

Procedure Committee

Oral evidence: Written parliamentary questions, HC 214

Monday 19 July 2021

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Members present: Karen Bradley (Chair); Chris Elmore; James Gray; Nigel Mills; James Sunderland; Suzanne Webb.

Questions 1-32

Witnesses

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

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Edward Argar MP and Hugh Harris.

Q1 Chair: Welcome to this meeting of the Procedure Committee. We are very pleased—although perhaps not as pleased as we would like to be—to have Minister Edward Argar back from the Department of Health and Social Care. The reason why we are not as pleased as we would like is that we had hoped that PQ performance might have improved such that a follow-up visit wouldn't be required, but we are grateful for your time, Minister. We also have Hugh Harris from the Department, who I know very ably supports you in this endeavour.

You will know that the Committee is extraordinarily sympathetic to the situation that the Department of Health and Social Care has found itself in and the pressures that have been put on the Department. I think it would be fair to say that if this PQ performance had occurred at any normal time, the Secretary of State would have been before us many, many, many moons ago, but we do understand that these are extraordinary times and an extraordinary situation.

Since your last visit, things are looking better, but we are very interested to know what your plans are for improvement. I want to give you the chance to make an opening comment and then we will go into questions.

Edward Argar: Thank you Chair, and with your permission I will keep my opening comment relatively brief, because I suspect that the Committee will know the areas that it wishes to probe and explore.

As you quite rightly said, since I last came before you in, I think, December we have seen significant improvements in our PQ response performance, but clearly not as much as we or, I suspect, you in the Committee would have wished to see. We have got up from a performance of, I think, around 7% on time last autumn to over 50% now. I know your focus will be on this Session, looking forward, as much as on previous performance, but that is an important statistic to highlight because we have got it up to that level. With PQ volumes increasing since the start of the new Session, we haven't seen it falling back below 50%. Hopefully that shows there is a bit more resilience in the performance and in sustaining that performance.

However, there is clearly some way to go. When we get on to it, both I and Mr Harris may give more details of our plan to get from 50% to 85%. That is still not where we used to be, which was around 97% pre-pandemic, and we'd like to get back to that level, but our plan is to make that next leap forward.

The only other thing I'd say before pausing is about the backlog. As well as dealing with flow of questions and trying to get more of them answered on time, the other element was, as you will recall, the significant backlog of questions, which when we last met I think was just shy of 1,000—a



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little bit less than that. We got that down to 179 by the time of Prorogation, of which 50 were still in time, and therefore you could argue that we could have answered them. So 129 was the ending backlog, and we are now, I think, with just a little over 150 as a backlog.

The only other thing I will say—we may also come on to this—is that a high percentage of those that we are not getting done on time, the amount of time by which they are overdue, if that makes sense, is significantly reduced from where it was when we last met. It is still not good enough, but significantly progress has been made, and my aim is to sustain it to build upon it.

Q2 Chair: Thank you. It is clear that significant work has been done. Are there any particular things that the Department has done that you would wish to highlight that have helped to get to this situation, which is still not brilliant, but is much better than it was?

Edward Argar: A number of things. One of them—you may even have written about in *The Times* today, but you raised it a previous meeting of this Committee at the end of June with the Leader of the House and when I last was there—is the personal commitment of the Secretary of State, which was a key element. We have had a new Secretary of State for around three weeks now, and he has already been both briefed on this and highlighted to Ministers and officials the importance he places on it as a reflection of the Department's answerability and accountability to Parliament and to Members and, therefore, to the wider public. He has already taken a close interest, which I know you would expect of a Secretary of State, and that often helps to drive focus.

In addition to that, since the end of the last Session we have revised our action plan to get from 50% to 85%—I will invite Mr Harris in in a minute, if he wants, to add anything on the detail of that approach. We have also put in place a weekly escalation process for the PQ team where performance is discussed. There are particular trigger points at which things go up to Hugh and where things are raised at ExCo—the senior civil servants at the Department—and ultimately, which has happened with a number of specific teams, to me, where teams will go through their performance, the reasons and their plan to address it.

You will remember that when we last met we had increased resource in the PQ team, and we have maintained the right level of staffing in that team. We have also recognised that one of the big challenges is less about turning the handle: the production, the team getting them done and sending to Ministers. It is about getting accurate and timely answers from the right policy officials. I would argue that there is limited value in a holding answer or an inaccurate answer to hit a target.

