In November 2020 over 100 MPs, peers and parliamentary staff got involved in Evidence Week in UK Parliament, run by Sense about Science.

Evidence Week in Parliament equips MPs, peers and staff with the insights and tools needed to use and scrutinise evidence for decisions. During the coronavirus pandemic constituents have understandably been asking more of MPs, expecting them to get across extremely complex issues with emerging and evolving evidence. This has highlighted the need for MPs to not only be able to understand the issues at hand, but also communicate the uncertainties and trade-offs involved in making evidence-based policy decisions.

Sense about Science was supported by our lead partner the Institute of Physics and our communication partners POST, the UK Statistics Authority (UKSA), Office for Statistics Regulation (OSR), and Ipsos MORI.

To launch Evidence Week, an outstanding panel including 13 Committee Chairs and experts from a number of the country’s leading scientific organisations came together with MPs to answer questions from constituents from across the country on how evidence is being used on the issues that matter to them. Throughout the week, MPs were able to engage with 3-minute briefings from our partners via a virtual platform, on how to handle and understand evidence in 15 pressing policy and research areas. The week was closed with a training session on using evidence specifically designed for parliamentary staff.

A summary of Evidence Week’s impact in numbers...

- The Opening Event was watched by 500 people.
- 200 people signed up to our virtual exhibition.
- The 3 minute briefings were viewed 392 times.
- Throughout the week over 100 MPs, Lords and Parliamentary staff engaged with Evidence Week including 34 MP’s, 47 of their staff, 10 peers, and over 20 key parliamentary and government staff.
An overview of the week

Opening event 16th November

A panel of experts and committee chairs joined constituency MPs to answer questions from across the country about how evidence is being used on the issues that matter to them. Questions were raised by a diverse audience of constituents, wanting to know how parliament was understanding and using data on a range of issues that matter to them and their communities.

Panel

Ed Humpherson Director General for Regulation at the UK Statistics Authority
Ian Diamond National Statistician
Professor Dame Ottoline Leyser Director of UKRI
Chris Tyler Director of Research and Policy in UCL's Department of STEaPP
Penny Young House of Commons Librarian
Greg Clark SciTech Committee Chair
Philip Dunne Environmental Audit Committee Chair
Caroline Nokes Women and Equalities Committee Chair
Darren Jones Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee Chair
Tom Tugendhat Foreign Affairs Committee Chair
Baroness Lane-Fox COVID-19 Committee Chair
Baroness Armstrong Public Services Committee Chair
Lord Krebs Food, Poverty, Health and Environment Committee Chair

By offering this event in a virtual format, 29 people were given a platform they would not otherwise have had for their concerns and questions to be heard and addressed. The event highlighted the desire of constituents for greater clarity on the evidence used to make decisions that affect them, and their concern that evidence is used appropriately in public policy making.

Our goal had been to remind people that you don’t have to be a scientist to be able to evaluate and weigh up decisions based on scientific evidence.

“The work that is done in Parliament affects every single one of us, now and in the future, and in many cases, it can make the difference between life and death. It is, therefore, important that decisions that are made are done with solid evidence, that the Government and the public know that they can back up the decisions they are making and cement trust between the two groups.” - Claire Price, VoYS member, Merthyr Tydfil & Rhymney

“I found it all accessible and interesting.” - Stephen Timms MP
3 minute evidence briefings 17th - 18th November

Through our virtual platform we hosted 15 video briefings from 12 of our research partners, including our lead partner the Institute of Physics. These briefings covered a wide range of issues.

- Data from underground (British Geological Survey)
- Mental health and frontline staff (British Psychological Society & Wiley)
- Housing retrofit: a case study on net zero interventions (Imperial College London)
- Community engagement, trust building and tackling misinformation in a pandemic (Institute of Development Studies)
- Physics in a pandemic (Institute of Physics)
- Physics talent lost before A-levels/Highers (Institute of Physics)
- Scarce materials: saving key elements to a green future (Royal Society of Chemistry)
- Estimating the education loss and inequality from Covid-19 (University of Southampton)
- Boosting UK productivity (University of Exeter)
- Future proofing infrastructure decisions to achieve net zero (University of Leeds)
- Is healthy + sustainable + carbon-neutral food realistic? (University of Nottingham)
- Net zero for your constituency (University of Oxford)
- Did disjointed systems prevent effective Covid-19 PPE entering the market? (University of Southampton)
- Nursing interventions – what works? (University of Southampton/NIHR)
- Can AI help to prevent domestic abuse? (LSE)

For the full programme see the Evidence Week website. These briefings were visited 392 times throughout the week. On the afternoons of 17th and 18th November academics from the 12 institutions were on hand to speak to the MPs, Peers and Parliamentary staff live.

Webinars 17th - 18th November

As part of Evidence Week in UK Parliament our communication partners POST, ONS and Ipsos MORI ran a series of 30 minute live webinars to MPs, peers, and Parliamentary staff about using scientific evidence for effective policy and scrutiny. The webinars were visited by over 70 attendees through the Brella site.

Staff training 20th November

For the first time this year we created a crash course in using scientific evidence, research data and resources, specifically designed with Parliamentary Staff in mind. Created in partnership with ONS, Ipsos Mori and POST this session introduced staff to the basics of understanding scientific evidence, and highlighted where they could use these skills and resources in their work - whether it is assisting their MP in making policy changes, drafting a speech or responding to casework.

This session was incredibly popular with 52 attendees from MPs and committee offices.

We received feedback that this kind of training was exactly what parliamentary staff had been waiting for. This was reinforced by the fact that 35% of attendees heard about the session through a colleague. Of those who attended, 96% said they would be interested in attending future Evidence Week training events.
Engagement

Over 78 MPs and their offices were represented throughout Evidence Week either during the opening event or through participation in briefings from the research partners. In addition to this, every single MP received the full programme of partner briefings by email.

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Looking ahead

Evidence Week brings together three groups; policy makers, researchers and the public, in a unique environment to promote parliament asking questions that reflect the public interest in sound science and evidence; public identification with evidence as a source of accountability; and governments anticipating public scrutiny. In one of the most challenging years for policymaking, Evidence Week 2020 was able to do this. The opening event enabled constituents to ask for evidence on issues that mattered to them, in order to hold parliament to account. Whilst researchers found that the policymakers came to them throughout the week interested to engage and learn more, voicing the questions and concerns of their constituents.

Bringing Evidence Week to an online platform came with new challenges, which our partners were able to respond to, and were able to adapt the way they communicated with MPs. We had some wonderful feedback from partners this year about the quality of the conversations. Many felt that the conversations they had this year had learnt themselves to much more long term engagement.

Partners were particularly pleased with the learning opportunities this year offered. Many also reflected the important role Evidence Week plays in offering a unique and safe opportunity for academics and researchers to enter parliament, not to lobby but to present and discuss evidence and their work.

One of the great successes for this years event was the Staff Training event, this proved incredibly popular and brought to our attention the lack of guidance for parliamentary staff on using and understanding both data and evidence, this is something we aim to build on in 2021.

Moving to a virtual platform enabled constituents, researchers and parliamentary staff not based in Westminster to have a greater involvement in Evidence Week. For Evidence Week 2021 we want to ensure no group is excluded from the conversation, by providing hybrid events with in person and virtual aspects.

“You assembled a strong line-up of credible speakers/Parliamentarians, around 30+, and there some good questions from an intelligent set of questioners, around 15+” - Philip Dunne MP

Webinar led by Ipsos MORI on behavioural science.

Evidence Week promotional video