

Evidence, engagement and informed policy making

Emma Sykes

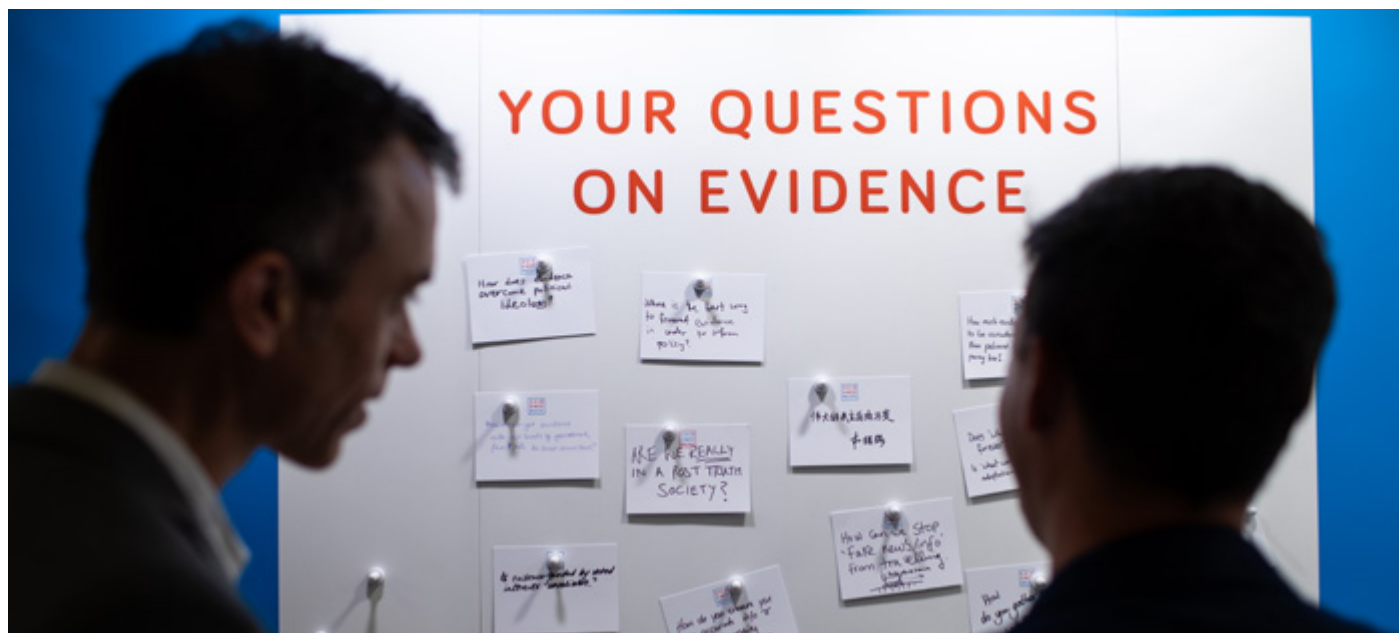
(Science Policy Officer,
Biochemical Society)

June 2018 saw the successful launch of the UK's first Evidence Week, a collaboration between Sense About Science, The House of Commons Library, and the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST). A week-long event filled to bursting with high-profile speakers, workshops and roundtable discussions, Evidence Week highlighted the importance of evidence-based policy making in the heart of Parliament. Members of both Houses couldn't escape the stands, the banners and the Voice of Young Science Network who were enthusiastically sharing the importance of evidence against a broad backdrop of issues ranging from solving the UK housing crisis to regulating genome editing.

With the very nature of science being underpinned by the generation and analysis of evidence, it is sometimes difficult for scientists to understand why policies do not always seem to follow the direction of available scientific evidence. Indeed, there are many other factors that come into play in policy making, including social, political and economic factors, and often these can appear to outweigh available scientific evidence when policies are agreed. For example, the cost-effectiveness of new medicines available on

the NHS or the strict regulations regarding genome editing. However, it is important that MPs are well-versed in the importance of informed policy making and it is imperative that policies are based on robust data and good-quality evidence, whether that be scientific or economic. As Chair of the House of Commons Science and Technology Committee, Rt Hon Norman Lamb MP, said at the evening launch of Evidence Week "If you make policy without applying evidence, ultimately you don't achieve your objectives".





Evidence Week opened a dialogue between parliamentarians and the scientific community and showed that, despite popular belief, we are not living in a post-truth era. Evidence very much underpins many of the decisions made by Government and we must hope that it continues to do so. However, in order to ensure that policy decisions are based on high-quality evidence, scientists must maintain this dialogue and continue to engage and communicate their research and expertise to the public, parliamentarians and policy-makers.

One of the main barriers for scientists in engaging with policy is often a lack of confidence, both in terms of their own relevant expertise and general uncertainty in how they can get involved. Policy making can be seen as an unfathomable maze with no obvious way in, but the reality is, anyone can engage with policy and it can be as simple as writing a blog or inviting your local MP to your lab to share your work.

Engaging with your relevant Learned Society can be an easy way to understand more about policy and ways to become involved. Many Societies represent their communities to Government and Parliamentary Committees through events, roundtables and responding to consultation inquiries. Researchers can also attend and participate in numerous events that expose them to policy makers, such as Voice of the Future, Parliamentary Links Day and STEM for Britain, where early-career scientists present their research in the Houses of Parliament. To further support our members, the Biochemical Society also has an informal Policy Network. This is an online group of members who have indicated their interest in

policy and wish to stay up-to-date with the Society's policy work. Network members can comment on consultation responses, learn about policy events and stay up-to-date with key policy issues affecting the molecular bioscience community through the quarterly newsletter.

MPs cannot be expected to know about all aspects of science, or every area that impacts society or the economy. As experts in their field, it is important that scientists engage with policy and are able to communicate their research in an understandable and accessible way. Informed policy making requires more than just the available scientific evidence. It is also vital that there is an open dialogue between scientists and policy-makers, where both sides can share their expertise against a back-drop of mutual understanding and respect. ■

Photography:
James Hopkirk

Further Reading:

- *The Biochemist Blog* No Weak Evidence! It's Evidence Week! (Leah Fitzsimmons) www.thebiochemistblog.com/category/blog-posts/policy/
- *Sense About Science* Voice of Young Science Network <http://senseaboutscience.org/voys/>
- *POST* Evidence Week: Why scrutinising evidence matters www.parliament.uk/mps-lords-and-offices/offices/bicameral/post/post-events/evidence-week/
- *The Guardian* Commons people: why parliament's 'evidence week' is a national victory: www.theguardian.com/politics/2018/jun/25/commons-people-why-parliaments-evidence-week-is-a-national-victory