

By Hajera Begum,
Stefano Fella,
Philip Loft

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Select Committee activity on Brexit, 2016-2020



COMMITTEE
AND
OVERSEAS OFFICES

Summary

- 1 Select Committee activity on Brexit
- 2 Brexit witnesses

Contributing Authors

Simon Horswell;
Ben Rayner;
Alex Hunter-Wainwright

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Contents

1	Select Committee activity on Brexit	5
1.1	Brexit meetings	6
2	Brexit witnesses	9
2.1	Types of witnesses	9
2.2	Gender breakdown of witnesses	11
2.3	Top witnesses	13

Summary

The UK vote to leave the EU in June 2016 sparked an intense period of activity for Select Committees in the House of Commons as they sought to scrutinise the Brexit process. This briefing provides an overview of Select Committee activity, providing data on public sessions held, witnesses questioned and prominent themes in Committee discussions.

Our analysis of data from the Select Committee Office shows that out of 2,571 public sessions held by House of Commons Select Committee between June 2016 and the end of January 2020, 474 (18.4%) covered Brexit.

Following the referendum vote, new committees were set up to scrutinise the Brexit process and issues arising from it. These included the Exiting the EU Committee and the International Trade Committee set up to reflect the establishment of new government departments. Existing Select Committees also launched Brexit-related inquiries relevant to their policy remit.

Committees held a series of public evidence sessions with witnesses from a range of sectors to gather views on the Brexit process and its impact. Overall, 1,775 witnesses gave evidence at Select Committee sessions relating to Brexit. These included witnesses from government and public organisations, business, trade bodies, non-governmental organisations and academia. Just under a quarter came from government at the UK level, including ministers, officials and former officials. The figure increases to over a third when including other government and public bodies. Less than 3% came from the devolved administrations.

Just under a quarter of witnesses were business representatives. Around a third of witnesses came from other external organisations, including academics, think tanks and charity/third sector organisations.

Just over 28% of witnesses were women. The figure was slightly higher where Committees had greater discretion as to who to invite.

Our analysis also identified the witnesses appearing most frequently in Committee evidence sessions. Seven of the top eight were either ministers or permanent secretaries at government departments, the other being the former governor of the Bank of England.

1 Select Committee activity on Brexit

The UK referendum vote to leave the EU on 23 June 2016 led to a new focus of activity across Select Committees in the House of Commons. New committees were set up to scrutinise the Brexit process, while existing committees launched a series of inquiries, holding public evidence sessions to examine the impact of Brexit in their scrutiny areas.

Select Committees

A Select Committee is a cross-party group of MPs or Lords given a specific remit to investigate and report back to the House that set it up. House of Commons Committees usually reflect the party balance in the House.¹

House of Commons Select Committees include those set up to scrutinise each Government department, and those with a broader or particular remit. Examples of the latter include the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, and the European Scrutiny Committee (which scrutinised legislation coming from the EU).

The [Liaison Committee](#) brings together the chairs of each of the Select Committees in the House of Commons. It considers general matters relating to the work of Select Committees and regularly takes evidence from the Prime Minister.

Select Committees conduct inquiries on relevant issues and publish reports based on these inquiries. Inquiries usually involve evidence sessions to gather evidence from witnesses. These are usually held in public and can be watched online. Witnesses generally include ministers and officials, representatives of organisations from outside Parliament, and relevant experts on the subjects being discussed. Written evidence can also be submitted. Oral and written evidence help to inform Committee reports on inquiry findings. The reports are publicly available and the Government is expected to respond to them. Select Committees can also hold evidence sessions that are not related to a particular inquiry.

¹ For more information see [this House of Commons guide to Select Committees](#). See also the Parliament [webpages on Select Committees](#). The Select Committee Office publishes a [weekly update](#) on its Brexit and post-Brexit related activities.

The establishment of new Select Committees also reflected a departmental reorganisation within Government. The Exiting the EU Committee and the [International Trade Committee](#) were set up to reflect the establishment of the Department for Exiting the EU and the Department for International Trade following the referendum vote. Scrutinising the work of these new departments was central to the work of these Committees.

The extent to which existing Committees refocused their activities varied according to their particular sectoral focus. Among existing Committees, the Brexit process had an important impact on the scrutiny role of the European Scrutiny Committee. While its primary role remained that of [scrutiny and assessment of EU legislative proposals](#), it also considered matters relating to the UK's withdrawal from the EU.

Scrutiny of the Brexit process also became an important element of the work of the [Liaison Committee](#), comprising Select Committee chairs. Its wider remit also includes scrutiny of European matters.

