

Procedure Committee

Oral evidence: Written Parliamentary Questions: Departmental performance in Session 2024-26, HC 48 (828)

Wednesday 17 June 2026

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Members present: Cat Smith (Chair); Bambos Charalambous; Sir Christopher Chope; Mary Kelly Foy; Gurinder Singh Josan; John Lamont; Mr Tom Morrison; Lee Pitcher; Kenneth Stevenson.

Education Committee Chair present: Helen Hayes.

Questions 48-78

Witnesses

I: Josh MacAlister OBE MP, Minister for Children and Families, and Tony Foot, Chief Operating Officer and Director General of Strategy and Operations Group at the Department for Education.

Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: Josh MacAlister and Tony Foot.

Chair: Welcome to this afternoon's public session of the Procedure Committee. Written parliamentary questions, WPQs for short, are an important tool for MPs in raising public interest and dealing with much of their constituency work, and our Committee routinely monitors the performance of Whitehall Departments in responding to WPQs in a timely manner. Where performance dips below a certain threshold, we ask Government Ministers and officials to come before us to explain any issues and set out their plans to resolve them.

This afternoon, we are joined by Josh MacAlister, the Minister for Children and Families, and Tony Foot, the chief operating officer from the Department for Education, to discuss the Department's WPQ performance over the last Session of Parliament. Good afternoon to you both. Before we begin questions, please will you formally introduce yourselves for the record, starting with Minister MacAlister?

Josh MacAlister: I am Josh MacAlister, the Minister for Children and Families, and the Member of Parliament for Whitehaven and Workington.

Tony Foot: Hello, I am Tony Foot, the chief operating officer for the Department for Education.

Q48 **Chair:** Thank you both so much for your time this afternoon. As is traditional, the first question comes from me. In the last Session of Parliament, there was a significant drop in the DFE's performance in responding to WPQs in a timely manner. Could you shed some light on the factors underpinning that drop?

Josh MacAlister: Thank you to the Committee for the opportunity to come before you and explain a bit about the Department's performance. As a Minister, I recognise the importance of the parliamentary questions process and the need for replies to be accurate, detailed and timely. The Department for Education's performance is poor, and I am not coming to you today to make any defence of it. It is not good enough, and the whole ministerial team are determined to get it back up to where it needs to be.

There are a number of causes of the deterioration in the response rate; some—volumes and the changing policy and legislative landscape—are contextual factors, and I will not spend any time talking about them, because you will have heard about them from other Departments. However, there are particular process challenges in the Department for Education, and I will briefly set out the changes we are making to get back up to timeliness. Essentially, those challenges bottlenecks in the process that mean that too many responses are not coming through when they should.

There are four key areas of action and, with Tony, I am happy to elaborate on them in more detail. First, we are streamlining the process. Some of



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those changes have already come into effect, which has allowed us to stop the deterioration of the response rate and achieve a slight improvement in recent weeks. That is welcome, but it is nowhere near where it needs to be, so further streamlining of the process needs to be done.

Secondly, we want to increase the visibility of teams' performance and have greater accountability across the Department for resolving the bottlenecks and ensuring the quality of answers is where it needs to be. Thirdly, there is the introduction of a new case management system. The Department is using an older system than other Departments, and we are going through the process of putting a new one in place. That will be in place by September this year, which will improve the system.

Finally, there is temporary additional resource to ensure that we get back up to responding in the expected time. Although the Department's view is that the situation is not the result of resource constraint per se, we do need additional resource in the next couple of months to get this issue fixed.

The commitment I am making on behalf of the Department is that we will be back up to 85% by the end of November. I will be in touch with the Committee between now and then with updates on the progress we are making.

Q49 Chair: You mentioned the increased volume, which we have seen across the board for all Government Departments. Is there anything specific to your Department that means you have particularly struggled, whereas other Departments have managed the increased volume and still met expectations? Other than what you have set out already, is there anything specific to your Department that means that that has been particularly challenging?

