

1 **Making an impact on Parliament: advice for the agricultural community**

2 The UK Parliament performs an important role in shaping policies and legislation, including
3 those related to agriculture. Parliamentarians (MPs and Peers) and the staff supporting them
4 want to use evidence to inform the passage of legislation and the scrutiny of government
5 policy since it decreases the chances of making a bad decision. This viewpoint explores how
6 communities of science and practice working in the agricultural sphere can engage with
7 Parliament to ensure that evidence informs decision-making. It makes five recommendations:
8 (1) know how to **engage** with parliamentary processes, (2) **communicate** relevant evidence in
9 a clear and concise fashion, (3) ensure that evidence is **credible**, (4) work with trusted
10 **knowledge brokers**, and (5) **persevere** over a long timescale.

11 **Keywords:** Agriculture Bill; Evidence-based policy; Evidence-informed policy; Parliament;
12 Science communication; Science-policy

14 **Introduction**

15 The UK Parliament performs an important role in shaping policies and legislation, including
16 those related to agriculture. However, based on the implicit assumption that policy is mainly
17 shaped by the Executive (government), rather than the Legislature (parliament), science-
18 policy scholars have tended to focus on the former rather than on how evidence is sourced
19 and used in parliaments (Kenny *et al.*, 2017a). This is a significant gap in the existing literature
20 because legislatures can play a key policy role (Goodwin and Bates, 2015), as evidenced by the
21 influence exerted by the UK Parliament in the Brexit debate. There is now an extensive
22 literature providing advice to communities of science, policy, and practice on how to improve
23 the use of evidence in policy-making (see Cairney; 2016; Parkhurst, 2017; Oliver and Cairney,
24 2019). Such advice, however, has rarely been based on empirical studies of evidence use in
25 legislatures where different processes operate as compared to government.

26 The utility of understanding how and why evidence is used in legislatures is clear; ultimately
27 it will improve the chances that evidence submitted by scientists and practitioners will be used
28 in policy-making. In the agricultural sphere, the UK Parliament plays a key role in shaping
29 related policy and legislation. At the time of writing, it is considering the suitability of the

30 Agriculture Bill, which is planned to pass through Parliament in the coming months. Many
31 other Bills that come before Parliament also relate to aspects of food and farming, which
32 allows MPs and Peers to debate and amend content. Select Committees regularly scrutinise
33 the policies of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) and conduct
34 inquiries into issues related to food, farming, and the environment.

35 A report led by University College London (UCL) and the Parliamentary Office of Science and
36 Technology (POST) (Kenny *et al.*, 2017b) investigated how the UK Parliament sourced and used
37 evidence. It found that evidence was deemed useful by people in Parliament, but various
38 factors determined whether a piece of information was likely to be used or not. The most
39 important factors related to the credibility of evidence, whether it had been received in a
40 timely manner, and also to how clearly it was presented to a mainly non-expert audience.
41 Observation of committee processes also found that evidence could feed into Parliament
42 through key individuals, including specialist advisers to Select Committees, through House
43 Library staff, or via MPs and Peers themselves (see Kenny *et al.*, 2017b for more detail).

44 In light of this report, this viewpoint makes five recommendations for how agricultural
45 communities of science (e.g. researchers) and practice (e.g. land managers, advisers) can
46 better engage with Parliament to improve uptake of evidence. It makes five
47 recommendations: (1) know how to **engage** with parliamentary processes, (2) **communicate**
48 relevant evidence in a clear and concise fashion, (3) ensure that evidence is **credible**, (4) work
49 with trusted **knowledge brokers**, and (5) **persevere** over a long timescale (see Figure 1).
50 Ultimately, this will improve the chances that policies and legislation related to food, farming,
51 and the environment are evidence-informed and hence more likely to work in practice.

