Jacqui Russell – scientist – FAQs

What sort of place do you work at?
I work at the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology. We're based in an office just across the road from the Houses of Parliament. Most MPs and Peers don't have a background in science, but they still have to make decisions and vote on important scientific issues. Our job is to help them to understand enough science so they feel happy that they're making the right decision. We usually do this by publishing short reports, called briefings, on a particular topic, but sometimes we also go and talk to groups of MPs about an issue.

Who do you work with?
There are seven of us here at the moment.

- **David** is our Director and oversees all our work. He also chats to MPs and Peers about the areas of science that they need briefing on from us.
- In addition to me, there are three other scientific advisers. We each focus on a particular area. **Gary** is an expert on transport and the environment, **Pete** on biological sciences and health and **Sarah** on IT and physical sciences. Sarah also looks after our website: http://www.parliament.uk/post/home.htm
- Sometimes we have university students who work with us for a few months to get experience of the type of work we do here. At the moment **Palwinder**, a PhD student, and **Marina**, a student from Uzbekistan, are here.
- **Jane** provides office support for all of us.

What do you do day-to-day?
I'm usually at the office from about 9.30am-5.30pm, although this is quite flexible and I work from home sometimes. I share an office with Gary and we meet the rest of the team for lunch and breaks in the canteen.

The main part of my job is to write short reports for MPs and Peers – and I could be asked to write about almost anything! Sometimes I think that it's a bit like being a journalist. Three weeks ago I knew nothing about Chemical Weapons, but now I've just published a 4-page briefing – you can see it on our website. I spent the three weeks searching the Internet for information and meeting experts. I have to make sure that I talk to people who represent all the different views on a topic, so that my briefing isn't biased at all. Going out and meeting lots of different people is one of the best bits of the job.

Once I had enough information about chemical weapons and was confident that I understood all the issues, I worked from home for a day to write the briefing. Sometimes it's easier to concentrate at home. The rest of the team read my first attempt and suggested quite a few changes – you have to get used to other people criticising your work! One thing they suggested was that I add some information on the history of chemical weapons. It's the sort of thing that helps to make the briefing more interesting for people who aren't scientists.

Did you want to be a scientist when you were at school?
When I was 11 I wanted to be a composer, although that didn't last for long, and I soon decided that I wanted to be a computer programmer. But by the time I choose my A levels I was fairly sure that it was biology and chemistry that I was most interested in. But I didn't really know what scientists did. It never even occurred to me that I might end up doing a job like this one. I didn't even know it existed.