

Procedure Committee

Oral evidence: Written Parliamentary Questions, HC 49

Wednesday 10 June 2026

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Members present: James Asser; Bambos Charalambous; Mary Kelly Foy; Gurinder Singh Josan; Mr Tom Morrison; Katrina Murray; Kenneth Stevenson; Michael Wheeler; Sir Gavin Williamson.

In the absence of the Chair, Bambos Charalambous took the Chair.

Questions 122-148

Witnesses

I: Dr Farrah Bhatti, Principal Clerk of the Table Office, House of Commons; Nick Beech, Acting Deputy Head of the Table Office, House of Commons.

Written evidence from witnesses:

- [Table Office, House of Commons \(WRP 12\)](#)

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Dr Farrah Bhatti and Nick Beech.

Q122 Chair: Good afternoon and welcome to this public evidence session of the Procedure Committee. We are continuing to take evidence for our inquiry into written parliamentary questions. Today's session will give us the opportunity to hear more about how the process works at an official level in Parliament, and about the role of the House administration and the Table Office in the written PQ system. We will also be using the session as an opportunity to ask the Table Office about some points that have been raised in this inquiry.

We are delighted to be joined by two senior Clerks in the Table Office, Dr Farrah Bhatti and Nick Beech. Will you please introduce yourselves for the record?

Dr Bhatti: Good afternoon, Chair. My name is Dr Farrah Bhatti; I am the Principal Clerk of the Table Office.

Nick Beech: Good afternoon, Chair. My name is Nick Beech; I am the acting deputy head of the Table Office.

Q123 Chair: As is the tradition, I will ask the first question. What is the purpose of WPQs, procedurally, and what in your experience is their value within the wider range of parliamentary proceedings and other scrutiny tools available to Members?

Dr Bhatti: Thank you, Chair and Committee, for inviting us to give evidence today. The purpose of written parliamentary questions is clearly set out in "Erskine May": it is "to obtain information or press for action". Those two key purposes are at the heart of the rules of order for written parliamentary questions.

As you allude to, a WPQ is one of a wide range of tools that Members have at their disposal for the scrutiny of Government. WPQs can be used to find out information on behalf of constituents or to press for a particular course of action. They are not there to progress other political arguments; there are better avenues for those sorts of things, like supplementary questions in the Chamber or parliamentary debates. They are not there to put forward substantive points about issues of conduct and things like that; for that, we would advise Members to use substantive motions.

Chair: Mr Beech, have you anything to add?

Nick Beech: No, that is accurate.

Q124 Mr Morrison: This is a question for both of you. What role can Members' staff play in supporting Members in the WPQ process?

Dr Bhatti: This goes back to the previous question about what questions are. They are a proceeding in Parliament, in the same way that a debate is a proceeding in Parliament. Consequently, questions should be initiated only by Members themselves. Procedure Committees in previous years

have been quite robust on that point; it is important to the integrity of the questions system that the initiation of questions rest on the responsibility exercised by elected Members in their personal duties as elected officials.

Having said that, Members use their personal staff in all sorts of ways to support their contributions to proceedings in Parliament, whether that is by giving assistance with speechwriting, supporting them in applications for debates or indeed drafting written parliamentary questions for them. That is supported through the current systems: Members' staff can access the online MemberHub system through delegated controls that Members set up for them to table those questions on behalf of the Member. We take it on trust that those conversations are happening behind closed doors and that the questions are being initiated by the Members themselves.

Nick, is there anything you would like to add?

Nick Beech: In many other areas of parliamentary activity, there is a very strict line on the role of Members' staff, for example on tabling a motion or adding a Member's name to an amendment on the Order Paper: it is very clearly defined who can or cannot do those things. Parliament, as ever, evolves, and this is an evolving area in which there is clearly a role that Members' staff play. It is a role that Members value, and it has been an increasing role over the past decade.

Q125 Katrina Murray: We are aware that the volumes of WPQs have increased substantially during this Parliament; that is one of the reasons for this inquiry. How has that affected the Table Office?

Dr Bhatti: I suppose, at the surface level, increased volumes of questions mean that the flow is higher, in terms of what the team is processing and the editing work that we do. We manage that work around a wide range of other responsibilities: the team is also responsible for the production of the daily Order Paper for Chamber business, and we deal with early-day motions, applications for Westminster Hall debates and Adjournment debates, and so on. At a purely surface level, higher volumes mean that the workload increases. The working hours in the day do not change, so we manage that through prioritisation in the usual way.

Q126 Katrina Murray: Have there been any other trends of which we should be aware in relation to volumes of WPQs?

