliamentarians with politically impartial information and research to support their work. This project focused on staff in departments and offices that engage with research evidence, including in the libraries (research services) and select committees, and specialist advisory units such as POST (bicameral) and the Scrutiny Unit (Commons only).

<sup>5</sup> The term Peers is being used as shorthand to refer to all Members of the House of Lord

<sup>6</sup> There are important distinctions between the roles of MPs and Peers. For the purposes of this report, however, we frequently treat them as a single category – 'parliamentarians' – and identify distinctions only where relevant for our findings.



Selected roles here included library staff and select committee staff, the latter comprising roles such as 'committee clerk', 'committee specialist', 'inquiry manager' and 'policy analyst', who all play a role in the use of research in a committee context. The number of staff employed in the Commons Committee Office is around 250. 60 staff are recorded as working in the Lords Committee Office in a committee organisation chart produced in July 2016.

### Group processes:

- **Select committees** – cross-party groups of parliamentarians given a specific remit to investigate and report back to the relevant House. The study focused on investigative select committees. They provide a scrutinising role, and are supported by staff as described in the previous section. Information gathering and evaluation are at the heart of the scrutiny function of select committees and this includes the gathering of written evidence, the questioning of witnesses in oral evidence sessions and preparing reports based on evaluation of the material obtained (Maer et al., 2009). Select committees focus on specific inquiries, which are Member-led, and usually respond to current issues. Occasionally, they perform open inquiries where they conduct a more thorough review of a field of knowledge. Inquiries are generally fast-moving, and several may run concurrently. Committees usually want to hear people's opinions (Geddes et al., 2017), and to hear about a body of work rather than specific studies. These facets of select committees determine, therefore, how research is sourced and used.
- The majority of chairs in the Commons are elected by the whole House and the membership of each committee is elected through a ballot process within each political party.<sup>7</sup> The chairs of select committees are allocated to the various political parties by agreement between party leaders broadly based on the same balance. The make-up of a committee's membership broadly reflects the party balance within the Commons as a whole. In the Lords, the membership of each select committee is agreed to by the House as a whole. The names in the appointment motion are recommended by the Committee of Selection.<sup>8</sup>
- Committee stage of legislation – Bills at committee stage may be handled in a variety of ways. In the House of Commons, most Bills go through public bill committees (PBCs). Each committee is assigned two chairs (one from each 'side') from a 'Panel of Chairs'<sup>9</sup>, which operates under the authority of the Speaker. Members of the Panel of Chairs are experienced MPs who are allocated to PBCs largely on the basis of rotation and availability, although the more senior and experienced members are usually appointed to the more contentious Bills. PBC chairs are assisted by a clerk. The make-up of PBCs in the Commons reflects the composition of the House. Each includes the relevant minister, opposition frontbench MPs and a whip on each side, plus others appointed by the Committee of Selection. Since 2007, PBCs examining Bills that have been 'programmed' (i.e. subject to an agreed timetable), have the power to receive written evidence and hear oral evidence.

7 The exception is the Backbench Business Committee, of which all the members are elected by secret ballot of all MPs.

8 By custom, the Committee of Selection accepts the nominations of the chief whips and the Convenor of the Crossbench Peers.

9 The Panel of Chairs is a group of senior MPs who can chair PBCs (as well as other general committees and debates in Westminster Hall). Standing orders specify that they should include the Chairman of Ways and Means (Deputy Speaker), and his or her two deputies, alongside not fewer than 10 other members. In practice, the Panel exceeds this with 23 members since 26 May 2010).

- A minority of Bills in the Commons are dealt with in a 'Committee of the Whole House' (CWH) when any Member can seek to take part. CWH is reserved for (a) highly contentious or significant constitutional Bills and (b) small, consensual or highly uncontentious or technical Bills (where setting up a PBC would be a waste of resources). In the Lords, a 'Grand Committee' or CWH is formed for committee stage. Unlike in the Commons, the Government cannot limit debating time, there is no formal evidence taking and any Peer is able to participate.
- **Political parties** – Most political parties have their own research functions: for example the Conservative Parliamentary Research Unit (PRU); Labour's Parliamentary Research Service (PRS); the Research Service of the SNP Westminster Group; and the Parliamentary Correspondence and Support Team (PCST) for the Liberal Democrats. These research units are politically partisan.
- **All-party parliamentary groups (APPGs)** – cross-party groups of MPs and Peers who share a common interest and wish to exchange information and inform debate on topics of interest may form an APPG. APPGs do not have official status in Parliament. They are run by and for parliamentarians, though many choose to involve individuals and organisations from outside Parliament in their administration and activities.
- **Parliamentary libraries** – The House of Commons Library provides research services to MPs and MPs' staff, and the House of Lords Library provides research services for Peers and their staff. In the Commons Library, staff can either be specialists in a particular policy area or generalists. Lords Library staff are generalists.
- **Specialist research centres** – these include the bicameral and the House of Commons' Scrutiny Unit. These centres aim to provide additional expertise on issues of a more specialist or technical nature. Key research services provided by POST include: publicly available peer-reviewed briefings for all parliamentarians that provide an overview of research evidence in a policy context, responsive support to other parliamentary services in dealing with complex scientific and technical issues or research evidence, and events to build links between parliamentarians and staff and external stakeholders. POST is typically staffed by a Director, eight advisers (two of whom are currently funded by ESRC and seconded from UCL STEaPP as part of the project underpinning this report), and two support staff. The Scrutiny Unit provides specialist legal and financial assistance to select committees, joint committees and public bill committees. It has 14 staff, including lawyers, accountants, an economist and a statistician.

Section 2.4 describes how these different individual roles and group processes were incorporated into the research design.

## 2.4 Methodology

Here we provide a summary of the methodological approach used in our study (see Appendix 1 in Volume Two for a detailed description).

After performing a literature review to identify existing knowledge on the use of research evidence in policy, particularly in legislatures, a mixed methods approach was used to gather the views held by different groups of people in Parliament. We were keen to harness methods previously used in the legislative research described in Section 2.2, including ethnography, documentary analysis, workshops, interviews and surveys. In total, our project was able to harness the views of 157 different people in Parliament, and supplement these with documentary analysis and participant observation, making use of rare privileged access to Parliament. Although there are some caveats to the methods used here (see Appendix 1 in Volume Two), the breadth and depth of the methodology compares favourably with previous studies. For example, Geddes et al., (2017) published guidance for academics on engaging with Parliament, based on a workshop with eight representatives from the UK Parliament; Brazier et al., (2008) were able to include 80 parliamentary representatives on the passage of legislation. Our study, however, managed to secure a much larger sample size, use a greater variety of methods to improve data triangulation, and we importantly also gained access to parliamentary processes that are usually beyond the scope of research (e.g. closed meetings). We consulted a range of different people, including MP, MPs' staff, parliamentary staff (e.g. library and select committee staff) and Peers, again in contrast to some previous studies. In addition to our general surveys and follow-up interviews, four case studies selected to examine select committee processes and trace the passage of legislation, and the influence of research on it.

These were:

- **The House of Commons Communities and Local Government (CLG) Select Committee.** The CLG Committee is a departmental select committee that shadows the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG). The role of the Committee is to examine the policies, administration and spending of DCLG and its associated arm's-length bodies, including the Homes and Communities Agency. The case study involved a three-month period of participant observation between October 2014 and February 2015. It also draws upon findings from the seven semi-structured interviews conducted as part of the case study (five committee members and two members of committee staff were interviewed).
- **The House of Lords National Policy for the Built Environment (NPBE) Committee.** The NPBE Committee was an ad hoc committee appointed on 11 June 2015 to consider the development and implementation of national policy for the built environment. It was given a reporting deadline of 23 March 2016. Ad hoc committees are temporary committees appointed to investigate and report on a particular subject, or to examine legislation, either in draft form (pre-legislative scrutiny) or after it has been enacted (post-legislative scrutiny). The case study is based on a three-month period of participant observation between July and October 2015.
- **The Small Business, Enterprise and Employment Bill** was one of 26 Government Bills passed during the 2014-15 parliamentary session. It had its first reading in the Commons on 25 June 2014 and was given Royal Assent on 26 March 2015. The Bill was wide-ranging, covering topics including access to finance, regulation, procurement, insolvency, employment law, education and child care (House of Commons Library, 2014b). The case study involved participant observation of two stages of the Bill's passage through Parliament: the public bill committee stage in the Commons and the grand committee stage in the Lords between October 2014 and March 2015. It is based on findings from 16 interviews conducted as part of this case study (one member of library staff, seven MPs and eight Peers were interviewed).

The **National Insurance Contributions Bill** had its first reading in the House of Commons on 17 July 2014 and was given Royal Assent on 12 February 2015. The Bill amended existing rules regarding national insurance benefits including simplifying the collection of contributions made by people that are self-employed, extending existing tax rules in some instances and introduced a Targeted Anti-Avoidance Rule to prevent the avoidance of national insurance contributions by intermediaries (House of Commons Library, 2014a). The case study involved participant observation of two stages of the Bill's passage through Parliament: the public bill committee stage in the Commons and the grand committee stage in the Lords between October 2014 and March 2015. It is based on findings from 2 interviews conducted as part of this case study (one member of library staff, and one Peer was interviewed).

**Table 1** illustrates the breakdown of respondents who took part in the research, and these methods, alongside others, are further described below. Alongside other issues, we were particularly interested in the impact of POST, so respondents were asked questions relating specifically to POST's work.

**Table 1:** Breakdown of respondents involved in the survey and interviews

Method	MPs	Peers	MPs' staff	Parliamentary staff			Total
				Commons	Lords	Anon	
Survey and interviews <sup>10</sup>	24	0 <sup>11</sup>	35	27	16	23	125
Case-study interviews	12	16	0	4	0	–	32
Total	36	16	35	31	16	23	157

<sup>10</sup> This includes participants who conducted the survey online and those who completed it face-to-face facilitated by an interviewer.

<sup>11</sup> Leadership changes in the House of Lords when permissions were being sought for this study meant it was not possible to survey Peers.

Five main research methods were used:

- **Survey** – conducted and responded to by 125 MPs, MPs’ staff and parliamentary staff in the Commons and the Lords. It asked a number of questions related to the use of research, including how it fed into Parliament (see Appendix 1 in Volume Two for survey questions).
- **Semi-structured interviews** – conducted with 62 people across all groups (MPs, Peers, MPs’ staff and parliamentary staff). This included follow-up interviews with 30 of the survey respondents in order to probe their answers in greater detail and 32 people as part of the four case studies, involving select committee staff and parliamentarians on both select committees and legislative case studies.
- **Documentary analysis** – mainly performed on the written and oral evidence used in the select committees and legislative case studies. From analysis of these documents, we were able to work out the proportion of different research types used from different sources (e.g. academia versus charities).
- **Participant observation** – performed on all four case studies, observing how committees used research. The level of participant observation in each case study varied according to the preferences of the responsible clerk; ranging from passive observation of public and private proceedings, shadowing the staff involved and active participation, including drafting briefings. Data from participant observation is mainly used to inform the study as a whole.
- **Workshop** – a roundtable discussion was held to map the different understandings of research and evidence within Parliament. The workshop involved representatives from across both Houses of Parliament and other external experts. (See Appendix 2 in Volume Two).

## 2.5 Data interpretation and presentation

One of the main difficulties with qualitative research "is that it very rapidly generates a large, cumbersome database because of its reliance on prose" (Bryman, 2008, p538). The techniques used in our study were not an exception to this rule: the interviews and documentary analysis generated a large amount of data in prose form. Such a scenario led Miles (1979, in Bryman, 2008, p538) to describe qualitative data as an 'attractive nuisance'. Researchers, however, generally use a technique known as 'coding' to make sense of large, unwieldy datasets. While there are few well-established rules for coding (Adler and Clark, 2011), most researchers use a few common techniques.

In our study, codes were assigned to individual words, phrases, sentences and whole paragraphs in each interview transcript and document in order to aid the interpretation of meaning. While there is no universal method of coding interviews, the method outlined by Bryman (2008) provides the clearest account of how it may be practised:

- **Open coding** describes the initial classification and labelling of concepts. At this stage, numerous codes may be attached to the data. Thus, many different concepts might be first identified from the interviews.
- **Axial coding** involves a reanalysis of open coding aimed at identifying the important, general concepts. A potential criticism labelled at this stage of coding involves the merging of codes, which could close off open-ended research too quickly.
- **Selective coding** tries to identify the most important concepts in the study.

Our approach was conducted in line with Bryman's recommendations. In the first stage, we assigned several codes to interviews and documents, and then merged codes that were deemed to be similar. For the purposes of providing a clear report narrative, we then tried to identify the most important themes. This process was conducted by two different individuals to improve reliability.

All stages in the coding process, from the identification of initial codes to the selection of the most important themes, are subjective (Bryman, 2008). We limited subjectivity by using lots of codes at an initial stage, and then we tried to select the most important themes by observing which ones appeared most often. Cross-referencing with data produced by other methods (e.g. participant observation, survey) was also important. We note, however, the inherent subjectivity in this process, and caveat the conclusions reached in this report accordingly.

We are careful to ensure that we do not provide an inaccurate, selective picture of how research is defined and used in Parliament, including presenting practices as widespread when they are based on relatively few data points. In this report, therefore, where we can offer confident, robust insights based on larger sample sizes (e.g. quantitative insights from documentary analysis or where data can be triangulated), we do so. Where quotations from interviews are used to support a specific point, we qualify its context. Thus, if the point is supported by several interviewees, we present this by using a selection of quotes in prose and signpost readers to supporting data in Volume Two. Where just a few respondents, or perhaps even one or two respondents, make an interesting point, we attribute quotes to particular respondents (saying e.g. 'one MP'). Where we do this, we are acknowledging that this point may not be generalisable across Parliament.

