

Procedure Committee

Oral evidence: Written parliamentary questions: monitoring in Session 2019-21, HC 790

Monday 7 December 2020

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Members present: Karen Bradley (Chair); Aaron Bell; Kirsty Blackman; Sir Christopher Chope; Chris Elmore; James Gray; Nigel Mills; James Sunderland; Owen Thompson; Suzanne Webb.

Questions 1-19

Witnesses

I: Edward Argar MP, Minister of State, Department of Health and Social Care, and Hugh Harris, Director, Ministers, Accountability and Strategy, Department of Health and Social Care.

[Correspondence with the Department of Health and Social Care](#)

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Edward Argar MP and Hugh Harris.

Q1 Chair: I thank Committee members for being here, and we are very grateful to Edward Argar, the Minister of State at the Department of Health and Social Care, for appearing before us. He has with him Hugh Harris from the Department.

As a former member of this Committee, Minister, you will know that we look at PQ performance. The Department of Health and Social Care has a record of being a good, if not outstanding, performer in responding to PQs, but that has not been the case over the past few months. Although the Committee understands the immense pressures that the Department is under, that performance has not improved as we would have liked, and we certainly have not seen a direction of travel that gives us confidence.

We are therefore grateful for your being here to speak to us. The Committee has many questions, but I understand that you would like to say a few words in opening.

Edward Argar: Thank you, Chair. I shall say a few words, but I suspect the Committee will pick up on the themes or areas that are of interest. I will keep this relatively general in setting the context, which the Committee will be aware I had the opportunity to do relatively recently in response to an urgent question from Sir Christopher.

The Department is grateful to the Committee for its patience during this challenging and unprecedented time across Government, particularly for the Department of Health and Social Care. Chair, you alluded to the fact that when I was first elected to the House I sat on this Committee. I recognised then, and I continue to do so, that parliamentary questions are a key and vital element of the ability of both Houses to scrutinise Government on behalf of our constituents and, in the case of the Lords, more broadly—and, indeed, the populace of this country.

On behalf of my Department, I take this very seriously, as I know does the Secretary of State and other Ministers in my Department. Prior to the pandemic, the Department had the best record of all Whitehall Departments in providing timely and, I hope, accurate answers to Members of both Houses. Despite having more PQs than other Departments, we had the highest response rate in Whitehall. It is therefore a matter of regret that we were unable to sustain that written question performance, and it is right that I apologise to the House and to the Committee for that and, as we go through this hearing, discuss the steps to get us back to where we would all wish us to be.

As I set out in answer to Sir Christopher in the Chamber, we faced a trio of concurrent challenges, the first of which was volume: between January and November this year, we received just over 11,000 written parliamentary questions across both Houses, compared with about 6,000 in the same period last year.



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The second challenge was timeliness: given the nature of the pandemic and the Government's response to it, we faced a situation that changed almost daily, with data being updated almost daily. Answers drafted by officials can be out of date shortly thereafter, so sometimes there is a challenge between accuracy and timeliness. Since taking responsibility for parliamentary question performance and for improving it, I have focused the team on accuracy and clearing the backlog and oldest questions first, although, subject to what Members wish to ask about, we might talk about that in a moment.

Finally, policy input is perhaps the biggest challenge. Despite increased administrative resources in the team that responds to parliamentary questions, the same policy officials have to respond to the pandemic operationally, draft regulations and statements to the House and similar. They are in many cases the only people with the policy knowledge to answer questions accurately.

We continue to field exceptional volumes of PQs, but I reassure the Committee that we are working hard to improve performance. Much though it is a pleasure to appear before the Committee, I hope I will not be required to do so again. It is therefore in my interest and that of other Ministers, as well as that of the House, that we get on top of this challenge. I am briefed weekly and continue to take an active role in the recovery of the Department's performance.

I should probably stop there and field your questions.

Q2 Chair: I very much hope that we will not have to have you or your colleagues back, although the Committee reserves the right to call other Ministers if we feel it appropriate, especially any Minister whose performance is an outlier.

You said you are updated weekly. When did the Department first become aware of the problems, and when was that first escalated to you as the responsible Minister? The Committee wrote to the Secretary of State in May. What actions were taken as a result of that letter?

Edward Argar: I am grateful for that question. Until the pandemic, performance was, as you have acknowledged, extremely good, so no issues were escalated to Ministers about performance or response rates.

