



# SULSA

Scottish Universities Life Sciences Alliance

## Engaging with Parliament

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**T**he Scottish Universities Life Science Alliance (SULSA) is a strategic alliance between nine Scottish Universities that was founded by the SFC in 2008. Created alongside 10 other research pools, as a result of the SFC's greater research pooling initiative, the pools were developed to encourage researchers across Scottish higher education to pool their resources and respond to increasing international competition.

Since its inception in 2008, SULSA has leveraged over £400m from its initial £27m investment from the SFC. During this time, SULSA has brought dozens of new Life Sciences researchers to Scotland and has helped to underpin new research angles.

SULSA continues to bring Scotland's Life Science researchers together, helping to assure the country continues to be a world leading environment for research into biological and biomedical science.

This report was written by SULSA's Executive Director Dr Allison Jackson alongside Dr Samantha Le Sommer who is an Early Career Researcher Representative for SULSA from the University of Aberdeen. Both with a keen interest in higher education policy, Allison has submitted policy responses to government consultations via SULSA on behalf of the Scottish life sciences research community, whilst Samantha is an active member of the Scottish National Party.

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## **1. Why Engage with Parliament?**

Politics influences our daily lives, and the decisions made by our governments dictate almost every aspect, from schools, to taxes, to immigration, and including scientific research. Getting involved in politics and engaging with parliament as a researcher is a fantastic opportunity to take part in the democratic process in order to both shape policy and, increase the impact of your research. With the current political climate, the responsibility of scientists to get their voice heard has never been greater. There are a number of ways you can get involved; voting, campaigning, signing a petition, joining a political party, becoming involved in pressure groups, contacting your MP/MSP, and taking part in consultations. This report will explain how both the UK and Scottish parliaments work, and different ways in which you can engage with Parliament.

## **2. Holyrood v Westminster – Differences and Roles**

### **2.1 The Scottish Parliament**

The Scottish parliament, often referred to as Holyrood, is the devolved, legislature of Scotland. The first Scottish Government elections were held on 6<sup>th</sup> May 1999, and power was officially transferred to the Scottish Parliament from Westminster on the 1<sup>st</sup> of July 1999. It consists of a single chamber of democratically elected members known as Members of the Scottish Parliament (MSP). There are 129 MSPs elected through the additional member system. 73 MSPs are elected from geographical constituencies by first past the post, and 53 additional MSPs are elected from 8 regional lists using proportional representation. This results in a single chamber parliament that is broadly representative of the overall popular vote. This means you have more than one MSP representing you. You will have your constituency MSP, and 8 regional MSPs, giving you 9 representatives from multiple parties representing your area in the Scottish Parliament.

### **2.2 Westminster**

The House of Commons and the House of Lords sit at the Palace of Westminster in London, and together they make up the two-chamber Westminster government. The House of Commons consists of 650 members of parliament (MPs) elected to represent their constituencies (by first past the post voting system), hence you will have one MP that represents you. The second chamber, the House of Lords, is appointed. Currently, there are around 790 sitting members of the House of Lords, all of whom (apart from the 90 hereditary peers,) are all appointed by the monarch on the advice of the prime minister.

The House of Lords has three functions; to question and challenge the Government; to work with the House of Commons to shape laws and to investigate issues through committees and; look at how to improve the way the country is governed. Both the House of Commons, and the House of Lords are set out similarly, with the government party on one side, and the opposition parties on the other. In the House of Lords, there are some members who do not belong to any political party, these are known as cross-benchers.

## 2.3 Devolved versus Reserved Matters

The Scottish Parliament is part of a process known as devolution, which is a system of government which allows decisions to be made at a local level, although the UK Parliament is sovereign (has ultimate power).

Since 1998, the Scottish Parliament has been given the power to introduce new laws on a wide range of issues, known as devolved matters. Issues remaining the responsibility of the UK Parliament alone are known as reserved matters. There is often confusion about what matters are devolved to Holyrood, and which are reserved to Westminster, and it's important to check which parliament is responsible to help you contact the correct person. Devolved matters include; education, housing, transport, tourism and economic development, sports and the arts, law and order, health, social services, agriculture, fisheries, and forestry (see Box 1). Following the Scotland Act 2016, there is now a transition process, transferring powers relating to taxation, some aspects of welfare and the administration of elections to Holyrood. In relation to Brexit, the EU Withdrawal Bill will return EU powers to Westminster, and not Holyrood, which will impact most devolved areas. Currently, exactly which areas will be affected, and how, is unclear, however you can keep up to date on the full devolved powers of Holyrood at the website below.

