

The Justice Select Committee and the BSC

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The Justice Select Committee, House of Commons

The Justice Select Committee is the House of Commons committee responsible for overseeing the “expenditure, administration and policy of the Ministry of Justice ...; and administration and expenditure of the Attorney General’s Office, the Treasury Solicitor’s Department, the Crown Prosecution Service and the Serious Fraud Office (but excluding individual cases and appointments and advice given within government by Law Officers) (*Standing Order No. 152*).” In practice, the Committee can look at any part of the Ministry of Justice’s policy or operations, from obvious areas like prisons and probation to the work of the Information Commissioner, Victims’ Commissioner and Government relations with the Island of Sark. The Committee generally meets once a week and, combined with the many different calls on members’ time, this means the Committee has to prioritise carefully its choice of inquiries. It is currently conducting substantive inquiries into the work of the family courts and probation. The Committee has MPs from four parties on it and broadly reflects the political composition of the House. Sir Alan Beith MP chairs the Committee.

The Committee is expected to hold pre-appointment hearings at which it quizzes putative appointees; it is also a statutory consultee on sentencing guidelines and is likely to be asked to scrutinise relevant bills and draft bills and to conduct post-legislative scrutiny of Acts. Other than these responsibilities, the Committee is free to determine its own programme and, in addition to large-scale inquiries, frequently holds one-off oral evidence sessions (often on timely issues, for example, recent sessions have considered magistrates’ courts closures and the work of the Legal Services Commission). The witnesses called and the subject matter of all evidence sessions are chosen by the Members, who respond to issues raised in the House; media reports; letters from constituents; the wider public and interested parties; and advice from the Committee Secretariat.

So how can members of the BSC get involved? The simplest way is to submit written evidence. At the beginning of an inquiry (and for some one-off sessions) we will send out a call for evidence (if you would like to be added to our mailing list please email justicecom@parliament.uk). Anyone can submit written evidence and instructions are available from our website (www.parliament.uk and follow the links to committees). The Committee is interested in a wide range of views, from professional groups, to academics, and those who have personally experienced the system. The Committee often receives surprisingly few submissions from academics and would welcome more. Academic research may only relate to one part of the terms of reference but can still be a valuable contribution to an inquiry. The Committee will sometimes appoint a specialist adviser who is an academic, and/or call academics to give oral evidence. The Secretariat now seeks information from the BSC database to inform its guidance to Members of the Committee on potential advisers and witnesses, but also selects from those who have submitted written evidence or otherwise made contact with the Committee. If someone is unable to submit written evidence in a timely manner, for example, because research is ongoing or a report has not yet been published, it is possible to contact the Committee Secretariat, in confidence if necessary, to raise their awareness of relevant research on an informal basis by phone or email.

You are also welcome to come and watch our oral evidence sessions, almost all of which are in public on a Tuesday morning. Watching a meeting may be helpful to students of criminology seeking to

understand more about parliamentary scrutiny. The atmosphere in committee is far less partisan than on the floor of the House of Commons, and reports are usually agreed on a cross-party basis. More details about evidence sessions are available on the website, as are video and audio recordings and transcripts of previous sessions. Some sessions are televised and all are broadcast on the web.

The Committee may decide to launch an online consultation to encourage greater participation in some inquiries, either from the general public or from particular stakeholders. For example, the views of prison staff were sought during the inquiry on the role of the prison officer. Members of the Society could assist the Committee in extending its reach by publicising e-consultations through their networks.

Once an inquiry is finished and the report is published the Government has two months to respond to the Committee's recommendations. Once it has received the response the Committee may wish to carry out follow up work on the report. For example, after the publication of "*Cutting Crime: The Case for Justice Reinvestment*" the Chairman gave speeches on the report at relevant conferences, and secured a debate in Westminster Hall. Members have also raised the points made in the report in various one-off evidence sessions.

In order to assist the Committee in performing its functions effectively the Committee Secretariat attempts to maintain a watching brief on all areas within the remit of the Ministry of Justice. The Secretariat would therefore welcome: invitations to attend relevant conferences; research reports; and notification of key research studies and programmes.