You see the first dip in performance in the early months of the pandemic, when pretty much the whole Department, including Ministers, were working remotely from home. The Secretary of State and his office responded directly to your letter in May without other Ministers being engaged. Resources were increased as a result, with renewed focus on answering parliamentary questions. That was still at the height of the pandemic and the focus remained very much on that, with Ministers not, in the usual way, being in the Department with piles of paper in their in trays.

On 1 September, with the summer recess having passed and performance continuing to be below what we would expect, the Secretary of State



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asked me to take the lead in looking into what we could do further to improve performance. You wrote to us last month, I think, and I responded, having taken on that responsibility from 1 September.

Q3 Aaron Bell: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Minister, for your time today. Are you confident that the Department has robust systems in place to allow staff to raise concerns about performance issues and potential understaffing?

Edward Argar: Yes, and after this I may ask the director responsible, Hugh Harris, whom I should have introduced at the start, to comment on some of the internal procedures.

Chair: You have an excellent official in Mr Harris, I can assure you.

Edward Argar: I believe he served you in a previous role, Chair, and I agree entirely.

It is possible to suggest that because the system worked smoothly prior to the pandemic and the dip in performance, routine reporting mechanisms were not in place; directors would have monitored it and alerted Ministers, as appropriate, but not as happens now.

The data I get every week summarising performance, the number of questions, the average number of days per month it is taking to answer particular types of questions and where some of the blockages are in the system, and the data to support that, give a much more granular layer of ministerial oversight. I regularly meet Mr Harris to discuss performance against where we would wish to be.

I will not go further into what I have done in prioritising sets of questions—the Committee might want to come to that—reflecting why performance has improved but is still relatively low: there is a conscious decision behind that in clearing the backlog.

I shall hand over to Mr Harris to answer on the mechanisms in his team for escalating those concerns.

Hugh Harris: Within the Department we have monthly reporting to the executive committee of parliamentary question statistics, ministerial correspondence and freedom of information requests. When the March data started to dip, it was recorded in the April ExCo meeting, and the April data, which dipped further, was recorded in May. There is a formal process whereby the data is escalated to senior management.

That was done monthly, but over the summer, as it was clear that performance was not improving to the degree that we wanted, that moved to weekly performance. As the Minister suggested, I chair a performance recovery board, whereby all the issues that need to be explored and discussed are explored and discussed.

The one addendum, which is not a matter of people not surfacing issues, is that as the nature of the pandemic and our PQ performance changed, we



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needed to change our data reporting mechanisms, for PQs as well as ministerial correspondence. It took us a bit of time to get the dashboard we needed for the circumstances in which we found ourselves, but for the past couple of months I have felt comfortable that I have the data I need to advise Ministers and take action where necessary.

- Q4 **Aaron Bell:** The inquiry is about written parliamentary questions, but you mentioned FOI requests and ministerial correspondence. Do you attach the same priority to all three categories, or is there a pecking order?

Hugh Harris: We try to hit all our internal and Cabinet Office goals. I try not to have a pecking order, not least because I have two different teams and I wouldn't want to prioritise one over the other. We try to make progress against the proportion of ministerial correspondence that is received within 18 working days, in the same way as we try to prioritise parliamentary questions.

- Q5 **Aaron Bell:** What is the most recent estimate of the scale of the backlog in questions and ministerial correspondence?

Hugh Harris: The backlog in PQs is, I think, now just under 1,000—a couple of weeks ago it was at 1,200, so it has come down a little. I would like to think it is coming down at a consistent rate of 200 every week or two, but I am afraid I cannot confirm that. It is down from its historic high. The figure for the backlog in ministerial correspondence is a little over 7,000.

- Q6 **Chair:** You say that you are reporting monthly. Is that giving Ministers enough transparency, or should it become more frequent during the recovery plan?

Hugh Harris: We now report to Ministers weekly, and I get a report weekly. The Department's formal executive committee meeting happens only monthly. If something of substance happens between the executive committee meetings that I think requires attention, we have two meetings of the executive committee each week largely to discuss covid-related issues. If something needs to be flagged it can be done informally outside the standard processes.

- Q7 **Sir Christopher Chope:** Thank you, Minister, for answering the urgent question and declaring that you have the PQ recovery plan and for giving us the headline approach in the plan, although it was frustrating not to receive a straight answer when I asked for a copy to be placed in the Library. Can we confirm that the PQ recovery project manager is in place?