Josh MacAlister: There is nothing specific to the Department. I have seen the evidence given to your Committee by Department of Health Ministers, and there were very similar issues about new policy and policies on fairly controversial areas, where there is a lot of constituency contact with MPs' offices, which cascades through into lots of written parliamentary questions being asked.

To take just one example, the SEND policy landscape, and adoption, which is my field, there have been considerable spikes in volumes. New policies have been adopted, which has required quite a lot of back and forth and, in some cases, rewrites. The rewrites rate has gone down, which is good. The proportion of answers provided by officials to MPs and Ministers that are being redrafted has reduced, but it is still too high. Building confidence in the system for giving accurate responses within the narrow timeframe we have requires a system that is really slick, so that questions can move through and be answered quickly. That is what we need to address.

Q50 Lee Pitcher: On the transition to the new casework system, you said you would like to get back to target performance by November. That system is coming in up until September. In the scenario planning, have you thought through the risks associated with bringing in a new system? If any of those risks were to materialise, would it detrimentally impact the

November target?

Josh MacAlister: Tony will come in on this, but the system is being used by other Government Departments, so it is not novel. I am confident we can make good progress between now and September on improving timeliness. The Department used to be high performing on response rates using the current system. There is now a higher volume, but we should be able to make progress even without the new system.

Tony Foot: We are working with other Departments to learn from systems that they have introduced. We have seen Departments get some real benefits—about 20% in terms of processing efficiency—from automated downloads of PQs and automated grouping of PQs. We are following and learning from other Departments that have done this and done this well. As the Minister says, the plan does not solely rely on that element; there is a series of other elements that really matter. We know we can do it even without the system, but the system will really help.

Q51 **John Lamont:** Good afternoon, Minister, and Mr Foot. I was going to ask about when you expect to get back to the 85% level, but you have confirmed that, hopefully, it is going to be in November. Can you explain what the process is within the Department? The question comes in and it goes to the policy people in the Department to draft a response; it then goes to spads before it gets to the Minister. Can you talk us through the process, please?

Tony Foot: I will go through the key stages of the process and then talk about the challenges and timeliness of each of those. Broadly, we look at four key blocks. There is an allocation process out to policy teams. It is important that that happens quickly so that the PQs get through to the drafting teams. The second part of the process is securing responses from those teams on time. It is quicker for named day PQs than it is for ordinary PQs, but we have clear deadlines for both of those processes. There is then a spad and ministerial clearance process. Across the whole of the cycle we look carefully at redraft rates, because redrafts add time to the process and, as the Minister says, it can undermine confidence in quality, which makes it harder for cases to flow through seamlessly.

Q52 **John Lamont:** Can you identify the bottleneck that has been causing the drop in performance? Are the rewrites that you mentioned the main issue?

Tony Foot: I can go through the different stages of that. In the allocation process, we are relatively rapid, with 95% of cases allocated to teams on time. We still have challenges with cases that are particularly cross-cutting, and we are taking further action on those, but at that stage of the process, we are relatively strong.

We have made progress on policy teams drafting responses on time, but we want to go further on that. There are some bottlenecks at the spad and ministerial stage that we will go through. The redrafts are critical. We were at around 19% redrafts in the second half of last year. We got that down to 12% at the beginning of this year, but we want that to drop further



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because, as I say, every one of those redrafts is additional time in the process and has an impact on confidence in the sequence overall.

- Q53 **John Lamont:** Analysing what you just said and thinking back to my time in Government, sometimes there were issues with spads and the Minister sitting on responses and not signing them off quickly enough. Is that an issue?

