POST ANNUAL REPORT 2016
The Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST) is Parliament’s in-house source of scientific advice. POST is an office of both Houses of Parliament, overseen by a Board of MPs, Peers, and external experts. Working with colleagues across both Houses, POST delivers a number of key services for Parliament:

**ADVICE**
POST provides advice on research evidence relating to public policy issues. Advisers provide oral briefings to select committees on research evidence relevant to inquiries, assessments of evidence received by committees, and ad hoc peer reviewed briefings prepared at the request of select committees or library research services. POST covers a wide range of areas including health, biological sciences, physical sciences, security, engineering, ICT, energy, environment, and social science.

**ANALYSIS**
POST provides impartial research summaries, placing findings in a policy context for parliamentary use. These often take the form of POSTnotes, which are peer reviewed by academia, industry, government, and the third sector, and POSTbriefs, which are longer, responsive policy briefings based on mini-literature reviews and peer review.

**BUILDING CONNECTIONS**
POST holds a number of events each year that connect parliamentarians to leading experts from the research community and other sectors. POST helps identify experts for Members, library research services, and select committees, for example, upon starting a new inquiry.

**HORIZON SCANNING**
POST identifies trends in science, technology, society, and policy, and analyses their implications for Parliament. Horizon scanning is core to all of POST’s work, including working with select committees, for example when scoping new inquiries.

**PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT**
POST works with people in Parliament who want to develop their skills in using research evidence, and with members of the research community who are keen to learn more about policy and Parliament. POST also works on capacity building initiatives overseas.

**FELLOWSHIPS**
POST manages fellowship programmes for academics, in collaboration with research funders and professional societies, bringing them into Parliament to conduct research, and support and learn about the activities of POST, committee offices, and libraries.

All of POST’s publications are peer reviewed and are available at [www.parliament.uk/post](http://www.parliament.uk/post).

This Annual Report highlights some of the work that POST completed in 2016, and outlines plans for 2017.
It has been an honour to chair the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology in 2016. POST, alongside knowledgeable colleagues in the libraries of both the Commons and Lords and specialists in the select committees, provides an invaluable service to Parliamentarians by supplying them with the information they need to carry out evidence-based scrutiny and debate. Such advice is more important than ever given the profound changes and uncertainties we face both at home and abroad, especially as we move towards the implementation of the decision to leave the EU.

POST plays a vital role in supporting informed debate on scientific and technological issues as well as enabling the use of research evidence across Parliament more broadly. POST’s concise and informative briefing papers called “POSTnotes” play a crucial role in keeping Members of both Houses of Parliament informed on topical scientific issues. This year they have been cited in debates covering topics ranging from infant mortality and stillbirth through to the impact of automated technologies on the workforce.

The POST Board plays a central role in ensuring that POST continues to provide Parliament with first-rate information and advice. This year we welcomed Professor Sarah Whatmore, Professor of Environment and Public Policy at the University of Oxford, and Stephen Metcalfe MP to the Board. We said goodbye to Sir David Davies, Nicola Blackwood MP, Liz McInnis MP and Sir Paul Brember MP.

The UK’s decision to leave the EU following the referendum raises many questions and will have repercussions across a wide range of policy areas. POST has already played a key role in supporting Parliamentary debate in this area by working with Parliamentary Outreach and the House of Commons library to organise a well-attended conference bringing together MPs researchers, Parliamentary staff, and academic researchers to discuss many main issues.

POST’s international reputation goes from strength to strength and its briefing papers continue to set a benchmark for Parliamentary scientific advice. This year, POST signed a memorandum of understanding with the Chilean Senate, which plans to set up its own office of scientific advice and is looking to POST for support and guidance. POST also hosted researchers from the parliaments of both Kenya and Malawi.

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The Board's secretary is Simon Fliander, Clerk of the House of Commons Science and Technology Committee. Ex-officio members are Paul Evans, Principal Clerk of Select Committees, House of Commons; Penny Young, Librarian and Director General of Information Services, House of Commons; Edward Potton, Head of Science and Environment Section, House of Commons Library; Tom Wilson, Clerk of Select Committees, House of Lords; and Dr Chandrika Nath, Acting Director, Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology.
POST conducts horizon scanning activities to identify areas of interest to Parliamentarians, and is working to strengthen this capacity through consultations with relevant communities of expertise. Building on the success of its first formal meeting to discuss futures held in 2015, POST held a second meeting in 2016 to give parliamentarians the opportunity to discuss the UK Government’s futures work with external stakeholders.