## 3. The use of research in Parliament

### 3.1 Highlights

- *Research was interpreted broadly in Parliament, beyond a narrow definition of 'research evidence'.*
- *Research was considered useful by people working in Parliament.*
- *Various types of research were used, particularly statistics. There were differences in the types of research used between parliamentary roles.*
- *Sources of research were diverse, including parliamentary libraries, external organisations, government departments and academia.*
- *Research fed into Parliament in a variety of ways, including through formal avenues associated with select committees (oral and written evidence), unsolicited mail, personal contacts, mailing lists and active searching.*
- *The purpose of research use was similarly diverse and varied by respondent: to support effective scrutiny (and inform policy); to provide background knowledge; to substantiate pre-existing views or hypotheses; to provide credibility and enhance public image; to inform opinions; to provide balance; and to score political points.*
- *Research appraisal was performed by parliamentarians and staff, although critiques were raised about its rigour.*

### 3.2 Definitions of research and evidence in Parliament

As discussed previously, this study set out to explore the use of a particular type of research that some have termed 'research evidence'. This traditional view of research evidence is common across academia (but applies elsewhere too) and generally associates knowledge-making with a rigorous, scientific<sup>12</sup> methodology. Although the boundary between 'research evidence' and other forms of research not generated by a robust methodology is always blurred (Gieryn, 1983; Rose, 2014b), there is still a distinction. Other forms of knowledge, such as experiential, lay knowledges, expert opinion or anecdotal evidence, are all important within a process of knowledge democratization (Collins and Evans, 2009), but are not usually associated with a robust 'scientific' methodology (Alliance for Useful Evidence, 2016).

To unpick these definitions in a parliamentary context, we ran a roundtable discussion with parliamentary staff and external experts (see Appendix 2 in Volume Two). The overall conclusion was that the term 'evidence' was used broadly. Parliamentary representatives explained the historical origins of the use of the term 'evidence' in Parliament, where it was used in a legal sense. Furthermore, the workshop discussed the distinction made in Parliament between evidence that is formally accepted as a proceeding of Parliament (such as that submitted to a parliamentary committee – see Appendices 3 and 4 in Volume Two) and other types of information. Evidence used in proceedings of Parliament is indistinguishable from testimony in the legal sense. It refers to a statement of witness offered as evidence of the alleged truth, and it is used to establish a set of facts about a case.

<sup>12</sup> We use 'scientific' here in a broad sense to include quantitative and qualitative methodologies used by natural or social scientists and humanities scholars, and other researchers based in a variety of institutions (government, universities, private sector).



Based on our interviews and survey respondees, Parliament was interested in evidence (and knowledge) of all kinds – practical, tacit, empirical and theoretical (see Section 3.4). The term ‘evidence’ is used to refer to different types of information such as academic research, information from individuals or organisations, legal information and for the Commons, information about Members constituencies and from their constituents. All types and sources of knowledge are considered of potential value. By contrast, ‘research’ is typically used more narrowly: predominately to refer to the material sourced and produced by staff involving the use of secondary sources that provided digested interpretations of issues.

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*From our interviews and survey responses, it was clear that Parliament is interested in evidence of all types – practical, tacit, empirical and theoretical.*

In light of these discussions, we encouraged a broad definition of ‘research’ encompassing all of its different interpretations in Parliament, including those relating to the term ‘evidence’. We set out to discover whether parliamentarians and staff thought research in all its forms was a necessary part of their work (next section), before exploring how different types of research were sourced and used. Where appropriate, we discuss whether parliamentarians and staff were able to distinguish between ‘research evidence’ and other forms of research; however, respondents rarely made such a distinction, and thus we are often only able to refer to research in its broadest sense.

### 3.3 Usefulness of research

In our survey, 85 people answered a question about how useful research had been to them over the last 12 months (11 MPs, 24 MPs’ staff and 50 parliamentary staff). Nearly all respondents (83/85) strongly agreed or agreed that research (broadly defined) was useful to them in their parliamentary work.

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*98% of survey respondents strongly agreed or agreed that research was useful to their parliamentary work.*

Follow-up interviews with survey respondents provided the opportunity to explore the perceptions of the usefulness of research, which were again overwhelmingly positive. A Lords committee staff member, for example, said that “99 per cent of the time you need to refer to others so you use research as a matter of course; it’s actually a question of when do you not use research” (interview 83). Several other interviewees agreed, including another Lords Library staff member (interview 62) who argued that “research provides quite a vital role within Parliament”. And according to one MP on the Commons Communities and Local Government Select Committee, the importance of research is growing: “research will become a more integral part of the process over the next few years” (interview 6).

There were challenges to the use of research, however, which are explored in Section Four. It is also important to note that interviewees rarely distinguished between ‘research evidence’ and other forms of information, as noted by an MP (interview 70):



*MPs employ staff who... don't really know what research is and what it isn't. I feel that you need an objective and an inquiring mind to do research and MPs' researchers need more objectivity in what they look at and how they use it. I believe that MPs' staff need more training on understanding how to research, where to start from. I feel there is a lack of understanding about this at the moment.*

Thus, we cannot say that there was overwhelming support for the usefulness of research evidence alone.

The results of two further survey questions are also interesting. 75 people answered a question asking them how often they had consulted research as part of their job over the last 12 months (3 MPs, 25 MPs' staff and 47 parliamentary staff). The three MPs who answered this question reported using research daily, but we note the small sample size. In addition, 9/25 MPs' staff said that they consulted research daily, as did 28/47 parliamentary staff.

In addition, 79 people answered a question about whether they were able to engage with research to a desired level over the last 12 months (3 MPs, 26 MPs' staff and 50 parliamentary staff). Half of parliamentary staff (25/50) and just over half of MPs' staff (14/26) reported that they were able to engage with research as desired. Two of the three MPs (very small sample size) suggested that they were happy with the level of research use in practice. All the other respondents suggested that they would have liked to engage with research more. Although sample sizes are small, the fact that some actors in Parliament feel that they would like to make more use of research (which was also supported in the interviews) suggests that more work can be done to facilitate greater research use.

### 3.4 Types of research used

Since research was interpreted broadly by actors in Parliament, the type of research used was similarly varied; 'research evidence', for example research from the Higher education sector, was used, but so were other types of research. This was typified by a statement from a Peer (interview 29) who sat on the Lords National Policy for the Built Environment Select Committee. The Peer said that "there is no single piece of evidence that the Committee has received which... [is] more useful than others... all the different pieces of evidence need to be pieced together to form the whole picture."

Our survey consulted MPs, MPs' staff and parliamentary staff. Respondents were given a set of 12 options to select from when asked about the types of research used in their parliamentary work. These options were selected following a literature review of similar surveys (Avey and Desch, 2014, Talbot and Talbot, 2014). The follow-up interviews allowed the question to be probed beyond these options. Referring to a high-speed rail Bill, one MP (interview 85) stated that many different types of research were used, arguing that they used "everything from academics to industry bodies".

In our survey, 94 people answered the question about the types of research that they used most often in their work (12 MPs, 33 MPs' staff and 49 parliamentary staff). Respondents were able to select as many types of research as they wished. MPs and MPs' staff selected statistics most frequently (11/12 MPs and 28/33 MPs' staff, compared to 32/49 parliamentary staff). On the other hand, parliamentary staff selected expert opinion most frequently (46/49 parliamentary staff, compared to 21/33 MPs' staff and 3/12 MPs). Also, parliamentary staff said that they drew a broader range of types of research than MPs or MPs' staff. Overall, the fewest types of research were referred to by MPs. This suggests that there are differences in the types of research used by different people in Parliament.

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*MPs and MPs' staff used statistics most frequently, while Parliamentary staff used expert opinion most often.*

Follow-up interviews of the same groups provided a similarly broad list of research used, as did further interviews of respondents associated with the four in-depth case studies of select committees (2) and the committee stages of legislation (2) (these also included Peers). Some interesting comments were offered on some of the research types listed above, and some of the extracts presented were made by interviewees connected to the case studies.

Statistics were mentioned most often in the interviews (and open-ended survey answers). One MP (interview 70) argued that they “like statistics [and] trust numbers more than opinions” and a further MP (interview 64) reported that they could not think of a single piece of work where statistical evidence was not used to support their argument. Three MPs’ staff agreed in the power of statistics, praising the “objectivity” of such data (anonymous survey respondent 46) and arguing that they “imply more gravity and fact” (interview 90). In fact, one argued (interview 84) that because “the MP that I work for is a figures person... statistics are almost a comfort blanket for him... if he knows the numbers, he feels that he knows the issues”. Interviewees tended not to reflect on the sourcing of statistical data. These views support previous findings in the literature. For example, in a meeting held with four staff from select committees and three staff from the libraries in both Houses (in June 2016 – Geddes et al., 2017), a librarian reported that Members are ‘happy’ if given a number because it ‘looks more verifiable or factual’. A committee clerk argued that statistics go ‘to the heart of their desire for credibility... it’s a bit like Dragons’ Den, you don’t get anywhere unless you know the figures’ (Geddes et al., 2017, p12).

Interviewees also discussed the usefulness of internationally comparable data. One Peer serving on the Lords National Policy for the Built Environment Select Committee (interview 28) stated that having international evidence in public policy is like “gold dust” as it is “immensely useful.” This Peer went on to give an example of where they had used some “Dutch research that has been done... on the impact of interventions on actual people’s lives over time” which was a “hugely powerful resource to back up your recommendations”. An MP (interview 50) reported that they were “particularly interested in looking at international comparisons... so you can search around the world to see what is working and then reapply it”. Two of these parliamentarians perceived, however, that this type of research was rarely available.

Some people noted the prevalence of, and their enthusiasm for, case studies, particularly examples of success [‘what works’] (e.g. from randomised controlled trials or pilots). A Peer serving on the Lords National Policy for the Built Environment Select Committee (interview 28) reported that case-study research had dominated evidence submission. When referring to the value of case studies and success stories, one MP (interview 86) argued that “one example... [can be] more powerful... [than] all sorts of figures”. Examples of success gave parliamentarians and the constituents to which they communicated “more confidence” (MP, participant observation of a select committee) in taking ideas forward. Another MP (interview 93) gave the example of a professor who had presented convincing example-driven evidence about successfully encouraging men to get their blood pressures checked by taking blood pressure monitors into barber shops. Results and success stories from ‘the ground’ can therefore be a vital part of the decision-making process, as noted elsewhere in the literature (e.g. Balmford, 2012; Rose et al., 2016).

### 3.5 Sources of research used

Since the types of research used for parliamentary work were broad in nature, so were the sources used to locate it. In our survey, 107 people answered a question about the sources of research that they used most regularly as part of their parliamentary work (23 MPs, 32 MPs’ staff and 52 parliamentary staff). Respondents were given 15 options, and asked to select as many that applied.

The sources of research consulted most frequently differed by respondent role. Table 2 lists the five sources that were selected most frequently by each role category. Academic sources were used most frequently by parliamentary staff (47/52, compared to 11/23 MPs, and 14/32 MPs’ staff.) The most frequently selected source for MPs was specific organisations, followed by Commons Library staff. MPs’ staff reported using government departments most (27/32), followed by Commons Library staff (25/32).

Other sources of research not ranked in the top-five by any role category included information from colleagues or friends (3 MPs, 12 MPs’ staff, 17 parliamentary staff), social media (2 MPs, 11 MPs’ staff, 13 parliamentary staff), trade associations or trade press (3 MPs, 5 MPs’ staff, 17 parliamentary staff), professional associations and bodies (7 MPs’ staff, 14 parliamentary staff), other MPs’ staff (2 MPs, 13 MPs’ staff, 2 parliamentary staff), POST (5 MPs, 4 MPs’ staff, 7 parliamentary staff) and community forums (5 MPs’ staff, 6 parliamentary staff).

A number of organisations were named specifically in the 107 responses and follow-up interviews with 30 of the same respondents. See Figure 1 (the brighter the words, the more frequently they were referred to). Since interviewees interpreted the term ‘research’ broadly, not all of the listed sources provide ‘research evidence’ as defined in Chapter two.

Interviewees similarly noted a range of different sources of research, including: the usefulness of MPs’ research staff in sourcing information, the use of government or government-related departments for research, the use of experts, the use of the media, social media and the internet, and the value of oral and written evidence submitted to committees or to open consultations (see e.g. quotes 1-5 in Appendix

5 in Volume Two). Three particularly prominent themes are discussed in separate sections below: the importance of the parliamentary libraries; the influence of external organisations, in particular charities; and sources of evidence for select committees. But before moving on, it is worth noting that academic research was widely mentioned in the interviews. Also in the survey 90% (n=49) of parliamentary staff said that they used academic research as part of their work; yet a series of challenges to accessing and interpreting it were also raised (see Chapter Four). As discussed in Section 3.7, it was noted from the interviews that people in Parliament often do not distinguish between the quality of different types of research.

