

# **Engaging with UK Legislatures: Maximising potential research impact - insights from a NI Assembly perspective**

**#UCommunicate – The Researcher as the Catalyst for Policy Change  
A One-Day Conference in Thought Leadership for Influence and Impact  
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# THEMES

- Remembering key aspects of the legislative context when designing, compiling & presenting research
  - Roles & Responsibilities
  - Working Environment
  - Research Needs
  - Research Providers
- Successful briefings for legislatures: content, style & tone
- Engagement & Impact: future actions for consideration

# **Remembering key aspects of the legislative context when designing, compiling & presenting research**

# Roles & Responsibilities

1. In the UK, legislatures (central and devolved) are empowered to:
  - hold the executive (the Government/departments) to account for its decisions
  - enact legislation to make new laws and to amend existing one
  - debate and decide on issues raised in the legislature
2. Simply stated, members elected to the legislature:
  - analyse specific issues impacting their people; and then
  - formulate and provide solutions to those issues
3. Legislative members undertake these roles and responsibilities in **their plenary, committee and constituency capacities**; when they scrutinise, propose and advise on matters within the legislature's competence
  - in NI, i.e. “transferred” matters under the Northern Ireland Act 1998, as amended, and commonly referred to as “devolved” matters  
(view: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1998/47/section/6>; <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1998/47/section/4>;  
[http://education.niassembly.gov.uk/video-gallery/scrutiny-explained\\_northern-ireland-assembly](http://education.niassembly.gov.uk/video-gallery/scrutiny-explained_northern-ireland-assembly) )

4. Legislative members work in a time-conscious, fast-moving environment; where they address a broad range of issues (often contested and complex); while balancing competing demands and managing regular information overload, including receipt of numerous briefings (oral and written).
5. They obviously are not specialists in all matters they consider; albeit they are specialists in some and generalists in others.
6. To do their job effectively, legislative members, committees and staff routinely rely independent research that is relevant, robust and evidence-informed, as well as timely and accessible.
7. Never forget legislative members and committees are political by nature.

# Research Needs: examples relating to a legislative member

- Developing the policy objective underpinning the member's bill (proposed legislation) (e.g. <http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/assembly-business/legislation/2011-2016-mandate/current-non-executive-bill-proposals/about-non-executive-bills/>); <http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/assembly-business/legislation/bills-explained/> )
- Conducting a public consultation on that bill and analysing responses received
- Drafting the individual clauses of that bill and those in its accompanying Explanatory and Financial Memoranda, including impact assessment statements, e.g., human rights implications
- Preparing the member's statements when introducing/discussing that bill in plenary/committee
- Preparing to participate in plenary/committee scrutiny of bills generally, including proposed primary and subordinate legislation (e.g. <http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/assembly-business/legislation/>)
- Framing an Assembly Question, e.g., a Ministerial Question (oral/written) during plenary on: a policy or legislative proposal; a budget or a spending proposal/decision; a capital project decision; or, other (e.g. <http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/assembly-business/questions-for-answer/>)
- Formulating a plenary statement when he/she brings a Motion on a particular issue for the legislature's consideration (e.g. <http://aims.niassembly.gov.uk/plenary/nodaynamedlist.aspx>)
- Preparing to participate in a plenary debate on another member's Motion (e.g. "No Day Named List" in the NI Assembly – see: <http://aims.niassembly.gov.uk/plenary/nodaynamedlist.aspx>)

# Research Needs: examples relating to a legislative member

- Preparing to undertake committee work, including that relating to: forward work planning (horizon scanning); bill consideration; inquiry participation; questioning of departmental officials during an evidence session; or, other (e.g. <http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/assembly-business/committees/>)
- Compiling the member's reply to a query from a constituent (e.g. <http://aims.niassembly.gov.uk/mlas/search.aspx>)
- Participating in the work of an informal cross-party group, with no official status in the Assembly, for example, a debate or a report on a particular issue (e.g. in NIA, an All Party Group (APG) – <http://aims.niassembly.gov.uk/mlas/allpartygroups.aspx>)
- Preparing to conduct a private or public meeting on a specific issue
- Formulating a speech or a statement that the member is to deliver
- Capacity-building in a specified area to expand the member's knowledge and or skills, in specified areas, e.g. public finance frameworks, human rights law, legislative procedure, tracking legislation, etc