Full list of devolved powers of Holyrood can be found at

<http://www.parliament.scot/PublicInformationdocuments/ListDevolvedPowers0218.pdf>

### Box 1: Devolved Matters

- Agriculture
- Economic Development
- Education
- Elections
- Environment
- Fisheries
- Forestry
- Health
- Housing
- Income Tax Thresholds
- Law & Order
- Local Government
- Social Services
- Some Welfare
- Sports and the Arts
- Tourism
- Training
- Transport

## 3. How Does the Scottish Parliament Work?

### 3.1 Holyrood

One of the major functions of a government is to pass new laws. The process of passing a bill in Scotland is relatively simple (see Box 2) and embodies these key principals: that the Scottish Parliament should be strong; that everyone in Scotland from all walks of life, pressure groups, religious groups and interest groups should be able to participate in the process; and that government should be open and transparent.

The majority of Government Bills are introduced by Scottish Government ministers. The first stage of a bill involves the Pre-legislative Consultation, which allows interested individuals and groups to be consulted about a proposed piece of legislation before it becomes a bill. This is run through the public Scottish Governments website, and the system prevents the government from being selective about who can participate in the consultation. This is an important stage in government in Scotland, and one where you can have a real, and loud, voice in shaping the policy of our government. Furthermore, the outcome of the consultation must be attached to the draft of the bill, and thus, the views of any opposition to the legislation are open and public from an early stage.

A bill then passes through a number of stages (see Box 2). In stage 1 a bill is sent to the relevant parliamentary committee for consideration, and the production of a committee report. Parliament then considers the general principals of the bill, and the whole parliament votes on if the bill should proceed.

In stage 2, a bill undergoes line by line scrutiny by the relevant committee and the whole parliament. At this stage amendments, or changes, to the bill may be made, and experts in the field will be called to parliament to give evidence to committees about the bills impacts. Expert witnesses can also provide feedback on the practicalities and suggest amendments or changes to the bill. A committee can call anyone who it believes may have something important to the debate, such as members of pressure groups, members of communities that may be affected by the bill, and researchers. This is followed by stage 3, where the bill is again considered by the whole parliament where further amendments can be made. There is the option to pass parts of the bill back to stage two for further scrutiny, and parliament can debate changes to the bill. Parliament then votes on the bill, if they vote in favour, the bill is passed, and if not, it falls.

Following passage of a bill, there is a four-week period where it may be challenged legally if the Advocate General, or the Attorney General, or Secretary of State for Scotland believe parliament cannot legally pass the bill, e.g. it's not a devolved matter. Once this four-week period has elapsed, the bill is sent for Royal ascent, where a bill must be signed by the monarch before becoming law. Once this is done, the bill is law.

### Box 2: Passing a Bill in Holyrood

1. Pre-legislative Consultation (open for anyone to comment)
2. Production of report and vote by Parliament if bill should proceed
3. Close scrutiny of bill, evidence heard, and amendments proposed
4. Vote by Parliament and further amendments if necessary
5. Debates of changes
6. Final parliamentary vote
7. Legal challenge period
8. Royal ascent → bill becomes law

## 3.2 Cross Party Groups

Cross party groups (CPG) are an opportunity for members of the public, interested groups and MSPs to meet, and to discuss a cause or interest. There are rules governing the CPGs, and in general meetings are advertised at least 10 days before, and groups meet a minimum of twice a year. There are a huge number of groups that scientists will find interesting; Arthritis and Musculoskeletal Conditions, Cancer, Chronic Pain, Diabetes, Disability, Epilepsy, Health Inequalities, Lung Health, Mental Health, Science and Technology, Life Sciences, and many others. A full list, and up to date meetings and times are available on the Scottish Parliament website (<http://www.parliament.scot/gettinginvolved/cross-party-groups.aspx>). Remember, anyone is welcome to attend a CPG. The SULSA Director and Deputy Director regularly attend the **Cross Party Group on Life Sciences** (<http://www.parliament.scot/msps/life-sciences.aspx>), which has MSPs and life sciences industry leaders in attendance. We also submit SULSA updates through the Life Sciences Industry Leadership Group, so if there is anything you would like us to consider putting forward please let us know.