**Table 2:** Five most frequently selected sources of research by survey respondent type (N=107; 23 MPs, 32 MPs’ staff, 52 parliamentary staff)

MPs (n-23)	MPs’ staff (n-32)	Parliamentary staff (n-52)
Specific organisations (87%)	Government departments (84%)	Academic (90%)
Commons Library (78%)	Commons Library (78%)	Government departments (75%)
Academic (48%)	International organisations (72%)	Media (73%)
Select committees (39%)	Media (69%)	Experts (64%)
Experts (35%)	Specific organisations (53%)	Specific organisations (64%)

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*90% of parliamentary staff said that they used academic research as part of their work, but many noted difficulties accessing and interpreting it.*

**ONS**

**Institute for Fiscal Studies**

**Joseph Rowntree Foundation**

**National Audit Office**

**Shelter**

**Federation of Small Businesses**

**Institute for Public Policy Research**

**OECD**

**British Medical Association**

**CAMRA**

**European Commission**

**Cancer Research**

**Trades Union Congress**

**Local Government Association**

**CBI**

**Chatham House**

**Fabian Society**

**Bank of England**

**Resolution Foundation**

**CIPD**

**Office for Budget Responsibility**

**Crisis**

**Environment Agency**

**Law Society**

**King's Fund**

**Gambling Commission**

**Figure 1:** Specific organisations mentioned in the survey and follow-up interviews  
(brighter text = mentioned most often)

### 3.5.1 Parliamentary libraries

The parliamentary libraries were considered to be important sources of research<sup>13</sup> for Members and their staff. One MP (interview 22) found the Commons Library “to be extremely useful because it broke down [a legislative] Bill into digestible pieces”. Similarly, a Peer praised the Lords Library for being “excellent, very speedy and concise” (interview 12). Many comments related to the excellent digestible service offered by both of the libraries. One MP commented (interview 7) that they are able to produce a simple “distillation of a whole plethora of information” which are “incredibly useful” and others found them to be vital in “establishing the evidence on a particular topic” (Peer, interview 29). One MP (interview 96) said that the research was “always well delivered and well presented”.

Importantly, research sourced by both libraries was considered credible by several interviewees. One MP, who was sitting on the Communities and Local Government Select Committee, commented (interview 17):

*I will always try and ensure if I was going to go and speak in a debate that I had got hold of the Library notes and had a breeze through that before I made any contribution. The other great thing about the Library note, of course, is that it is accepted across the House as a statement; it is beyond dispute.*

A further MP (interview 89) shared this opinion, stating that “if it comes from the Library we therefore assume that it is true – well we know it is true... we assume that it is representative”. Likewise, another MP (interview 96) described research conducted through the Commons Library as “balanced” and “impartial”.

In light of these comments, therefore, it was unsurprising to hear that the libraries were often the “first port of call” (MPs’ staff, interview 77) for parliamentarians and their staff to source research. Indeed, one MP (interview 86) described the Commons Library as “absolutely fantastic” and went on to say that “I don’t think there’s any other place better for parliamentarians across the world”.

An example was provided of where the “superb research facility” (MP, interview 96) of the Commons Library was used in parliamentary work. Referring to an upcoming parliamentary debate, one MP reflected on the value of the Library (interview 61):

*If there is an issue that is coming up, then I might ask one of my team to go into the House of Commons Library, which is the best source for evidence and research on any subject here in the House. The Library will supply sheets in a very short time to allow you to read them and make your mind up as to which way you should go on a particular subject. The Library was invaluable because, when you saw debates coming up, they would produce a report... within a very short period of time... and give you quality data.*

Thus, the libraries<sup>14</sup> are clearly the “go-to-place” (MP, interview 86) for sourcing research on many occasions. Fewer interviews were conducted with Peers, but some also praised the Lords Library (see above Peer 12).

Criticisms specific to the libraries are covered in Section Four.

<sup>13</sup> This statement defines research broadly, and it should be noted that House libraries did not always provide ‘research evidence’ as defined in this report.

<sup>14</sup> Most of our surveys and interviews were conducted with respondents based in the Commons, who can only use the Commons Library. Most responses thus focused on the House of Commons Library.

### 3.5.2 The Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST)

Respondents were asked questions relating specifically to POST's work. POST was considered to be a useful resource. One Peer (interview 30) said that they would "always read anything coming from POST", and POSTnotes were considered to be particularly well presented by many respondents (see Section 4.4.6). A further Peer (interview 11) argued that "anybody trying to make a quality speech on a topic is always going to be glad of anybody who is prepared to work for nothing to give them more information", a service POST would perform. However, some respondents knew "virtually nothing about POST" (Lords select committee staff, interview 83), particularly parliamentarians (e.g. Peer, interview 15: see quote 18 in Appendix 5 in Volume Two). This issue and others have been picked up in a separate report, which has been submitted to the POST Board for consideration.

### 3.5.3 Charities and external organisations

In addition to the parliamentary libraries, charities and external organisations (including international organisations) were a significant source of research. One Peer (interview 4) argued that charities and external organisations are influential because "you have to believe in the cause" to produce relevant information. Charities were able to provide an emotive response and campaigned passionately about issues. From the interviews, it was clear that charities and external organisations tended to understand parliamentary procedures better than other groups (e.g. academics). One Peer argued (interview 5):

*Hats off to them [charities]; they do know how to influence what is going on because they are very attuned to the legislative process. Unlike some other organisations that tend to lobby us about stuff that is going through Parliament, they understand the timing and the scheduling and what is going to be helpful and what isn't going to be helpful. Sometimes they will completely overload you, but by and large they are a joy to work with because they understand the system.*

In addition, an MP (interview 78) stated that NGOs are "very forthcoming... and are always very keen to work closely with parliamentarians... looking for opportunities for their voices to be heard here, and they will always back that up with support for briefing."

### 3.5.4 Sources of research for written and oral evidence submissions

Figures 2a to 2h show the proportion of different sources of written and oral evidence consulted by the case studies of scrutinising and legislative committees. Several clear patterns stand out.

Firstly, as noted by previous literature (Berry and Kippin, 2014, Geddes, 2016), evidence submissions tended to be dominated by external organisations from the not-for-profit sector, particularly charities. In almost all cases, the not-for-profit sector was the dominant source of evidence for the select committees, and at committee stage. This was probably caused by the reasons listed above from interviewees, namely that the not-for-profit sector is attuned to parliamentary processes and actively engaged.

Secondly, although parliamentary staff reported widely using academic evidence (e.g., for background briefings; they also noted its shortcomings, see Section 4), the higher education sector is poorly represented in written and oral evidence submissions to select committees and public bill committees. This is problematic where research evidence could be of more use to an inquiry than simply background information. The reason for higher education underrepresentation may be because the sector is less engaged with parliamentary processes, either through lack of knowledge, time or incentive.

As a result of the project's findings, POST is developing a web hub for academic researchers, which will provide guidance and information for researchers on many of the points above, as well as case studies of academics who have worked with Parliament and videoed interviews with parliamentary staff.

Thirdly, the Government and civil service were more dominant in the written and oral evidence submitted at committee stage for the National Insurance Contributions Bill. Although this source submitted evidence in all other cases, it was always outranked by other sources.

Overall, there was an uneven representation of different sources of evidence used in the scrutinising and legislative committees studied here. We discuss lessons that may be learned in Chapter Five, providing particular advice to the higher education sector, which submits less evidence than other sectors.



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*Written and oral evidence consulted by select committees and public bill committees tended to be dominated by external organisations from the not-for-profit sector, particularly charities. The higher education sector was poorly represented in written and oral evidence submissions to all committees.*

### **3.6 How research feeds into Parliament**

The lack of scholarly attention on research use in the UK Parliament has already been outlined. In short, only relatively few papers have researched the UK legislatures, as compared to the much larger body of work addressing the Executive. Where studies of research use in Parliament have been conducted (e.g. Geddes et al., 2017), they have tended to rely on small sample sizes, without considering parliamentary processes in detail. In papers analysing group processes in Parliament, such as the work of select committees (e.g. Benton and Russell, 2013) and public bill committees (e.g. Thompson 2016), the narrative focuses on the conduct and impacts of these bodies, rather than how they use research. In this section, we report on how research feeds into Parliament, including through group processes such as select committees and public bill committees. Again we note that since research was interpreted broadly by parliamentarians and their staff, we often refer to research in a broad sense, and not just ‘research evidence’.

#### ***3.6.1 Research sourced and received by parliamentarians and their staff***

Individual MPs and Peers are themselves a key route for research to feed into Parliament. They may have their own areas of interest, experience and expertise, which may be of direct use to committees or help them to identify relevant individuals and organisations from which committees can draw knowledge. Knowledge may also be formed through meetings with constituents or other stakeholders, or through information sent to them. On the whole, Peers are seen as more likely to bring significant direct expertise and experience to their work (Bochel & Defty, 2010; Russell & Benton, 2010).

In order to understand the role of parliamentarians, our survey asked respondents how much research is sourced and received by parliamentarians and their staff. Overall, 91 people answered this question (18 MPs, 26 MPs’ staff and 47 parliamentary staff). Most parliamentary staff (39/47) and MPs’ staff (18/26) said that they found most of the research by actively searching for it. In contrast, only 7/18 MPs actively searched for information, with research mainly coming from unsolicited sources (11/18).

Reflecting the dominance of unsolicited information received by MPs, this group talked about being “inundated”, “overloaded”, “showered” and “bombarded” with information (MP, interviewees 61, 79, 81, 86, 96) from external organisations, personal contacts and constituents. Although unsolicited, some MPs felt that receiving information in this way was generally useful, with one describing it as “very welcome” (MP, interview 78).

In terms of where research was used in their parliamentary work, 16 MPs and 26 MPs’ staff answered a question in our survey requiring them to rank different areas of importance. For MPs, research was mainly used for debates, in APPGs and select committees. MPs’ staff said that research was used mainly for constituency work, and in preparation for parliamentary debates, with stakeholder engagement being a close third.

MPs and Peers on the four case studies facilitated the use of research in two ways. First, MPs and Peers did their own personal work, sometimes with help from their staff, which then fed into their scrutiny. For example, as part of the Commons Communities and Local Government Committee inquiry into the Community Rights, one Committee member instructed his own staff to undertake some research into the number of Freedom of Information requests to several local authorities on this issue (MP, interview 18. See also MP, interview 17; Peers, interviews 4, 7, 10, 12, 13, 14, 16).

Second, committee members were targeted by external organisations, which sent relevant information directly to them, which in turn influenced the inquiry. The two legislative case studies show the significant amount of material that is sent to MPs and Peers directly from a range of organisations. In interviews, three people saw this information as helpful, despite acknowledging that it may be biased (MP, interview 7; Peer, interviews 4 and 5). Indeed, some interviewees revealed that they used such material directly in their scrutiny, either in weighing up the implications of the legislation, as ‘colourful’ background when speaking in debates and even directly in amendments. One MP recalled (interview 7; see also interviews 4, 5 and 31):

*You will get views from your stakeholders almost on a voluntary basis without prompting them; as soon as the Bill has been announced and they have had a chance to flick through it, they will come. For example, the TUC sent us a crib sheet of all the bits that they were interested in within about 48 hours, which laid out what the Bill was trying to do, where are the missed opportunities, what the Bill should be doing, what the TUC’s policy approach should be, and the Law Society did the same on the parts of the Bill that were relevant to them... [S]ome of the organisations that are really engaged in the process are pretty useful.*

Our findings are in line with previous studies that have shown that a range of factors can influence MPs’ and Peers’ scrutiny of legislation, such as hospitality from industry bodies (Maynard and Evans-Reeves, 2015), scientific and anecdotal evidence (Bates et al., 2014), as well as outside organisations (Crewe, 2015; Goodwin and Bates, 2015; Kettell, 2010; Thompson, 2016).



Figure 2a: Sources of research submitted as written evidence to CLG Select Committee (%)

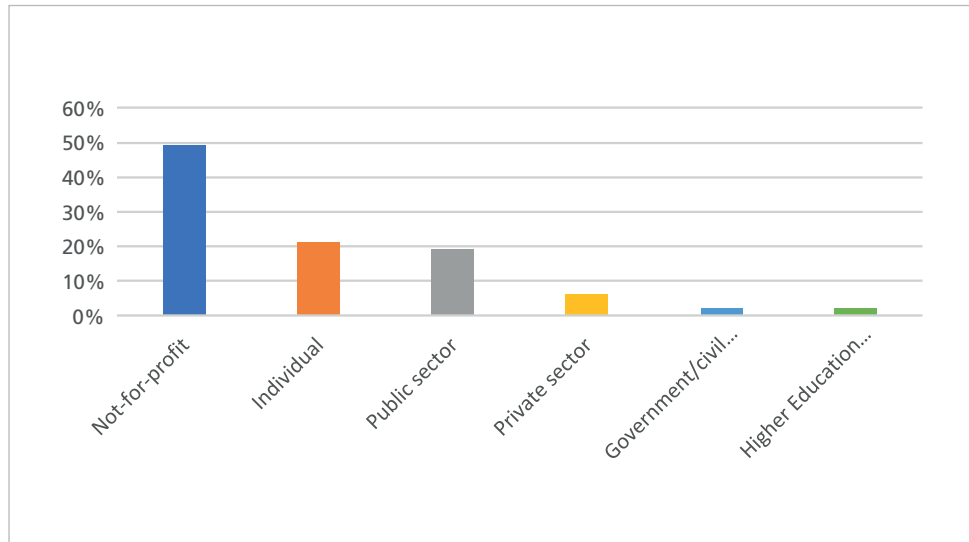


Figure 2b: Sources of research given as oral evidence to the CLG Select Committee (%)

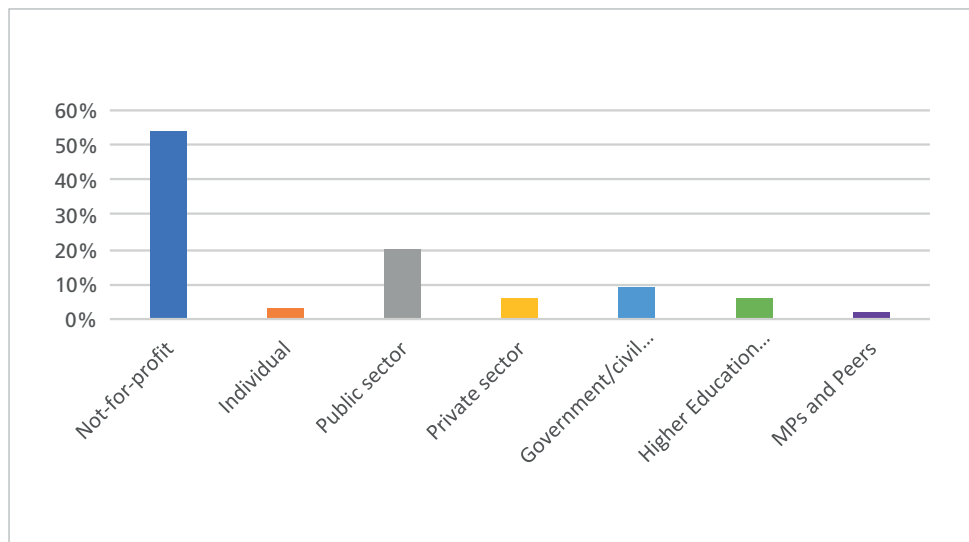


Figure 2a to 2h: Proportion of different evidence sources in written and oral evidence submissions to select committees. The 'not-for-profit' sector (dark blue) stands out as a dominant force in every case. The 'higher education' sector is denoted by 'green', but is used little in every case.