1.1

Brexit meetings

The Select Committee Office in the House of Commons has collected data on Brexit-related activity conducted by Select Committees since the June 2016 referendum. This includes data on all meetings held by Select Committees and witnesses called to give evidence. This briefing presents data on public evidence sessions held and witnesses called between the referendum in 2016 and the UK's eventual withdrawal from the EU on 31 January 2020 (**phase one**) across Select Committees. A further report will shortly be produced on Select Committees in the Brexit transition period (1 February to 31 December 2020, **phase two**).

Throughout phase one, almost all Select Committees carried out Brexit-related inquiries relevant to their policy remit. Economic, trade and foreign investment implications featured heavily as did a variety of home affairs issues including migration, borders, policing and security cooperation, and citizens' rights. Other major committee themes in this period included the environment, energy and climate change. Key post-Brexit Bills, on Agriculture and Fisheries for example, were also the subject of inquiries. Other issues to be examined by MPs include the UK's overall future relationship with the EU, participation in EU programmes, health (including the impact on the health and social care sectors), justice and human rights, the implications of Brexit for devolution and the impact on the creative industries. Individual committees' one-off sessions with their respective Secretaries of State also had a heavy Brexit-related focus during the phase one period.

Our analysis of public evidence sessions shows that out of 2,571 public sessions overall between June 2016 and the end of January 2020, 474 (18.4%)

where Brexit was discussed, but this represented a higher proportion (94.4%) of its meetings.³

Table 1: Select Committees: Brexit activity

28 June 2016 to 31 January 2020

Committee	Brexit meetings	Non-Brexit Meetings	% Brexit
Exiting the EU	85	0	100.0%
European Scrutiny	17	1	94.4%
International Trade	58	11	84.1%
Liaison	6	5	54.5%
Scottish Affairs	33	58	36.3%
Procedure	11	21	34.4%
Environment, Food and Rural Affairs	36	71	33.6%
Northern Ireland Affairs	25	69	26.6%
Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs	22	69	24.2%
Welsh Affairs	14	47	23.0%
Home Affairs	23	84	21.5%
Foreign Affairs	17	85	16.7%
Environmental Audit	16	82	16.3%
Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy	16	92	14.8%
Treasury	23	153	13.1%
Science and Technology	12	85	12.4%
Health and Social Care	10	73	12.0%
Housing, Communities and Local Government	12	99	10.8%
Public Accounts	11	159	6.5%
Justice	7	80	8.8%
Human Rights	3	65	4.6%
Digital, Culture, Media and Sport	4	99	4.0%
Defence	3	89	3.4%
Education	3	103	2.9%
Transport	2	85	2.4%
Women and Equalities	2	95	2.1%
Work and Pensions	2	115	1.7%
International Development	1	102	1.0%
Total (all committees)	474	2,097	18.4%

Source: House of Commons Select Committees

³ Only meetings that covered Brexit-related issues were recorded in this data. Some Committee inquiries included sessions that referred to Brexit and some that did not. Only the former are recorded in this data.

2 Brexit witnesses

2.1 Types of witnesses

Witnesses at Select Committee evidence sessions on Brexit came from a range of sectors, including Government and public organisations, business, trade bodies, non-governmental organisations and academia. As is generally the case in Committee sessions, witnesses were questioned on their (or their organisation's) views on the issue being scrutinised, or asked to explain the activities and positions of their organisation. Government Ministers were questioned on the views, positions and activities of the Government or their particular department.

Grouping witnesses by the type of organisation they work for or represent, our analysis showed that just under a quarter came from Government at the UK level. This total also included officials or former officials. A further 11.5% came from other government or public bodies. This included 2.9 % from the devolved administrations and their respective Parliaments/Assembly. 2.5% came from the UK Parliament, including 23 MPs and 15 Members of the House of Lords.

Witnesses also came from the EU and other international organisations, including the World Trade Organization. Overall, there were 2.4% international witnesses, including representatives of overseas governments. This included 10 witnesses (0.6% of the total) from the EU institutions. Just under a quarter of witnesses (412) were business representatives. Around a third of witnesses came from other external organisations, including academics (13.6%), think tanks (7.4%) and charity/third sector organisations (5.5%). 15 witnesses (0.8%) came from the trade union movement.

