

POST EVALUATION REPORT 2009

Summary of Findings

January 3, 2010

1. Background

The Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology is the UK Parliament's in-house source of independent, balanced and accessible analysis of public policy issues related to science and technology. Its aim is to inform parliamentary debate, and to keep parliamentarians informed about emerging and current science and technology issues and their policy implications. It does this through a series of written briefings ("POSTnotes") as well as longer reports, meetings and seminars, podcasts, and by providing direct support to parliamentary select committees and to individual parliamentarians.

POST is staffed by a small team consisting of a Director, six advisers and two administrative staff. It also makes extensive use of short term doctoral and post-doctoral fellowships supported by external organisations such as research councils and learned societies. POST's objectives, outputs and future work programme are overseen by a Board of 14 parliamentarians, (10 from the Commons and four from the Lords) and also four leading external representatives from the science and technology community. Officials from both Houses, also attend Board meetings.

Evaluation Method

Parliamentarians were selected randomly for face to face interviews, by listing them alphabetically and approaching every seventh person. In total 29 interviews with MPs and 23 interviews with Peers were conducted. The randomised selection guaranteed a representative selection process. Any remaining distortion in the interview sample is due to the fact that parliamentarians with an interest in science were more likely to agree to take part, than those with no interest.

POST used the data to inform decisions on how to increase parliamentarians' uptake of its work, and on potential modifications and improvements to its products, such as the revamping of the POSTnote format in 2010.

2.Summary of findings

Findings have been broken down into 12 key points, classed under the following headings:

- A. The importance of scientific information for parliamentarians
- B. Parliamentarians' usage of available sources of scientific information
- C. The role of POST
- D. Detailed feedback on POST services

Section A: the importance of scientific information to parliamentarians

1) 100% of interviewees thought that it was “definitely important” for parliamentarians to have access to an impartial analysis of scientific information. They argued that science pervades all areas, affects the lives of MPs' constituents and is increasingly relevant to public policy.

Scientific information is an important part of the knowledge base of anybody who is going to be involved in public policy or legislation...there are very large number of domains we are called upon to vote on where scientific knowledge is a key element in decision we are going to be taking. (P 18)

Science impinges on a great many of our debates and decisions and we need something objective to explain some of the issues. (P 8)

Parliamentarians emphasised the need for impartial information, in order to separate facts from values and avoid ideology-led or interest-led decision making.

Politicians arrive in politics because of their prejudices in a positive way and their ideologies, and yet we learn from Archimedes that when you have an idea about something the important thing is to test it, so a hypothesis needs to be tested and basic scientific, evidence checked approach to policymaking that actually works rather than ideologies that just pretend to work. (MP 11)

[Parliament] relies very much on outside bodies which have a vested interest in one aspect of a bill ... just follow the money and you can see where the information is coming from. We do need information that isn't dependent upon whomever the backers are sourcing the information. (MP 22)

Parliamentarians they felt that information from the media was often biased, and that an independent source was therefore crucial. However, the media remain key sources of information, with over 70 % of parliamentarians saying they would be “likely” or “very likely” to use the media as a source of information on science.

The press carries a lot of scientific information and some of it is very good...but there are irresponsible articles that catch the headlines and I think it is very important to have information that is sort of sober and not intended to capture the headlines. (P 10)

Very often science is misrepresented in the media. The media often get the balance wrong. (P5)

2) 90% of interviewees think it is important to have a source of information on science especially written for parliamentarians.

Parliamentarians said they needed an accessible source of information written in a language that they can understand and also use (e.g. in debate). The majority felt that the people producing such information needed to understand the context in which parliamentarians work, and to speak their “language”. POST was cited in this context. Responses indicated a high level of trust in “in-house” sources of information, which is backed up by quantitative data on the sources of scientific information that parliamentarians use (see Figures 11 and 12).

I think some of the most trusted information that I get is from the House authorities...we do have this feeling that the House gives you the best advice that is available and not party political. (MP 19)

I think [POST] is helpful because it is written by people who know the environment in which politicians operate and about parliamentary procedure. (MP 22)

We have a language of our own ... We are a busy lot and so the more that we can get information which is easily digestible in a language we understand and usable in a language we can present, then yes. (P 6)

Among the 10% who answered that a source of information on science especially written for parliamentarians was *not* needed, the message was that information need not be specially written for parliamentarians, providing that it was written in laypersons' terms and presented in an accessible form.

