

A collaboration led by Kathryn Oliver and Annette Boaz

*TRANSFORMING EVIDENCE* is an initiative aiming to look at how evidence is produced and used for public policy and services, led by Dr Kathryn Oliver (LSHTM) and Professor Annette Boaz (Kingston and St George’s). Despite significant investment in infrastructure and research into evidence use, lessons remain within disciplinary and policy silos, leading to waste and lack of learning about how to maximise the value of evidence.

We have four streams of work:

1. Sharing expertise and best practice about evidence use
2. Connecting communities across sectors globally
3. Advising decision-makers on how to make best use of evidence
4. Generating new research on evidence production and use

This submission draws on our work, and that of our multidisciplinary, multi-sectoral colleagues who met in September 2018 to develop a research and practical agenda for how to transform evidence production and use to inform society. Our aim in making this submission is to make the Committee aware of the existing evidence and expertise about how to produce and use evidence well, which should inform any future investment in research infrastructure by Parliament or more generally.

For more information, please see our website <https://transformure.wordpress.com/> or contact us

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**Executive Summary:**

1. Parliament, and Select Committees play a vital role in holding Government, organisations and individuals to account. This scrutiny role can only be performed effectively with access to robust and relevant evidence.
2. Effective scrutiny requires a responsive, diverse and mixed evidence base, to ensure that committees can assess how policies are implemented and experienced by different populations
3. There are limited resources to allow either good *access* to evidence and expertise, or *good assessment* of whether the evidence and expertise available to committees is representative and robust.
4. Existing evidence production / clearinghouse organisations can act as sources of evidence, but existing models such as the What Works Centres are unlikely to supply what scrutiny requires, being too narrow, solutions-focused, and unrepresentative of the scope of public debate.
5. There is no obvious place to seek advice on how to better find, assess or use evidence. A well-resourced advisory function would enable decision-makers to access the best advice on *how* to find and use evidence more effectively.
6. We recommend drawing more effectively on existing learning and expertise about evidence use to address three main elements:

* *Improving access to evidence and expertise*: Investing in existing and new networks, relatioships and infrastructure to enable better access to a more diverse and responsive evidence base.
* *improving the assessment of evidence*: Ensuring that the evidence found is robust and can be easily assessed in terms of quality and worth.
* *Improving use:* Good use implies being able to draw on internal and external expertise to consider policy history, context, alternatives, forecasting and scenarios, and deliberating with relevant stakeholders.

1. There are several possible ways to address these elements. We recommend:
   1. Making more visible existing relevant, high quality evidence and expertise, by using knowledge brokering and technology more effectively
   2. Supporting capacity building for those tasked with accessing and using evidence and expertise
   3. Drawing on, and support an advisory function to support better evidence use
   4. Exploring the infrastructure challenge going forward using a technique such as an innovation lab
2. We recommend Parliament increase resources to enable better access to and use of evidence, including capacity building, drawing on existing expertise about evidence use, and exploring potential infrastructure options to help meet its unique evidence needs.
3. **The Scrutiny function**
   1. Parliament, and the Select Committees, play an important role in holding government to account. Select committees have become more active and high profile in recent years, with over 40% of recommendations impacting on policy (1).
   2. Select Committees have broadened participation in parliamentary processes through inclusive methods, such as making all recordings and transcripts publicly available. This transparency should be applauded.
   3. The use of citizens’ assemblies and web forums to capture the views of diverse publics is also an important innovation, as they allow members to hear from a range of voices who may be affected by policies in different ways.
   4. For Select Committees to function effectively, they must have access to the most robust, representative evidence base possible. For any public policy issue, there will be a range of views and perspectives which need to be considered, including: whether the policy has been implemented as expected; how different publics experienced the implementation; how the policy compares with alternatives including historical cases; whether anything could be done to mitigate harmful effects or improve outcomes; and whether and how a policy interacts with other ongoing initiatives.
   5. We also note that Parliament is not a homogenous institution, including committees, libraries, the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology, amongst others (2). These different parts have different evidence needs.
4. **The evidence needs of a scrutiny function**
   1. The evidence needs of Select Committees are therefore very diverse. Examples of the types of evidence which may be required by and useful to committees include:

* Expert testimony, based on personal or professional experience and/or training
* Evidence synthesis, ideally systematic reviews which summarise the evidence base on a policy issue
* Primary research of a range of study designs, including randomised controlled trials, longitudinal studies, qualitative research, geographical mapping, documentary and historical analyses, as appropriate.
* Historical and political analyses of previous policy instruments of relevance
* Media analyses
* Public views, in the form of citizens’ assemblies, referenda or polls
* Representation from special interest groups, ideally those with specific expertise or experience relevant to the question in hand
* Representation of all sides of a public debate, with appropriate weight placed on the degree of consensus for each side
  1. The work of Committees is essentially reactive, meaning that unless there is an unusually long planning period, the evidence base must be assembled with little notice, with limited opportunity to seek out diverse experts or test the robustness and representativeness of the evidence base.
  2. The scope of the evidence base for any particular inquiry is set by the Chair and clerks. There is no guarantee that evidence exists within this scope, and there is limited or no opportunity for Chairs and clerks to discuss the potential dearth or existence of evidence with academics, researchers, or other experts, prior to consultations.
  3. Even though significant amounts of evidence are assembled, submitted, or presented to committees, there is limited opportunity to think through how best to *use* this evidence to inform recommendations, or how to consider what this evidence base tells us in view of what has been tried before.
  4. The evidence base which is available to committees may therefore fragmentary and unreliable. Access to evidence is challenging, as academic research is usually not easily available or well-translated (3). The selection of experts is often dependent on the personal networks of clerks or Chairs, leading to potentially biased and unrepresentative testimony (1,4), with women and BAME groups particularly underrepresented. This matters, as these perspectives are vital for members to gain a helicopter view of the scope of public debate.
  5. In summary, a scrutiny function needs an evidence infrastructure or process which can easily *provide access* to a diverse and robust evidence base, *assess the quality* of this evidence base, and *improve use* by supporting clerks and members to consider the robustness and representativeness of this evidence base.

1. **Meeting Parliament’s evidence needs**
   1. At present, these needs are not being met, but there is significant interest in the academic and policy community in improving communication between these spheres of activity (5,6).
   2. There are a number of potential sources of evidence, including clearinghouses and evidence production units, on which Committees could and do draw. These include:

* **In-house expertise,** in the form of the Libraries, clerks, analysts, and members themselves
* **Invited expert witnesses**
* **The Parliamentary Office of Science and technology (POST)**
* **The ten existing What Works Centres**
* **Government-commissioned or funded research,** such as the National Institute for Health Research’s [Policy Research Units](https://www.nihr.ac.uk/about-us/how-we-are-managed/our-structure/research/policy-research-units.htm), systematic reviews facilities (e.g. the EPPI-Centre <https://eppi.ioe.ac.uk>), or in-house governmental department research
  1. While useful, none of these can meet Parliament’s evidence needs alone. There are significant costs (e.g opportunity costs, childcare and travel, lack of institutional support and training) for individuals to participate in Committees and other parliamentary processes, which are unequally borne by women and other minority groups (6).
  2. The What Works centres, while providing a more systematic and robust evidence base, take a long time to assemble this evidence, and are not always aligned with policy or committee priorities (7).
  3. Many of the What Works Centres and research facilities funded by Government are tailored towards a narrow, often overly simplistic, solutions-oriented evidence base. For example, they tend to focus on interventions evaluated by randomized controlled trials (9). While helpful to inform policymakers ‘what works, for whom, and under which circumstances’ (10), RCTs cannot help us understand the policy context or history, how policies interact and are implemented, or how different populations experience policies (11).
  4. Government-funded research is not always publicly available and can be hard to find (8).
  5. Investment has tended to focus on producing more research, rather than on ways to mobilise it more effectively. Government uses these investments to help create the evidence base for better decision-making. Examples include the UK government’s Global Challenges Research Fund, a 1.5 billion pound fund established in 2015 to address substantive social problems or the thirteen, (up from nine original) Collaborations for Leadership in Applied Health Research and Care, which received £232 million 2008-2019 (12). Overall, more and more money is spent on producing research evidence, but this is not guided by current theory about *what types* of knowledge are most valuable to help address societal problems, or *how to produce* useful evidence, or how to *use* this knowledge in policy and practice setting (13,14). There is a vital role for networks, relationship building, systems and initiatives focusing on how to mobilise existing knowledge, as well as producing new evidence.
  6. There is no obvious place to *seek advice on how to improve access to and use of evidence*. Although there are a number of existing initiatives working on how to make research more accessible (such as St Andrew’s [Research Unit for Research Utilisation](http://www.ruru.ac.uk) (RURU), Nottingham’s [Science in Public](https://scienceinpublic.org), and the [Africa Evidence Network](http://www.africaevidencenetwork.org/)), or to measure research impact, there is no centre for the UK which acts as a hub to bring this learning together. The *TRANSFORMING EVIDENCE* initiative is bringing this learning together, but remains under-resourced. The existence of a well-resourced advisory function would enable decision-makers to access the best advice on how to find and use evidence more effectively (15).
  7. Parliament must be able to draw on a more diverse knowledge economy than existing sources can supply. In short, Parliament requires a more diverse, responsive and flexible evidence base than available through the existing infrastructure.