Dr Bhatti: What sorts of trend are you thinking of?

Katrina Murray: Anything that we might not have seen at a surface level, but that the Table Office has experienced. You deal with it every day; we do not.

Dr Bhatti: I will let Nick pick this one up.

Nick Beech: A concept with which I am sure the Committee is familiar is that of the card. This is a deeply unhelpful term; we are coming to the men's football world cup, and it has the slight air of us blowing a whistle or



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showing a red card. If we could rebrand it as something like a “mutually beneficial conversation”, we would all be a lot better off.

But the card gives us a measure, and it is a crude measure: the number of times we say to Members, “Can you have a conversation with us about this question?” If you are looking for a trend, 25% of questions were carded, historically. In the last Session, 2024-26, it was 15%, but that would have been on a curve; I would say that that was 25% coming down. In the current Session, it is 6%. The rules have not changed, but the way in which we are implementing them at the sharp end has, in the face of those increased volumes. That is a conscious management choice—a team choice—that we have taken.

On how the team are affected, I am lucky enough to lead them at the sharp end, and they are absolutely tremendous in the face of these increased volumes. I would like to put my thanks to them on the record for their work here and their resilience in the face of those challenges. I also thank our colleagues from PDS, who we do not hear enough about but who maintain the robust IT system that underpins it all.

Katrina Murray: So it is not that my grammar is getting any better, then.

Q127 **Michael Wheeler:** No one would necessarily disagree with anything that you have just said, and lots of witnesses have put their thanks to the team on the record, but might I just press you?

You have been very diplomatic about the increased number of WPQs and the strain it might be placing on the team. I am sure that they are rising to the challenge, as you have said, but we have seen a significant increase in numbers. I do not think anyone would expect that not to have an impact either on the ability of the team to deliver everything they would want to or on their wellbeing. You have been very diplomatic, but might I press you on the impact within the Table Office of the significant increase in numbers?

Dr Bhatti: There are a couple of things to say in response to that. The first goes to the point about wider trends and the increased volumes in a short period of time. There was one day recently—a Monday not long after the start of this parliamentary Session—when we had 800 questions in a day. That was unprecedented. I do not diminish at all the burden that that places on the team, who have risen to the challenge in the professional way that I would fully expect of them.

Where those events are unusual, and you get a respite over the next couple of days, over the non-sitting Friday or into the recess, it is manageable. Where those volumes are persistent, it can be difficult, and it does affect morale in the team, but we work with an incredibly professional group of individuals. Clerks and operational staff deal with huge volumes of emails and questions and have all sorts of other responsibilities, and they do an excellent job throughout.

I would add one thing. A Procedure Committee report over a decade ago, in 2011, recognised the discretion that the office has to hold over some



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ordinary questions to the following day on particularly busy days. We have it in the back of our mind that if we experience a really unprecedented day and we cannot process questions before staff are off home for the evening, often well after the rise of the House, we can hold those over to the following day. In my time in the Table Office—I have been there since September last year—we have only had to do that once, and it was not the day that we processed 800 questions.

Q128 Michael Wheeler: Would you say that we are seeing an increasing number of unprecedented days? Is it becoming a persistent norm that you do not have respite?

Dr Bhatti: Nick is at the coalface on these things, so I will bring him in, but my observation over the period in which I have been doing this job is that when I started, 500 or 600 was an unusual sitting day. Now, 500 or 600 feels very normal, particularly at the front end of the week; 800 was unprecedented. Recess volumes have gone up over the past full calendar year or so and are persistently high, so that does not provide the usual period of respite that we would get. But the demand is there from Members, and they obviously value questions as a product.

There are some interesting questions for this Committee. Does the purpose of a written parliamentary question remain what we set out at the beginning of this evidence session? Is that how questions should continue to be seen? If volumes continue to rise, what challenges will that present for the integrity and long-term stability of the system?

We know that Members get frustrated by poor answers from Government Departments. We do not play a role in looking at answers at all—that is not an authority that we have under the delegations to us from the Speaker—but clearly the system is creaking under the pressure of the numbers that are coming in, so I think it is right to take a step back and ask, “What do Members want from this system?” The inquiry that this Committee is conducting is really timely.

Nick Beech: I first performed this role a decade ago. At that point, we thought that 200 or 300 questions was a lot. The first manager I worked for, who was in Farrah’s role, said to me, “Do 30 good questions, and you’ve done a good job for the team.” It is 130 now, and that is quite a different matter.