Josh MacAlister: From my own perspective, I have responses for colleagues who ask questions about my portfolio, which are in some senses slightly easier to move through quickly. The volume that I am responsible for is much lower than, for example, Minister Gould's. She has responsibility for the curriculum and SEND, where the volumes are extremely high, particularly at certain times of the year. There is a need at the moment for spads to clear all PQs and for that then to go to Ministers. If there is a problem with the content that needs to go back and be rewritten, or a clarification question needs to be asked, or a spad is out of action for a few hours, you can quickly end up with responses arriving with Ministers on the day they are due. If, as I have today, there are commitments in the diary that mean you span the full day, you are basically timing out sign-off. So building in enough time earlier in the process to make sure that stuff moves through is important.

The other element is where the question relates to a Lords Minister's portfolio. I cover Baroness Smith's portfolio—I am answerable for it in the Commons. I clear all her PQ responses to MPs about higher and further education, which is not my portfolio area. They have been cleared already by spads and Minister Smith, and then by me. Actually it is quite hard to get allocation, policy response, spad clearance, Minister and Minister approved, with diaries as they are. We need to improve some of those processes. I alluded to this earlier: we need to improve confidence in the system, so that fewer people need to eyeball everything. That will be a big part of resolving some of the bottlenecks.

- Q54 **John Lamont:** Will the new system address that? It will not create any new Ministers or new spads to help with that process. It just strikes me that, ultimately, there is only so much capacity at that bit of the process. I do not know whether the new system will address that.

Josh MacAlister: The new system is just one of four things that we need to do. The system we are using at the moment is quite old. It has not been updated for a number of years. Other Departments use systems that are better at doing the allocation and the tracking—you can see the timeliness in a more transparent way, which helps the system to move through more quickly. All that is not an excuse. Our performance is nowhere near where it needs to be, but the volume of PQs with the Department has doubled from 2024 to 2025. The approach that we have at the moment cannot handle that volume. The bottlenecks have just grown, which is why the performance is on the floor and needs to be improved.

- Q55 **Kenneth Stevenson:** How will you ensure that efforts to improve the



timeliness of responses do not lead to lower-quality answers?

Tony Foot: That is a really important question. As the Minister said, quality and timeliness can and should go hand in hand. Ministers rightly have very high expectations of the quality of responses that go back to parliamentary colleagues, and the higher the quality, the better able we are to secure timely responses.

The actions we are taking on quality specifically are in two main blocks. First, we have significantly strengthened and improved the guidance and the WPQ templates, so that they absolutely reflect the latest set of ministerial preferences and the best practice in other Departments. Then we work very closely to watch the redraft rate to make sure that we target teams that have high levels of redrafting with training and support, so that they are able to improve. Alongside the system, that is one of the key things that will improve the pace of cases moving through the whole chain.

Kenneth Stevenson: I relate this back to engineering, and I think that the modern methodology is to make sure that the quality is inbuilt all the way through and is not just inspected right at the end. You seem to be doing that, and you have that iterative cycle, where you look at it again. Good, thank you.

Chair: We are delighted that Helen Hayes, the Chair of the Education Committee, is guesting on the Procedure Committee this afternoon. Helen, I think you have some questions.

Q56 **Helen Hayes:** Thank you very much for having me, Chair. I am glad to be here. Minister, you have mentioned a couple of times the role of automation in improving the Department's response rate. Can you tell us a bit more about what automation looks like in this context?

Josh MacAlister: Yes. The new system offers an opportunity to build in some AI functionality. Tony will come in on the potential of the new system coming in in September, but it is very limited, if of any use, at the moment in either the WPQ process or the Department's correspondence process. In my view, where we have a clear repository of information and of policy positions that the Department has taken, directing large language models at that content in order to generate first drafts and accurate information—if it can speed things up—I would be personally very supportive of. The use of that could allow for us to have highly accurate information on the table to be looked at by people, and to be cleared much more quickly and in a less resource-intensive way. Tony, do you want to say anything more?

Tony Foot: Absolutely, yes. On automation opportunities, the biggest gains for other Departments have been the automated download and the automated grouping and processing at the first stage of the process. We have seen other Departments secure much better information on the challenges and blockages at each stage of the system, so again we can take that information and feed it back into the process engineering that colleagues have described.