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73 Figure 1: Five key components of effective parliamentary engagement (based on Kenny *et al.*,
74 2017b)

75 In making the distinction between science and practice, this viewpoint makes no judgement
76 on which type of evidence is most important for policy-making. In other words, in accepting
77 that Parliament is meant to represent the views of all citizens, it provides advice about how
78 evidence of all types (e.g. 'scientific', experiential etc.) can be best communicated to
79 parliamentarians and their staff. This follows one of the main findings of the UCL/POST report,
80 which discovered that people in Parliament interpreted evidence broadly and welcomed
81 different kinds of information from a variety of sources (Kenny *et al.*, 2017b).

82 1. **Engage with parliament – know who and when to contact**

83 A key message from the UCL/POST report was the need to know how Parliament works, which
84 enables more effective engagement (Kenny *et al.*, 2017b). There are a variety of ways in which
85 evidence about food, farming, and the environment could feed into Parliament. Select
86 Committees, for example, scrutinise government policy and legislation. The Environment,
87 Food and Rural Affairs Committee will generally be the most relevant group for agriculture
88 and it regularly conducts inquiries which make a real difference¹. A formal call will be made
89 for written evidence with a terms of reference, which can be responded to by individuals or
90 groups with an interest in the specific inquiry. When scrutinising the Agriculture Bill, written
91 evidence was submitted by academics, trade union bodies, industry groups, charities and not-
92 for-profit organisations, farming groups, and other individuals². Subsequent oral evidence is
93 called for from the pool of written correspondents and the committee will rarely use any other
94 information as part of their formal inquiry. Being aware of calls for evidence, including
95 timelines, is thus vital – policy windows regularly open where evidence about issues related
96 to food and farming will be needed, and thus relevant parties must be ready to seize upon
97 them (see Kingdon, 2003; Rose *et al.*, 2017). It is usually best to submit evidence using the
98 online form, although committee staff can be contacted if different formats are preferable,
99 and individuals not wishing to respond themselves can work with organisations to influence
100 joint responses. In the UCL/POST study, Select Committee staff reported that evidence
101 received early in an inquiry has the most potential to influence its scope (Kenny *et al.*, 2017b).
102 Evidence can also feed into Parliament through All-Party Parliamentary Groups (APPGs), which
103 are more informal cross-party gatherings of parliamentarians interested in specific issues
104 (Kenny *et al.*, 2017b). There are many such APPGs related to farming³ and organisers of these
105 groups can be contacted via details listed on the formal register⁴. They regularly invite

¹See <https://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/environment-food-and-rural-affairs-committee/inquiries/> for ongoing and past inquiries by the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee.

² Sources of evidence submitted to the Agriculture Bill
<https://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/environment-food-and-rural-affairs-committee/inquiries/parliament-2017/agriculture-bill-17-19/publications/>

³ Relevant APPGs may include: “Agroecology for Sustainable Food and Farming”, “Dairy”, “Eggs, Pigs, and Poultry”, “Farming”, “Hill Farming”, “Science and Technology in Agriculture”, “Food and Drink Manufacturing”, “Food and Health”, “Fruit and Vegetable Farmers”, “Rural Business”, “Rural Crime” (subject to change with new ones established – others may be relevant, e.g. APPG on the Fourth Industrial Revolution).

⁴ <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm/cmllparty/190327/contents.htm> (register as of March 2019)

106 individuals with expertise on particular issues to speak to them, but cannot do so unless they
107 are aware of your knowledge and interest in engaging with them. These parliamentarians
108 might then feed what they learn into Chamber debates and committees on which they sit.
109 This means that taking a proactive approach by writing to individuals and groups, such as your
110 constituency MP, interested Peer or APPG, can be a good way of getting your evidence into
111 Parliament.

