

**Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee**  
**Thursday 20 March 2025**  
**4th Meeting, 2025 (Session 6)**

## **Committee Effectiveness – written submissions**

1. This paper sets out two written submissions that have been provided by witnesses who are participating in the roundtable discussion on the committee effectiveness inquiry. The submissions are:
  - a note on Audit Scotland’s activity to develop an impact reporting and evaluation framework for its work
  - a note from Dr Marc Geddes to highlight areas of his research in respect of parliamentary committees.

**Clerks to the Committee**  
**March 2025**

## Written submission by Gemma Diamond, Audit Scotland 13 March 2025

### Background

This paper provides a written submission to the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee inquiry into Committee effectiveness by Audit Scotland in advance of giving evidence to the Committee on 20 March.

This written submission concentrates on the area of focus relating to evaluation and sets out our activity to develop an impact reporting and evaluation framework for the work of Audit Scotland.

In June 2023 we published our shared vision for public audit: Public money is well spent to meet the needs of Scotland's people.

We set out our mission to provide clear, independent and objective assurance on how effectively public money is being managed and spent.

Between the Auditor General, the Accounts Commission and Audit Scotland we agreed the following shared outcomes for public audit:

- Public services in Scotland work better together to target resources more effectively.
- Financial planning and management are more effective across Scotland's public services.
- Public bodies delivered clearer and more transparent reporting.
- Our recommendations have a positive impact for people in Scotland.

To help us understand how well we are delivering on our shared outcomes Audit Scotland has developed a new impact monitoring and evaluation framework across its performance audit, Best Value and annual audit work.

### Impact and evaluation framework

Our impact monitoring, evaluation and reporting approach aims to:

- improve the information we have to **inform decision making**
- **support continuous improvement and innovation** in our audit approach
- improve our understanding of the **difference we make** and help us **promote the value of public audit**

We take a proportionate, robust and flexible approach to evaluating our impact. Our approach is holistic and covers all the audit work we deliver on behalf of the Auditor General for Scotland and the Accounts Commission, as well as stakeholder awareness and perceptions of the parties involved in public audit in

Scotland. We focus on developing a holistic understanding of what is changing in public services due to our audit work.

Monitoring and evaluating our impact is important to us because it helps us understand whether we are making a difference to our shared outcomes for public audit. It also helps inform where we should focus our audit work and recommendations and identify improvements to our audit approach that will help us increase our impact.

Our impact framework looks at:

- Whether our recommendations have been accepted, what traction our audit products are getting and what stakeholders think about its effectiveness.
- What's happening with our recommendations, including how our work is influencing change.
- What difference we have made through public audit.

When	What	How
<b>Monitoring early impact</b> (0-6 months)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have our recommendations been accepted?</li> <li>• What traction are our products getting?</li> <li>• What do stakeholders think of the effectiveness of our work?</li> </ul>	Product by product reach and engagement: Media, Social media, Web, Conferences, Committees and Stakeholder feedback.
<b>Evaluating early impact</b> (0-18 months)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What's happening with our recommendations?</li> <li>• How is our work influencing change?</li> <li>• What do stakeholders think of us?</li> </ul>	Product by product impact and recommendations tracking: Progress, Effectiveness, Reflections and Stakeholder feedback.
<b>Evaluating long-term impact</b> (18 months+)	What difference have we made through public audit?	Package of products: Track impact of our audit work on public audit outcome measures

We use our impact data to identify opportunities for innovation and improvement across our audit work. We also report to the Public Audit Committee on our impact and publish impact reports on our website. Longer-term we will use this data to

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help us evaluate our impact against our shared outcomes. Our [impact page](#) on our website provides more details of our approach, including our most recent [impact report](#).

**Written submission by Dr Marc Geddes, University of Edinburgh**

**13 March 2025**

I am a Senior Lecturer in Politics at the School of Social and Political Science, University of Edinburgh, where I have been research (and teaching) about the UK and Scottish parliaments since 2016. Over the course of the last 15 years, the focus of my research has predominantly focused on the UK Parliament's select committee system, but which has broadened out recently to compare parliamentary systems, including in Scotland. As requested, I am sending a short research note to highlight key areas of my research that may be valuable for the SPPA Committee, and which I could discuss further in oral evidence or in writing.

**Everyday practices in committees**

In my book (based on my PhD), *Dramas at Westminster*, I examined how MPs on select committees in the House of Commons interpret and carry out their scrutiny work. For this research, I undertook 46 interviews with committee members, chairs and staff. Some of the main findings are applicable to any context and – though I believe most MSPs and Scottish Parliament staff are already aware of these factors – they include the following findings:

- Interpretations matter. MPs have different ideas about scrutiny, which affects what they want to achieve and how they approach questioning. For effective scrutiny to occur, members need to be clear about this with each other and divide tasks in such a way to build on each other's strengths.
- No single instance of scrutiny will make a committee effective; the focus should be on continuous work and building interconnected 'webs of scrutiny'.
- Small and informal practices, behaviours and norms affect scrutiny. Importantly, once MPs get to know each other better and build trust with one another, cross-party working becomes more feasible. Committee visits were often cited as examples for breaking down barriers; turnover often hampered such developments.