Section B. Parliamentarians' usage of available sources of scientific information

3) High quality information on science is available, but is not being made best use of. This is largely because parliamentarians are inundated and cannot separate out good information from bad. They need help in navigating through the information.

Parliamentarians, in particular MPs, complained about being bombarded with information to the extent that it prevented them from actively seeking it from more credible sources.

I don't think we are short of information ... the quality of information is obviously an issue. The trouble is whenever anybody answers yes to that sort of question, what they finish up with is about ten times as much information, but not necessarily ten times as much understanding, so I don't want to trigger a great flood of scientific stuff. (MP 27)

The overall message is that parliamentarians do not need a greater *quantity* of scientific information, but that they need help in navigating through it. POST is seen as having a role to play in this, as discussed in the next section. One MP commented:

I think we need to have some route maps, and I do think the brief POST reports give quite a good route map, at about the volume per issue {that} a MP can take in... (MP 27)

4) POST and the Libraries are popular sources of information for members of both Houses when seeking information on science issues, as are government reports. Peers and MPs seek scientific information in different ways, reflecting the different contexts in which they operate.

Over 70% of all parliamentarians would be likely to use POST when seeking information on science issues. The Libraries and government reports were the most popular sources. Reasons cited by some parliamentarians for *not* using POST are explored in the next section. Overall, Peers appear to make more use of a wider range of information sources on science than MPs. They are more likely than MPs to turn to individual scientists and learned societies, and less likely to use the internet or mainstream press sources. Peers attributed this to the fact that they have more time to cultivate their interests, whereas MPs tend to have far busier schedules. In addition many of the Peers in the sample have strong links with the scientific community.

5) Parliamentarians prefer to receive information on science in hard copy. The internet is seen as a useful source of scientific information, but electronic information is regarded as less portable and many parliamentarians (Peers in particular) say they find it hard to read from the screen.

I find it much easier to read hard copy, especially on the train, you can read it better. (MP 24)

Theoretically, one should prefer an electronic copy, but if you are moving around all the time it is not as easy to get access to. (MP 19)

I am of a generation where I can't easily read off screen. (P 3)

Parliamentarians saw oral presentations as highly informative and engaging, particularly because they could ask questions, but finding the time to attend them is a key problem.

I have just been to a session on geo-engineering which was very interestingI probably had seven or eight different invitations which would have been interesting to go to but weren't on the radar for spending any time on. (MP 27)

SECTION C. The role of POST

6) Parliamentarians say that POST performs a crucial role in providing them with impartial, clear, concise, balanced and timely information as well as highlighting for them what scientific issues were important. However, POST could be more visible and there is room to expand its target audience.

The majority of parliamentarians interviewed were already aware of POST. Only a small fraction, (3 MPs and 1 Peer), had no prior knowledge of POST. Those who had heard of POST were highly supportive of its work.

The argument for getting POST going is the same as the argument which was advanced for why it still exists: it is essential to have a briefing system for parliamentarians interested in science and technology. (P 13)

[POST] recognises that we've all got a short attention span and it is written in a readable form. (P2)

It is important to have something which I think on the whole the POSTnotes do, which is not assume too much prior knowledge. (P 4)

Many comments related to impartiality:

There is so much depending on scientific judgements and scientific information and often it appears in the media as a particular slant, the key thing is that POST is independent and I have to say that I read their publications and I think they are excellent, just the right length and they are impartial and they are clear and I think it is excellent to have that. (MP 18)

MPs get bombarded with lobbying material from all sorts of people particularly when there is a bill coming before parliament, some people are never very sure of how to evaluate ...scientific information and it is very important when that happens that there is an impartial, factual service available to advise people about science and what is known and what isn't and of course POST doesn't always get it right, but it gets it nearly right in terms of being impartial and that is why it is so valuable. (MP 20)

One Peer said POST played a role in flagging up issues he should be aware of, although he pointed out that there was a danger in receiving too much information from POST because this made it harder for him to identify priority issues.

I read [POSTnotes] because I have been sent it from POST and [therefore] it must be important. (P 3)

Also, as mentioned in the previous section, POST (and particularly POSTnotes) are also seen as playing a role in helping parliamentarians to navigate through the multitude of different information sources available to them.