# Research Needs: examples relating to a legislative committee

- Horizon scanning to inform the committee's forward work planning (e.g. <http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/assembly-business/committees>)
- Scrutinising and compiling a report of the committee's findings on a bill proposed by: the executive/a department; a legislative member; another legislative committee; or, other (private or hybrid) (e.g. <http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/assembly-business/legislation/>); and the bill's accompanying Explanatory and Financial Memoranda, including impact assessment statements, e.g., human rights implications
- Developing the policy objective to underpin a bill that is to be sponsored by the committee (e.g. <http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/assembly-business/legislation/2011-2016-mandate/current-non-executive-bill-proposals/about-non-executive-bills/>)
- Drafting that bill, as well as the accompanying Explanatory and Financial Memoranda
- Conducting a public consultation on the bill and analysing responses received
- Scrutinising executive/departmental public finance proposals and decisions, such as those relating to the budget or spending (e.g. <http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/assembly-business/committees/2017-2022/finance/> <https://www.finance-ni.gov.uk/topics/finance>)
- Scrutinising executive/departmental policy proposals and compiling relevant replies (e.g., those stated in public consultation documents, such as the NI Executive's on the issue of Outcomes Based Government (a governance accountability model) - <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/statistics/programme-government> <https://www.executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk/publications/outcomes-delivery-plan-201819> <https://www.northernireland.gov.uk/consultations/programme-government-consultation>)



## Research Needs: examples relating to a legislative committee

- Scrutinising/considering reports compiled by executive/departments/government bodies and agencies/judiciary, and compiling relevant replies
- Identifying witnesses for evidence sessions, such as government ministers, expert witnesses, key stakeholders and other
- Formulating relevant lines of questioning for those evidence sessions
- Responding, as appropriate, to reports published by other institutions and groups, such as those from sectors, for example, voluntary/community, private and higher education
- Designing and conducting focus groups/surveys on a particular matter of interest, and then analysing responses received
- Organising stakeholder group meetings and analysing discussion
- Deciding on how to undertake an Inquiry into an area relating to the committee's statutory portfolio
- Undertaking that Inquiry, and then reporting at its conclusion on the consultation responses received by the committee, the evidence taken during Inquiry proceedings
- Formulating a speech or a statement that the committee chair/deputy chair or a member is to deliver on behalf of the committee
- Reviewing internal policies, practices or procedures to improve the committee's effectiveness
- Capacity-building in a specified area to expand the knowledge and or skills of the committee members and staff, for example, public finance, human rights, legislative scrutiny, tracking legislation, qualitative interviewing, etc

Central to legislative scrutiny and debate are briefings based on research:

**Secondary research** drawing on pre-existing evidence sources, including primary and secondary research based on an array of research methods (*Routinely needed*)

For example:

*Literature reviews* that synthesise prevailing literature addressing a specified area and critically assess gaps in current knowledge, including identifying limitations in theories and points of view or stating potential areas for further research and review

*Other secondary research* that summarises, re-interprets and or analyses - within a particular context – existing research and other evidence sources, such as reports from non-governmental organisations, departmental statistics, attitudinal survey data, focus group data, treatises of law, etc

**Primary research** examining a specific issue and related sub-issues; includes legal research (*Less often needed*)

## Dedicated **in-house** legislative research providers

- > Houses of Parliament – House of Commons Library  
<https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/>
- House of Lords Library  
<https://www.parliament.uk/business/lords/work-of-the-house-of-lords/lords-library/>
- Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology  
<https://www.parliament.uk/post>
- Select committee advisors (Commons & Lords)  
<https://www.parliament.uk/about/how/committees/select/>
  
- > Scottish Parliament – Scottish Parliament Information Centre (SPICe)  
<https://www.parliament.scot/parliamentarybusiness/research.aspx>
  
- > National Assembly for Wales – Research Services  
<http://www.assembly.wales/en/bus-home/research/Pages/research.aspx>
  
- > NI Assembly – Research and Information Service (RaISe)  
<http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/assembly-business/research-and-information-service-raise/>

## NI Assembly example:

- RalSe - the Research and Information Service – is a dedicated in-house service, in which researchers of disparate backgrounds, work within subject specialisms located four research teams (<http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/assembly-business/research-and-information-service-raise/find-out-about-raise/>)
- It delivers a range of research services for legislative members and committees, providing timely, non-partisan and evidence-based research in a variety of formats (<http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/assembly-business/research-and-information-service-raise/>)
- It heavily relies on existing academic and non-academic research when compiling briefings for members and committees, as well as its own.
- On occasion, RalSe is supported by paid/unpaid external research providers, who are commissioned to undertake research that is, e.g., to inform a member's or committee's briefing, or to expand the knowledge and skills of staff.
- Each year it is supported by 3-month PhD Policy Fellows, funded by Research Councils/UKRI (United Kingdom Research and Innovation) (<https://kess.org.uk/2018/06/28/research-council-policy-internships-open-call-for-applications-from-phd-students/>)