I should also say that WPQs are only one of the Table Office’s responsibilities. It is a proceeding in Parliament; it really matters to Members, and it matters a great deal to me. I would rank it below the Order Paper in the scale of things that are passing over my desk and their range of importance; we are also giving sub judice advice and arranging Westminster Hall debates and Adjournment debates. All those things matter intensely to Members, so we have to set it in the scale of our challenges.

You used the word “respite”, which is very helpful. Over the period in which I have been doing this, the one time we did not do what we said we



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would was on a recess day. I would earnestly counsel the Committee to carefully consider the arrangements for recess tabling of questions. There are no limits on the digital submission of questions using eQM during recess. The one time we did not manage to process everything was when one Member submitted 340 questions bang at the end of recess.

We do not have resource sitting around waiting for the opportunity to do some questions. We are in the world of a savings programme in the House of Commons. We want to be highly efficient, and we are highly efficient. If you could consider the rationale for Members being able to submit 20 questions on eQM on a sitting day and any number of questions on eQM on a non-sitting day, any steer you could give us would be helpful. I for one, and I suspect my team, would be very grateful, because “respite” is a key word.

If there is an event like the banking crisis, Members will want to submit a lot of questions and we will want to process those questions, but I would not like to ask the team to climb the mountain every day. Special circumstances call for special responses. If it becomes normalised, we have to think about this as managers.

Chair: That is very helpful.

Q129 **Michael Wheeler:** You might get your wish and come to a discussion of recess arrangements soon enough, but before we get to that, to what extent are you seeing duplicate, repeated or very similar questions playing a role in the increase in volumes? If that is an issue, what could we consider recommending to address it?

Dr Bhatti: We have always seen duplicate questions. That is not a new phenomenon. There is a really clear rule in “Erskine May” about duplicates. If you think about the logic, we always go back to purpose: what is the scrutiny purpose of a question? If it is to seek information, and that information already exists, or it is to press the Government for action, and that question pressing for action has already happened, why would you ask it a second time unless the circumstances had changed? That is one of the circumstances in which we would allow a similar or identical question to go through.

I should also say that duplicates have historically been quite difficult to pick up. We have a number of members of staff on the team, all of whom are processing questions individually. We have historical search tools that we have used to look for duplicate questions, and members of the team might spot something that they had edited something similar on before, or recalled something that looked like it might have been a duplicate.

Since the start of this parliamentary Session, we have rolled out an internal AI tool to identify similar questions. We have been using that for a few weeks, and that has certainly been helping us to identify duplicate questions. I was reliably informed by the team that on a single sitting day we had one Member of Parliament table 16 WPQs, of which seven were duplicates of their own questions from the preceding weeks or months.

Certainly, duplicates are an issue. We flag them where we see them. We card them, because it is against the rules of order to ask a duplicate question, and usually they get withdrawn.

Nick Beech: That is in paragraph 22.19 of “Erskine May”. It is a set of rules that we are implementing here; if Members wanted some different rules, we would be very happy to implement those.

Q130 **Gurinder Singh Josan:** There is currently no limit on the number of written parliamentary questions that Members can submit during recess. Why is that the case? What would the impact be if that changed?

Dr Bhatti: Why is that the case? There is a bit of history to this, which you can track through sequential reports from the Procedure Committee over a decade or so.

It has always been the case that during sitting periods, if you are tabling a hard copy, there is no limit. During non-sitting periods, Members could historically post questions in, and the staff would be present on a printing day—the day towards the end of the recess when questions get processed—to receive hard copies. When electronic tabling was introduced, an initial limit of five electronically tabled questions was set. At that point, there were conversations between the then Procedure Committee and various Members of Parliament, and it was thought that being limited to asking five questions during a three-month summer recess was insufficient, so a recommendation was made for the cap to be lifted for recesses of a week or longer. The cap on electronically tabled questions then shifted from five to 20, I think within the same year—I would have to go back to the reports to check. It was not really looked at again. The lack of a limit was not a big issue; it has only really emerged as something that has presented practical challenges in the last year or so.

An important point to make in respect of recesses is that, even though Members are submitting questions through MemberHub, and even though we are receiving and editing them, they are not published and are not sent to Government Departments until printing day. In a long summer recess, that is usually the Friday before the House returns the following Monday or Tuesday.

There is a risk, I suppose, that those volumes of questions coming in over the recess period become outdated before they are sent. There is also a Government perspective—I am sure you will hear from the Leader of the House at some point in this inquiry—that they return after a recess and there is a huge volume waiting on the desks of civil servants and Ministers for approval and response.

