



## Effectiveness of select committees

Standard Note: SN/PC/6499

Last updated: 29 January 2013

Author: Richard Kelly

Section Parliament and Constitution Centre

---

In its 2009 report, *Rebuilding the House*, the Select Committee on Reform of the House of Commons (the Wright Committee) recommended that “the Liaison Committee should re-examine the current role of select committees, their resources and their tasks, and in particular how to deal with the increasing demands of time made of Members as their role grows”.

On 8 November 2012, the Liaison Committee’s report, *Select committee effectiveness, resources and powers*, was published. The Committee reflected on the role of select committees and how they could do better at influencing Government.

Measuring the influence of select committees has proved difficult but some academic work has been undertaken. An assessment of the influence of select committees by the Constitution Unit, University College of London, fed into the Liaison Committee’s report.

On 24 January 2013, the Liaison Committee published responses to its report from the Speaker on behalf of the House of Commons Commission, from House authorities and from the Leader of the House of Commons. It described the responses from the House as “positive”, while “the response from the Government is mixed”.

The Liaison Committee noted that it had concluded its original report by stating that it would seek the support of the House. After it agreed to publish the responses, the Committee secured a debate in backbench business time. The debate is scheduled to take place on 31 January 2013.

This information is provided to Members of Parliament in support of their parliamentary duties and is not intended to address the specific circumstances of any particular individual. It should not be relied upon as being up to date; the law or policies may have changed since it was last updated; and it should not be relied upon as legal or professional advice or as a substitute for it. A suitably qualified professional should be consulted if specific advice or information is required.

This information is provided subject to [our general terms and conditions](#) which are available online or may be provided on request in hard copy. Authors are available to discuss the content of this briefing with Members and their staff, but not with the general public.

## Contents

<b>1</b>	<b>Background</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>Select committee effectiveness, resources and powers – the Liaison Committee report</b>	<b>3</b>
2.1	Role and core tasks	3
2.2	Impact of select committees	4
<b>3</b>	<b>Reviews of the effectiveness of select committees</b>	<b>5</b>
3.1	Developing a methodology to measure influence	5
3.2	Evaluating the performance of select committees	6
3.3	The policy impact of select committees	6
<b>4</b>	<b>Responses to the Liaison Committee’s review</b>	<b>7</b>
4.1	Debate on Select Committee Effectiveness, Resources and Powers	8
	<b>Appendix: Revised select committee core tasks</b>	<b>10</b>

## 1 Background

The Select Committee on Reform of the House of Commons was established “in the wake of the expenses crisis, which triggered demand for wider parliamentary and political reforms”.<sup>1</sup> In relation to select committees, it was asked to consider “the appointment of members and chairmen of select committees”. At the outset of its report, the Committee observed that this was just one issue that reformers were interested in:

The select committees are widely respected and seen as generally functioning well. They have won more resources in recent years. Their work on pre-legislative and post-legislative scrutiny, examination of expenditure and pre-appointment hearings is gaining ground. There is a strong desire to strengthen yet further these forums for cross-party work and government scrutiny and indeed extend the way they work to other parts of parliamentary life. Some have long held the view that it is crucial to create a parliamentary career path focussed on select committee work. Concerns have particularly focused on the role of the whips in selecting committee members and, in practice if not formally, Chairs, as well as the powers of committees and their need for access to the Chamber agenda, where despite some improvements they remain essentially noises-off.<sup>2</sup>

After addressing its terms of reference, the Committee also mentioned the effect of time pressures on Members and the difficulties they found in devoting time to select committee work and recommended that the Liaison Committee should undertake a review of select committees:

---

<sup>1</sup> Select Committee on Reform of the House of Commons, *Rebuilding the House*, November 2009, HC 1117 2008-09, para 18

<sup>2</sup> Select Committee on Reform of the House of Commons, *Rebuilding the House*, November 2009, HC 1117 2008-09, para 19

