

A Lived Expert guide to giving evidence to Select Committees

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What are Select Committees?



Select Committees are groups of Members of Parliament or Lords who work on specific areas of government business, like health, education, or housing. Their job is to investigate government policies and services to see if they are working well, hold those in power to account, and recommend changes to improve things. If you have lived experience of a particular issue, your insights could be incredibly valuable to shaping their work.

How do Select Committees work?

Committees begin by choosing a topic to investigate, often based on current issues or concerns. For example, they might look at how a new policy is affecting people or whether public money is being spent effectively. To get the full picture, they gather evidence from a wide range of sources. This includes professionals, charities, experts, and, most importantly, people who have lived through the issue they're examining.

When a committee investigates, they usually ask for 'written evidence': which is your chance to share your story and explain how the issue has affected you. Sometimes, they'll invite people to attend public hearings to speak directly to the committee - this is called giving oral evidence. These hearings are an opportunity for members of the committee to ask questions and dig deeper into the issues.

What can Select Committees achieve?

Once they've reviewed all the evidence, the committee writes a report with recommendations for how things could be improved. While the government doesn't have to follow these recommendations, they are taken seriously and often lead to real change in policies, services, or laws. Committees play an important role in raising awareness of problems, putting pressure on decision-makers, and ensuring that government actions are fair and effective.

How can I engage with a Select Committee?



For people with lived experience of an issue, there are a number of ways to get involved and influence a committee's work. If you see a topic being investigated that affects you, you can submit evidence online through the Parliament website. This can be as simple as writing a few paragraphs about your experience, or it could be more detailed, depending on what you want to share.

Sometimes committees also reach out to organisations, community groups, or individuals for evidence. If you're contacted or invited to participate, don't worry about being an expert—your story and perspective are what matter most. Advocacy groups can also help you navigate the process, providing advice or support to share your views effectively.

Public hearings are another way to engage. These are often informal and designed to make people feel comfortable sharing their experiences. Even if you don't speak directly, you can attend or watch hearings online to understand what's being discussed and see how the process works.

Getting involved with a select committee gives you the chance to make your voice heard and influence decisions that affect your life and the lives of others. Sharing your lived experience can shine a light on problems that might otherwise be overlooked and help shape better policies and services for the future. Your perspective matters, and committees are there to listen.