Edward Argar: Thank you, Sir Christopher. There are a number of points there. The view that I as a Minister took to your request to place the plan or the response in the Library was that, given that it is this Committee's role to scrutinise procedure in the House and that documents submitted to it are public, this is perhaps the most appropriate mechanism by which it can be put in the public domain and we can be challenged on it. If the Committee or the Chair wishes more broadly to have more information or



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detail, I am happy to write again to the Committee in a form that goes on the record and is available for Members and the wider public.

Mr Harris is in charge at the macro level of the approach and management and leads this work personally, given its importance to Parliament and the Committee. In terms of the named member of staff, my understanding from my conversations with Mr Harris and from my monitoring is that, yes, they are in place.

Q8 Sir Christopher Chope: We now have a PQ recovery project manager in place.

One of the examples that came up in the UQ was people's frustration that after weeks, if not months, they receive a substantive answer that states that the information requested is not available in the format requested, which suggests that the information is available if you have the wisdom and foresight to know the format in which it is held. Will you be a bit more helpful on that? It is frustrating that we do not know the format in which the information is held. Many Departments will give the format in which the information is held and even go so far as to share it if they are being co-operative. What can you do about that?

Edward Argar: Where information can be found or accessed, I have signed a number of these that might not be exact answers to questions but I have none the less sought to provide some data that I considered helpful or broadly pertinent to the question. I am conscious of the obligation set out in Standing Orders and in "Erskine May" to answer the question asked. There is a challenge: to ensure that we follow the rules and seek to be helpful.

On your broader point, Sir Christopher, on the challenges the Department has—as, I know, do some other Departments such as the Home Office, given the nature of the work that it does—many of the issues, including particularly with data, are complex. When the volume of questions has been lower we have been able to manage this, but the sort and complexity of data we are being asked to provide, particularly in named day questions, is greater than it would be perhaps in some other Departments. The data, often relating to the current pandemic, may still be raw data or data that does not come in a consistent format.

My final point, if I may pray in aid the then Home Secretary in 2016 when discussing Home Office performance and the immigration statistics, is that a lot of the information comes from external organisations—arm's length bodies, executive agencies or others—for which the Department answers to Parliament but does not necessarily directly control. Therefore, it is sometimes difficult to get information in a form that answers the question asked and to do so in a timely fashion. You might challenge that on both of those we are struggling to meet your expectations, but they are the challenges we face.

Although when I answer questions I will on some occasions say that the data is not available in the format requested, because it genuinely cannot be cut or put into a format that answers the question, I endeavour, as do



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my ministerial colleagues when they can, to stretch the boundaries a little to provide something helpful. It might frustrate on occasions, but we do try.

- Q9 **Sir Christopher Chope:** May I give a specific example? I asked about the number of intensive care beds available. I would have thought that the Department wished to have that knowledge to hand, because it is fundamental to fighting the pandemic. After many weeks I was told that the information is not available in the format requested. Surely you have information on the number of intensive care beds available in English hospitals. Can it not be shared with us, as I requested? Perhaps we can deal first with that specifically, because it does not seem to me to be a difficult question.

Edward Argar: I will look into the specifics of that for you, Sir Christopher, but the broader point is that the reporting mechanisms within the NHS do not easily facilitate the provision of such information. Numbers on bed provision—urgent or intensive care—will change because different beds can be brought into use and repurposed. The number will move to address demand, so it isn't quite as simple as the question suggests. I am happy to look at the detail of the question for you.

- Q10 **Sir Christopher Chope:** Another example of the answers that should be available to your policy officials is those that arise directly from statements made by Ministers in debates in the House. Nadine Dorries, responding to a debate in the House five or six weeks ago, quoted statistics relating to Sweden that she said came from *The BMJ* to try to address a point I had made. I sought to intervene and she said she didn't have time to take my intervention, so I tabled a question asking for chapter and verse. I have now received a reply stating that it was all wrong and the record will be corrected. There is no apology or suggestion on how it will be corrected or why it was wrong—or why it took so long to get to that stage.

Another example on the same theme is that about three weeks ago I asked the Prime Minister about the effect of T cell immunity on public policy and quoted *The BMJ* that it lasted more than six months. He said that the evidence cuts both ways, so I tabled a supplementary asking him to provide the evidence that it cuts both ways. That was transferred to your Department and we still await a reply.