One thing I would certainly want to come across in this evidence session, and in any discussion that I ever have with Members or a Committee of Members, is that we in the Table Office are here as Clerks to provide a service to Members. We are here because we are dedicated parliamentary servants. We want to support Members in their vital role of scrutinising the Government. We are here to support scrutiny, not stifle it. The question



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that I would pose to the Committee is “What is the rationale for unlimited numbers during a recess period? What will give the most effective scrutiny outcome for Members?” Ultimately, that is the most important thing.

Q131 Gurinder Singh Josan: If that were to change—I understand your question back to us—and we did say that there should be a limit on questions, or even that they should be published before printing day during the recess, what would be the impact of those changes?

Dr Bhatti: The first thing to say is that any changes should be driven by a political choice, on the basis, I assume, of a recommendation from this Committee. It would absolutely be for the House to take that decision about what it wanted to do. As Clerks we can advise on options and on the feasibility of those options, but ultimately, whatever the House decides, we will work through the implications of that in our resourcing models, operating models and so on.

You could look at something like a limit per printing day. You could look at having additional printing days peppered throughout a particularly long recess; that might be more appropriate in the summer than in other recesses. There is also the potential to do something like what the House of Lords does, which is to have anything submitted over that recess period count towards the first day, although that probably disadvantages Members of this House in comparison with the current arrangements.

If you are thinking about additional printing days, that would have a knock-on impact on Government Departments and their requirements because, once questions have been published and Government Departments have received them, the clock starts ticking, in terms of the timeliness of responses. So there are wider implications from changing the publishing days through a particularly long recess period.

Q132 Chair: Just to clarify, once a question has been submitted during a recess period, even though you receive it and deal with it, it is not published until the end of the recess period. That creates a bottleneck for the Department that deals with the question once it has been published, and it may be out of date by then anyway.

Dr Bhatti: That is correct.

Nick Beech: Yes, that is correct.

Q133 James Asser: This follows on from the question that was just asked, but it also probably links back to what you were saying, Nick, about the growth in numbers. Members can currently submit up to 20 WPQs on MemberHub each sitting day. We know that it applies only to the electronic system, but in your experience does that limit remain fit for purpose?

Nick Beech: The first thing to say is that Members have always been able to submit as many questions as they like in hard copy, and it is possible to imagine something like the banking crisis, where in-depth scrutiny by a Member who was in the building would be justified. What I would observe is that written parliamentary questions are popular with Members of Parliament, and I like working in a part of the House that is doing



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something that matters to Members. The 20 limit for a sitting day seems about right to me, from where I am sitting in my current role. If I were looking at recesses, I might recommend—although I would be far more interested in what Members thought than what I thought—an overall limit of 20 for the whole recess, possibly with multiple printing days, but I would be open to any other offers on that point. My main interest is in facilitating scrutiny, but if you would like a personal recommendation, 20 a day seems right for a sitting day.

James Asser: You are bound to get the odd Member who wants to put in more, but as an average it hits what people need, you think.

Dr Bhatti: It probably does. Observing the trends over a period is a useful thing to do. There is always going to be a risk that volumes continue to grow. If the 800 that represented one sitting day was Members tabling their maximum quota of 20 electronically, it was just 40 Members. It is conceivable that you could have double that number go through eQM and MemberHub to table their full allocation, so the system, to some extent, has always relied on sensible and responsible use.

The ability to table unlimited numbers in hard copy also remains a really useful safeguard, as Nick says, for urgent scrutiny need, and it does come up from time to time. Where it happens, there are some practical challenges about re-keying the questions if they are provided to us in manuscript rather than submitted, in addition to the hard copy submission, as an email attachment or something, but we always have really constructive conversations with Members in those circumstances and get a sense of the urgency of the questions that they are asking. The vast majority of Members we deal with are incredibly professional and work with us on how we can process those and in what timeframe. We would seek to do them, and often do do them, within the same sitting day.

Nick Beech: Some of the problems here are the problems of success. The vast majority of written questions that we are dealing with are very well drafted, in good faith—99% of them, probably. There are some superb drafters of questions out there among Members, who put in one or two beautifully crafted questions that get them exactly where they want to be, and in some cases, dare I say it, the Department is pleased to receive them, because they allow the clarification of important matters. There are really excellent purveyors of written questions out there, some of whom you took evidence from last week.

Q134 **James Asser:** They will be pleased to hear it. Moving on from the numbers to deadlines, if we were to recommend a later cut-off time for the electronic submission on MemberHub while retaining the ability to table in person until the rise of the House, what impact would that have on the Table Office and on Members?

