

Get Your Voice Heard Policy Briefings



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Introduction

As a student at the School of Oriental and African Studies, you are likely to possess unique expertise on subjects being discussed in Parliament. As members of various committees, MPs want to ask pertinent, targeted questions in their inquiries, and you could be the one to formulate them.

By keeping up to date with discussions in Parliament, you can identify issues which correspond with your interests and have your say by writing policy briefings. This allows you to steer the discussion towards what you want answered in Parliament.

This handbook produced by **SOAS Influencing Corridors of Power (ICoP)** will give you a step-by-step guide as to how to write a policy briefing and how to get it noticed by policy makers. Get in touch and get heard.¹

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¹ <https://blogs.soas.ac.uk/cop/>

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What is a policy briefing?

A policy briefing is a concise document that presents research findings to policymakers. Its aim is to highlight the relevance of those findings to specific policies, and to make recommendations for change based on them.

Learning about research and conducting it is what university students are devoted to.

As such, policy briefings are a very useful way for students to get directly involved in politics, and to play their role in ensuring that policy formulation is guided by research.

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Why write a policy briefing?

- 1) Policy briefings are an effective way of getting your voice heard.
- 2) You can develop useful contacts with Members of Parliament.
- 3) You can upload your briefings onto an online portfolio for prospective employers.
- 4) They are a great addition to your CV.

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Types and aims

There are a number of different departments in Parliament who you can write policy briefings for:

- Select Committees
- The House of Commons
- POST²
- The House of Lords³
- Issues which you feel your local MP should be raising in Parliament.

In general, policy briefings seek to:

- Address the important points, specifically keeping the target audience in mind
- Get MPs to make a decision based on facts.

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How to find relevant inquiries

To know what to write about, it is vital to keep up-to-date with relevant inquiries as they pass through Parliament. Here are a few ways of doing this:

- Checking Parliament's website for inquiries⁴
- Regularly checking for open calls for evidence⁵
- Signing up to POST, Commons Library, Lords Library, and Select Committee alerts
- Following relevant Twitter Accounts.

² The Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology. POST has been producing policy briefings for over thirty years and has an excellent guide:

<https://post.parliament.uk/how-to-write-a-policy-briefing/>

³ Both the House of Lords and the House of Commons have Libraries which produce in depth briefings and

impartial research: <https://lordslibrary.parliament.uk>, <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk>.

⁴ <https://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/inquiries-a-z/>

⁵ <https://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/inquiries-a-z/current-open-calls-for-evidence/>

How to write a policy briefing

Step 1: Think about your audience

- Why is the topic relevant to your MP?
(What are their political interests? What questions have they previously asked in Parliament? Which committees have they been/ are they on? What inquiries have they been/are they involved in?)⁶
- What impact does the issue you are raising have?
(Who is affected? What are the cost implications?)
- Connect the topic to a local area which the MP will be interested in.

Step 2: Structure

- Have a simple, clear layout and use subheadings.
- Use figures/ charts/ diagrams where appropriate to make data reader-friendly and to reinforce key points.
- There is **no official rule** on the length of a brief; however the more concise the better and you'll be lucky to get an MP to read more than one side of A4!
- Don't be afraid to use bullet points.

Step 3: Content

- Begin with an overview/ summary of the content.
- State how your brief relates to policy and what it is seeking to achieve.
For example, are you trying to change practice? What recommendations/ solutions are you proposing? What is the timescale? Why now?
- Make your methodology clear.
- Present evidence for your argument and be explicit about methodological limitations and the strength of your evidence.

⁶ You can search for your MP in the Parliament's data base and review their history of questions asked (oral and written): <https://members.parliament.uk/members/Commons>

- Include handy facts and figures MPs can use to emphasize points.
- Do not assume prior knowledge; keep acronyms to a minimum.
- Highlight consensus and ongoing debate, and be clear about how you are building on existing knowledge.
- Be explicit about areas of uncertainty.
- Use open access sources as much as possible.
- Provide contact details for interested parties to get in touch.
- Ensure your advice is objective. You have a duty to warn ministers if you feel that their decisions are unlikely to work/ are unworkable, and/ or will have negative consequences.