93. Select committees have rightly won respect for the work they do and they are being asked to take on an increasing number of tasks on behalf of the House. As a result committee members find it increasingly difficult to devote time to select committee work as well as all their other duties. **We consider that the Liaison Committee should re-examine the current role of select committees, their resources and their tasks, and in particular how to deal with the increasing demands of time made of Members as their role grows.**<sup>3</sup>

## 2 Select committee effectiveness, resources and powers – the Liaison Committee report

On 8 November 2012, the Liaison Committee's report, *Select committee effectiveness, resources and powers*, was published.<sup>4</sup> The Committee reflected on how select committees could do better at influencing Government. It also reviewed and revised the Core Tasks that it had agreed for select committees in 2002. It reviewed "committee activity since the 2010 General Election, and the impact of the 2010 'Wright reforms'"; and examined "how effective committees have been in addressing the range of their responsibilities".<sup>5</sup>

### 2.1 Role and core tasks

The Liaison Committee concluded that:

... select committees should influence policy and have an impact on Government departments and the agencies to which their functions may be devolved. This is our first objective. The extent of this influence and impact is the primary measure of the effectiveness of select committees.

13. But committees are not only concerned with influencing Government. ... **While committees' primary purpose is to scrutinise Government, it is sometimes in the public interest for them to extend their scrutiny to other organisations.**

14. A further important function of committees is to act as a forum for discussion and informed debate, raising issues in the public consciousness and giving a public platform to experts and affected individuals. ... **Scrutiny committees are not just involved in scrutinising others but have an active role to play themselves in putting issues on the agenda and acting as a forum for public debate.**<sup>6</sup>

In 2002, following a recommendation from the Modernisation Committee, the Liaison Committee set out ten core tasks for select committees. The Liaison Committee concluded that core tasks were still helpful:

We believe it continues to be useful to define core tasks for committees, to guide committees in deciding their programme, but not to constrain their freedom to decide their own priorities.<sup>7</sup>

It agreed revised core tasks, which are set out in the Appendix of this Note.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Select Committee on Reform of the House of Commons, *Rebuilding the House*, November 2009, HC 1117 2008-09, para 93

<sup>4</sup> Liaison Committee, *Select committee effectiveness, resources and powers*, 8 November 2012, HC 697 2012-13

<sup>5</sup> Liaison Committee, *Select committee effectiveness, resources and powers*, 8 November 2012, HC 697 2012-13, Summary

<sup>6</sup> Liaison Committee, *Select committee effectiveness, resources and powers*, 8 November 2012, HC 697 2012-13, paras 12-14

<sup>7</sup> Liaison Committee, *Select committee effectiveness, resources and powers*, 8 November 2012, HC 697 2012-13, para 16

## 2.2 Impact of select committees

The Liaison Committee drew on the research of the Constitution Unit, University College of London, on the impact of select committees (see section 3.3). The Liaison Committee reported that “Their overall conclusion was that committees were indeed influential on the Government, though they identified some areas where they could do better”.<sup>9</sup>

In the light of this and other evidence the Liaison Committee received, it reviewed the way in which select committees operate. It made recommendations on planning by committees: both strategic planning, considering what committees intended to achieve in the remainder of the current Parliament; and the detailed planning of their objectives in each inquiry they undertake. On planning each inquiry, it highlighted the importance of exploratory planning, timing and more strategic media and communications planning.<sup>10</sup> It returned to the subject of communications later in its report.<sup>11</sup>

The Committee reminded select committees of the opportunities available to debate select committee reports – both in Westminster Hall, in time at the disposal of Liaison Committee; and in the Chamber, in time at the disposal of the Backbench Business Committee. It suggested that it should be possible for the Westminster Hall debates to take place on a substantive motion. It also reported that it was hoping that procedures could be developed to allow select committees chairs the opportunity to make statements to launch select committee reports in a manner that mirrored the format of ministerial statements.<sup>12</sup>