Nick Beech: Later, I think, would be extremely challenging; earlier, I think, would be extremely helpful.

James Asser: I had a feeling that that might be the answer, but we thought we should test it.



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Nick Beech: At 6 o'clock on a Tuesday or a Wednesday, I might well be attempting to draft the Order Paper, which is best done in monastic calm with a wet tea towel wrapped around one's head—not an easy thing to do. At that moment, there could also be a flood of written questions, which are proceedings in Parliament—as Farrah rightly said at the beginning, we take them intensely seriously. If we could shift that back, I would suggest 4 o'clock as a nice easy number for everyone to have in their mind for the deadline on eQM. You are really just moving a 24-hour period slightly earlier, but that would very much help our workflow in the Table Office. If we have debate deadlines at that moment as well, I am trying to do three extremely serious things that Members care about at the same moment. It would be easier for us to break those things down, purely to manage the work.

Dr Bhatti: As Nick says, the cut-off period applies only to eQM; hard copy will absolutely continue to be accepted until the rise of the House. It becomes a sort of arbitrary 24-hour period in which Members can table questions. From a purely resourcing-model, workflow perspective, I will have more colleagues online and on shift earlier in the day during core working hours than I will have on the late shift. The late shift team are typically focusing on more urgent needs around Chamber business and the Order Paper. The impact that the cut-off time has on Members is probably a question for Members. I hope it would be minimal, particularly with the safeguards around hard copy.

James Asser: That is helpful, because while we are very alert to your position on serving Members and making it work, we are also trying to take on board the practical aspects of your work. We are keen for you to have your monastic calm rather than be lying in a darkened room with a wet tea towel on your head.

Q135 **Michael Wheeler:** Moving on slightly, several witnesses have praised the work of the Table Office staff in their evidence, as I alluded to earlier, but some have suggested that they feel that the Table Office too readily blocks questions, and that more questions should be allowed through to the next stage of reaching Ministers. How would you respond to that suggestion?

Dr Bhatti: I would say that we never block a question. We try really hard not to block questions. We query questions, because our role is to ensure that the House's own rules, which are clearly set out in "Erskine May", are being adhered to. We do that under the authority of the Speaker, who is the ultimate authority on the admissibility of questions. This alludes, I think, to the carding process, which we talked about earlier. A card is an invitation to have a conversation to try to resolve an issue; it is not a block. The only time we would say to a Member or a staffer that a question could not be tabled is if it were clearly disorderly within the rules of order.

Nick Beech: There are certain occasions on which a block is imposed by a Department, not by us. There may be some misconceptions here that we are involved in that blocking process. The most common one you get is national security. The recent training example we would use is the Chinese



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embassy. Rightly, Members asked any number of questions about the planning approval for the Chinese embassy. That had a block put on it by CLG, not any other Department—and it is Departments that put the block on, not the Government—and we did not accept any written questions on the planning process for the Chinese embassy directed at CLG on the grounds that it was a planning matter.

This was not an argument advanced by us, and Members know how to advance different arguments in different forums if they did not happen to agree with that. There were any number of other Departments to which it was possible to ask other questions that might relate to some of the other issues in relation to that particular choice. But that was a block introduced by the Department. The moment planning permission is granted for the Chinese embassy, that block comes off. We tend to allow one in those circumstances in order to establish the block, and all blocks disappear at the end of each Session, so we are looking for one question to re-establish the block or see whether the Department is still in that space.

The other, more common one would be in relation to national security, but as you heard last week from Mr Obese-Jecty, who sometimes asks a lot of questions about defence, Members can find other ways. These kinds of question might lead to conversations with a Department or a Minister in another setting where they might find out things that cannot be stated on the record. Beyond that, I refer again to the carding statistics: 25% historically, 15% in the last Session and 6% in this Session. That is a choice, made without changing any of the rules.

Q136 Michael Wheeler: Looking specifically at carding, I fully hear the statistics that you have given. You have clearly heard some of the evidence. I will not put it to you specifically that some colleagues have suggested in their evidence that you might be creating your own work by carding more than normal, because I accept your statistics, as I am sure the inquiry will.

I will ask a slightly broader question. In your view, as the people who administer the system and who have those very helpful conversations with me and colleagues, are the current carding arrangements fit for purpose, or are there changes that that would help us all to improve the system together?

Nick Beech: When I first did this 10 years ago, more Members came into the Table Office and it was a good thing. I do not want to card anybody; I want to facilitate Members to do effective scrutiny. If we start the conversation, I can think of all kinds of ways in which Members can get at what they want. It is simply about understanding what it is that I can help them with.

