

BRIEFING NOTE: Evidence Checks UK

<https://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/education-committee/dfe-evidence-check-forum/>

Owner: UK Parliament

Location: UK

Years in Operation: 2014-present

Implementation Level: National

Platforms: Web, Offline

How does it work?

“Evidence Checks” are one-month exercises in which members of the public are invited to provide comments online on the rigor of evidence on which policy is based. This process allows a large and diverse group of people with relevant experience and expertise to identify gaps in research that require further review. In the UK House of Commons, there is a Select Committee conducting oversight for each government department, examining spending, policies and administration. In an Evidence Check, government departments supply information to the Committee about an issue. Committee staff publishes the information on a new page within their own parliament.uk page that is dedicated to the evidence check, and shares the task of scrutinizing that evidence with a wider pool of experts, stakeholders and members of the general public for comment. Typically, the Committee uploads the government statement as a publicly-viewable PDF and frames the request with specific questions and problems which they would like participants to address. The process comprises three steps:

1. The Committee requests a submission from the government department responsible for a policy. The Department is asked to supply information about the policy in question and the evidence upon which the policy is based.
2. The Committee publishes the departmental submission and adds a page to their website to collect comments over a period of 3-4 weeks, inviting academics, stakeholders, practitioners and members of the public affected by the policy, to comment on the departmental advice. This can include comments on the strength of

the evidence provided by the department, highlighting contrasting evidence, selection biases, and gaps in the evidence. The web forum is public but committee staff may choose to review comments before and after users post them to check they are not defamatory, abusive, or otherwise inappropriate.

3. The Committee assesses comments and uses them to guide further investigation of the policy and/or integrates the commentary into its final report which is supplied to the relevant government Minister for response.

Within this broad approach, Commons Select Committees have implemented evidence checks in varying ways.

In 2014/15 the **Education Select Committee**, used the process to help it develop its work program. Initially, the Committee requested a 2-page statement on 9 topics from the Department of Education, inviting public comment via web forums on each, as well as comment on the Department's approach to the use of evidence generally. Comments in the web forums then informed Committee decisions regarding what areas to focus on and hold oral evidence sessions for.

In 2016, the **Science and Technology Select Committee** published 7 government statements on policy areas including driverless cars, smart cities, digital government, smart meters and flexible working arrangements. It sought comments that aligned with a framework that the Institute for Government developed in partnership with the Alliance for Useful Evidence and Sense About Science, which covered diagnosis of the issue, evidence-based action by government, implementation method, value for money, and testing and evaluation.

Targeted outreach, including social media, guest blogs on civil society organization websites, and leveraging the networks of organizations with expertise in the related policy topic, is crucial for obtaining high quality participation on an array of policy topics.

What are the outcomes?

Evidence Checks help committees more efficiently and effectively hold government to account by leveraging the collective intelligence of a broader expert audience. In 2016, the **evidence check conducted** by the **Women and Equalities Committee** into sexual harassment

in schools (dubbed a 'Fact Check') generated contributions from knowledgeable stakeholders, students with lived experience of harassment, and led to a revised (upwards) estimate of the incidence of harassment and information from contributions was incorporated into the subsequent Ministerial Briefing on the issue.

What does it cost?

There are no documented costs with what is essentially expanding the hearing process to the Web, enabling a broader audience to scrutinize what has been presented to the Committee. Because the process runs via the Committee's own webpage, the overhead is low.

What are the benefits?

- The online collection of comments reduces temporal and geographic barriers to accessing relevant experts, increasing the level of expertise and experience to which the Committee has access.
- Web forums where members of the public can submit their comments, to be reviewed by Parliament can encourage more members of the public with compelling lived experiences to contribute through less formal (but still transparent) processes.
- Does not require sophisticated technology and is a low cost option compared to other methods of collecting large-scale public opinion
- Solicits specific responses to clearly identified and granular problems posed by the Committees, rather than vague responses to broad problems

What are the risks?

- Evidence Checks could be improved with better technology that allows people to add references, rate one another's responses, add videos and additional briefing materials, and permits more sophisticated modernization.
- Without the right level of outreach to interested individuals and groups, participation will be low to non-existent.
- Questions have to be clearly framed lest participation fail to address the relevant questions of the reliability of evidence.

For more information, please contact: crowdlaw@thegovlab.org

The GovLab acknowledges the support of **NESTA**, the **Institute for Government**, **Sense About Science**, and the **Alliance for Useful Evidence** in creating this document.