The Liaison Committee also considered the way committees work. It identified the need for them to be “pro-active and forward-looking”; to consider experimenting with different approaches in evidence sessions (using ‘lead questioners’ or rapporteurs); to broaden their range of witnesses; and to consider commissioning research.<sup>13</sup>

The Liaison Committee commented on the way committee reports are drafted. It recommended that reports should be “short and accessible”; “avoid too many recommendations”; distinguish between conclusions and recommendations; and clearly state to whom the recommendation is addressed.<sup>14</sup>

The Liaison Committee was told that if committees improved follow-up, performance would improve. The Liaison Committee recommended that:

We recommend that each committee should appoint a member of staff, or an adviser, or an outside body, who will monitor follow-up to recommendations in respect of each report. The committee should report to the House at least once in each parliamentary

---

<sup>8</sup> More information on the development of core tasks for select committees is available in the House of Commons Library Standard Note, *Modernisation: Select Committees – core tasks*, SN/PC/3161

<sup>9</sup> Liaison Committee, *Select committee effectiveness, resources and powers*, 8 November 2012, HC 697 2012-13, para 61

<sup>10</sup> Liaison Committee, *Select committee effectiveness, resources and powers*, 8 November 2012, HC 697 2012-13, paras 64-69

<sup>11</sup> Liaison Committee, *Select committee effectiveness, resources and powers*, 8 November 2012, HC 697 2012-13, paras 85-93

<sup>12</sup> Liaison Committee, *Select committee effectiveness, resources and powers*, 8 November 2012, HC 697 2012-13, paras 48-50

<sup>13</sup> Liaison Committee, *Select committee effectiveness, resources and powers*, 8 November 2012, HC 697 2012-13, paras 70-78

<sup>14</sup> Liaison Committee, *Select committee effectiveness, resources and powers*, 8 November 2012, HC 697 2012-13, paras 79-80

Session upon how many of its recommendations the Government has acted, and what follow-up is proposed on outstanding recommendations.<sup>15</sup>

The Committee also considered the need for professional development for Members who serve on select committees. It provided information on the role of a committee chair and said that it intended to provide guidelines for members of select committees.<sup>16</sup>

The Liaison Committee commented on the importance of co-operation from the Government and the need for adequate resources for select committees if they are to be effective.<sup>17</sup>

During the debate in the House on the House of Commons Administration and Savings Programme, Sir Alan Beith, the Chair of the Liaison Committee, drew attention to the Committee's report and commented that:

I need to ensure that the necessary cuts to the House budget ... do not reduce the effectiveness of Select Committees and hamper us in our efforts to hold the Government to account and engage the public in our work.

Later, he said:

... The Liaison Committee welcomes the [savings] programme as an opportunity to improve and modernise the service that the Committee Office gives Committees and the public, but we emphasise that it is important that it should be shaped not just by the need to produce savings, but by the longer term goal of increasing Committee effectiveness.

Our report recommends more stability in Committee staffing; the ability to recruit some Committee Clerks directly from outside; greater flexibility in bringing in outside experts; and a modest increase in the number of media officers to enable us to have the work of Committees better explained and properly understood in the media.

In the longer term, we would like to see funding for additional staff in Chairs' offices, for the reason I gave earlier [the increasing burdens on their staff and constituency staff that arise from the increased expectations of them—they are now directly elected], and we look forward to a positive response from the House of Commons Commission to our recommendations on resources in due course.<sup>18</sup>

### **3 Reviews of the effectiveness of select committees**

#### **3.1 Developing a methodology to measure influence**

In 2009, Andrew Hindmoor et al reviewed the work of the Education and Skills Committee between 1997 and 2005.<sup>19</sup> They argued that previous comments on the effectiveness of select committees had been largely anecdotal. After reviewing claims made about the work of select committees, they commented that:

---

<sup>15</sup> Liaison Committee, [Select committee effectiveness, resources and powers](#), 8 November 2012, HC 697 2012-13, para 83

