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Making an impact on Parliament: advice for the agricultural community

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ABSTRACT

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

KEYWORDS: Agriculture Bill; Evidence-based policy; Evidence-informed policy; Parliament; Science communication; Science-policy

Introduction

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

The utility of understanding how and why evidence is used in legislatures is clear; ultimately it will improve the chances that evidence submitted by scientists and practitioners will be used in policy-making. In the agricultural sphere, the UK Parliament plays a key role in shaping related policy and legislation. At the time of writing, it is considering the suitability of the Agriculture Bill, which is planned to pass through Parliament in the coming months. Many other Bills that come before Parliament also relate to aspects of food and farming,

which allows MPs and Peers to debate and amend content. Select Committees regularly scrutinise the policies of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) and conduct inquiries into issues related to food, farming, and the environment.

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

In light of this report, this viewpoint makes five recommendations for how agricultural communities of science (e.g. researchers) and practice (e.g. land managers, advisers) can better engage with Parliament to improve uptake of evidence. It makes five recommendations: (1) know how to **engage** with parliamentary processes, (2) **communicate** relevant evidence in a clear and concise fashion, (3) ensure that evidence is **credible**, (4) work with trusted **knowledge brokers**, and (5) **persevere** over a long timescale (see Figure 1). Ultimately, this will improve



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

the chances that policies and legislation related to food, farming, and the environment are evidence-informed and hence more likely to work in practice.

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

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

A key message from the UCL/POST report was the need to know how Parliament works, which enables more effective engagement (Kenny *et al.*, 2017b). There are a variety of ways in which evidence about food, farming, and the environment could feed into Parliament. Select Committees, for example, scrutinise government policy and legislation. The Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee will generally be the most relevant group for agriculture and they regularly conduct inquiries which make a real

difference². A formal call will be made for written evidence with a terms of reference, which can be responded to by individuals or groups with an interest in the specific inquiry. When scrutinising the Agriculture Bill, written evidence was submitted by academics, trade union bodies, industry groups, charities and not-for-profit organisations, farming groups, and other individuals³. Subsequent oral evidence may be called for from the pool of written correspondents and the committee will rarely use any other information as part of their formal inquiry. Being aware of calls for evidence, including timelines, is thus vital – policy windows regularly open where evidence about issues related to food and farming will be needed, and thus relevant parties must be ready to seize upon them (see Kingdon, 2003; Rose *et al.*, 2017). It is usually best to submit evidence using the online form, although committee staff can be contacted if different formats are preferable, and individuals not wishing to respond themselves can work with organisations to influence joint responses. In the UCL/POST study, Select Committee staff reported that evidence received early in an inquiry has the most potential to influence its scope (Kenny *et al.*, 2017b).

² See <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.

³ 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/>

Evidence can also feed into Parliament through All-Party Parliamentary Groups (APPGs), which are more informal cross-party gatherings of parliamentarians interested in specific issues (Kenny *et al.*, 2017b). There are many such APPGs related to farming and organisers of these groups can be contacted via details listed on the formal register⁴. They regularly invite individuals with expertise on particular issues to speak to them, but cannot do so unless they are aware of your knowledge and interest in engaging with them. These parliamentarians might then feed what they learn into Chamber debates and committees on which they sit. This means that taking a proactive approach by writing to individuals and groups, such as your constituency MP, interested Peer or APPG, can be a good way of getting your evidence into Parliament.

2. Communicate clearly and openly

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

3. Be credible

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

4. Work with trusted third parties

Many individuals, including academics, advisers, and land managers will lack the time or specialist skills needed to engage with Parliament effectively. Whilst communication skills can be enhanced, working with trusted 'knowledge brokers' (see Bednarek *et al.*, 2018) can be a useful way of feeding information into parliamentary decision-making. These groups have a track record of communicating science clearly to policy-makers, and can thus bridge the gap between scientists,

practitioners, and parliamentarians. Various agricultural groups regularly engage in formal parliamentary processes, including trade unions (e.g. NFU, Farmers' Union of Wales), other agricultural groups (e.g. Countryside Land and Business Association, Soil Association), industry (e.g. Arla Foods), environmental groups (e.g. RSPB, National Parks authorities), and learned societies [see footnote 2]. Developing relationships with these organisations, and sending relevant information to them, can be a good way of engaging with Parliament. The Knowledge Exchange Unit at POST is another good organisation to work with.

5. Persevere

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

Concluding remarks

Effective engagement with the UK Parliament (and devolved parliaments), and legislatures across the world, is important if communities of science and practice in agriculture are to ensure that policies and legislation related to food, farming, and the environment are evidence-informed. Whilst the democratic nature of decision-making means that we can never guarantee that our evidence will be used to shape policy, we can take steps to improve the likelihood that our evidence is influential. This initially requires a clear understanding of how Parliament works and how evidence might be fed into formal and informal parliamentary processes. Once routes into Parliament are understood, and trusted third party organisations are identified to help with engagement, communication should be clear, evidence-based, and simple, and preferably sustained over long time-scales. I invite readers to put these recommendations into practice and to play their part in improving the use of evidence related to agriculture in Parliament.

About the Author

David Rose is a Lecturer in Geography at the University of East Anglia. He uses social science approaches to investigate the social and ethical implications of agriculture 4.0 and uses participatory methodologies to support user-centred design of agri-tech.

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

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