Themes covered previously included robotics and autonomous systems, internet of things, financial technologies, cities, and the future of ageing. In December, POST hosted a meeting to discuss the potential future uses of distributed ledgers, following the Government Chief Scientific Adviser’s review, Distributed Ledger Technology: Beyond Block Chain, which set out the opportunities and challenges posed by the technology. The meeting included an open discussion of the scope and balance of projects being considered by the Government, with relevant academic and business representatives. Areas of interest range from verifying a benefit claimant’s identity and making welfare payments via mobile phone, to replacing the birth, deaths, and marriage registry and ensuring the long-term integrity of digital public records.

Throughout 2017, POST will be undertaking a new horizon scanning exercise based on consultations with relevant communities of expertise as well as internally. The objective is to encourage cross-sectoral thinking, and develop a systematic shortlist of possible subjects for the POST Board to consider for inclusion in POST’s future work programmes.
The Social Science Section is now fully integrated into all of POST’s activities and supports the use of research evidence in many other sections across Parliament.

In October, POST was awarded a further three years of funding from the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) to continue its partnership with University College London until 2019. The aims of this next phase are to continue to embed the social sciences across POST’s work programme, maintain a social science stream of work, complete the study on the use of research evidence in Parliament, and use the findings to inform POST’s activities. The social science section will also focus on facilitating academic engagement, and on capacity building opportunities around the use of research.

Over the past year the social science section has contributed to all POSTnotes, and further developed a dedicated strand of POST social science work. This includes POSTnotes on Barriers to Healthy Food, Education in Youth Custody, Addressing Islamic Extremism, Integrating Health and Social Care, and Creating Age Friendly Cities. It has also published two POSTbriefs on Education of Young People Leaving Custody, and Academic Evidence on Selective Secondary Education.

The social science section has continued to support an increasing range of Select Committees. In the House of Lords, this has included analysing a survey of young people’s experiences of moving from school to work for the House of Lords Select Committee on Social Mobility. In the House of Commons, it has included providing a briefing for the Education Select Committee inquiry on selective education and writing a report on the experiences and perspectives of individuals personally affected by suicide for the House of Commons Health Select Committee inquiry on suicide prevention.

Capacity building was a crucial aspect of the social science section’s work in 2016 supporting both staff and Members. The section has delivered its second cross-House research methods course for Parliamentary staff, and developed and delivered a bespoke course on appraising research for Committee Specialists in the House of Commons. It also continued to play a crucial role in the House of Commons Member’s Professional Development Working Group, leading the development of on-demand briefings for the House of Commons. This included a session on the EU referendum, jointly run with the ESRC’s UK in a Changing Europe programme, and on using evidence, jointly run with the Alliance for Useful Evidence. Both of these received excellent feedback.

Increasing academic engagement has also been a key feature of 2016. A new fellowship scheme was established to offer academics from different subject areas and at any career stage the opportunity to work in Parliament. Supported by funds made available to universities to increase the impact of their research (Impact Acceleration Accounts), the scheme includes opportunities for academics to work on specific projects proposed by offices inside Parliament, as well as enabling academics to propose a project of their choosing. The scheme has been endorsed by the Research Councils, in particular the ESRC and the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC). In collaboration with Research Councils UK, as well as colleagues from Outreach and the House of Commons Library, we also ran a well-attended conference on Brexit, which brought academics together with parliamentary staff to network and share expertise. The connections built have already been used to inform other areas of Brexit-related work across both Houses.

As part of the work of the Social Science Section, POST is running a programme of activity to study the use of research evidence within parliamentary debate and scrutiny, including the impact of POST. The programme is now in its final phase and the report will be published in May 2017. A number of outputs have already emerged from this research, including a co-authored article with colleagues at University College London in a special issue of the journal Palgrave Communications focused on Scientific Advice to Governments.

EVIDENCE IN PARLIAMENT
Following the Paris Climate Change Agreement in 2015, POST has continued to support Parliament's scrutiny of the UK's carbon targets. The House of Commons reconsidered the accounting method used for carbon budgets in the 2016 Energy Bill and POST published an analysis on this topic in a POSTbrief. Towards the end of the year, attention shifted to how the UK will meet upcoming carbon budgets, with the Government's Carbon Reduction Plan due to be published in 2017.