<sup>16</sup> Liaison Committee, [Select committee effectiveness, resources and powers](#), 8 November 2012, HC 697 2012-13, paras 94-104

<sup>17</sup> Liaison Committee, [Select committee effectiveness, resources and powers](#), 8 November 2012, HC 697 2012-13, Chapters 5 and 6

<sup>18</sup> [HC Deb 8 November 2012 cc1062-1064](#)

<sup>19</sup> Andrew Hindmoor, Phil Larkin and Andrew Kennon, "Assessing the influence of select committees in the UK: The Education and Skills Committee, 1997-2005", *Journal of Legislative Studies*, Vol 51, No 1, March 2009, pp71-89

There is then a *prima facie* case for regarding Select Committees as constituting an effective area of parliamentary work. The problem here is that the evidence upon which such claims have been made is quite limited. Within both official reports and the extant academic literature, arguments about the influence of committees are supported through the inclusion of positive endorsements from seasoned observers, past or present committee members and, for illustrative purposes, lists of the occasions on which committee recommendations are claimed to have resulted in policy changes.<sup>20</sup>

They used the Education and Skills Committee's work from 1997 to 2005 to develop an approach to measure its influence. They identified four actors "over whom select Committees might be thought to exercise influence": Government; Parliament; the media; and political parties. They then discussed approaches that could be used to measure the Committee's influence on those actors, highlighting advantages and disadvantages of the approaches they considered.

### 3.2 Evaluating the performance of select committees

In March 2009, a paper by David Monk, Director, Executive and Committee Support, at the Australian House of Representatives, was published.<sup>21</sup> Monk reviewed recent literature on evaluating committees in Westminster Parliaments. He noted that Hindmoor et al (see 3.1) wrote about committee influence, whilst Tolley<sup>22</sup> wrote a "similar paper about the United Kingdom Joint Committee on Human Rights. He states he is measuring effectiveness but uses similar measures to Hindmoor et al".<sup>23</sup>

Monk reviewed arguments for and against attempting to measure committee performance quantitatively. He then considered what to measure. He suggested that "a concept such as political influence is more appropriate than effectiveness" and so preferred Hindmoor et al's terminology.<sup>24</sup> He concluded that "the objective measure of committee performance is the subjective views of participants and stakeholders" and identified six relevant groups: the government, the bureaucracy, the parliament, the stakeholders, the general public and the judiciary.<sup>25</sup> He used the rest of his paper to suggest methods for measuring their satisfaction.

### 3.3 The policy impact of select committees

Meg Russell and Meghan Benton of the Constitution Unit, University College London, studied the impact select committees have on Government policy. Their report *Selective Influence: The policy impact of House of Commons select committees* was published in June 2011.<sup>26</sup>

They reviewed work of seven select committees over the period 1997-2010. They reported "basic information about select committees and their work: for example, the number of reports that committees produce, the kinds of recommendations that they make, and the

---

<sup>20</sup> Andrew Hindmoor, Phil Larkin and Andrew Kennon, "Assessing the influence of select committees in the UK: The Education and Skills Committee, 1997-2005", *Journal of Legislative Studies*, Vol 51, No 1, March 2009, p73

<sup>21</sup> David Monk, "A Framework for Evaluating the Performance of Committees in Westminster Parliaments", *Journal of Legislative Studies*, Vol 16, No 1, March 2010, pp1-13

<sup>22</sup> MC Tolley, "Parliamentary Scrutiny of Rights in the United Kingdom: Assessing the Work of the Joint Committee on Human Rights", *Australian Journal of Political Science*, Vol 44, No 1, 2009, pp41-55

<sup>23</sup> David Monk, "A Framework for Evaluating the Performance of Committees in Westminster Parliaments", *Journal of Legislative Studies*, Vol 16, No 1, March 2010, p3

<sup>24</sup> David Monk, "A Framework for Evaluating the Performance of Committees in Westminster Parliaments", *Journal of Legislative Studies*, Vol 16, No 1, March 2010, pp4-5