The data suggest that POST could be more visible and could find better ways of disseminating its work to parliamentarians and making it more eye catching. For example one Member commented:

... I wonder if there is some way to make MPs aware that there is something available.... When I go downstairs and look at the library to see what briefings there are from debates, I have never seen anything from the POST group that has caught my eye. (MP 7)

Comments from the 4 interviewees that had not heard of POST, as well comments from other studies¹, indicate that there are still those who need to access information on science issues and do not know that POST's output is available. This merits further investigation.

¹ House of Commons Survey of Services 2009

One Member argued that POST should expand its role in providing analysis of research information:

I would expand POST's role, in terms of science and technology and engineering, those sort of key disciplines, it does have a key role in being able to pick up policy initiatives and to be able to look at the science behind them and to explain that to Members. I think the library does a good job in terms of legislation and what we don't get of course is a back up analysis of research that helps Members make a decision, and if you take for instance the scientific developments in terms of abortion that we did two years ago as a report and again it would have been really helpful for POST to have done a note on that ... (MP 26)

Section D. Detailed feedback on POST's services

7) POSTnotes are the most popular and well known of POST's products. The vast majority of interviewees had referred to them more than once over the past year. There is good awareness of POST's seminars and work for select committees. However, uptake of electronic information such as podcasts and the website itself, is much more limited.

When asked what POST services they had used in the last year, over 80% of parliamentarians said they had referred to the POSTnotes more than once (see Figures 9 and 10). 30% of MPs and 42% of Peers had also consulted POST briefings to select committees. While they had heard of other services like the website, seminars and podcasts, few said they had used them, often stating that they were too busy to attend seminars and were not technically proficient enough to navigate the website and download podcasts. This latter reason applied to Peers in particular, who as shown above, felt more comfortable using hard copy.

8) Parliamentarians use POSTnotes in many different ways. The most common use is to "kick-start" their research into a given issue. However, 22% of MPs and 28% of Peers would not use POSTnotes as part of their research. Their reasons for this range from wanting to "get closer to the horse's mouth", to preferring to use POSTnotes for general interest or to leave their researchers to read them.

POSTnotes were considered an authoritative source of information that helped to "kick start" the research process, and 40% of MPs and 52% of Peers would use them in this way:

I would go first to the library to see whether there was a POSTnote on that subject or not and if there wasn't I would either directly call them or ask the library to phone to ask if there was a historical POSTnote and if there wasn't that and I would say why wasn't there that. (P 20)

Very early, day one. I would say it would kick start but it would be one of three sources that kick start, Library note, POSTnote and then alongside, I will always work out what my own prejudice or view is first and then I'll test it against all these bits. (MP 11)

Before looking at nanotechnology or something like that I would look at the POSTnote because that would give me a very good, intelligent, factual summary in a short format which is useful to me. I might also use it to get some stats if I am doing something I know something about like a Bill or something then you either want a couple of extra statistics and I would look to them for that. (MP 24)

Well on the whole I have a box full of POSTnotes that go back about five years and what I would tend to do is flick through to see if there is anything relevant and that would probably be at the start (P 15).

Those who never relied on POSTnotes to support their research (over 20% of MPs and 30% of Peers) had various reasons. MPs preferred to leave such work to their researchers or to use them for general interest only. Peers felt that their role gave them access to key people and information and therefore they did not necessarily need to consult POST.

I used them for background. I don't use them for specific issues and when something comes up in a bill that I focus on I think I have to get closer to the horse's mouth. (P 17)

I've never been particularly aware that I have sought out a POSTnote on anything ever. I would generally have my researcher do the initial shift... (MP 10)

Two of the interviewed MPs (none of the Peers) said they found POSTnotes too complicated:

I do some health stuff on genetics and things but even then they've lost me, so they tend to go in the bin. So I wouldn't necessarily think of going to a POSTnote. (MP 3)

They are not usually written in a language that we can understand because we are not all scientists. (MP5)

9) The majority of parliamentarians find the level of detail in POSTnotes “about right” and think that 4 pages is the right length. A minority of MPs were in favour of a shorter note and thought they were too detailed.

Parliamentarians were shown a randomly-selected POSTnote and asked to comment on the ideal length of a scientific briefing, the level of detail and its overall style.

Almost all Peers and around two thirds of MPs, stated that at four pages the POSTnote represented the ideal length of a scientific briefing and that the level of detail was about right. 5 MPs (18% of the sample) thought that the notes should be only one or two pages, and that they had too much detail.

10) Parliamentarians were asked their opinion about the style of POSTnotes. Most comments related to formatting. Many MPs suggested some “revamping” of POSTnotes to make them more eye-catching and easier to read.