But remember, this is not a battle; often it is possible to suggest a course of action through which your recommendations align with the minister's requirements.

Step 4: Language

- Be clear and direct, and use simple language.
- Avoid the use of technical language, jargon, acronyms, abbreviations, abstractions, and corporate-speak.
- Keep sentence structures simple, and paragraphs short - make every word count!
- Avoid vague statements, such as 'will impact on...'; rather be specific and include measurables, through phrases such as 'will increase/ reduce X by...'.

TOP TIP!

Before you begin writing, think of your brief as an 'elevator pitch' - how would you convince a decision maker of your position in the minute it takes to ride an elevator?

Publicising

- Find MP's contact details on the Parliament website and **email them directly.**⁷
- **Target key policy actors directly.** Be sure to identify the right person(s) and send a paper version of your brief, as well as by email. Follow this up with a phone call after a reasonable amount of time (3-5 days).
- Liaise with SOAS Influencing Corridors of Power (ICoP) who can publish your briefing and support you through the process of engaging MPs.⁸
- Publish through **media outlets:** policy makers and MPs read the press and follow Twitter, so this is often an effective way to attract their attention.
- The **Policy Library** is a good site to publish your brief since its members and target audience include policy makers, civil servants and politicians.
- **Other organisations and individuals who could help include** international governance and advisory bodies, think-tanks, NGOs, business and industry, trade unions, religious institutions, community groups, and lobby groups.
- Create an **ORCID ID.** This unique 16-digit number identifies you as a researcher in the worldwide community, and ensures that all your work is attributed to you. Funding organisations such as Wellcome and UKRI⁹ also use it. Go to <http://orcid.org/> to create your ORCID number.
- Make your work **Open Access** so that your research output is free to access anywhere in the world. Contact your library for more info.
- Create a **Google Scholar profile.** This is a way to showcase your research output and to track google citations. This can make you more 'googleable' and thus more visible. Create an account and use Google Scholar Library links to access other work.
- **Connect through Twitter.** Twitter is now widely used in academia and is an effective platform to promote your research.
- **Impact Story.** This is used to track the visibility of your research. Metrics track the 'attention' your research receives, which allows you to assess its accessibility, visibility and reach. You can include annotations and descriptions about your outputs to make them more accessible. Sign up using your ORCID ID.

⁷ <https://members.parliament.uk/members/Commons>

⁸ <https://blogs.soas.ac.uk/cop/>

⁹ UK Research and Innovation <https://www.ukri.org>; <https://wellcome.ac.uk>.

Influencing

There are a number of ways students can influence policy:

- Submit evidence at the committee stage. This happens after bills have been scrutinised through the Second Reading. Current bills going through Parliament are listed on their website.¹⁰
- Submit evidence to Select Committee's with open calls for **evidence**.
- **Contact All-Party Parliamentary Groups (APPG)**. Whilst APPGs do not have the ability to influence policy themselves, they do provide useful networking opportunities. APPGs are searchable by subject group, so you can find those interested in fields that overlap with your interests.¹¹
- **Use the House of Commons Library**. This research service provides regular briefings on academic research and is a good tool for policy briefing templates. Specialists are not listed online, but you can contact hcenquiries@parliament.uk to be directed to an appropriate contact.
- **Search for and attend events relevant to your policy brief**. These will provide networking opportunities with policy makers to whom your brief matters, and also facilitate access to established policy research centers.¹²
- Seek opportunities to present **a short briefing - lunchtime seminars** are often the best.
- **Find and use the ‘downtimes’ of your target audience**: for example, Friday mornings are often a good time in Whitehall, Wednesday nights for Scottish Parliament, and before elections for civil servants. Some departments offer **‘brown bag lunches’** where academics can come for lunch and discuss the implications of their research

¹⁰ <https://services.parliament.uk/bills/>

¹¹ <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm/cmallparty/200408/contents.htm> (as at 08 April 2020)

¹² For example, The Mile End Institute, and UCL Public Policy.