<sup>25</sup> David Monk, "A Framework for Evaluating the Performance of Committees in Westminster Parliaments", *Journal of Legislative Studies*, Vol 16, No 1, March 2010, p6

<sup>26</sup> Meg Russell and Meghan Benton, *Selective Influence: The policy impact of House of Commons select committees*, June 2011

extent to which their work is reported by the media".<sup>27</sup> In order to consider the influence of select committees, recommendations were coded. Coding considered:

- Who the recommendation was addressed to;
- What the recommendation called for;
- How substantive the recommendation was (assessing both alteration and policy significance<sup>28</sup>).

In their report, Meg Russell and Meghan Benton drew attention to the problems of using recommendation success to judge effectiveness. So in addition to their quantitative analysis they also undertook qualitative analysis.

In their executive summary they highlighted the following conclusions:

There was general consensus, however, that adoption of committee recommendations is only one form of committee success, and perhaps not even the most important one. Select committees influence the policy process in many other more subtle, and less measurable, ways. We suggest seven forms of non-quantifiable committee influence: contributing to debate, drawing together evidence, spotlighting issues, brokering between actors in government, improving the quality of government decision-making through accountability, exposing failures, and perhaps most importantly 'generating fear'.

[...]

Although select committees are in many ways very successful, there is still room for improvement. We identify a number of problems, some of which have been widely commented on before. These include committees' frequent failure to follow up their recommendations; committees' relative inability to commission their own research; poor attendance and attention to detail by some committee members; and a failure by some in government to take committees sufficiently seriously. These last two points are interlinked: if committees can resolve the first, the second may resolve itself. An additional challenge is how to manage committees' relations with the media: media attention may benefit committees' status and influence, but being too media-driven can become a problem.

... Our general conclusion is that it is erroneous to assume that select committees are not influential on government policy. They are largely taken seriously in Whitehall, many of their recommendations go on to be implemented (though sometimes not until years later), and they have an important preventative effect in encouraging more careful consideration of policy within government departments.<sup>29</sup>

#### **4 Responses to the Liaison Committee's review**

On 24 January 2013, the Liaison Committee published responses to its report from the Speaker on behalf of the House of Commons Commission; from House authorities – the Clerk of the House replied on behalf of the Management Board and the Clerk Assistant responded to the Committee's recommendation on staffing issues; and from the Leader of

---

<sup>27</sup> Meg Russell and Meghan Benton, *Selective Influence: The policy impact of House of Commons select committees*, June 2011, Executive summary

<sup>28</sup> Alteration – the level of change that a recommendation demands to government policy. Policy significance – the relative importance of the policy to which the recommendation referred

<sup>29</sup> Meg Russell and Meghan Benton, *Selective Influence: The policy impact of House of Commons select committees*, June 2011, Executive summary

the House of Commons. It described the responses from the House as “positive”, while “the response from the Government is mixed”.<sup>30</sup>

In his letter to the Committee, the Sepaker addressed the Liaison Committee’s recommendations and conclusions relating to resources for scrutiny:

The Commission’s principal responsibility in this area is to provide the necessary resources for select committees. We have undertaken that scrutiny of Government will not be affected by the savings programme, as mentioned by the Committee at para 127; we are grateful for its acknowledgement that committees will need to show that their resources are being used efficiently. The Commission endorses the conclusions at para 128 on the longterm goals and will be ready to respond in due course to propositions designed to increase committee effectiveness.<sup>31</sup>

In a press notice on the publication of the Liaison Committee’s report, the Committee commented that “The Government has not yet recognised the changed mood in the House and the strength of our resolve to achieve change”. The press notice also summarised the Committee’s reaction to the responses it received:

The Committee says:

- It will be seeking the endorsement of the House of Commons in a debate on its conclusions about committee powers and effectiveness, and it will continue to press for progress.
- While it welcomes the positive tone of the Government response, it is not yet convinced that the Government has fully accepted the need for a new partnership approach with Parliament.<sup>32</sup>

