

Highlights from my Fellowship **at the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology**

By Sophie Mountcastle



Sophie is a final-year PhD student based in the School of Dentistry and is part of the Physical Sciences for Health Centre for Doctoral Training (Sci-Phy-4-Health). Her research aims to develop novel methods for testing antimicrobial techniques through the development of 3D oral tissue and biofilm models. She recently undertook a three-month Fellowship at the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology and has written about her experience in this blog post.

Most conversations with friends and colleagues about my **POST Fellowship** begin with explaining that it has nothing to do with delivering mail! In fact, POST stands for the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology. They produce impartial, peer-reviewed briefings for the UK Parliament. POST aims to make scientific research accessible by publishing four-page '[POSTnotes](#)' on a range of topics, from health and social sciences to digital tech and the environment.

About the Fellowship programme

Before I share all the exciting opportunities that working in Parliament offered me, I want to explain a little more about my POST Fellowship and what it entailed. [POST Fellowships](#) offer PhD students the chance to work with policymakers in Parliament. Over a three-month period, I researched and produced a POSTnote on a scientific topic that influences public policy. I spent the first month reading literature and interviewing over forty experts from academia, industry, and government. The next stage involved condensing my newfound knowledge into four pages, with advice and input from my POST advisor. Finally, the review stage offered the opportunity for members of POST staff and experts to comment on my briefing and ensure it was balanced and accurate.

I recently completed my three-month Fellowship at POST. Reflecting on my time in Westminster, I realised that I gained more than I thought from the experience and want to share my personal highlights.

1) Diving head first into a completely new topic

I am currently completing my PhD in the School of Dentistry. However, my briefing was about **food fraud**! With no experience in this field, I was nervous about my ability to capture the topic accurately. However, I found it refreshing to throw myself into a new area of research and gain some insights from different disciplines. Talking to academics and experts who were very passionate about their research made it surprisingly easy to engage in a new subject area. I have returned to my own PhD with more ideas and a fresh outlook on my work.

2) Learning new skills

The POST Fellowship allowed me to develop and improve many of my skills, not just my writing abilities. The interview stage of the process gave me newfound confidence when engaging with academics and experts. I am sometimes nervous at conferences or when networking with more senior academics. However, I approached all my interviews for the

POSTnote as a non-expert and learnt that people love to share their knowledge and welcome the opportunity to talk about their research.

The POSTnote review process was the most thorough I have ever experienced! Dealing with comments from over 35 reviewers was by far the hardest part of the Fellowship. It can be difficult to receive feedback when you have worked so hard on something. From my time at POST, I have learnt to separate the effort I put in from the comments I receive. In future, I will focus on how the feedback will improve my work, rather than it being a criticism of what I have accomplished.



Outside the House of Lords

3) New experiences

Working at POST offers so many opportunities alongside writing a POSTnote. In my first week, I watched Prime Minister's Questions from the public gallery and took a guided tour of the Houses of Parliament. I was inspired by the beautiful buildings and learning the history of our democracy.

It was a privilege to sit in the public gallery and watch the House of Lords debate that followed International Women's Day in March. I was excited to see the Chancellor of the University of Birmingham, Lord Bilimoria, contribute to a very interesting discussion and talk about the amazing efforts that our University makes to support women and their achievements.

Not only does POST produce scientific briefings, they organise a range of events to allow policymakers and the public to engage with experts. During my Fellowship, I helped at a POST event called 'Superbugs' about antimicrobial resistance. This was an opportunity for leading research groups to showcase their work on the fight against drug resistant infections. Professor Chris Whitty (the current Chief Medical Officer) attended and gave an inspiring speech about the vital research that many academics are carrying out in this field. I will continue to keep an eye out for future POST events, as they are a great networking opportunity and a chance to see first-hand the impact of scientific research in Parliament.



'Superbugs' (Photo credit – POST UK)

4) Understanding our Parliament

Before starting my Fellowship, I thought I had a good grasp of how the UK Parliament operates. However, during my placement I learnt so much more about its inner workings. It was reassuring to see how much high-quality research is carried out to help Parliament make informed decisions. As well as accessing the work of POST, both the House of Commons and House of Lords have Libraries that provide specialist, impartial information to assist Parliament in scrutinising Government.

The arrival of COVID-19 meant my time in Westminster ended rather abruptly, and I had to complete my briefing from home in Birmingham. However, the experience really highlighted the incredible efforts made by so many staff across the estate to ensure Parliament continued to be able to fulfil its duties. Seeing first-hand the quick response by the POST team to put together accurate summaries of the scientific evidence on COVID-19 showed me just how crucial their role is. It also demonstrated that it is essential for academics to engage with policymakers to ensure that accurate and reliable information is made available.

5) Being in Westminster!

One of the best parts of working in central London was being able to enjoy the spectacular surroundings. The Fellows office is situated right next to St James's Park, and we took every opportunity to wander through the beautiful green space and enjoy the wildlife. St James's Park is surrounded by iconic landmarks including Buckingham Palace, and is famous for the pelicans that have lived there for over 400 years!



Views of St James's Park

We also made the most of our access to the Palace of Westminster by meeting for a full English breakfast in the House of Lords Terrace Café every Friday. Every start to the morning, and we could reflect on everything we had experienced that week. Friday's often ended with a trip to a local pub, including The Woolsack which is located within the Palace of Westminster itself!

Final thoughts

Whilst my time in London was cut short due to the outbreak of COVID-19, I cannot help but feel extremely proud and grateful for the opportunity to work in the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology. The effort that goes into every briefing that POST produces is inspiring, and they play a vital role in sharing accurate scientific information with Parliament and the public. I would highly recommend the experience to any PhD student who has an interest in public policy or science communication.

My four-page briefing on Food Fraud is available [here](#).

For more information about POST, visit: <https://post.parliament.uk/>

For details of the various POST Fellowship schemes available, and information on how to apply, visit: <https://post.parliament.uk/>

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