Contacting MPs

There are 650 MPs in the House of Commons and 804 Peers¹³ in the House of Lords whose remit is to work in our interests. Below is a table of 14 MPs with their areas of interest and the committees they belong to. This demonstrates the huge overlap that can be found between MPs' interests and those of SOAS students, and how valuable and constructive SOAS students' contributions can be. Explore at: <https://members.parliament.uk/members/Commons>.

Name of MP	Party	Constituency	Political Interests	Countries of interest	Type of Select Committee	Contact Details
Paul Blomfield	Lab	Member for Sheffield Central	Universities, education, housing, voluntary and community sector, youth affairs	Southern Africa, Burma, Kashmir, Palestine, Somaliland	Business, energy and industrial strategy, Education, skills and the economy, able marine energy park, & Student APPG	paul.blomfield.mp@parliament.uk
Rehman Chishti	Con	Member for Gillingham and Rainham	Law & order, criminal justice system, foreign affairs, NHS	UK	Home Affairs, Petitions, Human Rights, Justice, Backbench Business	rehman.chishti.mp@parliament.uk
Yvette Cooper	Lab	Member for Normanton Pontefract and Castleford	Unemployment coal industry, poverty, equal opportunities, Islamic matters	UK	Home Affairs, National Security Strategy, Liaison, Education & Employment	coopery@parliament.uk
Stephen Doughty	Lab	Member for Cardiff South and Penarth	Islamophobia, human rights, equality, terrorism and security, international development, immigration	UK, Sudan, Libya, France, Chechnya	Home Affairs, International Development, Welsh Affairs, Arms Exports Controls, Commission for Aid Impact	stephen.doughty.mp@parliament.uk
Kate Green	Lab	Member for Stretford and Urmston	Employment, exclusion, poverty, equality, justice	UK	Home Affairs, Work and Pensions, European Scrutiny, Privileges	kate.green.mp@parliament.uk

¹³ MPs elected at the 2019 General Election. For a full list, visit: <https://members.parliament.uk/members/Commons> for MPs and <https://members.parliament.uk/members/Lords> for House of Lords' peers.

Tim Loughton	Con	Member for East Worthing and Shoreham	Finance, foreign affairs, education, environmental taxation, housing, health, childcare	Indian sub-continent, Latin America, Middle East	Home Affairs, Environmental Audit, Draft Mental Health Bill	loughtont@parliament.uk
Caroline Lucas	Green	Member for Brighton, Pavillion	Gender, animal welfare, poverty, the environment, drugs and alcohol	Middle East; particular focus on Palestine & Afghanistan	Environmental Audit & Student APPG	caroline.lucas.mp@parliament.uk
Khalid Mahmood	Lab	Member for Birmingham, Perry Barr	Community relations, British industry, international trade, terrorism	UK	Home Affairs, Broadcasting & Terrorism APPG	mahmoodk@parliament.uk
Ian Murray	Lab	Member for Edinburgh South	Education, services for disabled people, social justice, equal opportunities,	Middle East, Nepal, USA, South America	Foreign Affairs, Scottish Affairs, Public Accounts, Environmental, Arms Exports Control	ian.murray.mp@parliament.uk
Priti Patel	Con	Member for Witham	Trade, business, the economy, law and order	America, India, Middle East, Africa	Foreign Affairs, Arms Export Control, Public Administration, Members' Expenses, Draft Deregulation	withammp@parliament.uk
Naz Shah	Lab	Member for Bradford West	Equality rights, women's rights, home affairs, health and social care, Islam, security	UK, India, China	Home Affairs	naz.shah.mp@parliament.uk
John Spellar	Lab	Member for Warley	Energy, electronics industry, construction industry, defence	Australia, Israel, USA, Japan	Defence, Energy, Arms Export, Finance and Services, Conventions, & Terrorism APPG	john.spellar.mp@parliament.uk
Catherine West	Lab	Member for Hornsey and Wood Green	Arms exports controls, international trade, health and social care, migrant workers, prisons	China, Hong Kong, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Yemen	Foreign Affairs, Arms Export Controls, International Trade	catherine.west.mp@parliament.uk

Examples of current inquiries

Below are a few examples of recent topical inquiries conducted by the Home Affairs Select Committee which went through Parliament and which you could have presented evidence for, or written a policy brief for. Be sure to search and keep track of Committees and Inquiries.¹⁴

Islamophobia Inquiry

- The Committee closed the inquiry due to the December 2019 elections.
- The Committee built on the publication of a report by the All-Party Parliamentary Group on British Muslims calling for the adoption of an official working definition of Islamophobia.
- In addition to the evidence taken on the roles of print media, social media and the far right, the committee also invited evidence on:
 - The current extent of Islamophobia in British society.
 - The impact of official adoption of a definition of Islamophobia.
 - The role of politics.