I gave the Prime Minister notice of my question, so he must have been briefed by your Department that the evidence cuts both ways. Your officials must have had that evidence to hand, so why are they not able to provide that in a timely fashion to someone who asks a supplementary question?

Edward Argar: You ask two questions. I cannot go into the detail of specific questions and the evidence underpinning what a Minister has said from the Dispatch Box, so I shall go to the process point about timely answers.



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I suspect that your raising that point and question will have occasioned a revisitation of what was said by the Minister and checks on whether there was an inadvertent error in what was said from the Dispatch Box. That will take more time than simply giving a factual answer. You will know that the House has procedures for when Ministers, who are human, occasionally get something wrong from the Dispatch Box or give an inaccurate answer. It is incumbent on us to correct the record through the appropriate processes. Since being a Health and Social Care Minister, I have once inadvertently given an inaccurate statistic in a written parliamentary answer. I was required to correct the record of the House and write to the Member concerned.

Those are the established procedures of the House. Ministers always endeavour to correct the record where they have made an error. The individuals putting together a response to a parliamentary question would not always have that full background and therefore had to look into it, which can take longer than, understandably, you would wish.

- Q11 Sir Christopher Chope:** I do not want to hog this evidence session, but may I finish with this point? Another statement that was made by the Secretary of State, I think on 1 October, was that if we let things rip, hundreds of thousands of deaths would result. I asked a question about the evidence for that and it took more than two months to get an answer referring back to a report on 16 March as being the most up-to-date evidence on which the assertion was made. That is not good enough either, is it?

Edward Argar: You make two points. You may or may not agree with the content of the answer, but it is for the Minister responding to be accountable for how they answer and the evidence they supply as the basis for an assertion or statement made in the House. Where I do agree with you is your point about timeliness. That goes to the heart of what we are talking about. We need to address both timeliness and accuracy. If you are citing a report that dates back to March, for example, it should be possible to provide the answer in a timelier fashion instead of a wait of two months from September. That is why we have put in place these steps to ensure that, in the coming months, parliamentary questions are answered more swiftly and accurately and that we recover the performance level that we would expect and wish to have—and of course that you expect as you have a right to get answers to the questions that you put legitimately on behalf of your constituents and the wider public.

Chair: I know that you have many more questions, Sir Christopher, but we will now move on to Chris Elmore.

- Q12 Chris Elmore:** Thank you for your time this afternoon, Minister. One of the frustrations—Sir Christopher has put it more eloquently than I can—is a theme across the House. There has been an urgent question and Department of Health questions, but there is a general frustration that when Members raise points of order, or write to the Chair of the Committee saying that they have been waiting X number of weeks or months for a response, there seems to be no explanation of how



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Ministers are dealing with it. I do not mean this critically, because I know there is huge pressure on the Department and I understand what you have said about the position of the Secretary of State, you and the other Ministers. There is no statement to explain that you are picking this up with new processes.

Perhaps when Members raise a point of order with the Speaker or a Deputy Speaker, a Minister could come to the House the next day to answer that point of order—I am not suggesting every single one. That is one reason for Members' frustration. Everyone accepts the pressure on officials and Ministers, but there is a grey area of not telling us what is going on. Can you expand on that?

Edward Argar: I am happy to do that, and perhaps Mr Harris can come in, if appropriate, after I have finished. I entirely take the point. It is not that long ago that I was a Back Bencher tabling questions. Members table questions because the issue matters and they need to extract some information or wish to highlight an issue on behalf of their constituents. I entirely understand the importance of questions.

As Mr Harris said, we recognised the challenge once the pandemic had started to take hold. We had hoped that, over the summer, there would have been the opportunity to make up ground. Regrettably, there was not, because the questions kept flowing and the pressure on the Department was still there. In September, when that backlog of questions was over 1,500—I was briefed on Friday that the number is now below 1,000—the Secretary of State asked me to take a hands-on role.

The approach that we have adopted is to increase resourcing in the administrative part of the system—we have increased the PQs admin team from three to seven—but the real challenge comes at the point where policy leads and officials need to draft the answers. They are the people who continue to be stretched in different directions. Coupled with that—you may wish to explore this later—external organisations often have to feed in the information required. I am grateful for the Committee's patience with where we are, but Members are frustrated by a lack of tangible or rapid improvement. We have taken steps, although they are not as rapid as I would wish.