Table 2: Witness types before Brexit-related Committees

28 June 2016-31 January 2020

Witness type	Number	Proportion
UK Government	436	24.6%
Government Departments	234	13.2%
Cabinet	96	5.4%
Minister	82	4.6%
Former Civil Servant	22	1.2%
Former Minister	2	0.1%
Other Government and Public Bodies	204	11.5%
Devolved Administrations and Parliaments/Assembly	51	2.9%
Local Government	41	2.3%
Non-Governmental Public Body	42	2.4%
Other Public Bodies (e.g NHS)	32	1.8%
Bank of England	38	2.1%
UK Parliament	45	2.5%
MP	23	1.3%
Peer	15	0.8%
House of Commons Official	7	0.4%
International Witnesses	42	2.4%
Overseas Governments	19	1.1%
EU representatives	10	0.6%
World Trade Organization	4	0.2%
Former Members of Organisations	4	0.2%
Other Organisations	3	0.2%
United Nations	2	0.1%
Business Organisations	412	23.2%
Trade Bodies	238	13.4%
Businesses	174	9.8%
Other Stakeholders	606	34.1%
Academic	242	13.6%
Think Tank	132	7.4%
Charities and Third-Sector	98	5.5%
Legal	81	4.6%
University & Research Bodies	28	1.6%
Trade Union	15	0.8%
Journalist	10	0.6%
Other	30	1.7%
Total	1,775	

Notes: "Non-Governmental Public Bodies" are those listed in the [2017 Cabinet Office Report](#). "Universities and Research Bodies" includes organisations such as the Wellcome Trust. "Charities and third-sector organisations" include campaigning organisations and charities.

2.2

Gender breakdown of witnesses

Select Committees are encouraged to ensure that witness panels for public evidence sessions are diverse and have some gender balance. Table 3 provides a gender breakdown of witnesses appearing before each Committee to discuss Brexit. This shows that of 1,775 witnesses that gave evidence to Select Committees on Brexit-related issues in this period, 28.2% (501) were women. The only Committee to achieve a 50-50 split was the [Sub-Committee of the Liaison Committee](#) established to examine the effectiveness and the influence of the Select Committee system. No committee had a majority of female witnesses (not including those where fewer than ten witnesses overall featured in Brexit-related sessions⁴). Both the Education and Environmental Audit Committees were however also close to parity, with over 47% of witnesses female. The Exiting the EU Committee had the highest number of female witnesses (77) but this was 26.6% of its total number of witnesses. The Scottish Affairs Committee had the second highest number (50), accounting for just over a third of its witnesses.

⁴ This analysis excludes Committees where there were fewer than ten witnesses overall. The excluded committees are International Development (4 male witnesses), Transport (3 male), Liaison (3 female – all sessions with the then Prime Minister Theresa May), Women and Equalities (7 female, 2 male) and a joint European Scrutiny/Defence Committee meeting (2 female, 1 male).

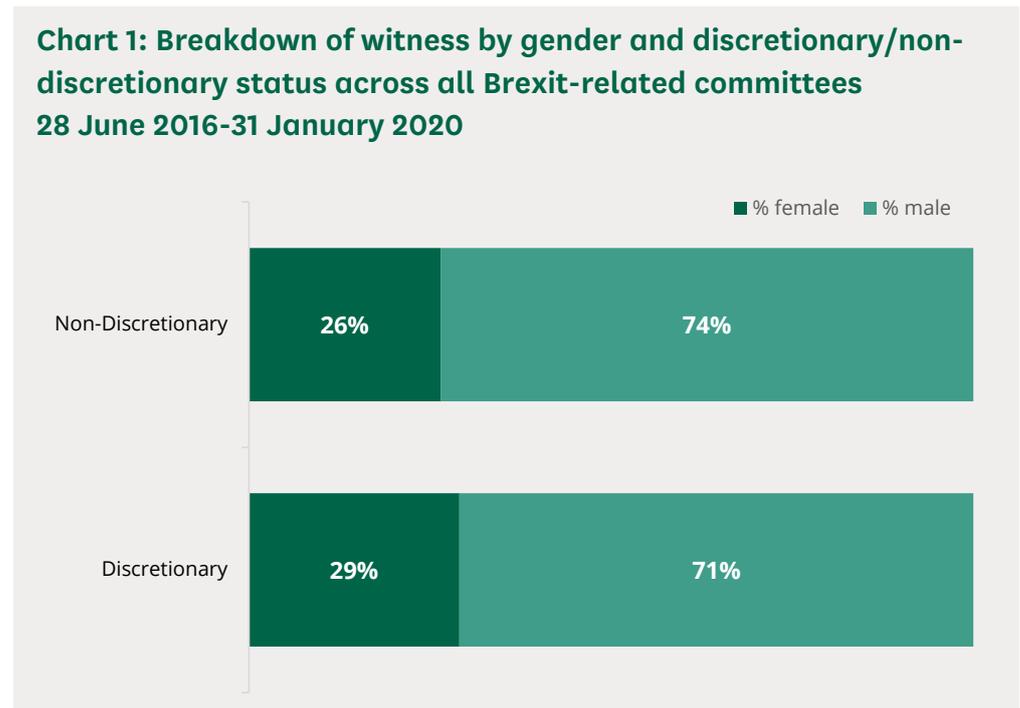
Table 3: Select Committee witnesses on Brexit: gender breakdownCommittees with 10 or more Brexit witnesses, 28 June 2016-31 January 2020
28 June 2016-31 January 2020