1. **Three elements to improve evidence use: access, assessment and use**
   1. *Improving access to evidence and expertise*: Parliament requires a mixed economy of knowledge production, including civic society and voluntary sector, internal, governmental or parliamentary commissioned research, librarians and clerks, as well as syntheses of the academic literature. It is difficult for select committees to know if they are accessing good evidence, whether they are accessing a complete representation of the evidence base, and whether they are using this evidence in the most appropriate way. Making a more diverse and representative evidence base available means building capacity, infrastructure, networks and relationships. For example, support could be targeted towards underrepresented groups to attend Committees as expert witnesses.
   2. *Improving the assessment of evidence*: Evidence need to be assessed to establish its relative worth and robustness – and the completeness of the evidence base. This requires capacity and capability in terms of trained staff with time to carry out this task. Without this capacity, it is not possible to know how complete, representative or robust the evidence seen by committees is.
   3. *Improving use:* Good use implies being able to draw on internal and external expertise to consider policy history, context, alternatives, forecasting and scenarios, and deliberating about the totality of the evidence puzzle with relevant stakeholders. It is far more than simply accessing research evidence. This implies time and resources for deliberation and creative use of evidence, and better engagement with relevant stakeholders outside of formal hearings.
2. **Our recommendations, using expertise about evidence use to support Parliament: 4 options for action**
   1. Parliament should review its internal spending on research and evidence infrastructure and expertise. It should consider revising this investment to support better in-house expertise and capacity to engage with evidence
   2. In addition, we suggest that four options should be considered:

* **Making more visible existing relevant, high quality evidence and expertise** Parliament should find ways to make existing evidence and expertise more visible and available to staff and members. This would include greater resources put towards evidence in general, but also using knowledge brokers (such as POST and [UPEN](http://www.upen.ac.uk/)) and technologies (such as [text mining](https://methods.cochrane.org/sites/default/files/public/uploads/james%20thomas.pdf) and automated literature searching) more effectively.
* **Support capacity building for those tasked with accessing and using evidence and expertise:** Parliament should consider providing training and support for staff and members on how to find, assess and use evidence. *TRANSFORMING EVIDENCE* are willing to co-design a set of learning resources to support this process, drawing on our expertise in evidence use.
* **Draw on, and support an advisory centre to support better evidence use**: Make better use of what we already know about how to access and use evidence more effectively. There is a body of literature and expertise which can help Parliament navigate these problems. *TRANSFORMING EVIDENCE* are ready to help Parliament expand its networks into this space.
* **Explore the infrastructure challenge going forward using a technique such as an innovation lab**. Parliament should task an external body to help explore infrastructure options to help address evidence needs. There are several potential models (What Works, Alliance for Useful Evidence) but we need to better identify the unique requirements of Parliament before recommending large scale investment. There are a range of approaches designed to support innovation processes, including policy labs, co-design events and sandpits. These approaches are being used by governments and non-governmental organisations to tackle  ‘intractable, complex, systemic policy problems that require fresh thinking that can lead to potentially transformative solutions’ (16). Policy labs, sandpits and co-design workshops involve significant amounts of facilitation to support intensive participation and free thinking to develop innovative solutions to complex problems (17).  Depending on the scale of the policy or practice challenge, the discussions are typically spread over a series of workshops rather than a single meeting. They also draw on a range of creative approaches, such as visioning and journey mapping (16,18). These approaches could be used by an external body such as *TRANSFORMING EVIDENCE* to help Parliament and Select Committees navigate its unique evidence challenges.

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