112 2. **Communicate clearly and openly**

113 People in Parliament have limited time and are generally not experts on agriculture. Hence,
114 evidence submitted to Parliament must be communicated in a concise and relevant style
115 without assuming a high level of understanding or including unnecessary jargon (Geddes *et*
116 *al.*, 2018; Kenny *et al.*, 2017b). This advice is relevant for all types of person seeking to engage
117 with Parliament on agriculture issues. For an agricultural scientist, it may be better to provide
118 a concise overview of what the body of evidence says, rather than providing long-winded
119 results of individual papers. If links to studies are provided, then these should be open access,
120 and preferably prefixed with a short abstract covering its key conclusions and
121 recommendations.

122 3. **Be credible**

123 Credibility has been ranked as a key component of evidence use in the UK Parliament (Geddes
124 *et al.*, 2018; Kenny *et al.*, 2017b). This is interpreted broadly in Parliament, with particular
125 types of evidence being considered credible (e.g. statistics), and suspicion being cast towards
126 sources that are known to have ‘an axe to grind’. When presenting evidence to Parliament, it
127 is important to provide credible evidence which supports your view. This could be peer-
128 reviewed evidence or experiential knowledge as long as information is provided to justify a
129 particular interpretation. Evidence submitted to committees is usually made publicly available
130 online and thus care should be taken with regard to content and tone. Caution may be applied
131 to working with particular organisations who may be treated with some caution due to their
132 political stance (see next point).

133 4. **Work with trusted third parties**

134 Many individuals, including academics, advisers, and land managers will lack the time or
135 specialist skills needed to engage with Parliament effectively. Whilst communication skills can
136 be enhanced, working with trusted ‘knowledge brokers’ (see Bednarek *et al.*, 2018) can be a
137 useful way of feeding information into parliamentary decision-making. These groups have a
138 track record of communicating science clearly to policy-makers, and can thus bridge the gap
139 between scientists, practitioners, and parliamentarians. Various agricultural groups regularly
140 engage in formal parliamentary processes, including trade unions (e.g. NFU, Farmers’ Union
141 of Wales), other agricultural groups (e.g. Countryside Land and Business Association, Soil
142 Association), industry (e.g. Arla Foods), environmental groups (e.g. RSPB, National Parks
143 authorities), and learned societies [see footnote 2]. Developing relationships with these
144 organisations, and sending relevant information to them, can be a good way of engaging with
145 Parliament. The Knowledge Exchange Unit at POST is another good organisation to work with.

146 **5. Persevere**

147 Policy change can be slow and incremental, or sudden and unexpected (see Owens, 2015).
148 However, ‘direct hits’ between evidence and policy, in other words quick policy change after
149 receipt of evidence, is much rarer than incremental change (Owens, 2015). Relationships with
150 individual parliamentarians, for example through local constituency MPs or links with APPGs,
151 can be slow and challenging to build. Trusting relationships with third party organisations who
152 may communicate on your behalf can be equally challenging to establish. All of this is made
153 more difficult if key points of contact keep changing, which is symptomatic of larger
154 organisations including in policy (Sasse and Haddon, 2019). Above all, however, we should not
155 expect immediate impact from the evidence that we submit to Parliament, but regular and
156 sustained engagement, including the maintenance of personal relationships, should improve
157 the ability of your evidence to cut through (Owens, 2015).

158 **Concluding remarks**

159 Effective engagement with the UK Parliament (and devolved parliaments), and legislatures
160 across the world, is important if communities of science and practice in agriculture are to
161 ensure that policies and legislation related to food, farming, and the environment are
162 evidence-informed. Whilst the democratic nature of decision-making means that we can
163 never guarantee that our evidence will be used to shape policy, we can take steps to improve

164 the likelihood that our evidence is influential. This initially requires a clear understanding of
165 how Parliament works and how evidence might be fed into formal and informal parliamentary
166 processes. Once routes into Parliament are understood, and trusted third party organisations
167 are identified to help with engagement, communication should be clear, evidence-based, and
168 simple, and preferably sustained over long timescales. I invite readers to put these
169 recommendations into practice and to play their part in improving the use of evidence related
170 to agriculture in Parliament.

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