I carded someone this morning through my deep ignorance of how springs are manufactured. I do not put questions through that I do not understand. My knowledge of the different grades of steel used in this country is insufficient, and I learned something. More of those



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conversations in which I get to speak to Members who know exactly what they are talking about would be better for me and better for them.

I suspect the clock will not be turned back on that, and I am all in favour of digital working. I understand the vast range of competing pressures to which Members are subject. At the same time, the personal contact in the Table Office is much the best way to resolve cards, in my experience. What I want to do is work effectively with Members. I need to listen to them, and then I can help them with my knowledge and my skills.

Dr Bhatti: That is right. The only other thing I would say is that, as Nick said earlier in this evidence session, the term “carding” is perhaps a little unhelpful. It creates the sense that we are stopping something happening, which is not the intention behind it at all.

The other challenge that we sometimes face is when multiple cards build up from individual members and start to clog up the back end of the system. Unless those questions are withdrawn, or unless a conversation happens and we resolve an issue through a redraft or something, they sit in the back end of the system and do not fall away until the end of the parliamentary Session. That creates a sense that there is some unfinished business that needs dealing with.

Our absolute preference is to deal with those conversations over the phone or in person. In our experience, it is much quicker to resolve an issue through discussion than through protracted email exchanges, particularly when there might be nuance in the way something has been interpreted or some additional policy background to an issue that can be shared much more freely in a discussion than it could through a back-and-forth in writing.

Q137 **Katrina Murray:** Thank you. I have certainly found this session to be very helpful.

Another specific area that has been raised with us is factual basis. Have there been any changes to that requirement over time? Do you see a case for making changes?

Nick Beech: It is in “Erskine May”, paragraph 22.13: “The facts on which a question is based may be set out as briefly as practicable within the framework of a question, provided that the Member asking it makes themselves responsible for their accuracy, but extracts from newspapers or books, and paraphrases of or quotations from speeches etc are not admissible.”

Historically, the basis for asking a question was something a Minister said at the Dispatch Box. We are now in a place where, much to the disappointment of Mr Speaker, bits of the Budget appear in newspapers in the week beforehand. Members say, “Can I ask a question about that?” I say, “What is the basis for thinking that such things are in the Budget?” It quite clearly says in “Erskine May” that a newspaper report is not good enough. Those are the rules of order in “Erskine May”; if they said something else that took account of where we are today, that would be

useful. We have been as permissive as we can in that space. An attributed quote, on the record in a newspaper, I think I would probably take.

On other elements of basis, I will give you an example. We had this as a question: "How much her Department has spent on funding terrorism." It is reasonable to ask at that point what the basis is for thinking that that Department funds terrorism. To get into that conversation, particularly by email, is quite a lot of work, to go backwards and forwards. I have to card that. I used to be the Clerk of the Foreign Affairs Committee and I can imagine the sort of organisations that that might be directed at. I would have liked to speak to that Member, because they probably have an organisation in mind. Maybe with a question that began with "whether", like "Whether her Department has provided funding to specific organisation X", we might get somewhere useful, but there is an imputation of wrongdoing there, and that is where we must ask for basis. For some of the other questions, we try to get out of it by using "whether" but not in one like that, where there is an imputation of bad faith. It is there in "May", but against that we are trying very much to facilitate scrutiny by Members.

Q138 Gurinder Singh Josan: Moving on to Government processing of written parliamentary questions, the transfer of questions between Government Departments was raised with us. How does the Table Office deal with submitted questions that appear to be for a different answering body?

Dr Bhatti: The team would provide advice based on its observations of ministerial responsibility across different Departments and where it has seen examples of transfers in the past, with both written and oral parliamentary questions. Where there is clarity on which Department is responsible, we might just edit that through in a written parliamentary question so that it goes to the right Department in the first place.

Where a WPQ is transferred, the Member still gets a response but it is perhaps not from the Department to which they initially directed the question. If Members were concerned and had a particular angle that they wanted to pose to a different Department, I would encourage them to come and speak to the Clerks in the team about how best to structure that question so that it more neatly fit within the departmental responsibility that they were looking for.

With oral questions, we provide advice on the risk of transfer, and it is for Members to accept that risk or otherwise. I think that the risk of oral transfers is slightly greater, because if a question is transferred for oral Question Time, the Member loses their slot on the Order Paper.

Nick Beech: For the avoidance of doubt, the Table Office plays no role in the decision to transfer questions.

Q139 Gurinder Singh Josan: Can you set out for us what a Government block is, in relation to written parliamentary questions, and how that works?