We could have significantly increased performance figures by telling officials to focus on the simple questions as they came in, and to let the older questions linger on because some of them were tricky in terms of getting the information together. I thought that was the wrong approach, because those answers would become rapidly out of date, so I asked the Department to focus on the oldest first—while in parallel triaging some simple questions where we could easily provide the answers—and to try to catch up. Inevitably, that means that the performance figures have not improved exponentially. We could have tried to “game” the figures before I came before the Committee, but I did not think that was appropriate.

It is worth remembering two other things. First, if a PQ is answered one day late, that counts as being not in time—frustratingly, I get a number to



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sign and I think, "If only that had landed on my desk yesterday before 6 pm it would have been on time." It is black and white. Secondly—while some of this will cause the Committee concern, I hope that it will also slightly reassure Members—I have asked the team to look at the average amount of time it takes to answer a particular type of parliamentary question.

In October, for example, for a Commons ordinary written question, for which the target is five days—we have not met that by any means, but we are working on it—the figure was 14.8 days. That is clearly unacceptable, but because in November I asked for the focus to be on the oldest PQs, the figure rose to just under 20 days. This month it is back down to just over 13, so I hope that the pressure we have put on clearing the backlog and answering older questions in November has caused the turnaround and wait times to decrease dramatically.

I know that 13.3 days will still count as late, so the headline statistic of percentage answered in time will trouble the Chair and the Committee for a little while yet, but that is the approach that I have put in place: increased resourcing, streamlining processes through the Department to get answers signed, and reminding all my fellow Ministers—in a polite but firm way—that we all have to put in the time to respond to Members.

Q13 Chris Elmore: You talked about other Ministers. I do not doubt for a second that the Secretary of State prioritises getting these answers out, and that is why he asked you to take the lead on it, but there are three other Ministers in the Department. Is there a collective will to deal with the backlog? You have the charts with all the data, so is there a particular pressure on PQs within one area of ministerial responsibility, in the sense that one particular Minister or Under-Secretary of State and their teams need—I would not say "to pull their socks up", as I am not doing this in a critical way—additional support. In fairness to you as Minister of State, it is not all on you. There are four other Ministers and it cannot be right that we scrutinise only decisions that you are making as the lead for correspondence.

Edward Argar: I entirely accept your premise, but I would say that the spread of parliamentary questions tabled is uneven across different Ministers. For example, Minister Whately has within her portfolio Commons responsibility for test and trace and social care. Those two issues have given rise to a significant number of questions. Minister Churchill has public health, general practice and dental practice, which are areas where there has been a significant and understandable level of interest from members of the public and therefore Members of Parliament. They have a higher volume, but equally they answer a higher volume. There is a challenge with their workload because of the number of questions coming in.

I do not know whether it shows up in the official record, but when I sign some PQs it will say, "Edward Argar for" and the name of another Minister with a different policy responsibility. I will sometimes answer questions on behalf of another Minister to try to spread the load. Ministerial bandwidth



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in signing answers is a challenge, but Ministers understand the importance of doing it—because none of us wants to appear before this Committee, or to have an urgent question in the House. That is one of the occasional constraints in the system.

But I come back to the fact that drafting the answers and getting them up to Ministers is still a real challenge, as is getting information from outside bodies to help furnish accurate answers. The short answer is that some Ministers have a much higher questions workload than others, so we try to spread them around a bit.

Chair: Do you want to come in, Mr Harris?

Hugh Harris: Not specifically on that issue, but on a previous question I have two contributions. First, everyone in the Department is aware that the current percentage done on time and the overall backlog is not where it needs to be. I would like to put on record, however, that the volume of answers that the Department is producing is substantially higher than previously. In the six months from June to November 2019, between 450 and 460 answers were produced every month. In November 2020, the figure was 1,300. I would not want the Committee to think that there is not a huge amount of effort going into the increase in volume, which is paralleled on the correspondence side. Of course, it is not good enough or quick enough, but the Department is pulling all the levers it can.

Secondly, on those levers, the Minister mentioned the increase in the central team. It is the policy officials within the departmental teams who do the drafting, and their number has increased enormously in the past six months. The Department has grown from about 1,500 to over 3,000 and that has helped to drive the volumes that we wanted to see. We have also increased capacity in private office, because the tail end of the process is there and we need to do everything we can to facilitate the ease of process there.

Finally, I am sure that the permanent secretary would like me to flag that he, on behalf of the Secretary of State, wrote to the whole Department a few weeks ago to reinforce the importance that the ministerial and executive teams put on their parliamentary responsibilities, including answering parliamentary questions.