Figure 2c: Sources of research submitted as written evidence to Lords National Policy for the Built Environment Committee (%)

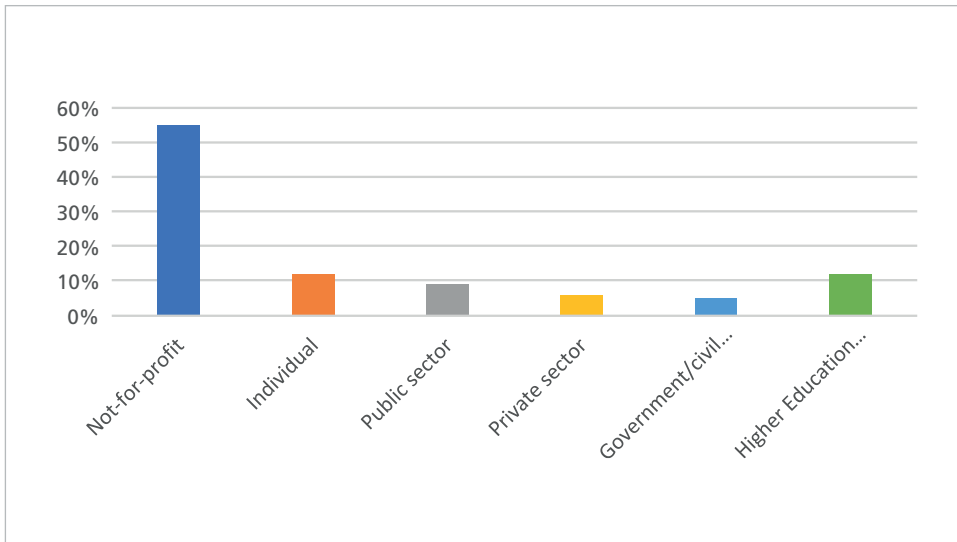
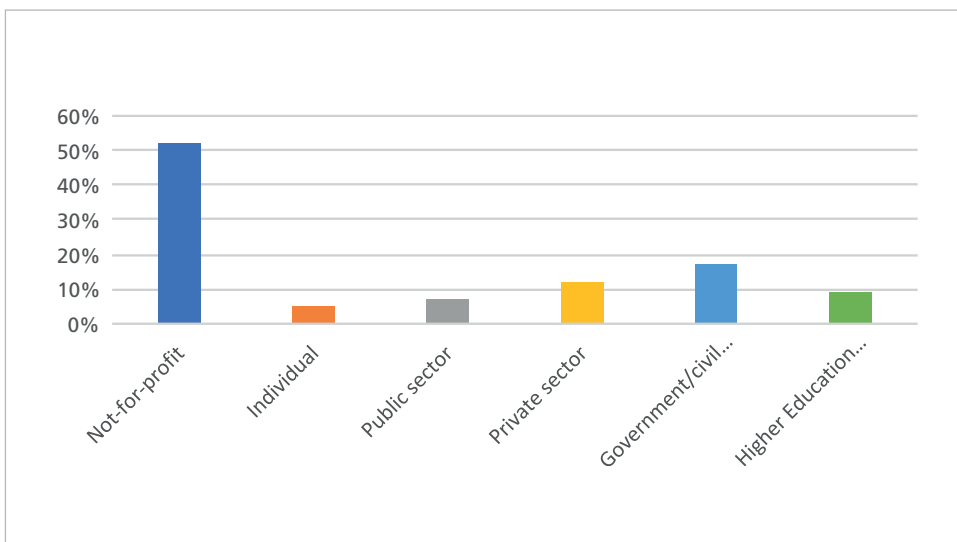
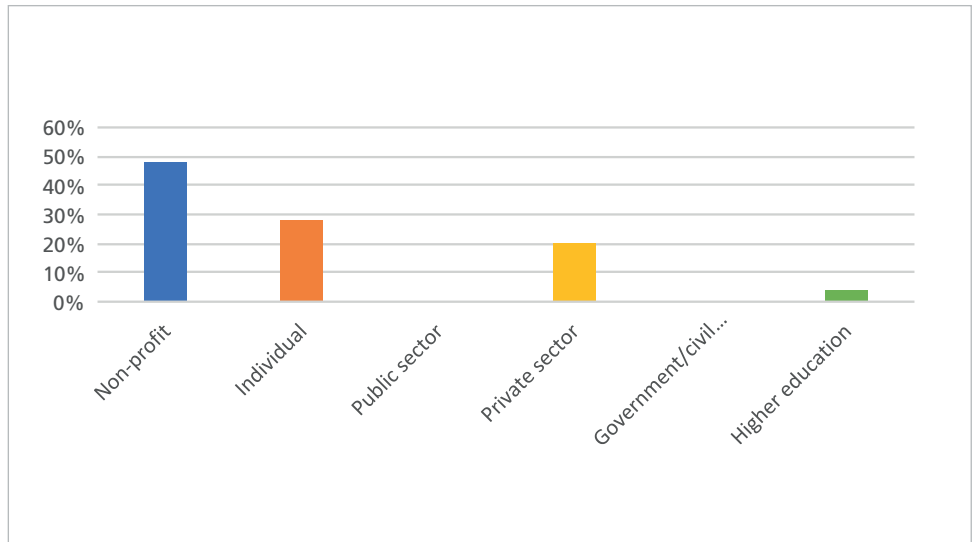


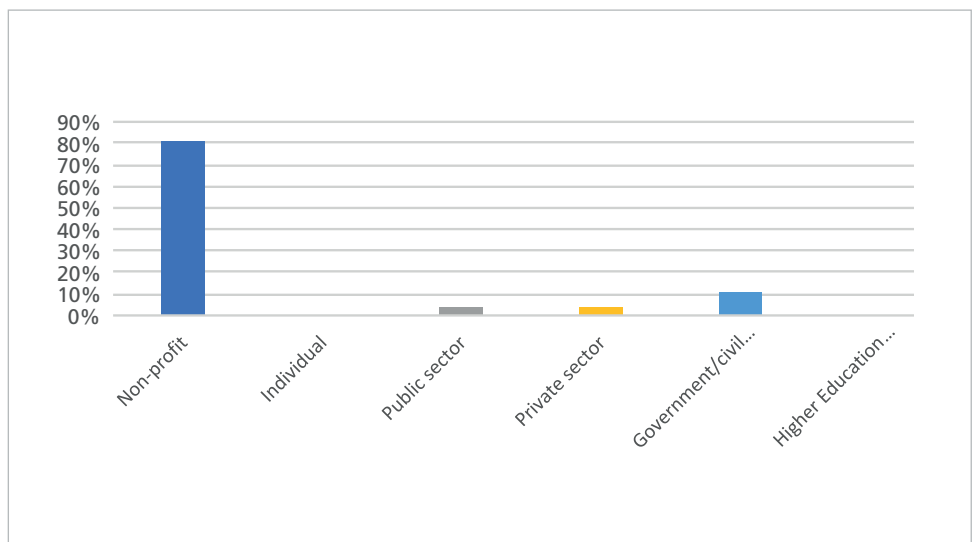
Figure 2d: Sources of research given as oral evidence to Lords National Policy for the Built Environment (%)



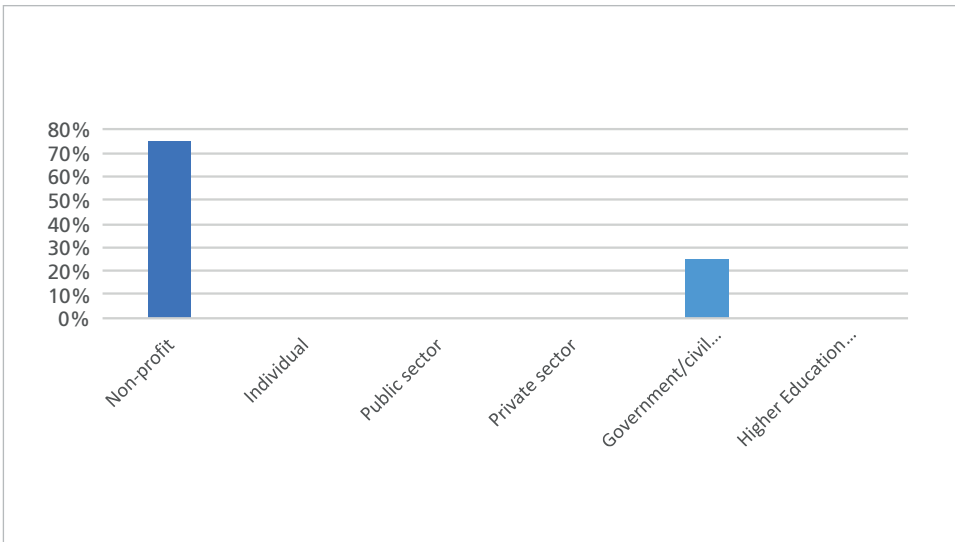
**Figure 2e:** Sources of research submitted as written evidence to the Commons Small Business, Enterprise and Employment Public Bill Committee (%)



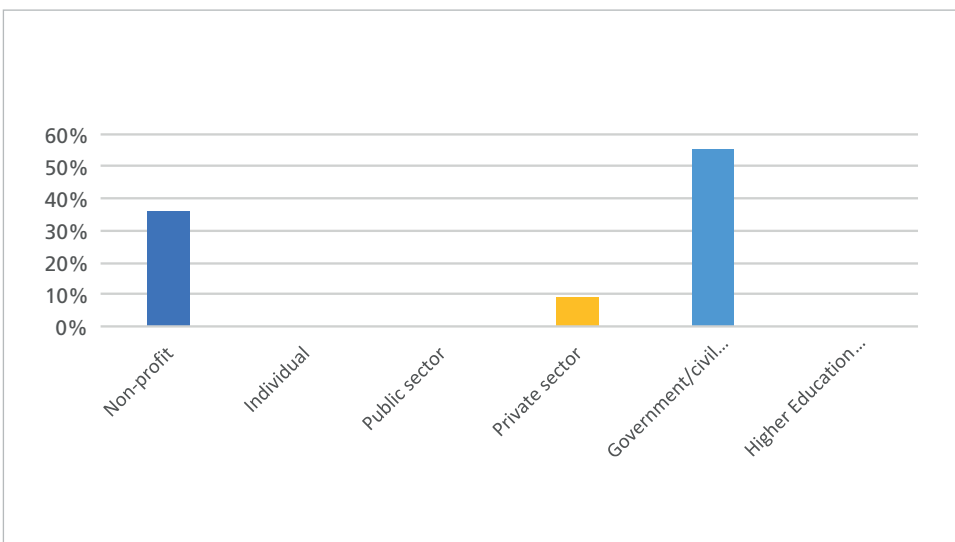
**Figure 2f :** Sources of research given as oral evidence to the Commons Small Business, Enterprise and Employment Public Bill Committee (%)



**Figure 2g:** Sources of research submitted as written evidence to the Commons National Insurance Contributions Public Bill Committee (%)



**Figure 2h:** Sources of research given as oral evidence to the Commons National Insurance Contributions Public Bill Committee (%)



### 3.6.2 Evidence submissions

Formal evidence submissions, both written and oral, are an obvious route for research to feed into Parliament. As detailed by Figures 2a to 2h, there was an uneven spread of sources of research used in the studied committees. The patterns in Figures 2a to 2h suggest that 'research evidence' as defined in this project is under-represented in Parliament as compared to other types of research. Both written and oral forms of evidence were perceived to be influential, although one Peer (interview 28) perceived select committees as relying largely on "oral evidence", partially because members "do not read all of the written evidence". In one staff members' experience, it was felt that "committees... on the whole... [tend to go] on the evidence that they themselves take, whether oral or written" (Commons select committee staff, interview 67).

Reflecting on their experiences of serving on committees, some interviewees suggested that there were cases where written and oral evidence submissions had contributed to a more informed inquiry. One MP (interview 2, Small Business, Enterprise and Employment Bill Committee) said:

*Well, it was vast and wide-ranging; we had views expressed right across the piece. It was informative and I found it very helpful. The written papers that we had from the FSB, from the trade unions, from pub companies and all the rest of it was very, very helpful to me because it gave me an awful lot of background and depth to a lot of subjects that I wasn't entirely familiar with. That was immensely helpful. So I found it very, very helpful to have that wide range of views expressed.*

Others agreed by saying that they found "evidence sessions very useful... [and] extremely valuable" and reported few "gaps in who was represented" (MPs, interviews 22 and 23, both from the Small Business, Enterprise and Employment Bill Committee).

Challenges raised in terms of evidence submission to select committees referred to potential bias, and the lack of data mobilisation due to the sheer amount of submissions. One MP, (interview 17), for example, argued that "we will have a witness come along... and you could very easily put at the end of it, 'Well, he would say that, wouldn't he?' So sometimes I wonder whether we learn a great deal from the evidence sessions." (MP, interview 17, Commons Communities and Local Government Select Committee). Furthermore, a Peer (interview 31, Lords National Policy for the Built Environment Committee) suggested that it was a challenge to distil "copious" evidence submissions. To address this problem, committees with a large amount of written evidence can produce a summary for Members.