# Research Providers - external

## Expert Witnesses

- Typically selected by a committee to provide impartial advice and expertise on a matter
- May include academic and non-academic witnesses, e.g. those from the third sector, think tanks, non-governmental organisations
- Identified by committee members or staff or in-house research providers, using a range of sources, including partnerships, e.g. NI Assembly's KESS (the Knowledge Exchange Seminar Series - <https://kess.org.uk/>), and the Assembly's Register of Experts, amongst others (<http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/assembly-business/research-and-information-service-raise/northern-ireland-assembly-research-register/>)

## Specialist Advisors

- Selected, appointed and paid by a legislative committee or member to provide impartial advice and expertise on a particular matter
- May be either academic or non-academic, such as those from think tanks, institutes, non-governmental organisations; private consultancy firms, etc
- Identified similar to expert witnesses

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## Consultants

- Selected, appointed and paid:
  - by a legislative committee or member to provide impartial advice and expertise on a particular matter; or,
  - by an in-house research provider: to provide research in a specified area during a peak demand period and enable that provider to meet competing Assembly business needs; or, to redress expertise or skill gaps in staff; or, to address information and data gaps arising from available research and data
- May be either academic or non-academic consultants
- Identified similar to expert witnesses

# **Successful briefings for legislatures: content, style and tone**

## Successful briefings for legislatures: content, style and tone

1. Use non-partisan and balanced writing that is free from political bias and “news management”. Never “sanitise” facts or findings to make them more palatable.
2. Present information logically, and signpost appropriately throughout, including effective headings/sub-headings and numbered paragraphs. For example, at the start provide an introduction that clearly explains the relevance of the briefing - the “so what” – the linkage to policy/legislation/public finance, i.e. the reason legislative members/committees should be interested. Then outline how the briefing is to be presented, ensuring the order of presentation is suitable for a non-specialist audience. Finally, insert a closing, including recommendations/proposals that link your research findings back to policy/legislation/public finance. Also have a key points section prior to the introduction.
3. Adequately address key elements of the briefing topic, ensuring agreed terms of reference are fully met.
4. Accurately and ethically use reliable and relevant information and data.
5. Undertake robust analysis (qualitative and quantitative).
6. Provide careful comparative analysis, allowing for relevant comparisons between the policy, law and or public finance of different countries, e.g. NI’s with England’s, Scotland’s, Wales’, and or the Republic of Ireland’s, etc.

# Successful written briefings for legislatures: content, style and tone

Include impact analysis, e.g., social, economic, environmental implications (direct and indirect effects), such as those within NI - a post-conflict society.

Highlight cost implications, such as potential impact on the “public purse”, private industry and or the individual citizen.

Provide GIS (Geographic Information System) local impact modelling, e.g., on a constituency basis.

Include interactive web-based resource references to enable further data interrogation to be undertaken by a legislative member and or committee.

Highlight references to your other publications for future legislative member/committee use; preferably those available on-line.

Include pictorial representations of information and data as much as possible, using traditional graphs and tables, as well as infographics and other forms of data visualisation.

State potential lines of questioning, meaning questions that link the research findings to a country's policy, legislation and or public finance; and or, helps to identify areas for further research to address information and data gaps.



## Successful written briefings for legislatures: content, style and tone

14. Write in plain English, using “natural” language and short sentences and paragraphs to simply explain, including explanation of abbreviations and acronyms when first used, as well as technical terminology and complex concepts. Avoid jargon. Do not assume knowledge as legislative members and committees have mixed levels of knowledge, backgrounds and interests.
15. Ensure precise writing, with correct punctuation, grammar and spelling, as such errors reflect badly on the author and can influence how the member/committee receives a briefing. Also such errors can result in ambiguity that can lead to misinterpretation and misunderstanding of the writing, and or its misuse. Remember it is a political context.
16. Accurately state all relevant caveats, including limitations or short-comings, leaving no room for misinterpretation or misunderstanding. Above reminder applies here too.
17. Use concise writing, providing a sufficient level of detail to contextualise and explain research findings and relevant linkages to policy, legislation and public finance. Concentrate on findings and those links (relevance – “so what”), not methodology, albeit that should be robust.
18. Provide recommendations arising from the research findings and linkages, stating them at appropriate places in the text, and using bolded and coloured font in text boxes to punctuate them.