Directly relevant for the SPPA Committee's inquiry are my findings around the role of chairs of committees:

- Electing chairs has significantly affected the way that MPs interpret and carry out scrutiny. Through the process of competitive elections, chairs view their role with enhanced legitimacy and confidence.
- Many chairs believe that they have a 'House role' in scrutinising a policy and promoting that scrutiny work on behalf of the House.
- The move from selection by political parties to elections by the House has changed perceptions more generally of the independence of the select committee system.
- Evidence also suggests that elections improve the likelihood of women becoming chairs of committees, increased the newsworthiness of committees, and improving the specialisation of MPs.<sup>1</sup>

Based on this evidence, the reforms introduced to select committees in 2010 have significantly strengthened the House of Commons.

### **The importance of diverse evidence for committee work**

In 2021-22, I conducted a Parliamentary Academic Fellowship with the House of Commons to examine the evidence-gathering process by select committees. I worked as a Fellow with the Environmental Audit Committee where I acted as participant-observer and acted as co-inquiry manager, while undertaking 50 interviews with MPs and staff. The project led to a final report published in 2023, *Good Evidence?*, with the following key points for committees:

- Alongside formal processes, i.e. written and oral evidence, committees are increasingly innovating with informal activities, such as roundtables, social media engagement, surveys, and focus groups.
- I observed a growing role for lived experience and public opinion as a form of evidence in formal and informal evidence-gathering, as well as an emphasis on diversity of witnesses' personal characteristics.
- Principles for 'good' evidence use included: (i) evidence being appropriate for the inquiry; (ii) evidence gathered from a diverse set of sources; (iii) evidence being systematically analysed; and (iv) evidence needs to be engaging for committee members, not just staff.
- I identified a range of challenges for committees, including a growth in volumes of evidence; unclear principles for using 'lived experience'; tensions in promoting diversity; a growth of different roles that committees are being asked to fulfil; time pressures; and a perceived lack of training around innovations.

In spring 2024, I began a new comparative research project called Studying Parliaments and the Role of Knowledge (SPARK), of which the Scottish Parliament is one case study. This project focuses on how parliaments across Europe gather, analyse and use different types of knowledge for their parliamentary work. Some key relevant points:

- The team will gather a quantitative database of stakeholders that have engaged with parliaments, including the Scottish Parliament. We have, thus far, collected data on three committees (Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee; Health, Social Care and Sport Committee; and the Social Justice and Social Security Committee), to understand how committees gather and use evidence.
- The German Parliament's committees has developed a rapporteur system whereby MPs are allocated particular portfolios within the committee's remit and, over time, become their party's go-to expert for particular topics, who have developed detailed policy knowledge. For this reason, the German Parliament has been assessed as a parliament of experts.

Although this project is in its infancy, I would be happy to discuss emerging findings.

## The changing contours of committee roles

As a result of my research of committees over 15 years, I have observed a trend in Westminster about the changing nature of select committees, which may offer a point of reflection for committees at Holyrood. Through my research, I have found that select committees play at least four key functions in the parliamentary system:

1. To scrutinise government policy. This is the basis of the 'core tasks' of committees, i.e. to examine the expenditure, policy and scrutiny of government.
2. To integrate democratic concerns into parliamentary processes. Select committees offer a distinctive way for stakeholders and the wider public to directly engage with parliamentary work.
3. To gather, analyse and use evidence to contribute to political debate. Through evidence-gathering, select committees make information available to parliamentarians and the public.
4. To professionalise and structure everyday work of MPs. Through committee work, MPs can specialise in policy and learn the ropes of parliamentary norms, such as cross-party working.

This research note is based on the following published research (as well as unpublished research and data):

- 'Comparing Evidence Use in Parliaments: the interplay of traditions and practices in the UK House of Commons and German Bundestag'. *Policy & Society* 43(4): 447-62. Published in 2024.
- *Good Evidence? How do select committees use evidence to support their work?*. Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh. Published in 2023.
- 'The Webs of Belief around 'Evidence' in Legislatures: The case of select committees in the UK House of Commons'. *Public Administration* 99(1): 40-54. Published in 2021.
- *Dramas at Westminster: Select committees and the quest for accountability*. Manchester University Press. Published in 2020.
- 'Committee Hearings of the UK Parliament: Who gives Evidence and does this Matter?'. *Parliamentary Affairs* 71(2): 283-304. Published in 2018.
- 'A Recipe for Impact? Exploring knowledge requirements in the UK Parliament and beyond'. *Evidence & Policy* 14(2): 259-76. Published in 2018 with co-authors K. Dommett and B. Prosser.

If the Committee would like copies of any of these documents, I would be happy to provide them.

<sup>1</sup> See, for example: [O'Brien \(2012\)](#), [Goodwin et al. \(2021\)](#), and [Gaines et al. \(2019\)](#).