In terms of the stage at which research could be more influential in the process, material submitted at an early-stage, before the scope of the inquiry had been demarcated, had a higher chance of success (according to respondents). As one Lords committee staff member (interview 69) argued:

*Research is more useful early on in the inquiry. Here, the committee have not received any written evidence that they can use to develop background briefings ahead of evidence sessions. Therefore they need other source material to base their briefings on. This is when research can shape the thinking of committee members, for example, research shapes the questions that the committee staff draft, which potentially shapes the issues in the members' heads and then the rest of the inquiry (in that if members see these as useful question they will ask to multiple witnesses which will then generate lots of data which the committee will then want to take account of in the final report).*

Others agreed with this point. A further Lords committee staff member (interview 83) argued that research was “most timely at the beginning of an inquiry” because it would “then govern what the interaction was afterwards.” Staff also said that more time was permitted to engage with research at an early-stage of an inquiry. In contrast, once written evidence has been submitted, additional research was seldom influential. This has important implications for researchers seeking to improve the use of evidence in Parliament.

The importance of evidence to select committees, which generally only draw on evidence that has been formally submitted, does not always apply to legislative committees for a number of reasons. First, only programmed public bill committees (PBCs) in the Commons have the power to take evidence. Second, witnesses for PBCs (only operate in the Commons) are chosen in practice by the Government and Official Opposition which can result in a partisan set of witnesses (Russell et al., 2013). Third, evidence sessions are often organised in a few days, which can limit the extent to which research feeds into the process (Russell et al., 2013). Fourth, PBCs rely on a small pool of people: PBC witnesses have often already engaged with Government in earlier stages of the drafting of the Bill and given oral evidence on similar topics to relevant select committees (Thompson, 2015: 100); and moreover, briefings produced by library staff on legislation often focus on the views of ‘key stakeholders’, who routinely feed into government consultations.

### ***3.6.3 Briefings produced by parliamentary staff***

The briefing papers for select committees are prepared by the clerks and the advisers (e.g., committee specialists and policy analysts). These briefs, in the words of one Lords committee staff (interview 72), “have to consider the information that staff feel Members need to know... [to] consider the information that Members will want as well as enough information for Member to... challenge any replies that come back to them from witnesses”.

Members value these briefing papers. One MP (interview 17) commented that the “most valuable research on the select committee” was “the briefings that the team supporting the select committee prepare”.

Based on our documentary analysis, the briefings did not explicitly appraise evidence. However, staff on the Lords National Policy for the Built Environment Committee did highlight issues that had been mentioned by a number of different written evidence submissions, giving an indication as to where there was consensus. Gaps in the stakeholder groups represented in the written evidence were also highlighted by Members from both select committees (and both legislative committees), who talked about wanting “a sense of where the gaps are, or how the information/evidence they have received fits into the wider literature about what is known” (Peer, interview 26, Lords National Policy for the Built Environment Committee).

Briefing papers are also prepared for those public bill committees that take evidence. They are supported by the Scrutiny Unit, which processes any written evidence submitted and coordinates with specialists in the Commons Library and in select committee secretariats to provide briefing material ahead of the oral evidence sessions (Levy, 2009; Russell et al., 2013). Staff from both libraries also produce briefing papers for each stage as a Bill progresses through Parliament to inform MPs and Peers in preparation for debates in the chamber and in committees on legislation. In general, library briefings papers on legislation highlight the key issues raised by the legislative proposals, provide some policy narrative to explain the genesis of the Bill, draw out any themes arising from consultation on the legislative proposals; and set out how key elements of the legislation will bring the proposals into effect.

### 3.6.4 Specialist advisers

Select committees have the power to appoint part-time specialist advisers to assist them, and most do so. Specialist advisers act as a source of expert advice and are often appointed because of their standing in a particular policy area. A survey of committee staff conducted as part of review by the Commons Committee Office indicated that 70% of specialist advisers had an academic background, and they were generally considered to improve the work of committees. (Turnbull 2009). Based on our case studies, many of the specialist advisers to the Communities and Local Government Select Committee had been former advisers on previous inquiries. These advisers came from a variety of organisations and, therefore, brought a range of perspectives to the Committee (two were from Russell Group universities, one was from a professional association, and one from local government). The Lords National Policy for the Built Environment Committee employed an academic from a Russell Group university as a specialist adviser. In selecting the specialist adviser, the Committee approached four candidates (all academics) and invited them to interview for the position informally.

The expertise of specialist advisers was used in different ways. The specialist advisers on the Communities and Local Government Select Committee seemed to work most closely with the Chair of the Committee and committee staff. In contrast, for the Lords National Policy for the Built Environment Committee, the specialist adviser was more visibly available to other Committee members (see Peer, interviews 26, 28 and 49) and assisted the Committee in interpreting the evidence that it received (interviews Peer, 28 and 29).

In our study, interviewees suggested that these advisers played a prominent role in research feeding into committees. One MP (interview 17) found them to be “very useful”, while a Peer (interview 28) found them to be “vital to any committee”.

An MP (interview 19, Commons Communities and Local Government Select Committee), in fact, argued that specialist advisers were the “main way that research... fed into the work of the Committee”, and referred to one adviser in particular. In his view, however, “this particular adviser had shaped the research... in a certain way to support his/her own view and attempted to influence what the Committee reported and the conclusions it had drawn” (MP, interview 19). Overall, in their view, the same MP (interview 19) thought that the Committee on which they had served “had engaged more with specialist advisers rather than research”.

Another comment also referred to the prominent role played by the specialist adviser in shaping the inquiry. One MP (interview 21, Commons Communities and Local Government Select Committee) said that:

*The specialist adviser mainly has contact with the Clerk, the clerk and the researcher then develop the questions, which the members then deliver in an evidence session. This does not give committee members any opportunity to pursue their own interests relevant to the particular topic, or to bring to the discussion their own knowledge or experience in a particular matter.*

The specialist adviser was thought to be prominent at the beginning of the inquiry in particular. A Commons committee staff member (interview 25) said that “researchers are not involved at the beginning. [Rather the] Chair talked to specialist adviser, she wrote the proposal, the Committee then built upon that.”

### 3.6.5 Informal seminars

Some select committees hold informal seminars with experts to gather ideas for inquiry topics, or as part of the inquiry process, usually at the beginning. These seminars allow committee members to gain a fuller understanding of the topic area by hearing from experts and asking questions of them in a relatively informal, private setting. They do not count as formal evidence, although a summary can be reported as written evidence (House of Commons Committee Office, 2013). Seminar participants are usually identified by committee staff in conjunction with the committee Chair. Participants are also suggested on request by other parliamentary offices, such as the libraries or POST.

Informal seminars enabled research to feed into both the select committee case studies. The Communities and Local Government Select Committee held a private seminar as part of its ‘legacy’ report in which participants were selected by Committee staff. Participants included past and present specialist advisers and a few individuals who had submitted evidence to the inquiry. Participants were selected according to perceived utility and influence on committee members (for example, the previous specialist advisers).

### 3.6.6 Commissioned research

Select committees in the Commons have access to a budget that they can use to commission work from external providers. Interviews with ten Commons committee staff, who had experience of commissioning research, were enlightening. The most common reason for commissioning work was a perceived need for research that was “objective” (interviews 25, 99 and 100) or “independent” (interviews 98 and 101) where topics were considered polarised or highly political (interviews 25, 98, 99, 100 and 101). Having the work undertaken by someone external to, and independent of, the committee and Parliament was seen to be important to ensure the credibility and authority of the inquiry. Three interviewees said that the commissioned work was necessary because of a gap in the existing literature (interviewees 25, 99, 100, committee staff) with two interviewees reporting that work was commissioned if it was outside the expertise of the specialist adviser (interviewees 99, 102, committee staff). However, one committee staff member said that the process of designing, procuring, commissioning and generating original research could not be a swift one. There was always a risk that a committee, or its political context, may have moved on since the information was requested.

The Communities and Local Government Select Committee commissioned two pieces of work during the case study period. The first of these occurred from discussions between the chair and a specialist adviser, and was produced by a university department. The second was commissioned through an open process and was undertaken by a charity. In both cases, the commissioning process was seen as important because of the perceived lack of existing information. For the first piece of commissioned work, it was also thought necessary because of the differences of opinion on the Committee about the issue.

Although all committee members were consulted and kept informed about the commissioned work, some members said they were unaware that this work had been commissioned. Members were also divided about the usefulness of the work with one MP saying that it had an instrumental impact upon the inquiry (interview 19); another said that it made the same impact as research received through written submissions (interview 21). Interviews with committee staff suggested that the impact of commissioned work was reduced due to the poor presentation of the results (interview 25).

### 3.7 Appraising research

The question of what constitutes ‘good evidence’ has been probed in the literature (e.g. Glasby et al., 2007; Nutley et al., 2012), and Boaz and Ashby (2003) note the difficulty of assessing research quality. Our survey probed whether MPs, their staff and parliamentary staff felt confident in appraising evidence. Overall, 78 people answered a question asking them how confident they were in their skills to appraise research (11 MPs, 22 MPs’ staff and 45 parliamentary staff). There were differences between roles: 37/45 parliamentary staff felt ‘very’ or ‘quite’ confident in appraising research, while 15/22 MPs’ staff and 6/11 MPs felt the same. 20/78 respondents across all roles felt that they were ‘averagely’ or ‘not’ confident in appraising research.

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*A quarter of survey respondents felt that they were either ‘averagely’ or ‘not’ confident in appraising research.*



A few interviewees, including staff associated with the committee case studies, also raised the shortcomings of evidence appraisal in parliamentary work. There were some examples of individuals checking the quality of evidence; for example, a Commons committee staff member (interview 60) chose personally to investigate the approach taken by a group of academics on the subject of financial indebtedness. Their report had differed from conclusions reached by other organisations, and the staff member was keen to check the methods used in the academic research to ensure robustness. A Peer sitting on the Small Business, Enterprise and Employment Public Bill Committee said that they “had never taken anything at face value” (interview 5). An MP who reported that they did check methods and biases in data was actually a scientist by training (interview 59). In reference to evidence appraisal, a Lords committee staff member (interview 73) argued:

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*This is the reason you're hired; you're expected to have a level of competence. It is the job of a policy analyst to do research.*

In contrast, a few MPs spoke of not having the skills “for dealing with certain sources of information” when they initially arrive in Parliament (interview 85). Obviously, MPs are not primarily elected for their expertise in evidence scrutiny. As such, they are often reliant on the staff they employ directly (MPs’ staff, interview 92), but one staff member questioned the extent to which they had the training or necessary support to excel in evidence appraisal (MPs’ staff, interview 74). All groups, however, stated that it was sometimes difficult to appraise contradictory sources of evidence, but parliamentary staff generally had more developed skills to do this. For example, staff commented on appraising evidence by looking for contradictions in findings (interview 45 Commons committee staff), good referencing (interviews 37 and 47 Commons committee staff), sound methods (interviews 60 Commons committee staff and 72 Lords committee staff), balance (interview 73 Lords committee staff) and judging the quality of the source (interviews 45 Commons committee staff and 73 Lords committee staff).

The ability of people in Parliament to interrogate specific types of research evidence was questioned by a few interviewees, especially the difficulty for MPs in appraising statistics and academic research. A Peer sitting on the National Insurance Contributions Public Bill (interview 16) argued that “knowing what the research, in a more technical sense, actually says” is “more than a slight problem”, particularly since “a lot of people are scared of numbers”. This interviewee went on to argue that “because [Members] are not familiar with numbers, they accept them and they don’t question them”. Referring to the questioning of witnesses on select committees, a Commons committee staff member (interview 45) recalled a situation where they were “responsible for [questioning] some scarily erudite witness, such as a Cambridge professor... [it] was quite intimidating and I kept thinking ‘please keep it simple for me’.” An MP serving on the Communities and Local Government Select Committee (interview 19) further commented that often, during evidence sessions, Members could be “bowled over” by figures that are quoted. They went on to argue that it was often “unclear what the parameters of these figures were or where they came from”, which made it difficult for parliamentarians to be able to assess their validity. MPs reported that academic sources “assumed a lot of knowledge” (MP, interview 66), and given that “most politicians are not experts on most subjects” (MP, interview 89), effective scrutiny of that type of research evidence can be difficult.