Since future heating policy is expected to be a key part of the plan, POSTnote 523 on the Carbon Footprint of Heat Generation was published to inform scrutiny of the topic. In 2016, the UK signed off its first nuclear power plant for decades and POST published POSTnote 531, on how the UK manages the world’s largest stockpile of separated plutonium. It offered an analysis of the safety, security, economic, and energy policy implications of different options.

POST also supported staff to scrutinise the economic models used to inform high-level energy and climate change policy decisions, running a training session on this topic and drafting a POSTbrief on energy-economic modelling due to be published in early 2017. This fed into an inquiry by the House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee, on the Treasury and Sustainability.

Support for committees continues to make up a significant part of our work and in 2016 POST supported the (now disbanded) House of Commons Energy and Climate Change Committee with inquiries on Low Carbon Network Infrastructure and Renewable Heat and Transport, the House of Lords Economic Affairs Committee Inquiry on the Economics of Energy Policy, and the House of Commons Northern Ireland Affairs inquiry on the Electricity Sector in Northern Ireland. We have also continued to advise a range of committees on future inquiry topics.

In 2017, Brexit will be a significant topic and POST will be publishing a briefing on Future Energy Efficiency Policy and Brexit in February. This will build on 2016 work concerning Brexit, which has included hosting a roundtable at Parliament’s recent Brexit conference and working with committees and libraries to help identify key energy and climate change issues.
The UK’s exit from the EU is likely to lead to extensive changes in how the UK manages its natural resources over the long term. This will inform a range of publications POST produces in coming years on opportunities and challenges for UK environmental legislation and policies.

For example, the possibility of rewilding areas to support ecosystem service benefits such as flood alleviation has become an area of parliamentary interest. However, as noted in POSTnote 537 on Rewilding and Ecosystem Services, suggested benefits remain largely unproven and while it is likely to be a cost effective approach for managing some areas of land, rewilding does not equate to simple land abandonment.

The creation of the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy also provides the opportunity to address resource challenges, with POSTnote 536 on the Circular Economy highlighting how resilient supply chains could enhance resource security, create jobs, provide environmental benefits, and reduce energy use. Global projections of increasing population size, urbanisation, and changes in consumption patterns discussed in POSTnote 516 on Trends in the Environment suggest there will be increasing demands on water, energy, and food systems that will need to adapt to changes in climate. POSTnote 543 on the Water-Energy-Food Nexus summarises approaches to consider interdependencies between water, energy, and food security and how this information might inform policies and strategies.

This year has also highlighted the environmental risks the UK faces, with storms in January causing widespread flooding across Northern England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland. Extreme rainfall events are predicted to become more frequent and severe in the future as the climate changes; POSTnote 529 on Adapting Urban Areas to Flooding, summarised measures for addressing increasing risks from rivers, surface water, sewers, and ground water. An emerging environmental risk was highlighted in POSTnote 528 on Marine Microplastic Pollution; plastic pieces under 5 mm in size have become a widespread ocean contaminant. Sources include fibres from synthetic textiles, microbeads from cosmetic and industrial applications, and large items of plastic debris that break down into smaller pieces. Studies have shown the presence of microplastics in seafood, but potential risks to human health are little studied and remain uncertain. This was subsequently the subject of an inquiry by the Environmental Audit Committee, and the Chief Medical Officer has announced an investigation into the impact on human health of microplastic particles.
The Biological Sciences and Health Section has produced a wide range of briefings and seminars to inform parliamentary debate on health and on the impact of new developments in technology.

Health and healthcare provision was a key issue in the 2015 General Election and continues to feature prominently in Parliament with, for example, the House of Lords establishing an ad hoc committee to review the long-term sustainability of the NHS. An important aspect of such policy considerations is improving public health to help reduce the burden placed on the NHS by people suffering from largely preventable conditions such as obesity, diabetes, some cancers, and cardiovascular disease. POST published briefings and organised seminars on improving public health across a wide range of ages and settings. This included POSTnote 533 on Electronic Cigarettes, which examined their potential to improve public health through helping people quit tobacco smoking and looked at the regulatory issues they raise. A seminar on Pre-conception Health, Obesity and Pregnancy looked at links between maternal obesity and outcomes for infants at birth and later in life, a theme raised in the Chief Medical Officer’s most recent Annual Report.