# Successful written briefings for legislatures: content, style and tone

19. Include transparent citation of sources relied on.
20. Deliver the briefing in a timely manner.
21. Proactively make reference to available guidance on giving evidence, including contacting relevant people for constructive critique (such as the university's communications and media teams) and others (e.g. RalSe researchers or Assembly committee clerks <http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/assembly-business/committees/guide-for-witnesses-appearing-before-assembly-committees/> ; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f8tzZTqTR2c> ).

# Successful oral briefings for legislatures: content, style and tone

1. Prior to making the oral briefing, prepare a written briefing in accordance with the earlier guidance.
2. “Chunk up” your written briefing and develop a structure that enables the delivery of a logical, clear and concise oral presentation, reflecting the features noted in relation to written briefings, especially those relating to accuracy and precision. And remember to:
  - Start with a brief introduction signposting both why you are there (the “so what”) and what you will cover;
  - Then succinctly outline essential context-setting information, e.g., research methodology (little detail, just big picture);
  - Follow on with clear and concise overview of the key messages arising from your research;
  - Try, wherever possible, to link those points to policy, law, public finance or other;
  - Close by identifying proposals, such as lines of questioning, potential solutions or recommendations, including areas for further research and scrutiny, to plug information and data gaps.
3. Pitch your presentation appropriately so that it is accessible to members/committees, which have mixed levels of knowledge, understanding, backgrounds and interests.
4. Rehearse the presentation so that you are prepared, but remember to be flexible when you present. Avoid reading the presentation; be dynamic. Do not be deterred by interruptions or movement in the room when presenting.

## Successful oral briefings for legislatures: content, style and tone

5. Remember that everything stated is recorded orally and in writing, and then kept for future reference. Think before you speak; do not rush, but ensure you do not exceed the time allocated for your briefing.
6. Careful when answering member/committee questions that ask for consideration of hypotheticals or speculation. Be savvy and exercise prudence. Never take uneducated guesses. Always be honest when you cannot answer a question; suggest coming back with a written submission on the given question. Always ask for clarification if a question is unclear.
7. When doing an oral briefing for a committee, always seeks to respond to committee members' questions through the committee chairperson. Similarly, ask your own questions or make suggestions through the chair.
8. When preparing to present, proactively make reference to available guidance on giving evidence, including contacting relevant people for constructive critique (such as the university's communications and media teams) and others (e.g. RaSe researchers or committee clerks <http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/assembly-business/committees/guide-for-witnesses-appearing-before-assembly-committees/> ; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f8tzZTqTR2c> ).

# Examples of written/oral briefings for Assembly use

- View previous briefings to Assembly committees
  - Written: <http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/assembly-business/committees/>
  - Oral: <https://niassembly.tv/committee-archive/>
- View previous KESS briefings
  - Written & Oral: <https://kess.org.uk/>



Northern Ireland  
Assembly



# Knowledge Exchange Seminar Series (KESS)

...is a forum that encourages debate on a wide range of research findings, with the overall aim of promoting evidence-based policy and law-making within Northern Ireland

## **KESS AIM:**

To provide an annual seminar series where the public sector joins with academics to consider research findings for the purpose of promoting evidence-led policy and law-making in NI.

### **OBJECTIVE 1:**

To impact on the development of policy and law in NI, the seminars will seek to develop understanding and awareness of issues that relate to the Programme for Government of the NI Executive.

### **OBJECTIVE 2:**

To encourage engagement and debate among a spectrum of attendees, the seminars will aim to encourage attendance from MLAs and their staff, Assembly staff, public and private sector employees, academics and representatives from voluntary and community groups.

