

“So, how do you decide what to write about in POST?”



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As an advisor working for the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST) I get asked this question a lot. People I meet at conferences, parliamentary colleagues and even my friends are keen to find out how we choose the topics for our research.

POST, a bicameral team, produces impartial, evidence-backed and peer-reviewed briefings on topics as diverse as online extremism, quantum technology, food waste and palliative care.

With such a broad remit and the ever-rapid pace of progress in science and technology, there is a thorough process for deciding what to write about, which ensures our publications best suit the needs of parliamentarians.

To give readers an insight into what goes on behind the scenes at POST, I'll explain how one of our recent publications – a briefing about using psychedelic-assisted therapy to treat mental health conditions – was selected, researched and written.

Psychedelic-assisted therapy is the use of psychedelic drugs, such as LSD and MDMA, in combination with therapy. After careful screening, patients undergo therapy before taking the drug and attend additional sessions afterwards to talk about their experiences.

Small clinical trials in hospitals and universities in the UK have shown that psychedelic-assisted therapy can be a safe and effective way to treat certain mental health conditions, such as depression. However, conducting such research is challenging and expensive due to the legal status of psychedelic drugs.

So, how did we choose to write about this topic?

We focus on what interests parliamentarians...

The POST team keeps a finger on the parliamentary pulse. We get insights directly from members who tell us what issues they would value research on. We

also work closely with select committees and Library staff from both Houses to understand what is coming up in Parliament.

We were aware that members from both Houses were concerned about the burden of mental health conditions. As there have been no new antidepressants developed in the last few decades, and existing medications can have limited success, we knew members were interested in novel ways to treat patients.

Psychedelic-assisted therapy was debated in the Commons Chamber in 2023, with the discussion focused on the legal and logistical challenges of using controlled drugs in clinical research.

Also in 2023, the Home Affairs Committee published a report that recommended “urgent” changes to the legal status of some psychedelic drugs to facilitate larger clinical trials.

... and sometimes on topics that aren't coming up in Parliament!

Sometimes we research topics because they're not being discussed in Parliament.

Through attending events, keeping up with science news and maintaining close contact with stakeholders in research and policy, we get a feel for what's being talked about and what might develop as an issue.

We also conduct regular horizon scans, where we seek input from experts across the UK. The insights they provide give us an overview of emerging themes likely to be of interest to parliamentarians in the next five years. Our recent horizon scan identified over one hundred trends!

Usually, we conduct research after hearing about a subject inside and outside of Parliament

This was the case for psychedelic-assisted therapy. In addition to the interest from members, several UK universities were involved in clinical trials, and the UK was hosting a major international conference focused on psychedelic drug research. Several high-profile books, films and newspaper articles had also increased public interest in psychedelic drugs and their use in therapy.

We research complex subjects

Explaining complicated topics in accessible, jargon-free language is what POST does best.

A challenge I faced when writing about psychedelic-assisted therapy was explaining the ‘Catch-22’ situation that UK researchers find themselves in, due to how controlled drugs are grouped into five ‘schedules’ (which are categories independent from the ‘class’ a drug is in).

Schedule 1 drugs are those with no medicinal use, whereas drugs in schedules 2 to 5 are used in medicine with safeguards in place. For example, doctors use heroin as a painkiller, so it is placed in schedule 2, meaning it is stored and administered in hospitals, but its use is tightly regulated.

LSD, MDMA and psilocybin (the chemical found in ‘magic mushrooms’) are not considered to have any medical use, so are in schedule 1.

Herein lies the problem: UK researchers find it very difficult to conduct clinical trials using schedule 1 drugs due to the costs and paperwork involved. As a

result, large studies with thousands of participants have not taken place, meaning that it is not yet possible to fully understand the efficacy and safety of psychedelic-assisted therapy. Without the results of these trials, policymakers can't decide if psychedelic drugs should stay in schedule 1 or move to a schedule for drugs with a proven medicinal use.

We cover areas where the evidence base is difficult to understand

In some cases, a topic is complex but the body of evidence behind it is relatively straightforward. In other cases, a topic may appear simple but the evidence behind it is complicated!

To ensure debate, scrutiny and policy decisions are informed by the best available evidence, POST unpicks research findings. We explain what studies can say, and what they cannot, and we highlight evidence gaps. We look at the quality of research, for example, outlining where there's a correlation but not necessarily a causation, or if a survey has a large and representative sample or not. We communicate uncertainty and the reasons behind it.