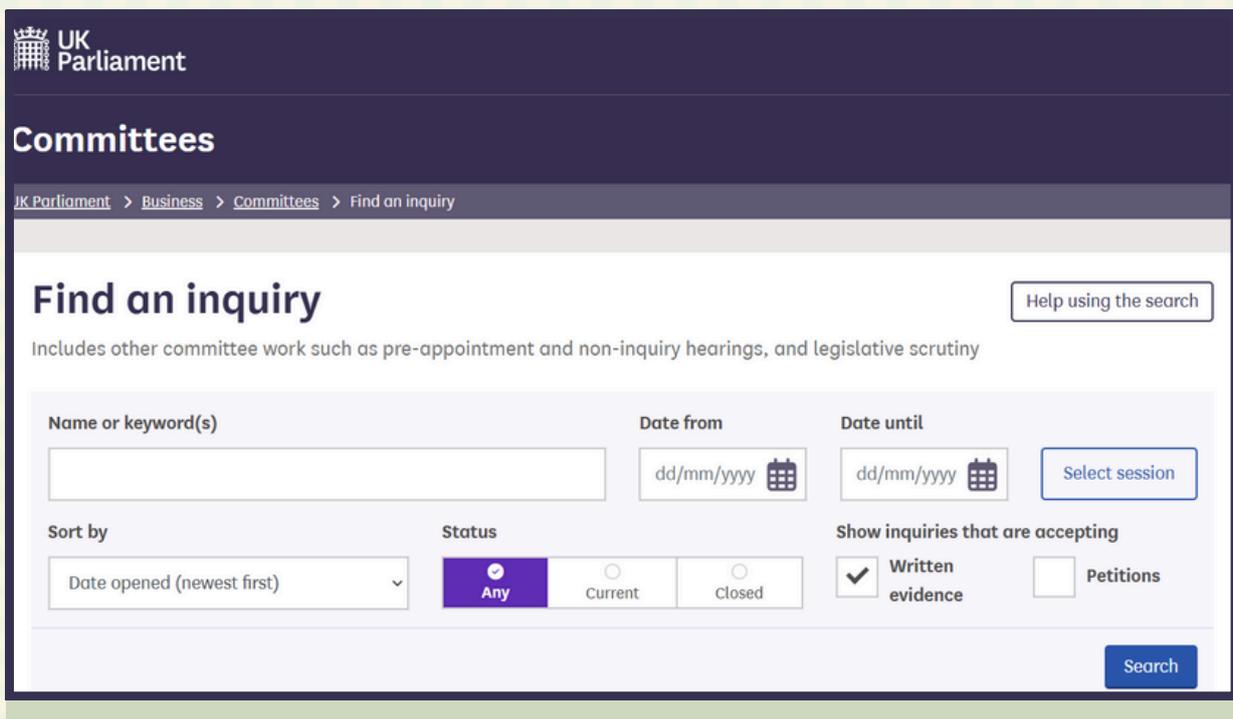
Tips for giving written evidence

Once a select committee has decided on a topic or issue to investigate, one of the first things it does is what's known as a 'call for evidence'. This means the select committee requests people and organisations to submit relevant written evidence to help with its investigation or inquiry.

Whether you know about the issue or topic through your work or from personal experience, select committees are keen to hear your perspective: the purpose of the call to evidence is to gather as much useful information as possible.

Finding an inquiry to submit written evidence to

You can find a searchable list of committee inquiries on the Parliament website, by clicking [here](#).



The screenshot shows the 'Committees' section of the UK Parliament website. The main heading is 'Find an inquiry', with a sub-note: 'Includes other committee work such as pre-appointment and non-inquiry hearings, and legislative scrutiny'. There is a 'Help using the search' button. The search interface includes a text box for 'Name or keyword(s)', two date pickers for 'Date from' and 'Date until' (format dd/mm/yyyy), and a 'Select session' button. Below these are filters for 'Sort by' (set to 'Date opened (newest first)'), 'Status' (radio buttons for 'Any', 'Current', and 'Closed', with 'Any' selected), and 'Show inquiries that are accepting' (checkboxes for 'Written evidence' (checked) and 'Petitions'). A 'Search' button is located at the bottom right.

You can search for keywords to find an inquiry that might be relevant or of interest to you.

There's also a handy button to filter all the inquiries to only show those that are currently accepting evidence.

Alternatively you can check the webpages of specific select committees, where you can see which current inquiries a committee is undertaking, and whether they're accepting written evidence.

Writing your evidence



Once you've found an inquiry you think you'd like to submit written evidence to, the first thing to do is to read the inquiry's call for evidence carefully. These can look different for different inquiries, but they will all contain important background information about why the inquiry is being held, as well as other information the committee thinks you need to know about how it's approaching the inquiry.

Calls for evidence will often include a 'terms of reference', which explains the scope and purpose of the inquiry.

Most importantly, the calls for evidence will include a list of questions the committee wants answers to, and the deadline for submission.

Once you've read the call to evidence and the terms of reference, you are ready to start writing your evidence. Select committees provide detailed instructions about how to do this, and it's important you follow these instructions closely - otherwise your evidence might not be accepted by the committee.



Writing Evidence: Dos and Don'ts



Do

- Be concise. You should try your best to keep your submission under 3,000 words
- Include a short summary - especially if it's more than 3,000 words.
- Include an introduction with information about who you are, about the organisation you work for (if relevant), and the reason why you're submitting evidence.
- Directly answer the questions the committee has asked in the call for evidence. You don't need to answer all the questions though!
- Submit your evidence as a single Word, ODT or RTF file (no PDFs!) and be under 25MB in size.

Don't

- Include logos or pictures (including a few charts and graphs is ok).
- Send the committee material that's already been published. You can reference relevant work you may have published though!



