

Written evidence submitted by Sense about Science

### **Sense about Science**

Sense about Science is an independent charity that promotes the public interest in sound science and evidence. We work with communities all over the UK to make sense of evidence, and with researchers and policy makers to improve use of evidence in public life.

We work closely with the House of Commons Library and the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST) to deliver Evidence Week in Parliament each year, bringing together constituents, parliamentarians and researchers in briefings on cutting research tools and findings to assist Parliament in its scrutiny function and to assist MPs in understanding constituency issues.

**What topic(s) do you think the Modernisation Committee should prioritise and how do they link to one or more of the strategic aims set out in the Leader’s memorandum?**

### **The function of Members’ offices in the context of AI, data, evidence synthesis and complex problem solving in government**

We have observed that the challenge of getting to grips with different kinds of evidence, from understanding the impact of free school meals to assessing the roll out of Electric Vehicle charging, is rapidly expanding with the increased use of data and AI in decision making. In previous reviews of the working conditions in Members’ offices, little attention has been paid to the demands this creates to keep Members informed as both legislators and representatives nor to the suitability of the role categories for staff set by IPSA <sup>1</sup> and the resourcing of Members’ offices. The skills for analysing, evaluating and interpreting data are essential and expensive.

The House of Commons Library and the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology provide valuable support and training throughout the year, but there should be an explicit discussion about whether they are expected to provide all of these functions for Members’ offices, or support a wide variety of staffing arrangements, and how resourcing should reflect this. Grant Hill-Cawthorne, Managing Director of Research and Information, noted that inquiries from Members’ offices to the Library have doubled in the new parliament, compared to previous years.

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<sup>1</sup> Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority. MP Staff Job Descriptions and Pay Bands for 2023-24. Published 2023. Accessed December 16, 2024.  
[https://assets.ctfassets.net/s90k6prbkeee/3eN8MaLMcUU0AMi4j7A0uM/5a7ca19be9b89f5e4fba53185459d19/MP\\_staff\\_JDs\\_spreadsheet\\_2023-24.pdf](https://assets.ctfassets.net/s90k6prbkeee/3eN8MaLMcUU0AMi4j7A0uM/5a7ca19be9b89f5e4fba53185459d19/MP_staff_JDs_spreadsheet_2023-24.pdf)

There is no policy of providing formal training to assist staff in evaluating data and evidence. This is critical as research methods become more sophisticated and the resulting evidence more complicated, staff need to be able to interpret and evaluate complex data. However, employing staff with the prerequisite skills would be beyond MP staffing budgets.

An assessment by the committee of how MPs offices can be equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills to work effectively in delivering on all their responsibilities would significantly help improve culture and working practices.

### **Why would the topic(s) benefit from the attention of the Modernisation Committee?**

Members' offices have long argued for additional training and resourcing to help staff overcome the skill gap present to critically appraise reports and legislation e.g.

“[professionalising offices] is essential in enabling MPs to provide the level of scrutiny needed for a vibrant democracy” (Liz Twist MP)<sup>2</sup>. Mandating core skills for distinct roles allows MP staff to meet modern needs and perform roles better.

The final report by the Speaker's Conference on employment conditions<sup>3</sup> found that less than a quarter of the budget allocated to Members for training and welfare provision for staff was being used, and it has acknowledged that the workload of many staff negatively impacts on their ability to access professional development e.g. “Perhaps then the most precious gift a Member can give their staff is that scarcest of resources – time – to properly partake of training opportunities” (Lord Willets)<sup>4</sup>.

### **Is there any existing work relevant to the topic(s) which you think the Modernisation Committee can build on?**

The House of Commons Library provides a 'Good Information Toolkit', and introduced 'misinformation' training at instigation of the Leader of the House in 2023. Many Members' staff register for training sessions during the annual Evidence Week in Parliament, which provides bite size learning on how evidence can be scrutinised, how data can be understood and used, and how to critically analyse statistics and reports. Although the response to these training sessions has been overwhelmingly positive, uptake would be enhanced by greater endorsement and promotion, so that accessing training is recognised as a priority. More

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<sup>2</sup> Liz Twist. MPs need more support and resources to improve parliamentary scrutiny. The House. Published 2023. Accessed December 16, 2024. <https://www.politicshome.com/thehouse/article/mps-need-support-resources-improve-parliamentary-scrutiny>

<sup>3</sup> Speaker's Conference on the employment conditions of Members' staff: second report. (July 2023) <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5803/cmselect/cmspeak/1714/summary.html>

<sup>4</sup> Lord David Willets. The importance of policy scrutiny. The House. Published 2023. Accessed December 16, 2024. <https://www.politicshome.com/thehouse/article/importance-policy-scrutiny>

broadly, Evidence Week would benefit from coordinated support that enabled organisers to make advanced bookings.

### **A professional framework for staff to equip offices with the essential skills for modern policy decision making**

Integrating skills for analysing, evaluating and interpreting data into formal training programme, and recognising these as essential as good management and fiscal responsibilities, would better equip offices to meet the demands of modern policy development. Support in, for example: communicating and understanding uncertainty, developing a comprehension of research methodology, and asking the right questions, including what might be missing, would ensure Members are better able to effectively hold themselves and policymakers accountable for decisions, fulfilling their roles as representatives and legislators. We would be happy to continue working with POST and Library colleagues to integrate our provision into this.

Exploration by the committee of development of a professional framework mandating core skills for distinct roles, and reevaluating how office budgets are provisioned, would be value. This could consist of guides, inductions and continuous training that develops staff and Members so that they are well equipped to scrutinise evidence and adapt to changing developments in the House.

### **Recommendations that the Committee could consider in this regard:**

- Assessing how Members' offices can be equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills to enable them to effectively scrutinise and evaluate policy evidence.
- Review the demands made on the House of Commons Library and POST in the context of AI and evidence synthesis, and ensure they are resourced appropriately.
- Mandate core training and induction, and ensure agencies and regulatory bodies are recognised and visible to Members and staff, to ensure offices are accessing resources and support throughout people's careers.
- Consider development of a professional framework mandating core skills for distinct roles in Members' offices, and reevaluating how office budgets are provisioned.
- Encourage more departments and offices to engage with and actively shape Evidence Week in Parliament to best deliver on the needs of the House.

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