Due to the challenges of conducting research, clinical trials investigating psychedelic-assisted therapy are relatively small, often involving only 30 to 60 patients. Some trials are even smaller, and sometimes research is based on individual case studies. This means their results are less likely to be generalisable. However, there are pooled analyses, which combine evidence from multiple studies. These analyses suggest that psychedelic-assisted therapy can be more effective, and have fewer side effects,

than some commonly prescribed medications.

The potential for confusion when interpreting the evidence base led to POST writing five 'Rapid Response' articles to explain how psychedelic-assisted therapy might treat different mental health conditions. A further briefing outlining policy considerations for psychedelic-assisted therapy research was published in early 2025.

We write about challenging issues where there are a range of perspectives

Our briefings can cover subjects that some consider controversial. We review published literature, interview experts to capture perspectives and ensure our work is thoroughly peer-reviewed to bring an impartial approach to subjects that evoke a range of opinions.

Psychedelic-assisted therapy attracts commentary from groups including psychedelic 'evangelists', biotechnology entrepreneurs, patient advocacy groups and drug reform campaigners.

Calls to action from these groups often get confused. Some want all drugs to be decriminalised or legalised for recreational use, others want to see psychedelic-assisted therapy available in NHS hospitals, some think patients should be able to take psychedelic drugs home with a prescription, and others are concerned that legitimate use of psychedelic drugs in controlled clinical trials could lead to a rise in illegal use.

By focusing the recent briefing on one specific area (the use of psychedelic drugs in clinical trials to treat patients with mental health conditions), it was

possible to tease apart these different views and bring nuance to the debate.

As we were writing about a sensitive issue, it was important to acknowledge the stigma associated with mental health conditions and the use of drugs with illegal classifications.

We write about areas where there have been developments in related policy

Parliamentarians are often keen to understand if there is evidence that a policy has (or hasn't!) worked in the way it was intended, and what should be considered when developing future policy.

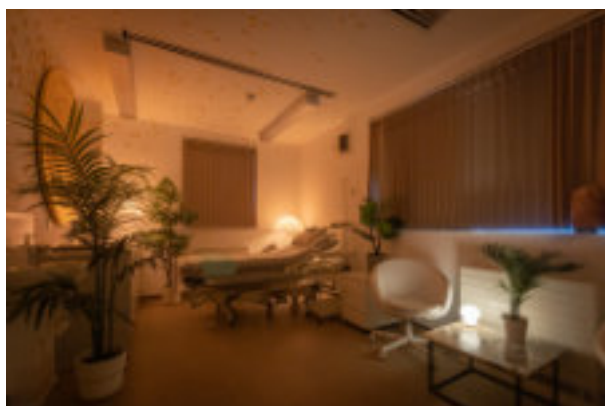
In December 2023, the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs, a non-departmental body that advises the government on drug harms, published a report considering the 'barriers to research' for schedule 1 drugs. The report outlined the challenges academics face when conducting clinical trials with schedule 1 drugs, such as costly licences and time-consuming paperwork. It highlighted to us the level of interest in potential updates to policy regarding research using schedule 1 drugs.

We seek feedback from the POST board

POST has an advisory board comprised of a diverse mix of MPs, peers, representatives from learned societies and senior parliamentary staff. The board provides feedback on proposals for new briefings to ensure our work reflects parliamentarians' interests.

To receive updates from POST, including information on how to get involved in our future research, subscribe at post.parliament.uk/subscribe

Figure 1: The CIPPRes Clinic - Centre for Psychedelic Research



An NHS-Imperial collaborative research initiative set up to conduct pioneering psychopharmacology & psychedelic research at St Charles' Hospital.

The CNWL-Imperial Psychopharmacology & Psychedelic Research (CIPPRes) Clinic, launched in early 2021 is a collaborative, multidisciplinary research initiative between Imperial College London and CNWL (Central & North West London Mental Health NHS Foundation Trust).

The CIPPRes Clinic is set up to deliver exciting new experimental psychopharmacology research that could have a major positive impact in mental health and neuroscience.

The NHS-based CIPPRes Clinic will be run in close association with Imperial's Centre for Psychedelic Research and Division of Psychiatry where most of the research staff will be anchored.