Looking ahead, AI definitely has significant potential to source data more quickly and effectively, albeit it is always a really important principle that answers are human-driven and human-owned for accountability.

- Q57 Helen Hayes:** There is a huge debate within the Department's remit of responsibility about the use of AI in the education system, and there are concerns about the potential that we end up with work that has been generated by AI being marked by applications that use AI. We could cut out human interaction from much of the process of education if we do not get this right.

What principles are you applying to decision making in this process? We would all agree that our constituents expect to see bona fide responses from a Minister, reflecting the judgment of the Minister and the policy position of the Government—not something that a machine has spat out to meet a deadline and improve performance in the Department.

Josh MacAlister: There are a couple of things to say. There is a functionality distinction between our use and the role that AI could and should play in the education system—I imagine that topic was discussed at the Education Committee meeting this morning. That goes beyond the brief of this session. There are really important factors around cognitive offloading, the challenge that you need in the system for children, the marking of children's work, and the role that feedback can have for children through teacher-pupil interaction.

That is a completely different function to what a lot of PQs represent, which is an information trawl. Lots of PQs that I receive and sign off are specific questions about data points that are in files or links on other Government sources. AI could assist with identifying that and presenting it quickly, and then it would be approved and signed off by a series of human beings before it gets released.

My view is that, in time, the public would look increasingly dimly on Government Departments and agencies not making full use of technology where it can create more efficient processes that save them tax money—these processes are all expensive—and deliver more efficient, quick and transparent public services. The principle would be that where automation can speed up processes that humans would take longer to do, we will use it with human judgment and sign-off baked into it. That is the approach that I would expect the Department to take.

- Q58 Helen Hayes:** Thank you. Are you looking at any other measures that could help to streamline those processes? It would be helpful to hear a bit more about where the bottlenecks are. Is it Ministers signing off? Is it the drafting capacity? What are the stages?

Josh MacAlister: Tony can say a bit more about this, but across the four buckets of the process, there is an accumulation of delay that gathers through them—some more so than in other areas. With Ministers and spads, the accumulation is greater. They are at the end of the process, so to some extent you might expect that, but it accumulates through. Tony,



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do you want to say a bit more about the four areas where we are putting changes in place to meet the target?

Tony Foot: Absolutely. We have talked about the system, and I will not repeat that. The Minister talked about two areas: streamlining processes and raising visibility and accountability.

On the streamlining processes part, we are doing three things. The first is improving the spad clearance process by more clearly marking cases that are particularly urgent and helping spads to triage more effectively so that cases can move automatically on to Ministers and we do not squeeze the ministerial clearance time. There will be more frequent meetings between the WPQ team and the private office so that we have a real-time feedback loop on process challenges and any quality issues, and then we will share a daily lates report. Every day, information is shared across the private office set for all PQs that are late and the reasons for that so that we are learning in real time about those areas.

On accountability and raising visibility within the Department, there are two further steps that we are taking. First, the permanent secretary holds regular accountability meetings with each of her directors general. Performance on WPQs will be a standing item in that until we are back up to 85%. We are also going to use SCS forums each month to call out and celebrate the teams that are doing this well and give them a chance to discuss and talk through the things that are working for them as well as to challenge and call out the teams that are performing poorly.

Q59 Helen Hayes: On occasion, my Committee has been frustrated at late responses we have received to our reports from the Department. We perceive a tendency for the Department to wait until it has got all the answers, or it is a convenient moment to respond to the Committee. That is not how accountability is supposed to work.

There are timescales attached to Committee responses regarding the accountability process and the role of Back-Bench MPs and Committees in bringing information into the public domain and holding the Department to account. It is not for the Department to hold on to those responses until it is ready to provide them. Within the process we are talking about for questions, I wonder whether some of the delay is about that tendency to hold on to things until you have an answer that you are ready and want to give rather than the more bureaucratic issues that you have discussed already?