#### **4.1 Debate on Select Committee Effectiveness, Resources and Powers**

The Liaison Committee noted that it had concluded its original report by stating that it would seek the support of the House.<sup>33</sup> After it agreed to publish the responses, the Committee secured a debate in backbench business time. The debate is scheduled to take place on 31 January 2013, on the motion:

That this House welcomes the report of the Liaison Committee on Select Committee effectiveness, resources and powers, Second Report of Session 2012-13, HC 697, and the responses to it, Third Report of Session 2012-13, HC 911; welcomes the positive impact of the Wright reforms, particularly the election of committee chairs and members, on the effectiveness and authority of select committees; endorses the Committee’s recommendations for committee best practice and the revised core tasks for departmental select committees; looks forward to agreement on procedures for committee statements on the floor of the House and arrangements for debates on committee reports; agrees that co-operation from Government is crucial to effective

---

<sup>30</sup> Liaison Committee, *Select committee effectiveness, resources and powers: responses to the Committee’s Second Report of Session 2012–13*, 24 January 20-13, HC 911 2012-13, paras 1-3

<sup>31</sup> Liaison Committee, *Select committee effectiveness, resources and powers: responses to the Committee’s Second Report of Session 2012–13*, 24 January 20-13, HC 911 2012-13, Appendix A, Response from the Speaker on behalf of the House of Commons Commission

<sup>32</sup> Liaison Committee press notice, *Government underestimates our resolve, say Committee Chairs*, 24 January 2013

<sup>33</sup> Liaison Committee, *Select committee effectiveness, resources and powers: responses to the Committee’s Second Report of Session 2012–13*, 24 January 20-13, HC 911 2012-13, para 5; Liaison Committee, *Select committee effectiveness, resources and powers*, 8 November 2012, HC 697 –I 2012-13, para 138



scrutiny; and supports the Committee's call for a new relationship between Parliament and Government, which recognises the public interest in greater accountability.<sup>34</sup>

---

<sup>34</sup> House of Commons, *Future Business No 103*, 2012-13, 28 January 2013, 2781

## **Appendix: Revised select committee core tasks**

The revised select committee core tasks set out by the Liaison Committee in November 2012 are:

Overall aim: To hold Ministers and Departments to account for their policy and decision-making and to support the House in its control of the supply of public money and scrutiny of legislation

### **STRATEGY**

Task 1 To examine the strategy of the department, how it has identified its key objectives and priorities and whether it has the means to achieve them, in terms of plans, resources, skills, capabilities and management information

### **POLICY**

Task 2 To examine policy proposals by the department, and areas of emerging policy, or where existing policy is deficient, and make proposals

### **EXPENDITURE AND PERFORMANCE**

Task 3 To examine the expenditure plans, outturn and performance of the department and its arm's length bodies, and the relationships between spending and delivery of outcomes

### **DRAFT BILLS**

Task 4 To conduct scrutiny of draft bills within the committee's responsibilities

### **BILLS AND DELEGATED LEGISLATION**

Task 5 To assist the House in its consideration of bills and statutory instruments, including draft orders under the Public Bodies Act

### **POST-LEGISLATIVE SCRUTINY**

Task 6 To examine the implementation of legislation and scrutinise the department's post-legislative assessments

### **EUROPEAN SCRUTINY**

Task 7 To scrutinise policy developments at the European level and EU legislative proposals

### **APPOINTMENTS**

Task 8 To scrutinise major appointments made by the department and to hold pre-appointment hearings where appropriate

### **SUPPORT FOR THE HOUSE**

Task 9 To produce timely reports to inform debate in the House, including Westminster Hall, or debating committees, and to examine petitions tabled

### **PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT**

Task 10 To assist the House of Commons in better engaging with the public by ensuring that the work of the committee is accessible to the public

Source: Liaison Committee, [Select committee effectiveness, resources and powers](#), 8 November 2012, HC 697 2012-13, para 20