Writing tips



Write in plain English and explain any technical terms you use.



Make it very clear which of the committee's questions you're answering. This will help you make sure that what you're writing is relevant to the inquiry. It will also help the committee when it reads your evidence.



Clearly signpost any recommendations for the Government or other relevant organisation (e.g. regulators, councils, public bodies) you have, and would like for the committee to consider.



Include your thoughts about the most important questions the committee should ask the Government.

1

Use section headings and numbered paragraphs.



Submitting your evidence



Each inquiry has an online portal where you can submit your evidence.

This portal will first ask you to provide information about who you are, such as:

- The capacity you're submitting evidence in: e.g. as an individual or on behalf of an organisation.
- Your contact details
- There will be a box to tick if:
 - You want your evidence to be anonymous - meaning the committee will publish it, but not your name or details that could identify you.
 - You want your evidence to be confidential - meaning the committee will read your evidence but not publish it.

Remember though: the committee has the power to decide whether evidence is kept anonymous or confidential.



What happens to your evidence once you've submitted it

- The select committee will probably publish your written evidence on the internet as part of its inquiry. Evidence cannot be removed once it's been published.
- The committee doesn't have to publish your evidence, though. It will email you to let you know what it's planning to do with it.
- Your evidence may be included in any report(s) the committee writes and publishes as part of the inquiry.
- If you want to publish the evidence you've submitted to the committee yourself, you must ask the committee first.
- Submitting written evidence can sometimes lead to you being invited to give oral evidence to the committee. See the section on giving oral evidence for tips.

Other helpful information

If you find it difficult to send your evidence online, have access requirements, or want to send your evidence in a different format (e.g. in an audio file) then contact the committee directly and they'll be able to help. You can contact the House of Commons Enquiry via:

- Email hcenquiries@parliament.uk
- Call 0800 112 4272 (Freephone) or 020 7219 4272
- Talk through Text Relay on 18001 020 7219 4272

Alternatively you can contact the select committee directly: contact details can be found on each committee's webpage.

Useful links

 [Official Parliament guidance on giving evidence to select committees](#)

Tips for giving oral evidence and looking after yourself during this

Oral evidence is usually taken in public in the House of Commons committee rooms in Westminster, or occasionally via video link. Oral evidence sessions are usually broadcast live and archived on www.parliamentlive.tv. Committees normally publish a transcript (written record) of what is said in oral evidence sessions. The public seating in committee rooms is usually open for anyone to attend, including the media.

Sharing your experiences and expertise as oral evidence can help to challenge stigma, change public perceptions, contribute to media narratives and influence policy change. Hearing directly from lived experts like you has power.



Wellbeing

Speaking publicly about your experiences can be difficult, as well as listening to the stories of others during the select committee hearing. With the responsibility of educating others on an issue they may know little about, combating stigma and misconceptions, and addressing potentially difficult questions without being triggered, giving oral evidence can be challenging. Looking after yourself during and after the process of giving evidence is important.

Remember you are not alone, there are people to support you.

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Preparation

Research

- The committee chair will give you a short outline of the inquiry, you can then follow up with the clerk for a 1:1 to get more information
- If you're not the first evidence session, watch back the previous sessions, particularly if there are other similar organisations so you can get a sense of the type of questions you may be asked, what are the style/tone of questions.
- Organise a conversation with the committee clerk before the session, ask:
 - What are the key themes the committee wants to cover?
 - What is the line of questioning likely to be?
 - What are each individual committee member interested in around the topic?
- Do your research: come with data/ stats to support your evidence
- Spend time beforehand thinking about what you are happy to speak about, and what you may not want to share. Some of your experiences might be too raw.
- Draw boundaries around what you share and when, especially if this involves other people or upsetting information (this may also change over time).