### 3.7 The purpose of research use

Our findings suggest that research was used for several reasons [see quotes 6-12 in Appendix 5 in Volume Two for more quotes]:

- **To support effective scrutiny and inform policy** (25 participants: 7 MPs, 3 Peers, 1 MPs' staff, 14 parliamentary staff). In other words, using research to hold the Government to account, question select committee witnesses, or test the suitability of legislation and suggest amendments if necessary. For example, one MP (interview 6, Commons Communities and Local Government Select Committee) argued that research was a "weapon in our armoury to do more effective scrutiny". This theme was a widely mentioned purpose of research.
- **To provide background knowledge** (16 participants: 6 MPs, 4 Peers, 1 MPs' staff, 5 parliamentary staff). Here, research was used to provide useful background, for example to a parliamentary debate or select committee inquiry. Research would help to set out the context, bringing parliamentarians and their staff up-to-speed on an issue. For a complicated issue, such as the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership, one MPs' staff member (interview 74) argued that research provided them with a good "introduction on the different sides of the debate".
- **To inform opinions** (11 participants: 4 MPs, 4 Peers, 2 parliamentary staff). Here, research is used to reach a view about an issue. One MP (interview 88) said that research helps "coordinate your ideas" with a further MP reporting that it could help to question pre-existing ideas (interview 61).
- **To substantiate pre-existing views or hypotheses** (10 participants: 5 MPs, 1 Peer, 2 MPs' staff, 2 parliamentary staff). Here, research was used as supporting evidence for a particular view, usually pre-conceived. One Peer (interview 12 Small Business, Enterprise and Employment Bill) argued that they would often approach an issue "with a view from my own history... and I will be looking for evidence and a filling-out of why I have arrived at a view". Two members of MPs' staff agreed that research was useful to "bolster opinions" (interview 74) and to "support specific points" (interview 84). An MP (interview 70) further agreed by saying that "researchers will know the MP's point of view and will try to find things that support it".
- **To provide balance** (9 participants: 1 MPs' staff, 8 parliamentary staff). Research was used to provide a balanced view about an issue. This was useful in both committees and debates. Referring to Small Business, Enterprise and Employment Public Bill Committee, a member of staff in the Commons Library (interview 20) said that research was sought to "make sure all relevant views of stakeholders are represented". A member of the Lords committee staff (interview 73) stated that every effort is made to "ensure that political perspectives are balanced out" through the evidence they use. There was an awareness from both MPs and MPs' staff that research could be biased and a breadth of research was useful for "getting both sides" of an argument (MPs' staff, interview 90).
- **To provide credibility and enhance public image** (6 participants: 3 MPs, 2 MPs' staff, 1 parliamentary staff). In other words, research was used to enhance the credibility of arguments put forward by MPs, and simultaneously their public image. A member of the Lords Library staff (interview 68) was conscious about the credibility of research given to Peers, saying that "we need to make sure that we are only using authoritative sources because we are giving this to Members, and Members are using it in the Chamber". When writing to a Minister on a constituent's behalf, it was important for MPs to use research "to illustrate the point' credibly" (MPs' staff, interview 74). MPs were aware of the importance of using evidence and finding the "killer facts that you need" (MP, interview 82) to support arguments in debates, otherwise you can "end up looking quite foolish" (MP, interview 63). As a further MP argued (interview 86) "when you stand up... all you have got to do is make one mistake; the speech could be brilliant, but if you make one mistake that's it, your credibility is out the window."

- **To score political points** (3 participants: 2 MPs, 1 MPs' staff). Research was used politically, particularly in parliamentary debate, as seen in this anecdote from an MP's researcher (interview 77):

*One of my colleagues works for [an MP from a different party] who quoted incorrect figures, and I took great gusto and pride in providing [the MP that I work for] with the correct figures which she quoted at a later date. There is a great deal of satisfaction about that; it is a political point scoring. There is nothing to be gained, they are all figures, so we are not gaining anything; we are gaining emotive point scoring. An MP (interview 95) agreed with this sentiment, arguing that there "is a political motive" to the use of research since you "can undermine their argument". They went on to argue that "part of the political fight is that you try to undo the Opposition's argument with well-researched facts, and that is a fact".*

## 4. Factors affecting the use of research in Parliament

### 4.1 Highlights

- *Several factors influenced the ability of people in Parliament to use research of all kinds.*
- *Many of the factors are closely inter-linked.*
- *Credibility of the source of the research is a particularly important factor affecting use.*
- *Other important factors for individuals included ease of sourcing, ease of use, personal attitudes and time.*
- *Parliamentary processes, such as select committees and public bill committees, affected the use of research.*
- *Lack of time constrained research use for all groups, but particularly for MPs.*
- *Challenges to using academically-derived 'research evidence' included lack of accessibility, limited relevance, and poor presentation or overly complex communication of research.*

### 4.2 Survey ranking of factors affecting use of research

In our survey, 88 people answered a question that asked them to rank factors that were important in deciding whether to read or use a piece of research [defined in its broadest sense] (22 MPs, 20 MPs' staff and 46 parliamentary staff). Overall, the credibility of the source was ranked as the most important factor in helping respondents to decide whether to read and/or use a piece of research, followed by the relevance of the research.

Also influential were ease of use and ease of sourcing. This differed by respondent type. The highest-ranked six factors were broadly similar for parliamentary staff and MPs' staff. For example, both MPs' staff and parliamentary staff ranked the credibility of the source as the most important consideration (this was ranked third by MPs). Credibility of the methods was the third most important factor for parliamentary staff and the fifth for MPs' staff (tenth by MPs). Furthermore, presentation of research was the second most important factor for MPs' staff and was ranked fourth by parliamentary staff (seventh by MPs).

In contrast, MPs ranked three factors in the top six that did not appear in that of MPs' staff (parliamentary staff were not asked to rank these factors). These were the personal importance of an issue (ranked as the third most important factor for MPs), the importance of the issue to their constituency (fifth most important) and staff resources available (sixth).

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*In our survey, the credibility of the source of research was overall ranked as the most important factor in determining use.*

The interviews allowed us to investigate the question of influential factors in much greater breadth and depth since respondents were not constrained by given options.

Below, we present a list of factors highlighted by interviewees as influential there is some overlap between the factors presented above, and thus we cross-reference when appropriate.

### 4.3 Group processes in Parliament

The nature of processes operating in Parliament, including select committees and public bill committees, shaped the use of research. Here, we discuss factors specifically affecting the use of research in select committees and the committee stage of legislation.

#### 4.3.1 Factors affecting the use of research in select committees

Here, we present findings from the case studies of investigative committees, in which interviews and ethnographic methods were used. Some interviewees offered general comments about the “brilliant amount of work” (MP, interview 66) that select committees do, and a Peer (interview 49) sitting on the Lords National Policy for the Built Environment select committee commented that, in their experience, “all of the research... received was helpful... and sufficient”.


The different stages of select committees influenced whether research could be more or less influential. Interviews illustrated that research “communicated at the start of an inquiry” (MP, interview 19) had a greater chance of being influential than if it was submitted much later on (see also quotes 13 and 14 in Appendix 5 in Volume Two). This is because research submitted early on could help set the terms of reference of the inquiry, setting the tone for future discussions. Furthermore, an MP (interview 17) offered a useful insight into the key point at which research could become influential in a select committee:

*We have a meeting which is called the Heads of Report meeting where we, as Members, set up templates for the clerks to go away and draft up a report... It is probably the most important meeting of the lot... If I miss that meeting I have had it, because the next opportunity then is when the committee clerks have drafted their report and then I may object to something they have said... So you could have half a dozen evidence sessions, be able to attend all of those, but miss the Heads of Report. And, by contrast, you could also have a Member who has attended very few of the evidence sessions and then decides to rock up at the Heads of Report meeting and express his or her opinion very strongly at that meeting and influence the direction of a report without having necessarily sat through all of the evidence.*

Different levels of research use at varying stages of an inquiry has been noted elsewhere in the literature (Goodwin and Bates, 2015), suggesting that engagement from researchers at an early stage is crucial.

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*Interviewees suggested that research communicated at the start of an inquiry had a greater chance of being influential.*



There was also a sense from some select committee members and staff that a reliance on submitted written and oral evidence affected research use. However, it must be noted that many comments were perhaps made on the basis of a perception of the procedures, rather than any hard-and-fast rules. As shown in Chapter Three, analysis of the evidence submitted to the studied select committees (and public bill committees too) revealed patterns of uneven participation across stakeholders, with most submissions coming from non-profit organisations. An MP (interview 66) argued that a select committee “is only as good as the input and, at the moment, we are very dependent on those that are very engaged”. This view was also reflected by others (see e.g. quote 15 in Appendix 5 in Volume Two). These observations suggest that select committees are able to use a good range of research when various sources, such as external organisations and academia, are engaged with an inquiry. Yet, it also suggests that research use is less prominent where there is reduced engagement. Thus, a clear understanding of, and engagement with, parliamentary procedures was a key determinant of research uptake and use.

The reliance on select committee staff to do research was also raised as a key factor affecting research use. One MP (interview 21) reflected on “the closeness of the relationship between the clerk, researcher [e.g., committee specialists] and chairman” on select committees. These actors tended to be influential in whether research was sourced and used. They argued that research staff on committees had a key role to play in sourcing research and would often provide guidance to Members about what questions to ask and the research underpinning those questions.

Furthermore, one MP on the Commons Communities and Local Government Select Committee and one Peer on the Lords National Policy for the Built Environment Select Committee suggested that the ‘consensus culture’ of select committees could restrict the extent to which committee members felt able to challenge interpretations of evidence put forward by witnesses or other committee members. The MP said that “on occasions when [I] ventured from the brief to ask [my] own questions, I’ve been told off by the committee chair” (MP, interview 21; Peer, interview 26).

### 4.3.2 Factors affecting use of research in the committee stage of legislation

Although the Lords does scrutinise legislation at the committee stage, only in the Commons do legislative committees take formal evidence. In a similar way to select committees, public bill committees can receive written evidence from external sources, and take oral evidence from interested parties, in order to help them assess a Bill. Thompson (2014) found that the relatively recent (since 2006) inclusion of written and oral evidence into these committees had provided a greater opportunity to change Government Bills (although noted some challenges). Indeed, one MP (interview 22) commented that they had found evidence sessions “very useful” and “extremely valuable”.

The fact that PBCs are formed quite late in the passage of legislation can influence the use of this information. The committee stage assesses legislation after Second Reading, both in the Commons and the Lords. Some interviewees (e.g. MP, interview 3, and Commons committee staff, interview 47 – see quotes 16 and 17 in Appendix 5 in Volume Two) suggested that since PBCs are formed late in the policy process, the ‘battle lines’ between Government and Opposition parties are already drawn. As one MP argued (interview 7):

*I wouldn't place too much emphasis on the actual Bill Committee itself because the deal that is done between the Government and Opposition whips will depend on whether or not we have talked for as long as we possibly can or whether or not we can get through things quickly.*

By this late stage, the usual channels (whips and party leadership) have already agreed various matters, including the number of evidence sessions and the witnesses. This process can thus limit the mobilisation of research for legislative scrutiny, as Whips are incentivised at this stage to call witnesses who support party political views (Russell et al., 2013). This could be one of the reasons why Thompson (2014) observed that amendments tabled by Opposition Members and Government backbenchers (and hence the potential research they use to support these amendments) have struggled to make an impact.

## 4.4 Other factors affecting research use

These factors affected the use of research by individuals, but also affected the group processes described above.

### 4.4.1 Scheduling and the issue of time

Parliamentary scheduling, and the associated issue of time, was a significant factor both for individuals and the group processes mentioned above.

In our survey, 82 people responded to a question about the time available to find and use research (11 MPs, 24 MPs' staff and 47 parliamentary staff). Overall, 33% of respondents agreed with the statement that they had enough time to find and use research in their parliamentary work, while 26% disagreed with this statement. There were differences in responses to this question by respondent type. No MPs agreed or strongly agreed that they had enough time to find or use research. In contrast, 10/24 of MPs' staff felt the same and 30/47 parliamentary staff. From our survey, therefore, time constraints seem to be a bigger problem for MPs.

Time constraints were discussed by all groups (including Peers) in our interviews. The lack of time available for parliamentary work had a significant impact on research use, and is closely related to the complexity of scheduling. As outlined in Chapter Three, individual Members and Committees can be inundated with research sent by external organisations, such as constituents. There is little time for parliamentarians and their staff to source and read a large quantity of research. Referring to their work on Lords National Policy for the Built Environment Select Committee, a Peer (interview 49) stated that “time is a big factor. The Committee couldn't take evidence from everyone it wanted to and there was a limit on how much evidence they could take”.

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*Research was often consulted by public bill committees after the 'battle lines' between Government and Opposition Members had been drawn. This restricted the scope of the committee and its use of the research.*



Interviewees with experience of speaking in debates and serving on committees spoke about the tight parliamentary schedule. Referring to the Small Business, Enterprise and Employment Bill, one MP argued (interview 7):

*The employment issues in the Bill were given 90 minutes; there were lots of colleagues that wanted to speak and scrutinise it, and they just weren't able to. Third Readings – after two votes it got 35 minutes. In a Bill that complex in nature and with the effort that external researchers put into it as well, it just seems a bit disrespectful to then just force it through in 35 minutes.*

A further MP (interview 2) raised similar concerns about the lack of time in committees to source research:

*It is just simply we have got to get on with it and try to understand all the information that is coming our way. That is symptomatic of the role of an MP, it is not just specific to this Bill; it is simply that there is a whole host of information that you are just bombarded with and inundated with in the course of any day, and you have to find your own way about managing it.*

Furthermore, a Peer (interview 15) also referred to the restrictions caused by parliamentary scheduling. Tight scheduling and lack of time thus has a significant impact on the amount of research that can be sourced and used in decision-making.

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*Our survey indicates that time constraints inhibit MPs' ability to find and use research.*

Also important to note here is the influence of scheduling and time on the use of research evidence. One of the major challenges to use of research evidence was the nature of the parliamentary timetable versus academic timescales. As one MP sitting on the Communities and Local Government Select Committee member noted (interview 18) "inquiries by select committee are relatively, by parliamentary standards, quick and sharp, and that probably wouldn't fit in with academic timetables where research tends to be programmed in and take a long period of time". A Peer serving on the Small Business, Enterprise and Employment Public Bill Committee (interview 4) agreed, arguing:

*I have worked a lot with academics. They would never be able to turn something round in 24 hours. It is not the way they work. It is a real mismatch. I don't think academics could turn something around overnight, which is often what we need. Someone can put down an amendment [now referring to Commons debate] even the night before a debate, and by the next day I have to stand up and say whether or not we support that amendment. I don't know many academics who would work to that timescale.*

In addition to supply problems, the tight parliamentary timetable meant that parliamentarians and staff would struggle to find time to read academic research (even if they had access to it). One select committee staff member (interview 37) reported that it takes time to "distil" academic literature; time which usually does not exist. As such, this respondent tended to look for a summary which were more user-friendly. The same select committee staff member did say, however, that there were signs of universities "producing more glossy stuff which distils key results".

