Discovering and Understanding Government Information

Aims

By the end of this session you will be able to:

- Explain what is meant by 'government information'.

- Understand different types of government information.

- Access online resources (free and subscription-based) to find government information.

1. What is government information?

- Definition:

  Publications from the state and related public bodies, intended for public viewing.

- Examples include:

  - Parliament and devolved parliaments & assemblies.
  - Regional/local government.
  - Non-ministerial departments e.g. HM Revenue & Customs.
  - Executive agencies e.g. UK Border Agency.
  - Non-departmental public bodies e.g. Arts Council of England.
  - Parliamentary bodies e.g. Electoral Commission.
  - Official statistics.
  - It may also include data files.

Inman, J., & Picton, Howard J. (2012). Finding official British information: Official publishing in the digital age. Oxford: Chandos.

2. Parliamentary Papers

- Definition:

The term Parliamentary Papers refers to documents that are laid before Parliament. These include the working papers of Parliament, other papers produced by Parliament and its committees or presented to Parliament by outside bodies.

- Papers produced by Parliament and its committees:

Both Houses of Parliament publish documents that result from their work and that of their committees, such as:

- o Select committees reports and evidence.
- o Register of Members' interests.
- o Standing Orders – the rules for conducting business in both Houses.
- o Sessional Returns – which includes statistics on the work of the Commons for each parliamentary year.

These papers are published as House of Commons or House of Lords Papers.

For more information, see: [About Parliament - Parliamentary Papers](#)

3. Primary Parliamentary Publications

- o Green Papers: Green Papers are consultation documents produced by the government. They outline proposals for new policy and invite feedback from people inside and outside Parliament during the consultation period. For more information see: [Green Papers](#).
- o White Papers: White Papers contain a more definitive view of Government policy. They offer an opportunity for further consultation before a Bill is finally presented to Parliament. For more information see: [White Papers](#).
- o Bills: A Bill is a proposal for a new law, or a proposal to change an existing law, that is presented for debate before Parliament. Bills are introduced in either the House of Commons or House of Lords for examination, discussion and amendment, and proceed through several stages in both Houses before receiving Royal Assent and becoming an Act of Parliament. For more information, see: [Bills](#).
- o Acts of Parliament: An Act of Parliament is a law, enforced in all areas of the UK where it is applicable. It includes amendments made during its passage through Parliament.For more information see: [Acts of Parliament](#).

4. Secondary Parliamentary Publications

Statutory instruments:

"Statutory Instruments are the most common form of secondary or delegated legislation, and are often the detailed regulations and orders needed to bring an Act of Parliament into force". (Inman & Picton 2012, p. 72)

They are used to add detail to or amend existing legislation. For example, a Statutory Instrument could be used to state the date at which an act will come into force.

For more information see: How laws are made (UK Parliament YouTube channel)

Inman, J., & Picton, Howard J. (2012). Finding official British information: Official publishing in the digital age. Oxford: Chandos.

5. Command Papers

Command Papers are Government publications which are used to convey information and decisions that the Government think should be brought to the attention of the House of Commons, and/or the House of Lords. The term refers to 'By command of her Majesty'.

These can include many government publications such as State Papers, White Papers, Green Papers, reports of Royal Commissions & other Committees of Inquiry, statistics and annual reports of some government bodies.

Most, but not all, are published in a numbered series which have prefixes such as C, Cd, Cmd or Cmnd, depending on date.

6. Discovering Government Information

It is important to look at original material from authoritative and unbiased sources, and not an interpretation of it.

Remember that information from sources such as social media may well be representative of a particular viewpoint and may not be unbiased. As always, it's important to think critically and question the information you're using.

The databases Public Information Online and UK Parliamentary Papers provide access to a wide range of official information, much of which may be freely available from official websites but often not in an easily searchable format.

The next three pages of this tutorial introduce you to these sources and the different kinds of information available from them.

7. Official websites

- [Gov.uk](#) - The main web portal for government services and information.

- [UK Government web archive](#) - Provided by the National Archives.

- [Legislation](#) - Legislation (Acts and Statutory Instruments) for the United Kingdom from 1267 to the present day.

- [Parliament](#) - Many Parliamentary publications available, including Hansard from 1988 and Select Committee reports from 1997.

- [Parliamentary datasets](#) - Datasets from both Houses of Parliament. Links to all treaties in force, published by the Foreign Office.

- [Insights](#) - House of Commons Library blog, offering an impartial and authoritative take on the latest issues and statistics.

8. Public Information Online

[Public Information Online](#) provides full text access to UK Parliamentary, Scottish Parliamentary, Northern Ireland Assembly, Scottish Government and Non-Parliamentary publications.

UK Parliamentary material from the 2006/07 Session onwards includes:

- House of Commons Papers

- House of Commons Bills

- House of Lords Papers

- House of Lords Bills and Amendments

- Command Papers

- Public Bill and Standing Committee Debates

- Public General Acts and Explanatory Notes

- Amending Statutory Instruments

- House of Commons Daily Hansard

- House of Lords Daily Hansard

- House of Commons Weekly Information Bulletin

For more information see: Public Information Online Pepper v Hart research

9. UK Parliamentary Papers

The UK Parliamentary Papers database offers the working documents of the British government for all areas of social, political, economic, and foreign policy.

University of Sheffield staff and students have access to 18th, 19th and 20th century collections as follows:

- Bills and Acts 1695-2004

- Command Papers 1833-2004

- House of Commons Papers 1715-2004

- House of Lords Papers 1714-1805

- Hansard 1803-2005

- Journals 1688-1834

- Debates 1774-1805

- Histories and Proceedings 1660-1743

Summary

You have reached the end of this resource.

Why not look at some of our other Information and Digital Literacy resources?

Book onto a workshop: Information and Digital Literacy Workshops.

Take an online tutorial: Information and Digital Literacy Tutorials.

References
Inman, J., & Picton, Howard J. (2012). Finding official British information: Official publishing in the digital age. Oxford: Chandos.

Full URLs

About Parliament – Parliamentary Papers:

https://www.parliament.uk/about/how/publications/parliamentary/

Green Papers: https://www.parliament.uk/site-information/glossary/green-papers/

White Papers: https://www.parliament.uk/site-information/glossary/white-paper/

Bills: https://www.parliament.uk/about/how/laws/bills/

Acts of Parliament:

https://www.parliament.uk/site-information/glossary/acts-of-parliament/

How Laws are made (UK Parliament YouTube channel):

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iM4CKYCrW7Y&feature=youtu.be

Public Information Online: https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/library/cdfiles/pio

UK Parliamentary Papers: https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/library/cdfiles/hcpp

Gov.uk: https://www.gov.uk/

UK Government web archive: http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/

Legislation: http://www.legislation.gov.uk/

Parliament: https://www.parliament.uk/

Parliamentary datasets: http://www.data.parliament.uk/

Insights: https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/category/insights/

Public Information Online Pepper v Hart research:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V2iLI7liAB0&feature=youtu.be

Information and Digital Literacy Workshops:

https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/library/infoskillsworkshops/index

Information and Digital Literacy Tutorials:

https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/library/idlt

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