Nick Beech: There are cases—I mentioned earlier the Chinese embassy, or national security—in which a question is put in and the Department



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declines to answer. As ever with written questions, it is but one tool; Members have other tools open to them. At that moment, where a block appears, it might be a moment for Members to consider using a different tool to pursue their scrutiny objectives. I would also say that it is only a Department that puts in a block, not the whole of Government. It may be that there are other elements of such questions that Members can explore in other places.

Q140 Gurinder Singh Josan: Would the Table Office welcome more Government input in interpreting blocks?

Dr Bhatti: Sometimes, responding Government Departments do not fully understand the impact of their answers in relation to the team then applying those blocks. I would certainly welcome greater clarity from Government in understanding what those words are and what they mean, and a system in which the Government more proactively told us that they would not be answering questions on a matter. It is often just left to us to understand that from the answer that has been given. You could come up with ways to have a more systematic arrangement between Government Departments and the Table Office to be really clear on when those blocks are imposed, when they have been lifted and when they might change.

Q141 Gurinder Singh Josan: If there is only very limited information from the Department, presumably the information that you have to communicate back to the Member is limited.

Dr Bhatti: We would just advise the Member on the basis of the responses that have already come through. The responses that the Department send go directly to the Members themselves.

Q142 Mr Morrison: We have touched on this slightly, but some Members have raised concerns about the quality of some responses to WPQs. Why is the Table Office's role limited to approving questions, and not approving answers? On top of that, what advice could the Table Office give to Members when they are dissatisfied with a response?

Dr Bhatti: To take the first question, our authority to review the orderliness of questions, which underpins the service that we provide in relation to editing and submission, derives from the Speaker's authority, which is set out in "Erskine May". It is a principle that you see playing out in the Chamber day in, day out, where the Speaker will judge the orderliness of things that are being asked in the Chamber. You will also often hear Mr Speaker say that he is not responsible for ministerial answers. Without his authority, we likewise have no responsibility for the answers that Departments give to written parliamentary questions. That is the fundamental point there.

Sorry: was your second question about what Members can do if they are dissatisfied?

Q143 Mr Morrison: Yes: what advice can the Table Office give Members if they are dissatisfied with a response?



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Dr Bhatti: We would certainly help with the drafting of pursuant questions to try to pinpoint a more detailed answer, if a Member wanted to continue to pursue the matter through WPQs. We have often seen Members raise their dissatisfaction with the quality of answers through points of order in the Chamber, or even follow up on unsatisfactory answers through oral parliamentary questions in the Chamber, either where they have come up through the oral questions shuffle or where they have been successful in bobbing for a supplementary question. We sometimes see Members applying either for urgent questions or for debates such as Adjournment debates, to pursue an issue on which they have had a series of unsatisfactory responses.

What else, Nick? There must be other things that I have missed.

Nick Beech: The Leader of the House would always be somebody to speak to on such matters.

Dr Bhatti: Yes, and we are also very conscious of the work that this Committee does on the timeliness of responses. Certainly, in the context of this ongoing inquiry, we have referred a few Members to this Committee.

Q144 **Mary Kelly Foy:** In your written evidence, you suggest ending the pretence that ordinary WPQs are answered on the second sitting day after they are tabled. Can you give us a little more detail?

Dr Bhatti: Sure. Ordinary questions are put down for answer on the second sitting day after the day on which they are tabled. That is based on the general requirements for the notice periods for questions, as set out in the House's Standing Orders. Questions are not formally answered by Departments before that date, so in effect it is the first date on which they could possibly answer it, rather than the deadline for answering.

Over time, a series of target timeframes have been established on the basis of former Procedure Committee reports. In the '70s, the House endorsed a recommendation from a Select Committee on Parliamentary Questions that ordinary responses be considered to have been provided on time if they are provided within five working days of the date for answer, which is essentially seven working days from the tabling date.

To put that in a working timeframe, if you publish the question on a Monday, Wednesday is the earliest date for answer. That is the answering date that appears publicly, but Tuesday of the following week is working day No. 5, and that would be the first time that the House would deem it to have been answered on time. Answers that are still not provided within 10 working days are considered to be late under those arrangements, which were endorsed on the Floor of the House. We have this slight anomaly whereby the answering date put up online is the earliest possible answering date, but there is a House expectation that five to 10 working days is about right. Perhaps, based on a recommendation from this Committee, if it were minded to make one, that could be clarified.

Q145 **Sir Gavin Williamson:** I wonder whether I could ask your advice. I do



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apologise for arriving late, like a response from the FCDO to a written question.