#### 4.4.2 Credibility and peer recommendation

The credibility of the research source, and whether research was recommended by colleagues or existing contacts, was ranked highly by respondents to the survey. The interviews also showed that research use was more likely if the source or content was considered credible, or if it had been recommended by colleagues or other contacts. Interviewees argued that some sources were known to be “politically biased” (Commons committee staff, interview 60), but others said it was difficult to find out whether someone had “an axe to grind” (MPs, interviews 63 and 65) until quite late in the process. As noted in Chapter Three, some types of research, such as statistics or material sourced by the parliamentary libraries, were considered more credible than other sources.

Although we have discussed the challenges in appraising the quality of research in Chapter Three, interviewees made a judgement on research in several ways, even if the difference between ‘research’ and ‘research evidence’ was rarely made. In appraising scientific research, an MP (interview 61) considered “factors such as when the data was collated, by whom, how much of it there was and how wide the evidence is”. Furthermore, a Commons Library staff member (interview 33) stated that “good quality research has to be research that has a good methodology behind it”, which one MPs’ staff (interview 90) could be assured by “whether it has been peer reviewed and published”.

Credibility was defined differently by respondents. For some respondents, credibility was determined by how well known an organisation was, both to them as an individual, but also to others in Parliament. Here the issue of trust was emphasised consistently. Referring to their role on the Lords National Policy for the Built Environment Select Committee, a Peer (interview 27) said that the “author of the research is important in deciding whether to read or engage with it”. An MP (interview 61) agreed, saying that “the first thing we look at is who is it from”.

A judgement on the quality of the source could be made through colleague recommendation (Peer, interview 27), by “word of mouth” (Lords Library staff, interview 36), through “pre-existing relationships” (Lords Library staff, interview 36), or by working with organisations previously and getting to know them “quite well” (MPs’ staff, interview 91). Recommendations by colleagues were thought to be important because “if you’re investing three or four hours into reading a book, it’s got to be entertaining and relevant for you to do it” (MP, interview 85). A Commons committee staff member (interview 58)

furthered this point by reiterating the tight parliamentary timetabling (noted in all case studies), arguing that a triage system operated. Hence, the staff member often focused on the pieces of research recommended by others when having to prioritise what to read.

#### 4.4.3 Availability and accessibility

Ease of sourcing and ease of access were considered important factors in the survey, and attracted widespread discussion in the follow-up interviews. Availability is connected to ‘relevance’ discussed later in this section.

Research could not be used in parliamentary decision-making if it did not exist in the first place. A Peer (interview 28) argued, for example, that select committees could often be “ahead of the game compared to the academic community... wrestling with things where there is no body of evidence”. This may be particularly true for emergent, new issues on the parliamentary agenda, which have not been subjected to long-term scientific research.

Lack of accessibility was another commonly raised theme, particularly with reference to academia. Lack of access to research evidence was discussed widely in interviews. Lack of open access publishing was a particularly prominent theme. An MPs’ staff member (interview 77) argued that universities could be “closed doors... nine times out of ten we don’t know what they’re working on”. If there were “infinite resources” a Commons Library staff member (interview 43) said that they “would subscribe to all” sources, but this was not the case. A further Commons Library staff member (interview 39) did praise the fact that they had access to the ESRC data archive which was described as a “fantastic resource”. Thus, research evidence was used when access was easy.

Closely linked to the next factor of awareness, 78 people answered a question in our survey asking them how confident they were in their skills to find research (11 MPs, 22 MPs’ staff and 45 parliamentary staff). Nearly all (41/45) parliamentary staff said they were very or quite confident in finding research, 17/22 MPs’ staff shared the same view, as did 7/11 MPs. Despite high confidence in finding research, parliamentary staff did say that some issues were more difficult to research than others. For example, one Commons committee staff member (interview 47) reported that if they didn’t “know a topic terribly well” they were not “always entirely confident” about where to find information, as compared to a topic that they had researched before. Thus, the familiarity of an issue affected accessibility, which in turn influenced research use.

#### 4.4.4 Awareness

Awareness that research existed on a particular topic was another determinant of research use. Referring to committee stage of the Small Business, Enterprise and Employment Bill, one Peer argued (interview 11) that “it is always about awareness. It’s like any product isn’t it? It is about awareness.” Here, we can refer back to where an MP’s staff member described universities as “closed shops” (interview 77), and thus it was difficult to know what research was being done. As suggested in the previous section, lack of confidence about sourcing research was indicated by some survey respondents (but many, particularly parliamentary staff, were confident). In simple terms, therefore, if parliamentarians and staff did not know that a piece of research existed, it could not be taken up into the decision-making process.

#### 4.4.5 Resources

In our interviews, we specifically asked interviewees about the availability of resources. Two Commons committee staff members reported being satisfied with the resources available to source research, and also the ability of staff to interpret this research. One (interview 45) reported that they felt “well supported by the House in engaging with research” and was encouraged “to attend relevant seminars or conferences”.

Another (interview 60) argued that people employed by the Committee Office tend to “have research backgrounds” and therefore were able to support research use in select committees to a good standard. As suggested from our survey responses, parliamentarians often relied upon staff (their own or parliamentary) for research sourcing, partially because these individuals had developed good research skills. One MP (interview 17) noted, however, that if pressing constituency matters arose, their available resources would be more thinly spread and research sourcing could “get squeezed”.

Critique was directed towards the resources available to Peers when compared to MPs. Some Peers noted the lack of resources available to the Lords Library and the absence of a permanent budget to employ researchers. One Peer (interview 10) stated:

*If you looked at a pure client service model [of the Lords Library], the people that [they] are dealing with don’t have staff whereas others have staff, so on that basis you would say that the need [of resources and support] is greater, but [instead] the support is less.*

Other Peers (e.g. interviews 13 and 15) agreed with the “lack of resource” (interview 13) in the Lords. Comparing the research capabilities of Peers with that of MPs, a Peer (interview 13) said that “they [MPs] all have assistants and assistants for assistants and constituency advisers, and god knows what else down the other end, who can do a lot of the pre-digestion; we don’t have any of that”. The Peer went on to argue that “it would be great if I had a full-time researcher working for me because it would be possible for them to hit the phones”. It should be noted that Peers receive an attendance allowance of £300 per day, which may be used to employ staff; furthermore, MPs’ staff often work on constituency work, which is not a commitment that Peers must fulfil. In addition, the Commons Library has more staff because of the extra commitment placed on it by fielding enquiries from MPs on behalf on constituent (roughly 60-70% of enquiries), something which the Lords Library does not need to do.

There were also some criticisms of the Commons Library. Six MPs highlighted shortcomings such as variance in quality across different subject areas (interviews 59, 70 and 81), not enough appraisal (interview 3) and a reliance on less robust sources of research, for example, comments in the press (interview 50).

#### 4.4.6 Presentation style

The survey of MPs, MPs’ staff and parliamentary staff asked if there was a preference for how research should be presented (e.g. length, format, style). This was answered by 52 people, who emphasised a preference for short, concise, well-written briefings, ideally with an executive summary or abstract (see Figure 3).

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*Survey respondents demonstrated a preference for short, concise, clearly written research, ideally with an executive summary or abstract.*

In interviews, many parliamentarians and staff agreed that good presentation of research was key to it being used, particularly in a time-pressured environment in which some users were non-experts in specific fields. One MP's staff member (interview 91) recalled using research from an organisation, which tended to "be quite readable and clear"; therefore, they would use them again in the future for research. In the words of one MP (interview 17), "the shorter the better". Interviewees mentioned that verbose qualitative research was less user-friendly than quantitative information, and emphasised a preference for summaries. Visual information was considered useful in contrast to long prose (MP, interview 17). Although a Peer (interview 27) suggested that "there was a shortage of short summaries", there was a warning from one Peer (interview 12) about making executive summaries too short without enough information included.

An MP (interview 3) provided a useful summary of how research should be presented:

*I think the watchword is it needs to be quality not quantity, it needs to be user-friendly, recognising that politicians are all running around like headless chickens trying to do more than it will ever be feasible to do in any one day and, in a sense, if you don't make it easy to find the bit that you really want then we are not going to be able to provide the level of scrutiny that is really needed.*

Research evidence from academic sources was widely considered to be written in complicated ways (see e.g. quotes 19 and 20 in Appendix 5 in Volume Two).

Answering specific questions about POST, many interview respondents considered POST to provide well-presented research. Positive responses included the following statements from two MPs (interviews 77, 64):

*I have to say the POST stuff is the most useful because everything we get is usable; we have to sift through what we get from the Library, and a lot of it goes this way or that way or in the bin.*

*The Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology themselves are very, very good at creating what is called POSTnotes; they are very easy to digest, four A4-page documents that provide you with a good summary and then links that allow you to go off and identify the things you are not sure about in greater depth.*

#### 4.4.7 Relevance

Several interviewees across all groups argued that research would have to be "relevant to what is topical in [their] brief" (MP, interview 75), particularly if time constraints limited the extent to which research could be consulted. If research was relevant to their work, or indeed their own interests, then it was more likely to be used. The relevance of much research evidence was criticised, particularly from academic sources. Although an MP's staff member (interview 77) noted that academic research was useful "in response" to a pressing problem, such as Zika, it was sometimes presented as answering the wrong questions. One Commons Library staff member (interview 38) stated that they:

*mainly use think tanks rather than academic and that is not an accident. The problem with academic research is that it might be very interesting, useful background, or interesting discussion, but it is often not very connected with the immediate political concerns of the day... whereas think tank stuff is generally very directed at something.*

Other interviewees (e.g. quote 21 in Appendix 5 in Volume Two) agreed that academic research can be "interesting" but "not so useful for briefing Members on pressing points". (Lords Library staff, interview 55). However, the same interviewee did note that many Peers were "very interested in academic work and academic research". The Lords Library staff member (interview 55) continued, saying that there is "a group of them that I can think of that are very interested; they don't want a summary, they don't want us to precis anything, they want a stack of journal articles". This reflects much literature that identifies a divide between scientists and policy-makers (e.g. Cvitanovic et al., 2015), including in legislatures (Geddes et al., 2017). In short, academics prefer to digest research evidence in a different way to non-scientists. Parliamentary staff may take this into account when presenting them with research, particularly in the Lords where there are many academics.

#### 4.4.8 Attitudes, experience and expertise

Chapter Three discussed how research was used to support arguments. Thus, in order to be used it had to “chime” with the views of its user (MP, interview 87). In our interviews, there were suggestions that research would be more influential if it aligned with personal views or opinions on a topic (see e.g. quotes 22 and 23 in Appendix 5 in Volume Two). Contrastingly, an MP (interview 70) said that colleagues would be “less likely to use research if it proves them wrong”. An MP (interview 19) serving on the Communities and Local Government Select Committee gave one example of how “the personal biases of Members shape whether research is engaged with”. They argued that some parliamentarians were sceptical of the role of local government, and this could affect the level to which they engaged with research that suggested that local government was, in fact, effective. One MP (interview 86) also said that research was more likely to be used if it interested them personally, or affected their constituents.

Level of experience in Parliament was also a factor affecting the use of research. Some newer members of committees were not always familiar with the previous work of the committee, or how research could be used in oral evidence sessions (MP, interview 19 Commons Communities and Local Government Select Committee). A further MP (interview 17 Commons Communities and Local Government Select Committee) said that you get “more effective as an MP the longer you are here”, and gave a specific example of understanding select committee processes better. After a period of time serving on such a committee, the MP understood that there was much more reading to be done at the start of an inquiry, as compared to near the end. This knowledge helped the MP to arrange their time accordingly so that necessary reading could be done.

Several interviewees also noted the expertise of staff, but also parliamentarians, particularly in the Lords. In their study, Bochel and Defty (2010) found considerable expertise in the House of Lords, with many Peers being experts within their chosen fields. As such, they noted the high quality debates in the Lords. Two interviewees for our project agreed (e.g. see quote 24 in Appendix 5 in Volume Two). Being “well-versed in a particular area” (Peer, interview 10) or having a research background, enabled parliamentarians and staff to use research more prominently in their work. An MP (interview 19) stated that their “background as a property lawyer helped them to understand issues more quickly in areas related to this... [and] enabled them to weigh up... different witnesses” on select committees. Yet, the MP reported feeling less confident on more scientific topics because of their background.

**Short**  
**Precision**  
**Electronic**  
**Relevant**  
**Facts**  
**Detail**  
**Short**  
**Online**  
**Timely**  
**Graphics**  
**Abstract**  
**Succinct**  
**Data**  
**Numbers**  
**Brief**  
**Length**  
**Concise**  
**Clarity**  
**Referenced**  
**Bullet points**  
**Statistics**  
**Charts**  
**Synopsis**  
**Headings**  
**Bitesize chunks**  
**Honest**  
**Tables**  
**Links**  
**Summary**  
**Clear**

Figure 2: Figure 2: Words used to describe preferences for how research is presented in survey and follow-up interviews (larger and brighter text = mentioned most often)



#### 4.4.9 Topic area

The subject under consideration shaped the uptake of research. For example, if it was a relatively well-known topic area, then research may not be required, whereas a complex topic often demanded research. An MP (interview 89) gave some examples:

*It depends on the subject. If I was taking part in a debate on [the civil war in] Yemen than almost everything I said would have to come out of research because I'd be starting from a relatively low base. If I was doing the equivalent on broadband I could probably stand up and do 10 minutes without really thinking about it. It might not be very good but it would be adequate.*

Another MP (interview 24) argued that “some issues lend themselves to research more than others”. They went on to argue that some members oppose Bills on moral or ethical grounds. Thus, for issues with a strong moral or ethical dimension, such as stem cell research, abortion or other matters often associated with a human conscience, research may not be required from those parliamentarians who oppose the Bill on principle.