Chair: Owen Thompson has a series of questions about areas that are of particular concern.

Q14 **Owen Thompson:** Thank you, Minister, for being here this afternoon. You have touched on a number of the overarching themes on which I will focus. When looking at the principal challenges in trying to recover the Department's position, have you made an assessment of which key areas are in need of additional support? Are there any pinch points causing the delay?

Edward Argar: The areas that are generating the biggest volume, and thus the biggest challenge, are those that sit within the portfolios particularly of Minister Churchill and Minister Whately. To amplify that, in



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the past three months Minister Whately has answered just shy of 800 PQs and Minister Churchill just over 1,000. That ties into things such as social care, test and trace, and the NHS, which comes to me, by and large, except for primary and dental care.

One challenge with many of those areas is that information needs to be obtained from external bodies for which we are answerable. While the policy officials draft the answers, my understanding is that the information still needs to be obtained from other organisations that are part of the health and social care ecosystem. That is not a criticism of those organisations—they are working hard and doing their best—but it can add delay into the system, particularly where there are relatively new teams or they are dealing with something relatively new.

As well as getting the teams set up over the summer, focusing for example on testing—and, in the coming months, on vaccination—there has been a slight learning curve for those teams in terms of knowing what information they will be asked for in order to be able to respond in a timely fashion. We are working hard to do that, but it presents a challenge.

- Q15 Owen Thompson:** When looking at the process from question being asked to answer being produced, the Minister ultimately signs it off, but is there a point at which ministerial special advisers have any input before sign-off?

Edward Argar: It may help if I quickly run through the five or six stages of the process. First, the question is received from the Table Office and logged on the system. It is then allocated to policy teams and waits for them to say, “Yes, this is one for us.” The policy officials then do an initial draft. It then comes back to the parliamentary team, who do a quality check. Sir Christopher and others may say that we need to strengthen that part of the process in terms of accuracy and quality, and I am always happy to look at that. The answer then either goes up to special advisers or it goes back for a redraft if it falls at that fence.

Once the answer has got to a level where policy officials and the parliamentary team feel that it is accurate and appropriately drafted, it goes up to special advisers for review. I believe that that stage adds value to the process. It is not about changing it, or putting spokes in wheels, it is about adding value. Special advisers will often have a breadth of perspective across the policy area which a particular policy team may not, so they may be better placed to ensure that it answers the question that the Member of Parliament has asked. They will review it and then it goes to the private secretaries and into Ministers’ red boxes to be signed off, or—and I have done this a few times—have a line put through it and sent back for redraft because we do not believe that it answers the question.

The final point I would make is that special advisers’ role in reviewing answers and sending them on to Ministers is not a point that adds delay or blocks into the system. The delay comes mainly from the drafting process

and from obtaining the information to put the draft together and getting a quality draft up to Spads and Ministers to send out.

- Q16 Owen Thompson:** You have mentioned a number of times the reliance on external agencies. I completely accept that point, but do you have even a rough idea to what extent answers rely on information coming from other agencies?

Edward Argar: It is genuinely a mixture. Were you to table a question to me about, for example, how many parliamentary questions were answered within a particular time, it would be easy for me to answer because Mr Harris would have that answer within the Department. Many of the questions that are being tabled, especially at the moment, relate not just to what the Department is doing, but to the NHS and MHRA approvals of vaccines, for example.

The health ecosystem is complex in terms of the organisations involved. The Health and Social Care Act 2012 gave the NHS that separate operational role, which has benefits but also raises challenges because it is a separate organisation that keeps its own records and you have to draw those records in. I pay tribute to those organisations, which do their very best to supply the information required. This is in no way a criticism of them. They understand parliamentary scrutiny and do their best to supply the information, but they are also very busy dealing with operational issues, just as the Department is.

I am sorry that I cannot give a clearer answer. I can answer some questions within my own policy teams in the Department, but others will need extra information from outside.

Chair: Thank you. Can I now bring in Suzanne Webb?

- Q17 Suzanne Webb:** Thank you for your time, Minister. Looking at this slightly differently, are there any aspects of the system used by the House to transmit the questions to the Department and then to receive answers that cause any difficulties for timely answering?

Edward Argar: Mr Harris may want to come in on this, but I would not challenge the House's processes in terms of tabling and sending questions to us and our returning the answers. It is clear from Standing Orders and from what is set out in "Erskine May" how Ministers effect the transfer of a question when they believe that another Minister is better placed to answer it. If I recall correctly from "Erskine May", the responsibility sits with the Minister to whom the question was originally tabled until such time as it is accepted by another Department.