Mr Beech has put forward a number of suggestions about how you can pursue things. He is absolutely right. We all know that a lot of what goes on in Parliament is performative and is about finding different ways to exert pressure.

Over many years, the Procedure Committee has published lists, and Departments have largely ignored them. We publish these lists reasonably regularly. We could put in a recommendation that the Leader of the House verbally report the list—the shaming list, shall we call it—over five days. The Department that comes at the bottom of the list would then have to make a statement on what they are doing to improve that.

The Procedure Committee could make such a recommendation so that there is a consequence. I have always taken the view that if people do not believe that there is a consequence to their actions, there will continue to be poor behaviour, because it will never be that much of a priority. Would that be helpful, potentially, in focusing the minds of Departments? No one wants to come bottom, do they?

Dr Bhatti: The House is absolutely in charge of its own rules. If the House wanted to take a decision like that, I think that would be perfectly reasonable. If this Committee wanted to recommend it and put it to the House for a decision, that could become part of the framework of our rules.

Q146 **Sir Gavin Williamson:** We often talk about bringing someone to the Bar of the House, although we never do. You could create a mechanism by which there is always someone coming to the Dispatch Box to explain.

Dr Bhatti: There is always scope for creative thinking in developing new and interesting procedures. Ultimately, that is a political decision, but you could certainly envisage some kind of reporting mechanism, a role for a Committee of the House or ways of linking reporting to requirements for time on the Floor to discuss something with a Minister. That would all be subject to developing some kind of procedural framework, putting that to the House for a decision and then seeking its endorsement.

Sir Gavin Williamson: Thank you ever so much.

Chair: We will have two of the worst-performing Departments before us in a few weeks' time. We also have a meeting with the Leader of the House, so we can put some of these proposals to him.

Q147 **Kenneth Stevenson:** What training and guidance in relation to WPQs does the Table Office offer to Members and their staff? Would it help to have more training after Members have settled in?

Nick Beech: We have always had an extensive training offer both for Members and for their staff. We will train in groups; we will train individually; we will set up a formal session with a group of Members; we will do an informal session with an individual Member or member of staff. Over the years, I have participated in all those things.

I wish that more such training were taken up. I wish that more Members and more Members' staff asked me to run such training sessions. However, I appreciate that Members of Parliament have a range of demands on their time. Having worked with Members of Parliament for many years, I appreciate the challenges in finding time and space in their diary. We would very much like to see more Members and Members' staff, and we would do our level best to make it worth your while.

Q148 Chair: The last question is from me. A number of Members have suggested that increasing the resourcing of the Table Office would be a solution to the challenge presented by the volume of WPQs. To what extent do you see resourcing alone as a solution? What related issues would need to be considered alongside it? You have touched on some of them, but what else is there than resourcing?

Dr Bhatti: I think we have to take a step back from the resourcing question and circle back to where we started: what do Members want from this system? We know that they place a great deal of value on written parliamentary questions and get a huge amount out of the questions that they submit—even in the current world, where there are concerns about the quality of answers and so on. From my perspective, we want a system that is sustainable, that has integrity, that stands up to the status of being a proceeding in Parliament and that is taken seriously, as it ought to be, by all who use it.

We are an organisation that will always adapt to the needs of Members. Personally, I do not think that this is a resourcing problem; I think that the Committee and others need to think carefully about what the long-term future of questions looks like. Let us have a restatement of the purpose of questions and make sure that the rules set out in "May" and so on are linked to that purpose, so that we are holding the lines that the House wants us to hold on the orderliness of questions.

From a resourcing perspective, if you gave me two, three or four extra Clerks tomorrow I would absorb them instantly, but does that solve the problem in the long term? I am not sure that it does. We have talked about the numbers that are coming through at the moment, but to some extent questions have always been a slightly precarious system. If 100 Members turned up today and tabled 20 questions each, that would be 2,000 questions, but we would get through them and we would do them in the most pragmatic way possible—and that is Members' right. It is their absolute right to ask questions and scrutinise the Government, but as we have said a couple of times during this session, we are here to facilitate scrutiny.

We want Members to get the most out of these systems. You can have either a high-volume, low-quality system or a low-volume, high-quality system. Where the balance sits across those two areas is a judgment that politicians need to make, I would say.

Chair: As there are no follow-ups from anybody, that brings us to the end of our questions. Thank you both very much for taking the time to speak



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to us today. It has certainly been very illuminating, and there is lots for us to think about in our inquiry. As ever, if there is anything that you would like to add, please send it through to the Committee Clerks, who will make sure that we see it promptly.