Series	Delivered/Scheduled Seminars, with 1-5 academic presentations (See website for policy briefings, power point presentations, videos and pod casts)	Attendees Registered
<b>Series 1: Mar 2012 – Jun 2012</b>	11 (11 originally scheduled)	179
<b>Series 2: Oct 2012 – Sept 2013</b>	16 (16 originally scheduled)	375
<b>Series 3: Oct 2013 – May 2014</b>	14 (14 originally scheduled)	422
<b>Series 4: Nov 2014 – Jun 2015</b>	16 (16 originally scheduled)	587
<b>Series 5: Oct 2015 – Jun 2016</b>	16 (18 originally scheduled, but 2 deferred due to political events.)	484
<b>Series 6: Oct 2016 – Jun 2017</b>	15 (19 originally scheduled, including 2 from Series V. But then 4 deferred due to political events.)	454
<b>Series 7: Oct 2017 – Jun 2018</b>	17 (18 originally scheduled, including 4 rescheduled from Series VI, but 1 of the rescheduled was cancelled as academic could not attend.)  <a href="mailto:eileen.regan@niassembly.gov.uk">eileen.regan@niassembly.gov.uk</a>	665



# KESS contact points:

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# **Engagement & Impact: future actions for consideration**

## 1. Maintain current awareness to inform your horizon scanning and issue spotting when designing, compiling and presenting research findings – e.g.:

**a.** Keep abreast of government developments through efficient website and social media use:

- Read on-line briefings and blog articles, such as those produced by UK legislatures, such as RalSe's *Research Matters* blog (<https://www.assemblyresearchmatters.org/>)

- Sign up for press releases and newsletters from the Assembly, the Executive, the departments, the Northern Ireland Office, UKRI, individual UK Research Councils, etc

- Follow their social media

- Visit routinely their websites

- Learn more (e.g. draft NI Executive's Programme for Government and related Outcomes Delivery Plan

<https://www.executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk/publications/outcomes-delivery-plan-201819>)

**b.** Be visible through proactive networking and engagement with existing and new contacts, e.g., actively share research findings, initiate conversations and attend events, with, e.g., the following:

- RalSe researchers (Assembly in-house researchers)

- KESS

- MLAs and their staff

- Political Parties

- Assembly All Party Groups

- Other academics/researchers (within and outside your research area/discipline/ university)

- Voluntary/ Community Groups

- Trade Unions

- Think Tanks

- Executive/departments, other public bodies

- Networks such as: Northern Ireland Community and Voluntary Association (NICVA); Westminster's Study for Parliament Group; Stand Up for Science; Alliance for Useful Evidence; What Works Centres, etc

## 2. Actively share your research findings with diverse groups and through multiple channels, on repeated occasions – e.g.:

### a. Legislative context – such as:

- NI Assembly committees
- RalSe researchers (in-house researchers)
- KESS
- Individual MLAs and their staff
- Political Parties
- NI Assembly All Party Groups
- Houses of Parliament committees
- Scottish Parliament committees
- Welsh Assembly committees
- Westminster's Study for Parliament Group

### c. Academics/researchers – both within and outside your research area/discipline/ university

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### b. Executive context – such as:

- NI Executive Office
- NI Departments
- Arms length bodies
- Non-departmental bodies

### d. Other – such as:

- Voluntary/ Community Groups
- Trade Unions
- Think Tanks
- Institutes
- Networks/Associations such as: Northern Ireland Community and Voluntary Association (NICVA); Westminster's Study for Parliament Group; Stand Up for Science; Alliance for Useful Evidence; What Works Centres, etc

## 3. On a regular basis, apply your learning from this presentation, and persevere – e.g.:

**a.** When designing, compiling and presenting research briefings – e.g.:

- when networking and disseminating research findings
- when responding to a public consultation exercise of a legislative committee or a government department; or,
- when briefing a committee as an expert witness, specialist advisor or consultant in a legislative context.

**b.** When formulating research proposal applications to secure funding – e.g.:

- reflect in the application linkages between the the proposed research and government decision-making in NI (e.g. the draft NI Executive's Programme for Government and related Outcomes Delivery Plan <https://www.executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk/publications/outcomes-delivery-plan-201819> ; decisions taken by NI Departments <https://www.executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk/publications/reports-decisions-taken-by-northern-ireland-departments-20182019> )
- liaise with academic colleagues both within and outside your discipline and university; or,
- include inter-/multi-disciplinary dimensions by working with other academics.

**c.** Register your details on the Assembly “Register for Experts” and with other legislatures and seek to become an expert witness, specialist advisor or consultant in a legislative context.

**d.** Nurture an engagement and impact culture at your institution when developing and delivering course outlines and related lectures, e.g., include opportunities for knowledge exchange and transfer, to strengthen existing networks and – importantly – to develop the next generation of researchers.

# Any Questions?

**Contact:**

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