Another strand of the biological sciences and health section’s remit is to explore the impact of new technological developments. POSTnote 517 on Intellectual Property and Plants looked at new developments in plant breeding, explored the extent to which they had triggered a move towards protecting intellectual property rights through patents as opposed to the more traditional plant breeding rights, and examined the policy issues associated with any such move. POSTnote 541 on Genome Editing looked at new techniques which have significant implications for plant breeding as well as for human therapies. It also explored the safety and ethical implications of using genome editing for human therapies, including genetic changes that may be passed on to future generations. New technologies were also a theme of a popular seminar on Evidence-Based Policing, which explored developments such as the use of GPS in hotspot policing, and the impact of body-worn video on policing and prosecution rates. Other technological developments leading to new dementia drugs were explored in POSTnote 535 on New Drugs for Dementia which described the challenges faced by researchers in this area and the progress made towards finding drugs that will delay the progression of these diseases.

Finally, the Biological Sciences and Health section published a number of other POSTnotes and POSTbriefs in the last year on subjects that featured prominently on the Parliamentary agenda. These include POSTnote 518 on Psychological Health of Military Personnel and POSTnote 519 on Electronic Health Records, as well as POSTbrief 16 on Climate Change and Infectious Disease in the UK.
Automation technologies were a recurring theme for the Physical Sciences and Computing Section in 2016. Briefings looked at software offering personalised financial advice without human guidance, increasing automation of railway signalling, and potential effects of automation technologies on the UK workforce. POST also supported other parliamentary teams examining this topic, for instance the House of Lords Science and Technology Committee during its inquiry into Autonomous Vehicles.

In October, POST staff joined with parliamentary science advisers from across the world at the annual European Parliamentary Technology Assessment Conference to discuss the implications of robotics, artificial intelligence, online platforms, and other technologies for the future of labour. Discussions ranged from the legal challenges presented by robots capable of learning and exercising autonomy, to the opportunities and risks of crowd-sourcing labour.

UK security also featured prominently in the physical sciences section’s work. The powers available to security and law enforcement agencies in obtaining access to communications were discussed during debates on the Investigatory Powers Bill in the first half of 2016. POSTbrief 19 on Data Encryption and POSTnote 520 on Digital Forensics supported Parliament’s scrutiny of the Bill. In October, we published POSTnote 540 on Nuclear Security which looked at the prevention of malicious acts involving nuclear or radiological attacks, and are currently researching a briefing on the cyber security of the UK’s critical national infrastructure.

We have also been working to disseminate our work to audiences beyond Parliament. POST staff featured twice on the BBC World Service’s technology radio programme ‘Click’, discussing access to clean water and sanitation as discussed in POSTnote 521 (broadcast date 11 May 2016), and financial technologies as discussed in POSTnote 525 (broadcast date 25 May 2016).
INTERNATIONAL

POST has continued to support parliamentary-strengthening activities in a number of countries in 2016, as well as hosting visiting delegations. The main focus was a collaboration with a DFID funded consortium led by the African Institute for Development Policy (AFIDEP). The objective was to engage high- and mid-level health policymakers in Kenya and Malawi, and build their capacity to access and use research evidence in their work.

POST hosted two research staff from the Parliaments of Kenya and Malawi for one month in March, having previously hosted two staff in 2015. The staff engaged in a wide variety of placements and meetings across Parliament, which aimed to offer exposure to how evidence feeds into UK parliamentary processes and practices. The programme allowed time for the African staff to develop future plans, and since these visits the Kenyan research department have introduced peer review, a standardised formatting for their briefs, and a new database to store responses to members’ enquiries. The Malawian Parliament published guidelines for evidence use in Parliament. The African staff have also run workshops to share their learnings with other staff. POST continues to provide bi-monthly mentoring for the staff, and Dr Aaron Goater spoke at the recent launch of the Malawian Parliament’s evidence use guidelines alongside the Speaker and Clerk of the Malawian Parliament.

In May, Adam Afriyie MP signed an agreement with Senator Guido Girardi, President of the Chilean Senate, stating that POST would help the Chilean Congress establish a science advisory body for its Members. With support from the British Council and the Commission for Future Challenges, Science, Technology and Innovation of the Chilean Senate, a member of POST staff visited the Chilean Congress in December to share POST’s experience and expertise in providing science advice to policy makers. A further visit to Chile by a member of POST’s staff, plus visits by two of our Chilean counterparts, are planned for 2017.

STAFF

Dr Chandrika Nath, Acting Director
Chandrika previously worked at the British Antarctic Survey and has a PhD in high energy physics from the University of Oxford. She has a particular interest in international development. She is standing in for Dr Chris Tyler as Director until March 2017, and normally heads the Physical Sciences Section.