Committee	Female	Male	% Female
Liaison Sub-Committee	7	7	50.0%
Education	10	11	47.6%
Environmental Audit	36	40	47.4%
Public Accounts	19	25	43.2%
Work and Pensions	6	10	37.5%
Culture, Media & Sport	9	16	36.0%
Scottish Affairs	50	94	34.7%
Home Affairs	29	58	33.3%
Health & Social Care	15	38	28.3%
Welsh Affairs	11	28	28.2%
Procedure	8	21	27.6%
Northern Ireland Affairs	21	56	27.3%
Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs	21	56	27.3%
Exiting the EU Committee	77	212	26.6%
Environment Food & Rural Affairs	38	106	26.4%
Science & Technology	12	36	25.0%
European Scrutiny	10	30	25.0%
Foreign Affairs	13	41	24.1%
Justice	6	19	24.0%
International Trade	43	148	22.5%
Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy	16	58	21.6%
Joint Committee on Human Rights	2	8	20.0%
Housing, Communities & Local Government	10	43	18.9%
Treasury	19	91	17.3%
Defence	1	12	7.7%
Total (all committees)	501	1,274	28.2%

Source: House of Commons Select Committees

When breaking down by gender, it is also useful to make a distinction between discretionary and non-discretionary witnesses. Discretionary witnesses are individuals that are directly invited by Committees because of personal expertise or insights they may bring, for example academics or representatives of think tanks and non-governmental organisations. Non-discretionary witnesses are those that appear because they hold a particular position, namely Ministers and key office holders (e.g. heads of public bodies and other key organisations falling within the Committee's remit). Committees will have less discretion as to who to invite in relation to these organisations. This can be a grey area and can depend on the nature of the inquiry itself and whether or not a Committee needs to question a particular office holder or individual. Conversely, if a Committee is seeking to hear from a balance of representatives from a particular field, sector or area of expertise, it can exercise more discretion over witnesses.

Our analysis, when breaking down witnesses between those with discretionary and non-discretionary status, shows that 26% of non-discretionary were female. For discretionary witnesses, the figure was higher, at 29%.



Source: House of Commons Select Committees

2.3

Top witnesses

Our analysis has also identified the witnesses appearing most frequently in Committee evidence sessions. The top witness was George Eustice, when Minister of State at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA), with 12 appearances. He was closely followed by the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster/Cabinet Officer Minister (and former Secretary of State at DEFRA), Michael Gove. Seven of the top eight were either ministers or permanent secretaries at government departments, the other being the former governor of the Bank of England, Mark Carney. The sessions were usually held at a time when the witness held the position indicated. The highest placed witnesses from outside Government and other public bodies were Sam Lowe, Senior Research Fellow at the Centre for European Reform think tank, and Shanker Singham, Chief Executive of Competere Group and formerly of the Legatum Institute.

Table 4: Top witness appearances			
Titles/Positions are those usually held by witnesses when attending			
George Eustice MP			
Minister of State, DEFRA	12	Clare Moriarty	
		Permanent Secretary DEFRA/DExEU	7
Michael Gove MP		Sam Lowe	
Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster/Secretary of State DEFRA	11	Senior Research Fellow at Centre for European Reform	6
Mark Carney		Shanker Singham	
Governor, Bank of England	9	CEO, Competere	6
Jon Thompson		George Hollingbery MP	
Permanent Secretary and Chief Executive, HMRC	9	Minister of State for Trade Policy	6
David Davis*		John Alty	
Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union	8	Director General, Trade Policy, Department for International Trade	6
Andrea Leadsom MP		Robin Walker MP	
Leader of the House/ Secretary of State DEFRA/BEIS	7	Parliamentary Under Secretary of State, DExEU	6
Thérèse Coffey MP		Sir Philip Rutnam	
Minister of State/Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, DEFRA	7	Permanent Secretary, Home Office	6

Note: *Includes [one appearance](#) at the European Scrutiny Committee by David Davis MP after he left the role of Secretary of State for Exiting the EU.

Source: House of Commons Select Committees

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