Messaging & Practice

- What is your core message - what do you want to change/ what is your solution to the problem?
- What are your stories and statistics to support your message? Make sure you are not sharing sensitive information or other people's stories without consent.
- What is your call to action - what do you want the government to do?
- Sentence starters to share your stories...
 - 'We know from our work,'
 - 'For example...'
 - 'In my own experience...'
- You can redirect yourself in the moment if you aren't comfortable, using stock phrases: "Thank you for your question, but I'm not comfortable answering that."
- Gets colleagues, friends/family to ask you questions to practice what you want to say
- Record yourself answering to get used to answering the questions

Remember you are the expert in your experience, and that's why you've been asked to give oral evidence. They want to hear from you.

On the day

- If you are joining via video link, check your video, audio, and background well ahead of time and have the link ready.
- Have your call-to-action that you can come back to
- As committee members may interrupt answers, start with the main thing you want to say and then share additional points afterwards.

After

- After the event you may be exhausted, so in case you need it, build in some downtime for the rest of the day or day after.
- Extending your reach: Oral evidence sessions at Select Committees are recorded either via audio recording or video. You can find these on the parliament.tv website and download clips. Use these clips on social media platforms to reach new audiences with your message and maximise your impact.

Case Study

We spoke with a survivor of honour based abuse who volunteers with Karma Nirvana. Karma Nirvana has successfully campaigned to make forced and child marriage illegal. Their current campaign asks the government to create a statutory definition of honour based abuse.

Karma Nirvana were approached directly by the Women and Equalities Select Committee to give evidence. Eight members of their survivor advocate panel gave oral evidence in a closed session in summer 2023. The hearing wasn't recorded or broadcast, and evidence was anonymised.

Positives about the experience

- The select committee sent a briefing in advance explaining what would happen, the remit and limitations of the select committee.
- They were given the questions they'd be asked in advance, and told they didn't need to answer any questions they did not want to.
- Transport costs were funded. She pointed out this is not common from large organisations: she has contributed to radio and TV documentaries in the past and not had travel costs covered.
- "I felt so empowered - the whole train journey home I was googling how to become an MP. I couldn't sleep that night because I was so excited."
- "Giving evidence was one of the best things I'd ever done. I felt empowered - but that was shaped by my organisation."
- She recommends that people clarify if their hearing will be open or closed, and if it will be recorded or broadcast. This is important for security.
- Emotional support from her organisation was essential to making it a success:
 - The charity CEO is intentional in picking survivors who are at a stage in their recovery where they are able to give evidence.
 - The survivor advocate panel and the charity staff support each other, 'like a family'. The charity CEO and COO came with them and gave them a big hug on arrival. The CEO called her a week later to check how she was.
- Seeing the impact of their evidence: "The report is still there on the government website and I can see my story and that feels really validating."

Negatives about the experience

- Not getting the outcome they hoped for: "The government turned down our recommendations. We felt crushed. The charity staff expected it. 'Don't worry this is how it is, it takes time.' But for us it felt like crap. People were really upset, I was upset."
- Psychological after-care was essential, but this came from Karma Nirvana. She noted that large organisations rarely offer this support. "For example I did a Woman's Hour interview. I asked the producer - what after-care can you provide? Basically - not much."

Quote from a Lived Expert

Marissa Begonia is Coordinator of The Voice of Domestic Workers and has lived experience as a migrant domestic worker. Marissa gave evidence at the 2018 Government Health Committee scrutinising Home Office and NHS Digital information sharing.

"We have the experience, we know what's happening. The people I talked to were touched. It's coming from the heart, the passion is in you. It's important as a speaker giving evidence. I was also prepared with data, with what is actually happening, they could feel my anger, and what's happening to the community. Not just our community but others too. We have the drive to campaign against it, hoping to succeed."

- Marissa Begonia

Conclusion

Engaging with select committees as a lived expert is a powerful way to influence government policies and decision-making. Whether you contribute through written or oral evidence, your insights and experiences can shed light on critical issues, challenge assumptions, and advocate for meaningful change.

By following the practical tips shared here - preparing thoroughly, setting boundaries, and prioritising your wellbeing - you can make your voice heard while protecting yourself emotionally.

Remember, your perspective matters, and your contribution can play a key role in creating a better future for many others.

Good luck!