Josh MacAlister: In my experience, it definitely is not. The Department's view is that we want to respond within the timeframe set and the expectation there. There are sometimes very inconvenient questions where you think that if the Committee had asked that next week, I would have been able to give them a fuller answer. However, we definitely do not hold them back. We are not in a good place on our performance with this, and we want to get it back up to the right place and would prioritise doing that over having the more convenient moment through which to



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answer. I will take on board your broader point about Select Committee responses; you make an entirely reasonable point.

- Q60 **Mary Kelly Foy:** In your view, what are the particular difficulties posed by named day questions compared to ordinary questions? Are there any suggestions around actions that could be taken to overcome those difficulties?

Josh MacAlister: Our performance on named day questions is even worse than on normal written questions because it takes time away from the bottlenecks that we have in the standard process. It is a more acute issue. In answer to previous questions, Tony described how we have tried to compress those timescales for named day questions. All the four actions that have been set out will help with both types of questions being answered in a timely fashion.

- Q61 **Mary Kelly Foy:** Given that named day questions caused such difficulties, do you think that that distinction should be maintained?

Josh MacAlister: As an MP, no, I do not think so. There are few and far between moments where you would need an answer at that pace. On balance, thinking about what matters most for the parliamentary process and Parliament undertaking its functions—for accuracy and speed and getting the balance right—my view is that one model with one set of expectations would be reasonable.

- Q62 **Mr Morrison:** Our inquiry has found that some Departments are performing better than others, even with significant increases of volume. For instance, the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero has a near 100% on-time response rate across both categories. Have you worked with any other Departments to share best practice or do you know of any channels where Departments can share those kinds of things?

Josh MacAlister: We have not done enough of that, otherwise we would be in a better place now. However, we are really alive to this. Neither myself as the Minister nor Tony as the official are here today to say that we have had it really tough and the volume means that it is not in a great place and then to make excuses. It is nowhere near where it needs to be, and we have it within our own powers between now and November to get it back to where it needs to be. Part of that is looking at Departments that are getting it right and duplicating what they are doing.

Tony Foot: We are chairing a cross-Government WPQ network, so we are very well placed to learn and to collaborate with other Departments. We have done that very consciously. The system step we are taking is very much informed by lessons and learning from other Government Departments, and it is similar with the other steps I have described on clearances, raising visibility and accountability. We are, for example, talking closely with DESNZ.

- Q63 **Lee Pitcher:** You may be aware that we have a much broader inquiry under way on WPQs; we are seeing the Leader of the House next week to conclude it. There is a set of terms of reference for that, and I wonder



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whether you have any views on those.

Josh MacAlister: I have not seen the terms of reference. Are there particular parts that you would be interested in?

Lee Pitcher: We have asked a similar question to a number of people who have come to see us as part of the other inquiry. It would be good to get your feedback on them to see whether there is anything missing or anything you think would be particularly important. I assume, Chair, we might be able to get them sent out.

Q64 **Chair:** Absolutely. If it is easier, Minister, we could write to you and perhaps get something in writing. We are looking broadly at written parliamentary questions and how they are used, and we are interested in your experience as a Minister answering them in terms of volume. We are aware that Departments across the board, not just DFE, have seen an increase in volume. We know that a lot of them are struggling with maintaining timely responses and the power of Back Benchers to hold Government Ministers to account, but, at the same time, getting quality answers back. It is much broader than just the timescale thing; we are looking at how we can perhaps do things differently. We are happy to write to you about that.

Josh MacAlister: That would be great. My perspective is only from the Department for Education, but the issues of written parliamentary questions and correspondence are often seen as one and the same. We manage and respond to them in a similar way, and some of the challenges we have with WPQs are similar to the challenges we have with correspondence in terms of bottlenecks, timeliness and quality. They are a really important mechanism where you can often elaborate more and ask more questions of Ministers, and the majority of that correspondence is from MPs. I am happy to share feedback, but it may well be worth widening the net to look at correspondence between parliamentarians and Ministers as well as the formal WPQ process.