## 3.3 Committees

Committees are small groups of MSPs that scrutinise bills and new laws or investigate a certain issue. This is where the vast majority of government work is done, and committees are monumentally important to the functioning of the Scottish Parliament. Compared to Westminster, committees are more critical as they offer backbench MSPs the chance to have their voice heard in detail, and to deeply scrutinise potential new laws. Furthermore, the public can observe these meetings (but unlike CPG cannot participate); often access to Committees are ticked (tickets are free). Committees such as Health and Sport or, Education and Skills, may be of interest. A list of committees, and their scope, can be found here <http://www.parliament.scot/parliamentarybusiness/committees.aspx>. Tickets to attend committees and also full parliament sessions are available here <http://www.parliament.scot/visitandlearn/visiting-the-parliament.aspx>.

### 3.4 SPICe

SPICe is the Scottish Parliament Information Centre (<http://www.parliament.scot/parliamentarybusiness/research.aspx>), and provides impartial briefings to government and to the public. It is a public repository of all **research briefings** that SPICe have produced, and that MSPs have been given. There are thousands of research briefings available for you to read; remember these can be an invaluable source for constructing a letter to your representative (you can attach briefings to emphasise a point), or even for thesis and grant writing. There is also a dedicated **Brexit SPICe Hub** (<https://scottishparliamentinformationcentre.org>) which includes briefing on scientific funding and higher education in the wake of Brexit.



Image 1. Scottish Parliament, Holyrood, Edinburgh



## 4. How Does the UK Parliament Work?

### 4.1 Westminster

Bills introduced at Westminster, have a different pathway from conception to law to Holyrood (Box 3). Initially a bill is read in the House of Commons, followed by an order for the bill to be printed. It is then published for the first time as a House of Commons paper and moves to the next stage, the second reading. The second reading is the first opportunity for debate. The MP responsible for the bill gives an introduction, and opposition MPs then have the opportunity to respond and debate. At the end of the debate, MPs will vote on the bill and if they vote in favour it must proceed. Some bills can pass directly through this stage if MPs do not object to it.

Next is the committee stage - like the Scottish Parliament, this is a line by line examination of the bill, and where the main scrutiny occurs. If the bill starts in the Commons, the Public Bill Committee is able to take evidence from experts and interest groups from outside Parliament. This is where you may be able to contribute evidence. Amendments to bills are published daily and will be discussed in committee. Once all clauses of the bill are agreed, the bill will be reprinted and move back to the House of Commons for the Report stage. A minority of bills are dealt with by the House of Commons sitting as a committee itself, but this is a more complex route to law.

The report phase gives MPs in the House of Commons a chance to discuss the bill again, at length, which may take several days. At this stage amendments or new clauses can be suggested. The report stage is followed by a debate on the third reading of the bill (normally immediately); at this stage debate is limited to what is actually in the bill itself. If it passes this stage, the bill then goes to the House of Lords, where the entire process happens again, from first to third reading, including committee and report stages, and again you may have an opportunity to submit evidence. The main role of the House of Lords is to further scrutinise and 'tidy up' the bill in order to make it a better piece of functional law and minimise loopholes. It's worth noting that often, bills will 'ping-pong' between the two houses at this stage as the two battle it out over the wording, or number of amendments, before coming to agreement and voting to pass the bill to the next stage. Although rare, bills can still fail at this stage if the two houses do not agree, or very rarely, the government can use the Parliaments Act to vote it through without the House of Lords agreement. Once both houses have reached an agreement, the bill goes for Royal ascent to become law.

### Box 3: Passing a Bill in Westminster

1. First reading – bill is published as House of Commons paper
2. Second reading and debate in House of Commons
3. Vote to proceed with bill in House of Commons
4. Committee examines bill including taking evidence and generates amendments
5. Report phase – bill discussed at length in House of Commons and amendments suggested
6. Third reading and debate in House of Commons
7. Bill passes to House of Lords, numbers 1 – 6 are repeated
8. Bill can pass back and forward between two Houses until agreement is reached and it is voted through
9. Royal ascent → bill becomes law

## 4.2 Committees

Like in the Scottish Parliament, committees at Westminster do a huge amount of work, and both the House of Commons and House of Lords have committees that scrutinise bills and legislation, and debate and suggest amendments. There are two broad types of committees at Westminster: investigative, which investigate and issue and then report back their findings, and legislative, which pore over bills and debate their contents. There are a plethora of committees at Westminster and a full list is available here <https://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/>.