The final thing I would reference—I do not cast a value judgment on this, but it has been raised by some as a challenge and may be something that the Committee wishes to look at—is the answering of named day parliamentary questions with a holding rather than a substantive answer. This is something that Sir Christopher has raised with me, if not in the House then certainly in conversation.

My understanding is that it is within the guidance on the parliamentary questions for written answer system of the House that if named day questions cannot be answered substantively on the day for answer they should receive a holding answer. That is what the House expects a Department to do. Ideally, we should give a substantive answer where we can, but if we cannot do that, we are required under that guidance to provide a holding answer. The Committee may wish to take a view on whether that works, but that is for you.

Q18 Suzanne Webb: Are you concerned that a drive to answer the questions on time might lead to a reduction in the quality of answers, bearing in mind the volume you have?

Edward Argar: Yes, and that is why the processes that we and Mr Harris have put in place are designed to catch up with the backlog and improve our performance without compromising quality. When we are answering about 11,000 questions—that is the number that has been tabled to us this year—it would be foolish of me to say to the Committee that there will not be a single one on which a Member may not come back and say, “Hang on; that slipped through the net and was not up to the quality or accuracy that we expect.” When that happens, I apologise, and of course we will seek to give an accurate answer.

I do not think there is a trade-off between timeliness and accuracy, but where we have come from and why we have reached this point reflect the fact that we would rather be accurate in our responses to Members and as up to date as we can be, even if it meant that on some occasions it takes a few days longer to produce the answer than the target date.

That reflects something that the then Home Secretary said to this Committee in 2016. She recognised that deadlines could be missed, but she would rather miss a deadline than give an inaccurate answer to the House. We may not get it right 100% of the time, but that is the steer I have given. I do not know if Mr Harris wants to come in on that question.

Hugh Harris: The only point I would add is that we monitor our internal redraft rates, both those that make it to private office and those that are looked at before that stage. We have not so far seen an uptick in problems, which gives me some comfort that officials are not rushing to get out poor-quality responses. We do keep it under review.

Chair: Thank you very much, Minister. I realise that we have kept you in a chilly room for quite some time.

Edward Argar: You can keep me for as long as you wish, Chair; I am happy to answer questions.

Q19 Chair: We have now exhausted our questions. As someone who has sat on the other side of the table, I recognise how important it is to get a grip on written questions. Apart from anything else, it can help Ministers to see where there are systemic problems. It is an early warning indicator. As you will know, because Members cannot be in the Chamber all the time and asking questions as we would normally do, many of us are



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relying on written questions to be able to put points to Ministers.

I know that you take this seriously. Will you share with the Committee the progress in the work you are doing? If we can see the information by ministerial portfolio, that will help us to understand where the pressures really are. If there is anything else you would like to share with the Committee later, we would be happy to receive it. We would rather not have you back here if we can avoid it, but we reserve the right to do so.

Edward Argar: You are right about the importance of ministerial grip on this. If I recall again from that evidence session in 2016, when I sat in a chair to your right, it was Sir Edward Leigh who highlighted that the Home Office had had a challenge in relation to PQs from 2013 onwards. The Home Secretary had only recently given you the responsibility to deal with it, but you got a grip and we did not have to call you back again. I recognise the value of that. I went through the transcript of that session over the weekend and noted that your then Department and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport had produced their approaches to recovery of PQ performance, so I have asked my private office to see whether those documents still exist in those Departments. Even though the context is different in this pandemic, there will be things that we can learn from them.

In terms of your final point, if it suits the Committee perhaps I could write to you with an update on the volumetrics, either before Christmas or when we return in January, and saying, "Here is where we have got to; here is where we expect to be in another four weeks; if you are not happy, I am willing to appear before the Committee again to answer further questions." Perhaps it would be more appropriate in the first week of January.

Chair: Perhaps we can see where the Department gets to by the end of the month and then the most useful thing would be to get the information on a rolling monthly basis. I know that Sir Christopher will be monitoring it very closely.

Edward Argar: I suspect he will.

Chair: Thank you again, Minister, and Mr Harris—it was very nice to see you again, Mr Harris—for your time and for answering the questions. I know how hard you have been working to rectify the situation and I hope that we do not have to call you before the Committee again.