Q65 **Bambos Charalambous:** If you could change one aspect of the WPQ system for the Commons, what would it be?

Josh MacAlister: My answer to Mary's question probably covers that. A simple thing would be to move to one model with one set of expectations. There are some characters who ask lots of questions. My one wish would probably be to see some of those volumes drop, but that may encourage the opposite effect.

Q66 **Bambos Charalambous:** When you say just one model, do you mean getting rid of the named day questions?

Josh MacAlister: Yes.

Q67 **Sir Christopher Chope:** Can I dig a bit further into the delays that are caused by Ministers and/or spads looking at these questions and then rejecting them? It is a very high figure—19%, although you said you got it down to 12%. Are those rejections being made by spads or by Ministers?

Josh MacAlister: The 19%—which bit of the process does that sit in?

Tony Foot: That is the spad stage of the process, and 12% go back at that stage.

Q68 **Sir Christopher Chope:** What about the Minister stage of the process?

Tony Foot: I do not have that statistic with me, but it is a significantly lower number than that.

Q69 **Sir Christopher Chope:** Going back a few years, when I was a Minister, we did not have spads, so the Ministers took responsibility. Would it not improve the process, the timeliness and the accuracy if spads were not in the way? The Ministers decide the policy, they look at the answer that has been drafted by officials, and if they see an issue arising from it, they can refer it to a spad if need be. Why don't you cut the spads out of the process and let Ministers take responsibility and control?

Josh MacAlister: How many— Well, I am not here to ask you questions, Sir Christopher, but I would imagine that you had a considerably lower volume of questions being asked.

Sir Christopher Chope: In answer to that: no, I did not, because I was the junior Minister for the poll tax, or community charge. I think I probably had more questions than any Minister in the Government at that time.

Mary Kelly Foy: I can imagine your answers. *[Laughter.]*

Q70 **Sir Christopher Chope:** One of the issues that caused a lot of the questions was that, because the policy was being developed, nobody knew the details of it. One of the problems that you will have in the next six or nine months is what exactly is involved in the social media ban. It seems to have been produced a bit off the hoof, so isn't that going to generate an enormous number of additional questions? Will you need to bring in extra resources, or will you just need to be clearer about your policy?

Josh MacAlister: The social media ban is a DSIT policy, but there may well be questions that drift into DFE's policy responsibility space. Taking the substance of your question, the volumes mean that it is extremely difficult to have no special adviser process built into the response to WPOs. Officials overwhelmingly do a really efficient job of articulating, from their area of responsibility, the position of the Government at the time, but you will know that many policy areas go beyond the remit of the policy official who is responding.

Having somebody who has a wider departmental view and a view of the politics, which is what we are all engaged in here—I do not mean that in a glib way—of what the Department is trying to do and whether that is expressed in the answer that is being given is an important part of the process. Were that to rest simply with Ministers, they would be out of action for a considerably larger amount of time—which may well be something that Members are happy about.



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Q71 Sir Christopher Chope: Drilling into that, what do you mean they would be out of action for a considerable amount of time? All you mean is that they would have more stuff in their red box overnight and they would have to work a bit harder.

Josh MacAlister: Correct; that is what I mean.

Q72 Sir Christopher Chope: Yes, so you are ducking out of working as hard as you could.

Josh MacAlister: I don't accept that. There are finite hours in the week, even with colleagues who work 60 or 70-plus hours. The allocation of time is a reflection of the allocation of priority. WPQs are an important part of the priority of being a Minister, but they are not the only part, and it needs to be balanced in a measured and sensible way, as I think most Members would expect. The spad process is an important part of it.

Q73 Sir Christopher Chope: Do you ever overrule the spad? Or does the spad tell you if he or she has rejected that question on your behalf and had it redrafted? I want to get a handle on it somehow.