## 4.3 The Science and Technologies Committees

The two most relevant committees to SULSA members that will have consultations and take written evidence will most likely be the **Science and Technologies Committees (STC)**, of which there are two, one run by the House of Commons (<https://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/science-and-technology-committee>), and one run by the House of Lords (<https://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/lords-select/science-and-technology-committee/>). Public meetings of both committees can be attended by members of the public and information on attending them can be found at <https://www.parliament.uk/visiting/visiting-and-tours/watch-committees-and-debates/committees/>, however private meetings are for members of the committee only. You can keep up to date with the STC on twitter [@LordsSTCom](#) and [@CommonsSTC](#), as well as subscribing to email alerts. Another important committee may be the **Health and Social Care Committee** (<https://www.parliament.uk/healthcom>, [@CommonsHealth](#)).

SULSA regularly submits evidence for consultations to all these committees (<http://www.sulsa.ac.uk/sulsa-reports/>). If you wish to submit written evidence, this can be done as an individual, or through SULSA. If there is a topic on which you feel strongly about, let us know, and we can help coordinate submissions if there is broad Scottish expertise, or give you some advice on how to proceed.

#### 4.4 Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST)

POST is the parliament's in-house independent analysis and research centre, which generates balanced and accessible analysis of public policy issues related to science and technology. It provides an excellent source of information, and **briefings about science and technology in the UK** (<https://www.parliament.uk/mps-lords-and-offices/offices/bicameral/post/work-programme/current-work/>, [@POST UK](#)).

#### 4.5 All Party Parliamentary Groups

All Party Parliamentary Groups (<https://www.parliament.uk/mps-lords-and-offices/standards-and-financial-interests/parliamentary-commissioner-for-standards/registers-of-interests/register-of-all-party-party-parliamentary-groups/>) are similar to the Cross Party Groups in Holyrood, and run by and for Members of the Commons and Lords, though many choose to involve individuals and organisations from outside Parliament in their administration and activities.



Image 2. Houses of Parliament, London

## 5. Ways to Engage with Parliament

### 5.1 Writing to your MP/MSP/MEP

Writing to your MP or MSP (or even Member of European Parliament) is a fantastic and simple way to engage. For every person who bothers to write to them, it is often assumed there are many more who feel the same way. You can see what your MP/MSP may be personally interested in by finding out whether they are part of an All-Party Parliamentary Group or a Cross Party Group. When contacting your MP/MSP, a short, handwritten or printed letter is most effective. Take time to edit your letter for length and clarity. In your letter, try to make a single coherent point in your own words, rather than using a premade template as this makes it clear the issue you are writing to them about is very important to you. Additionally, include examples of how the piece of legislation, or the situation, directly affects you, as these are more likely to get your MP/MSPs attention.

One recent example of how effective this approach can be, was when the author, Samantha Le Sommer (who was at the time a PhD student at the University of Aberdeen), wrote to her MSP Gillian Martin on Brexit and post-Brexit immigration, and concerns over how funding affected the department she worked in and her future as a scientist. Her unabridged letter was read out to the entire parliament by her MSP during the Scottish Higher Education and Brexit debate in 2016. Telling your representatives how you feel can be a powerful and impactful way to contribute to government policy.

### 5.2 Representative Surgeries

Elected representatives of all kinds, from local councillors, to MPs and MSPs and even Members of European Parliament, hold surgeries where they can meet their constituents and talk face-to-face about issues that concern them. Building a relationship with your representatives, especially as a scientist, can be an important route into participation. Some members surgeries are by appointment only and some are drop-in, so double check before you go along and remember to look out for informal opportunities too. Many elected members will have informal drop-in coffee mornings or a local office where you can deliver your letter in person, or have a chat with their staff.

### 5.3 Other Ways of Engaging

There are several other ways of engaging with parliament in a broader sense, including interacting with your **local councillor**, **campaigning** (via demonstrations, sending letters and emails, petitions, organising visits to an elected members surgery, or social media campaigns), **signing petitions**, and **joining a political party or pressure group**.

