

PSA/UK Parliament Internship Programme:

In the midst of a global pandemic the ability to adapt became key. For many of us this meant adapting to the spaces in which we spent the working day, shifting towards the virtual world of Zoom calls, Microsoft Teams, and mute buttons. For Parliament, this adaptation meant a break from longstanding tradition and a turn to an almost technological dependence of online deliberation and hybrid meetings. To be at the heart of this change during my four-month internship was an extraordinary experience which, in a fortunate turn of events, complemented my own research on the use of online platforms for citizen participation.

I was based in the Environmental Audit Committee (EAC) within the House of Commons. The EAC has a particularly wide remit; considering the extent to which the policies and programmes of both government departments and non-departmental public bodies contribute to environmental protection and sustainable development. With an initial background in environmental science, I felt at home amongst the Committee's subject matter and was warmly welcomed to the team as a colleague rather than an intern. The team met regularly and was always happy to engage in informal and ad hoc discussion.

From day one I was fully immersed in the work of the Committee. I was tasked with leading on an inquiry into the use of heat pumps, as part of a wider review on Technological Innovations and Climate Change. My work included writing the terms of reference, processing evidence submissions received, producing briefing materials for the Committee, identifying, and liaising with witnesses, and briefing MPs orally. This culminated in conducting an evidence session which was reported on by national newspapers; something I will relish for a long time! To manage an inquiry from start to finish gave me invaluable insight into parliamentary process and the dynamics of the Committee - an experience that would have been very difficult as an external researcher looking in.

The wide remit of the team meant I was also able to engage with several other ongoing inquiries. Working closely with the team's specialist advisors, who each had extensive knowledge of the Committee's work and wider processes, I contributed to both the 'Energy Efficiency of Existing Homes' and 'Greening the post-Covid Recovery' inquiries. This provided an excellent opportunity for me to become familiar with several other Committee responsibilities within a short space of time and to develop a knowledge base on a range of policy areas.

The shift to virtual working brought with it some distinct advantages. I was able attend meetings I would never have normally been able to join in person - my fourth day of placement included the launch of the Climate Assembly UK's report, a wider team meeting and a non-inquiry session with the Secretary of State for BEIS - all before lunch! The move online also meant that the team and I were able to easily meet and engage with more stakeholders and members of the public, gathering more evidence and thus strengthening our work. To experience this adaptation first-hand was perhaps the most valuable insight. Despite all the challenges and changes the pandemic brought us, the work of the Committee not only continued but thrived. Perhaps a glimpse into a future way of working? Overall, it was an extremely fulfilling and humbling experience, and I would strongly encourage others to apply for this internship.