Dr Chris Tyler, Director (Parental Leave)
Chris has a PhD in biological anthropology from the University of Cambridge. He was previously Executive Director at the Centre for Science and Policy, University of Cambridge, and a science adviser to the House of Commons Science and Technology Committee.

Dr Abbi Hobbs, Senior Adviser
Abbi has a PhD in Science and Technology Studies from the University of York. She previously worked as a policy officer for the Academy of Medical Sciences and as a consultant in science policy and health. She heads the Social Science Section.

Dr Caroline Kenny, Adviser
Caroline has a PhD in Political Science from the University of Birmingham. Prior to joining POST, she worked at the Institute of Education, studying the use of research in policy and practice.

Dr Aaron Goater, Adviser
Aaron is an applied mathematician with a PhD in reservoir engineering for carbon capture and storage from Imperial College London. Prior to working at POST he was a post-doctoral researcher at the British Geological Survey.

Dr Jonathan Wentworth, Senior Adviser
Jonny has a background in plant ecology with a PhD in plant ecological genetics. He worked in MANF and Defra before joining POST. He heads the Environment and Energy Section.

Dr Peter Border, Senior Adviser
Pete has a PhD in biochemistry from the University of Liverpool. Before joining POST he worked in the agricultural and biotech sector and as a freelance writer. He heads the Biological Sciences Section.

Dr Sarah Bunn, Senior Adviser
Sarah has a PhD in neurosciences from Imperial College London. Before joining POST she worked as a scientific adviser at the Department for Work and Pensions and as a research scientist for Novartis Pharmaceuticals.

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COMMUNICATIONS AND ADMINISTRATION

Naomi Stewart, Science Communication Manager
Naomi has a Masters in Science Communication from Imperial College London, and previously worked for United Nations University and the Government of Canada, as well as a journal editor and science policy consultant.

Dr Shanna Marrinan, Science Communication Manager, Interim
Shanna has a PhD from the Social Policy Research Centre at Middlesex University. She has also worked for the Department of Science, Technology, Engineering and Public Policy at University College London.

Henry Lau, Science Communication Manager
(on secondment to Parliamentary Digital Service)
Henry previously worked at the Institute of Physics as an outreach officer. He has a Masters in Science Communication from Imperial College London.

Yasmin McNeil, Team Manager
Yasmin previously worked in finance and IT before moving to Parliament 10 years ago.

PHYSICAL SCIENCES AND ICT

Dr Lydia Harriss, Senior Adviser
Lydia has a PhD in biophysics from the University of Oxford. Prior to joining POST, she spent two years at the Wellcome Trust, working in communications, exhibitions, events, education, and investments. Lydia is heading the Physical Sciences Section until March 2017.

Harry Beeson, Adviser
Harry recently completed his PhD at the University of Cambridge, where his research focused on nanotechnology, having previously completed an EPSRC fellowship with POST.

POST FELLOWSHIPS

They create a platform for engagement between funders and Parliament, and generate valuable knowledge and fresh thinking to Parliament. Most importantly, they provide training for early career researchers, as they spend three months embedded in Parliament to ‘do’ policy advice. This is an essential way to learn how our parliamentary democracy works, how policy is made, and how academic research fits into the policy making process.

This year, the opportunities for incoming POST fellows grew considerably. While most remained with POST, supervised by one of our Advisers and charged with preparing a POSTnote, some spent their time in the House of Commons Library, House of Lords Library, and select committees in both Houses. The support that these postgraduates and career academics provide across the House is extremely welcome but most importantly, the range of experiences available for Fellows to learn about Parliament is broader and the growing alumni of POST Fellows is becoming ever more influential.
POST is an office of both Houses of Parliament. The House of Commons contributes 70% of POST’s core funding and the House of Lords 30%. This is the only direct funding that POST receives. In financial year 2015/16, POST’s budget and expenditure were £609,987 and £581,394 respectively (breakdown below). A 4.6% underspend was largely due to temporary understaffing.

POST is supported by indirect funding in two main ways. First, this year’s 36 Fellows had their three-month secondments funded by a range of research funders and professional societies. Five of them spent their secondments in other sections of Parliament. Second, POST’s social science section is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council with the staff seconded from University College London.

- Salaries and other staff costs: 94.9%
- Conferences, travel and official entertainment: 3.9%
- Publishing and office supplies: 0.8%
- Commissioned work: 0.4%