## 6. I want to get my research and its outcomes presented to parliament, how do I get started?

- Write to your MP/MSP or attend a surgery/drop-in-session.
- Contribute to parliamentary consultations (via SULSA)
- Submit your own evidence (see Box 4)
- Attend relevant meetings of Cross Party Groups (Holyrood; <http://www.parliament.scot/msps/cross-party-groups.aspx>) and All Party Parliamentary Groups (Westminster; <https://www.parliament.uk/mps-lords-and-offices/standards-and-financial-interests/parliamentary-commissioner-for-standards/registers-of-interests/register-of-all-party-party-parliamentary-groups/>)
- SPICE Workshops for Academics in the Scottish Parliament ([http://www.parliament.scot/Academic\\_engagement\\_in\\_the\\_Scottish\\_Parliament.pdf](http://www.parliament.scot/Academic_engagement_in_the_Scottish_Parliament.pdf))
- UK Parliament Research, Impact and the UK Parliament training sessions (<https://www.parliament.uk/academic-training>)
- UK Parliament Women in Parliament training sessions (<https://www.parliament.uk/about/parliament-and-women/resourcesget-involved/outreach-programme/>)

### Box 4: Guidelines for Writing a Good Submission

1. State clearly who the submission is from, i.e. whether from yourself in a personal capacity or sent on behalf of an organisation
2. Be concise –no more than 3,000 words
3. Have numbered paragraphs
4. Begin with an executive summary in bullet point form of the main points made in the submission
5. Include a brief introduction about yourself/your organisation and your reason for submitting evidence
6. Include any factual information (with references) you have to offer from which the committee might be able to draw conclusions, or which could be put to other witnesses for their reactions
7. Include any recommendations for action by the Government or others which you would like the committee to consider

See <https://www.parliament.uk/get-involved/have-your-say/take-part-in-committee-inquiries/commons-witness-guide/> for further information

## 7. I want to get policy experience, how do I get started?

- You can work with **SULSA** to produce written evidence and policy documents (see Box 4). These activities are often a great way to dip your toe into the water and get a better feel for what kind of policy work you are interested in and what you enjoy doing. You can see all our submissions at <http://www.sulsa.ac.uk/sulsa-reports/>.
- **PhD internships** (e.g. UKRI PIPS placements at learned societies such as the Microbiology Society, Sense About Science etc. or SPICE).
- The **Royal Society** run a **pairing scheme** every year (<https://royalsociety.org/grants-schemes-awards/pairing-scheme/scientists/>), where researchers can attend Westminster and be paired with either a Lord or an MP and learn more about life at parliament, while getting to interact directly with parliamentarians. Applications for this scheme normally open early spring.
- The **Scottish Crucible** (<https://scottishcrucible.org.uk>), an annual leadership and development program run by the Royal Society, which includes seminars, skills sessions, tours and informal discussions to help Scottish researchers broaden their horizons and generate networks and partnerships. Applications open in winter.
- Many **academic and learned societies will have policy teams**, for example, the Microbiology Society (<https://microbiologysociety.org/policy.html>) has policy schemes in which members can take part in. As does the British Society for Immunology (<https://www.immunology.org/policy-and-public-affairs>).
- The Scottish government, via SPICe, offers **Academic Fellowships** for researchers (<http://www.parliament.scot/parliamentarybusiness/100472.aspx>) wishing to undertake research within certain criteria, normally within designated fields that the government is interested in from law, to transport, migration and health. SPICe also host a number of PhD students every year (<http://www.parliament.scot/parliamentarybusiness/100476.aspx>), that are recruited through research councils, where students can work on policy papers and briefings and gain experience in a government setting.
- Scotland has a rich network of **policy conferences** (<http://www.scotlandpolicyconferences.co.uk/conferences/scotland-policy-conferences>), where interested parties can get together, and talk with elected members, and others with similar interests about policy. Be it as a delegate, or as a speaker, or contributing to a policy document, there are a variety of ways to get involved in these events.
- The Royal Society of Edinburgh, **Young Academy of Scotland** (<https://www.youngacademyofscotland.org.uk>) provides a platform for innovative young entrepreneurs, professionals and academics to develop a coherent and influential voice, and to address the most challenging issues facing society in Scotland and beyond. Applications for membership are open roughly every second year.
- If you are interested in higher education policy, sign up to the **Wonkhe** Monday Briefing (<https://wonkhe.com>) and read the **Times Higher Education Magazine** (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com>).