Josh MacAlister: Very rarely. I cannot think of questions where I have looked at the answer, not been happy with the feedback from the special adviser and gone back around the loop. Some of these questions drill into important parts of Government policy, which, if not totally clear, deserve some conversation and dialogue. That is no bad thing, and in many respects, it may well be what Members are seeking by putting a parliamentary question in.

Tony Foot: On the process side, from an officials and process perspective, we are trying to make sure that the spad clearance process is as efficient as possible, so there is much greater marking and indication of what is most urgent, and an automatic progression point for cases to move on to Ministers so that we are not squeezing the ministerial time.

Josh MacAlister: Sir Christopher, you made a point about the bulge of issues as they come through—for example, SEND reforms. There is an important role for—Tony referred to this—making sure that the policy teams are really well prepped for being super-clear on the evolving policy position of important, high-profile areas where the volume is high, because otherwise we get swamped and responses are delayed.

Q74 Sir Christopher Chope: Would it be unfair to characterise what you are saying as that, essentially, Ministers are delegating to their special advisers the role that they as Ministers should have, in a lot of the policymaking?

Josh MacAlister: No.

Q75 Sir Christopher Chope: In that case, why aren't the questions coming directly from officials to Ministers?

Josh MacAlister: In the same way as Ministers do not draft the first draft of an answer, there is a process that involves delegation, because



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Ministers do not do, end to end, the running of Departments, as you well know.

- Q76 **Sir Christopher Chope:** But special advisers are not civil servants; they are political appointees. What I am saying is: why can't you rely on the civil servants to produce an answer and then you, as the Minister, look at it and see whether it is properly drafted and reflects your policy? If you did away with the special advisers—you have said, in your evidence, that sometimes the special advisers are on sick leave or annual leave or whatever it is called, and that therefore that delays the process. Surely the absence of a special adviser should not delay the process in any circumstances.

Josh MacAlister: I disagree. Tony, how many officials do we have in the DFE—6,000?

Tony Foot: About 7,000.

Josh MacAlister: And we have four or five spads and five Ministers. The ratio of officials, who are not party political, to appointees, who are able to express the will of the Government, is very imbalanced. The resource allocation of that time needs to be put into the things that are most important, and that is a combination of special advisers and Ministers working as part of a political team to pursue the agenda of the Government of the day. That is more than right and proper.

- Q77 **Sir Christopher Chope:** Just one final question: can you assure us that you as a Minister, when you answer a parliamentary question, have read the question, read the answer and physically approved it yourself, rather than delegated that to a spad?

Josh MacAlister: Correct.

- Q78 **Lee Pitcher:** I want to delve a bit more into planning ahead. Sorry, these figures might not be exact, but if you go back a couple of decades, we were talking about 30 letters per week for an MP, whereas we know we get about 200 emails per day now. The volume just at an MP's office has substantially changed. If we look at the figures for what is coming to the Department, there was, from the 2023-24 Session to the '24-26 Session, an 89% increase in volumes. So much more is coming in.

You talked about planning ahead. You wish you had talked to some of the other Departments about some of the things they have put in place, in order to learn from that best practice. In terms of the exponential increase in numbers that we see nowadays, are you ready for the level coming in to be sustained? Basically, are you planning for that increase remaining the same now, because it becomes the new norm?

Tony Foot: Yes, and the actions that we are putting in place are designed to enable us to do that. The other thing I would say is that, alongside this, it is obviously really important that we are continuing to make publicly available information more accessible, more usable, and more possible for colleagues, parliamentarians and citizens to download and use. To give one example of that, we have invested a lot in our Explore education



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statistics service, which now basically, for all DFE data, allows you to download tailored cuts of data, based on your own parameters. We continue to invest in those services that make it possible to access information directly, rather than people having to ask for it.

Chair: That brings us to the end of our questions. If you would like to add anything, please feel free to write to the Committee and we will make sure that we look at that promptly.