When asked if the style of the note made them want to read it, Peers were very positive about the readability of POSTnotes, 90% answered “yes”. MPs were slightly less enthusiastic. 52% said “yes” and 37% said “no”, whilst 8% were undecided.

Parliamentarians were asked for their suggestions on how to improve the style of the notes. Comments on style fall into four key areas:

1. improve the summary

The front page should contain a better summary of the overall POSTnote, taking the reader through to conclusions and pointing out further sources of information. This way, parliamentarians could immediately grasp the relevance and importance of the subject under discussion.

2. break up the text more

Parliamentarians said they preferred graphical representations that break up the text and preferred statistical data presented in tabular or graphical form.

There is lack of summary and lack of bolding, you can't scan down it and find anything. It looks dull. I can't bring myself to read it. Bolding, headlines, key boxes. You need to be able to scan. (MP 23)

3. better headings

Some mentioned that the “POSTnote” banner heading took up too much space and conveyed little information.

This and the title, the whole emphasis when you look at this is that is a POSTnote, instead of the emphasis being cervical cancer. (MP 7)

I would probably make it clear on the top what it was about because POSTnote doesn't mean anything, doesn't say anything, so I would make it clear that it was information based on science and technology in bigger letters so somebody would read it and it was relevant to a particular bill. (MP 17).

I think this is too big, the heading banner is too big, you've wasted space and you could use that space not to put in more words but to have a slightly larger font. (P 2)

4. Make the notes more striking

While most Peers endorsed the style of the POSTnote, many of the MPs stated that it didn't "grab their attention" and draw them into the issue. Their recommendations included seeking external advice from professional designers and imitating promotional material designed to catch the attention of readers.

In the nicest possible way, this is plan A of desk top publishing from about the late 80s and it could do with a bit of jiggling up. (MP 27)

A couple of parliamentarians made comments on content and indicated that there may be some variation in standard between POSTnotes. The importance of strategic thinking, and highlighting which issues were settled and which still under debate, was stressed by one Member:

I feel occasionally they have slightly lost the strategic overview and objective and there are too many boxes that don't connect very well to the central line of argument.... I think it is just that there is better strategic thinking in some of them than in others or the topic is riper or at the right stage of ripeness and occasionally you get one where you think, that really hasn't sharpened my grasp of what the key issues are and that is what I really look for. A good POSTnote leaves you having a sense of which are the settled and which are the debatable points. (P 17)

11) Parliamentarians use information from POST in a wide variety of ways. The most popular of these is to "inform parliamentary debate".

When asked how they used or would use POST in Parliamentary business, over 90% of respondents stated that they used POST to "inform Parliamentary debate". Around 70% of MPs and Peers said that they read POSTnotes for general interest and half used POST in their select committee work. Around one in three MPs and one in two Peers used POST to table parliamentary questions. Only a small percentage, 4% MPs and 13% Peers said they would not use POST at all.

12) A wide variety of suggestions was made as to how to improve POST's services. The most common suggestion was improvement in online resources.

When asked how POST could improve its services (beyond the improvements in the POSTnote style mentioned previously), the most popular suggestions were a quarterly newsletter (delivered electronically) and improved online resources. Drop-in sessions and visits from staff were less popular on the grounds of time already being overstretched. Podcasts were also less popular, partly because awareness of them was low.

MPs said they would use online resources if they were better developed and easier to navigate, in particular if online content included a search facility and links. Suggestions included **better indexing of POSTnotes** – for example having an index of POSTnotes under subject headings and subheading with links to other POSTnotes and sources of information. Parliamentarians said they would like to see a history of POSTnotes on particular issues so that they could trace the parliamentary history of any given subject.

Some parliamentarians called specifically for POST to provide suggestions for reputable sources of information on the web:

The POST briefings are extremely helpful...that is a format that works because it is straight forward, it has a lot of source material and it is easy to digest. ... It is very easy if you google a particular topic of the day to get misled by bad science on the web and one thing that POST could strengthen is how it establishes link into subjects on the web by making sure that the sites that are linked into are properly peer reviewed. (MP 13)

Parliamentarians also asked if POST had thought about publishing a series of POSTnotes on a particular theme, like climate change.

They commented that unlike other Parliamentary services there is no **induction** to POST for new MPs and Peers, and their researchers. With no induction, many parliamentarians fall into habits of researching that exclude POST services. POST would benefit from inducting new parliamentarians and their researchers.