Furthermore, MPs said that research was more likely to be sought if it helped to support a constituent. For example, an MP (interview 64) said:

*[We] get more involved in the detail... when one of [our] constituents is affected; then [we] really want to understand the wider issue because it is going to have a negative impact on somebody that [we] are elected to represent. I think that is when [we] get involved in a bit more detail.*

Lastly, as shown in the detailed report on the case studies (see Appendices 3 and 4 in Volume Two), some topics discussed by scrutinising and legislative committees attracted more written evidence than others. Issues related to charities that engaged widely with Parliament would receive more written evidence, as would any issue for which there were strong interest groups.

#### 4.4.10 Timing of research publication coinciding with a policy window

As argued by policy scholars (e.g. Kingdon, 2003) windows of opportunity periodically open in which the political ground is more fertile for the uptake of evidence than at other times. This means that the same piece of research can be taken up into policy at one time, but ignored at others. There was some evidence from the interviews that research was sometimes required at short notice when an issue suddenly rose to the top of a political agenda (e.g. crisis events such as Zika). A Commons Library staff member (interview 1) said “to put it bluntly, unless [a major piece of research] chimes with the headlines in the newspaper that morning, it can be quite easy for it not to make a big enough ripple for people to be aware of it”. A Peer (interview 16) offered similar views, saying that:

*for most people in politics, their interest in the subject is like a lighthouse beam. When the beam is on that subject it is only on that subject, but then their focus moves, and that subject goes to outer darkness because they can only focus on a small number of things at a time.*

Thus, if an issue was prominent on the parliamentary agenda, it was more likely for associated research to be sourced. Academic institutions were generally not considered to be good at presenting timely research (e.g. quotes 25 and 26 in Appendix 5 in Volume Two).

#### 4.4.11 Alignment with other sources

Six interview respondents (e.g. quotes 27 and 28 in Appendix 5 in Volume Two) mentioned that research was more likely to be used if it aligned with conclusions reached in other sources; in other words, if it confirmed the prevailing view, rather than opposing it. Where research differed from the consensus view, it was treated more cautiously due to concerns of being “led down the garden path with a really extreme view” (select committee staff, interview 60). Many interviewees reported a tendency to use multiple sources in order to enable cross-referencing of information. With reference to a Lords select committee, one Peer (interview 29) argued “there is no single piece of evidence that the committee has found to be more useful than others. All the pieces of evidence need to be pieced together to form the whole picture”. Cross-referencing between sources gave interviewees “more confidence” (MP, interview 93) in their parliamentary work.



#### 4.4.12 Understanding

In Chapter Three, we briefly touched on the observation that some types of research are harder to understand than others. Non-expert parliamentarians, unsurprisingly struggled to understand research if it was presented in a complicated form. Scientific, academic and other forms of data, such as quantitative data (e.g. economics), were sometimes hard to comprehend. A Peer (interview 16) argued that:

*A lot of people are scared of science. That is a great pity. And also that is compounded here [Lords] because people are older [so] a lot of scientific development is quite challenging to them because it stuff they didn't learn at school and so they think, 'What does all this mean?' So it is very important that people do have an understanding of it, really, but there are quite a lot of people that don't.*

Similar sentiment was shared by other groups. When outlining the extent to which parliamentarians and their staff could appraise research, it was noted that several problems exist in judging the quality of evidence. A lack of a research background for many Members restricted their ability to scrutinise evidence, including erudite witnesses on select committees. The problem of policy-makers not understanding research evidence has been raised in the literature (Sutherland et al., 2013), but the research community may be able to communicate better to limit the problem (Tyler, 2013a).

## 5. Reflecting on research use in Parliament

This project has provided a unique insight into the use of research, including research evidence, in the UK Parliament. The project has illustrated that ‘research’ is broadly defined in Parliament with a number of different types and sources of evidence being used by different actors. Academically-derived research evidence is thus only one source of research used in Parliament, which is to be expected if we consider Parliament to uphold principles which support the democratisation of knowledge (i.e., all people should be allowed to have a say). Throughout this report, we have been careful to distinguish ‘research evidence’ from other forms of ‘research’, the former referring to a more academic, scientific conception of evidence, and the latter encompassing several other forms of knowledge. It was evident that many actors in Parliament did not distinguish between them to any degree. When appraising research, there was often a lack of consideration of the methodologies behind the evidence.

We have also mapped out the processes through which research evidence feeds into Parliament. The challenges outlined in the two previous sections relate to the specific context of Westminster, including the nature of UK democratic politics, parliamentary procedures, available resources, the cultures of the two Houses, and the complex interaction between these factors. In identifying and discussing the factors that promote or restrict the use of research in Parliament, interviewees volunteered a series of suggestions to improve the use of research evidence in Parliament. These suggestions have implications for a variety of audiences, including the research community, research advisory bodies such as POST, and Parliament itself. Below, we reflect on specific messages targeted towards different audiences. (We use quotes only sparingly; solutions-based quotes from parliamentarians and staff can be found in Volume Two.)

### 5.1 Higher education sector

Our findings suggest that academic research is not cutting through; for example, the voluntary sector outperforms the higher education sector in terms of written and oral evidence submissions to committees in Parliament. Academic research was criticised for being submitted too late (or not at all) to be influential in parliamentary processes. Academic sources of research were also criticised for being poorly presented with overly technical jargon, and hence for taking too much time to digest. The lack of time and skills to interrogate the quality of evidence in Parliament, for example evidence raised by witnesses in select committees, may be overcome by training end users or amendments to tight parliamentary schedules (see next section). But, to overcome the limited, and poor quality, engagement in Parliament from the higher education sector, universities and academics need to take action.

Four broad solutions are suggested:

- *Better communication and presentation of research.* POST can play a leading role in encouraging scholars from universities and other research institutions to improve science communication. One useful tip is to encourage academics “to write proper abstracts” or policy briefs (Commons committee staff, interview 53), which summarise key messages succinctly (see Balian et al., 2017). Other solutions such as compiling evidence systematically into usable summaries (particularly examples of ‘what works’), providing more visual research and removing scientific jargon is needed. For the latter point, the success stories being compiled by the government ‘What Works’ centres, and the user-friendly summaries of what works in conservation science by Sutherland et al., (2017), are good examples to follow.
- *Understanding of, and engagement in, parliamentary processes.* An extract from an interview of a Commons committee staff member (interview 58) was interesting. They spoke about the useful experience gained by an external researcher from a pairing scheme in Parliament:

*I think the placement of interns in a select committee for three months, or through the whole process of starting and finishing an inquiry, is a fantastic thing. What we delivered was a scientist who now had a much better understanding of policy and where science might fit in that, where their expertise might fit into Parliament, how they could get involved in Parliament, and how they might go back into science and take that policy knowledge with them. So we have a really motivated person whose writing skills have improved because they have been asked to do a different form of writing to a reasonably high quality, write to an audience they had never considered before, at a pace they had never written to before.*

Members of the research community would benefit from closer engagement with, and a better understanding of, how Parliament works. As stated before in this report, while research has focused on how to improve researchers' understanding of policy, this has not focused on legislatures (Kenny et al., 2017). This has occurred despite the fact that legislatures, including the UK Parliament, make important decisions (Russell and Cowley, 2016). The dominance of charitable and not-for-profit organisations submitting written and oral evidence to scrutiny and legislative committees suggests that they understand how Parliament works more than the higher education sector. As one Peer noted (interview 49), the "voluntary sector have upped their game". The low proportion of evidence submitted by universities and other research institutions should be a concern for all researchers. Pairing or fellowship schemes, may be an important part in raising awareness of legislatures in the research community. Existing schemes, such as those run by POST and the Royal Society, are good examples to follow. Universities should support policy engagement activities from their academics, and provide incentives for this.

As a result of our project's findings, POST is developing a web hub for academic researchers, which will provide guidance and information for researchers on many of the points above, as well as case studies of academics who have worked with Parliament and videoed interviews with parliamentary staff.

- *Provision of relevant research.* Scholars such as Callon (1994) have suggested that science is a public good. Parliamentarians and their staff interviewed in this project suggested that academic research was not always relevant to policy needs. In order to produce more policy-relevant science, both the supply and demand side need to be reconciled. On the one hand, Parliament could communicate research needs better to the academic community, but academics could also take steps to build relationships with key individuals and knowledge brokers, such as POST and the parliamentary libraries, in order to identify relevant needs.
- *Enhance credibility.* While it is vital to present research in a user-friendly, relevant way, the higher education sector should not abandon rigour. Parliamentarians and their staff ranked credibility as the most important factor determining research use, although the method of determining credibility was unclear. Academics thus need to continue to display rigour and integrity, and focus on building a reputable name for themselves, for example by providing advice in a timely fashion. Finally, these elements should be brought together so as to develop a clear brand that policy makers associate with credibility.

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*The low proportion of evidence submitted to committees in Parliament by the higher education sector should be a concern for all researchers.*

## 5.2 Parliament

Greater attention could be placed on ensuring that parliamentary end users of research evidence – parliamentarians, their staff and parliamentary staff – understand what it is, and how other forms of research might differ from a methodological point of view. While there was some understanding that academic or science-based research evidence is often more robustly generated than other forms of knowledge, the importance of a rigorous evidence-base was not always appreciated. Credibility was deemed important, but the method for determining it was not always clear, and it appeared that limited evidence appraisal was conducted. This provides an opportunity for key knowledge brokers, such as POST and the parliamentary libraries. For example, POST could build on its existing research methods training course to parliamentary staff<sup>15</sup> to provide training for parliamentarians and their staff on how to source and appraise research, offering simple tips on how to distinguish between robustly compiled evidence and other forms of information.

The nature of such training might differ between roles; for example, it might be more detailed for parliamentary staff and MPs' staff, people who this project found were important for sourcing and using research. Since MPs generally relied upon staff to source research, in part because of tight parliamentary schedules, training for this audience could be different. Such training might provide a list of key questions for MPs to ask staff about the research that they are sourcing on their behalf.

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*More attention could be placed on ensuring that parliamentarians and their staff understand what research evidence is, including how to appraise its quality.*

This study also raises some concerns about some formal parliamentary processes. Few formal parliamentary processes were set up with the use of research evidence as a forethought (because they are primarily democratic and legal processes), which inevitably means that in some cases, processes make suboptimal use of research evidence, or, at worst, hinder its effective use. Our findings corroborated and expanded upon two examples that have been outlined in previous work.

The first example is the range of evidence received by select committees, which does not come from a balanced cross-section of potential providers. Although some effort is made to avoid 'the usual suspects', the government and the not-for-profit sector often dominate submissions and the higher education sector is usually underrepresented. This problem is compounded by the fact that constraints of time and capacity often mean that there is not 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.

The second example is the way that expert witnesses are selected to speak before public bill committees. The selection of witnesses by the usual channels (whips and party leadership) can mean that witnesses serve political purposes, rather than providing a balanced and nuanced commentary on the evidence relating to the legislation. Addressing these concerns will require pragmatic, informed choices about how to treat research evidence within formal parliamentary procedures.

Some of these challenges are well known tacitly, at least within Westminster. Exploring how to address them was the impetus for Chris Tyler (then Director of POST) to seek a partnership between ESRC, UCL STEaPP and POST to establish the Social Science Section and this study. Our findings enhance our knowledge of how different people understand and use research evidence, and its key routes into Parliament. The study is being used to focus the work of the Social Science Section on how best to deliver summaries of research evidence (e.g. POSTnotes), to deploy resources to support other parliamentary staff, to develop and deliver training on research evidence within Parliament, and to support Parliament's 'Universities Programme' to increase academic understanding and engagement.

<sup>15</sup> See [www.parliament.uk/mps-lords-and-offices/offices/bicameral/post/about-post/professional-development1](http://www.parliament.uk/mps-lords-and-offices/offices/bicameral/post/about-post/professional-development1)

### 5.3 Addendum: future research directions

This study examined only the parliamentary demand-side of the research-to-use ecosystem. Equally important are the supply-side researchers and the many intermediaries who translate research for parliamentary use. These actors operate in a complex environment shaped by (and shaping) political and funding priorities. Our analysis of the impact case studies from the 2014 REF (which was conducted in parallel with this study) shows that Parliament is thought (by the submitting academics) to be an important beneficiary of research, with 20% of cases claiming substantive engagement with Parliament.

Our analysis also shows the role intermediaries can play in facilitating engagement and impact between researchers and Parliament (Kenny, 2015). Relationships and interactions between researchers and users is recognised to increase the likelihood of research evidence being used (Langer et al., 2016, Nutley et al., 2009, Walter et al., 2005, Walter et al., 2004). To date, there have been a few attempts to map networks between researchers and users (Chambers et al., 2012, Oliver et al., 2013, Oliver et al., 2014), and the importance of undertaking such analyses for Parliament has recently been made (Geddes et al., 2017). This is reinforced by our study. In the face of time and resource pressures, and in response to the established culture and procedures, people in Parliament are often left to take shortcuts to find relevant research by relying on familiar individuals and organisations. Greater mapping of relationships between actors within and outside Parliament is an important aspect of further study for determining how research evidence could be most effectively mobilised to support effective governance within our democratic societies.

There is also much to gain from expanding the research model used in this project to explore the use of evidence in other legislatures, further filling the gap in literature on evidence use in legislatures. While we noted that some studies had looked at research use in legislatures throughout the world, it is a relatively unexplored topic. Research on 'civic epistemologies' (Jasanoff, 2005) has illustrated that evidentiary standards, science advisory structures, methods of policy reasoning and institutional arrangements for public decision-making vary markedly between countries (Miller, 2008). Thus, although the UK example illustrates the need for further study elsewhere, the particularities of the UK Parliament restrict its wide relevance. Further research could investigate how legislatures in Europe and elsewhere define and use research, as part of a programme of research aimed at guiding science advisory structures in different settings.

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*Few formal parliamentary processes were set up with the use of research evidence as a forethought (because they are primarily democratic and legal processes), which inevitably means that in some cases, processes make suboptimal use of research evidence, or, at worst, hinder its effective use.*

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