Windrush Children Inquiry

- The report was published in July 2018, and the government's response in September 2018.
- The Committee questioned the Home Secretary on the citizenship issues being experienced by the children of the Windrush generation.
- MPs present: Yvette Cooper, Kirstene Hair, Tom Loughton, Stephen Doughty, Naz Shah.

Counter-Terrorism Inquiry

- The Committee kept a watching brief on counter-terrorism, holding evidence sessions with senior officials and other stakeholders.
- Topics covered in meetings included: recent terrorist attacks, surveillance and control measures, the Prevent Strategy, online extremism, counter-terrorism policing.
- MPs present: Yvette Cooper, Rehman Chishti, Kate Green, and others.

¹⁴ For Committees, search at <https://committees.parliament.uk/committees/>; for Inquiries, search at <https://committees.parliament.uk/inquiries/>. Search for more details on the listed inquiries via the website's search box.

Below are a few examples of inquiries conducted by the Foreign Affairs Select Committee:

The World Food Programme Inquiry

- The session considered the impact of food insecurity in populations around the world, how WFP operations responded to humanitarian crises, and how the UK engaged and supported the organisation's aims.
- MPs present: Tom Tugendhat, Ian Austin, Chris Bryant, Priti Patel, Ann Clwyd, and others.

China and the International Rules-Based System Inquiry

- The deadline for submissions was January 2019, the report was published in April 2019 and the Government's response in June 2019.
- The inquiry sought to examine how China participated and engaged with the international order and how the UK could respond to and support the process.
- MPs present: Tom Tugendhat, Andrew Rosindell, Royston Smith, and others.

Global Britain and India Inquiry

- The report was published in June 2019 and the Government's response in September 2019.
- The purpose of this inquiry was to take stock of the UK's relationship with India and to examine the relationship as an important test case of the 'Global Britain' strategy.
- The inquiry was also an opportunity to consider a number of cross-cutting issues such as the relationship between trade and broader strategic relationships and the implications of the UK's visa policy in a foreign context.
- MPs present: Ian Austin, Ann Clwyd, Priti Patel, Andrew Rosindell, and others.

Other Ideas

- Keep up-to-date with Parliamentary business via:
<https://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/business-papers/commons/agenda-and-order-of-business/#session=35&year=2020&month=3&day=22>
- Look at the policy briefings of NGOs such as Amnesty, the Children's Society, Liberty, Reprieve etc. for templates and inspiration.
- If you wish to offer the House of Commons Library or House of Lords Library feedback on their briefings, or if you just want to ask a question, contact them at:

House of Commons:
papers@parliament.uk

House of Lords:
hlresearchservices@parliament.uk

Personal Advice

Personal advice from MPs on how to write a policy brief:



Catherine West, MP (Labour)

- Naturally, it depends on the topic/debate but the best rough guide can be found at the House of Commons Library.
- NGOs are also a good option
- Page numbers with headers/footer are useful.
- Helpful information can be given in smaller chunks inside a text box on the side.
- Always provide evidence and/or statistics.



Kate Green, MP (Labour)

- Keep the brief very short - MPs receive a huge amount of briefing material, most of which they can only scan.
- Longer papers should be directed at their researchers.
- It is generally better if you can make the briefings as timely as possible (stay updated with forthcoming Parliamentary business via the Parliament website).
- Individual MPs particularly appreciate constituency-level data.
- Research individual MP's policy interests, for example, what select committees they members of, what front bench portfolios do they hold, what they have been writing about/ raising in debates - and focus on briefing MPs on those particular issues. This is better than blanketing MPs with information.
- The best way to contact MPs is via their Parliament email.



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