Particular teams are new and dealing with a high volume due to public interest, for example, the vaccines team and, increasingly now, the managed quarantine team and the travel team. You suddenly see a new team put in place to deal with a new policy area and a lot of questions. They have grown their teams to ensure they have the resource, not only



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to do the day job but to recognise that this is part of the day job, and to help recover performance in those areas.

We have seen with vaccines and with test and trace that, with additional resource, once they are over the initial shock of volumes of a new policy area, their performance has been good. We are now seeing improvement with the managed quarantine team. I don't know if you would like Mr Harris to say a few words on that plan to get from 50% to 85%.

Chair: Yes, please. Mr Harris.

Hugh Harris: Thank you, Minister. The core components of the plan fall into the same categories as the previous plan: capacity, capability and accountability. The Minister already said a little bit about capacity, where we have increased the size not only of the central team, but of private office, as you might anticipate, given wider challenges.

We have increased individual teams and, of course, the Department, as a whole, has grown quite substantially from about 1,800 to more than 3,000. With the taking on of the Office of Health Promotion, it may grow a bit further. I don't think we should leap to capacity being a get out of jail free card here, but it is right to ask the question. The central team at the moment are considering what, if any, additional resource in any of those elements in the process chain would be helpful to drive further change.

On capability, we have identified the teams that have the biggest challenges, in terms of the proportion responded to on time. There are interventions with them on a regular basis, to work out exactly what the blockage is, to try to focus the resource where the problem lies. As the Minister implied, we have had quite some success with that, first with vaccines and test and trace, and more recently with the managed quarantine service. That is something we can look to expand further.

The third area is accountability. The one additional reform that I would highlight from the past few months, which made even more difference than I had dared hope it might, was much greater transparency within the Department, at deputy director, director and director general level, of monthly performance. If you track the performance of the official bit of the chain, it was between February and March that it leapt from a little bit above 35% on time, to 61% on time, when information started flowing round the Department, showing exactly where people were on the league table.

We have probably extracted most of the juice that we can from that, though we are continuing to look at whether we can escalate that still further. Indeed, just a couple of weeks ago, the first piece of formal advice went up to the Minister, identifying the areas of the Department that performed less well on the monthly target. I anticipate that, alongside the work on capacity and capability, there is also more work to do on accountability.



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Edward Argar: Just on that point, Chair, there is an additional strand of that, which, with your permission, we may continue when we return from summer recess. That is my monthly letter to you and the Committee. I hope that is helpful for the Committee to keep an eye on it and to make public on your Committee page. It also focuses minds in the Department that, once a month, I will ask for very up-to-date data to be able write to you with, hopefully, better news each month.

Chair: We always like to be able to help focus minds, so if we can fulfil that role, we will be delighted to do so. Let me bring in Suzanne Webb.

Q3 **Suzanne Webb:** Do you analyse what is being asked? I am curious as to whether much of what is being asked is available elsewhere. Could that information be cascaded better, or signposted, so that people could find it on bulletins and newsletters? I wonder whether much of the information is driven by the volume of urgent questions that you have—whether people put in for their urgent questions and they cannot get in, and whether that is still at the forefront of their minds. That may be driving up volume. I am trying to fix on where this volume of information, questions and requests is coming from.

Edward Argar: They are very good questions. One thing I would say at the outset is that, hopefully—in the nature of events changing, and with life and political interest in our area continuing but going back to more normal levels—we will see a reduction in the volume. We are working on the assumption that we cannot bet on that and that our plan should be to work with the volumes we are getting. If the volumes decline, great—we should be able to perform even better, which is the hope.

To your specific point, in terms of urgent questions, we have probably—I could be wrong—answered more urgent questions and given more ministerial statements than any other Department, for obvious reasons, over the past year. In the listings for those—the Speaker’s Office will probably have a view on this—we are perhaps seeing less pressure to get in on them than there was at certain points during the pandemic, when events were almost moving on a weekly basis, or even on a daily basis. That said, there is still clearly considerable interest in this. What often can happen off the back of a UQ or a statement is that, sometimes, ministerial answers and others can trigger in Members’ and the public’s minds, quite rightly, other questions, which they then ask using the written question process, quite properly.

Is there a better way or a different way of giving Members that information? We routinely look at the sort of questions we get, and I have to say, anecdotally—if there is any more that we can get on this, we will write to the Committee—the vast majority are asking for information that is not always, in the format requested, available in a public forum. By and large, most Members—I am not saying this about everyone—make an effort to look and seek out the information themselves, and they use the PQ process to find something that they cannot get or, legitimately, to highlight for Ministers and the broader public a particular issue that their

constituents would wish them to highlight. I think that is entirely appropriate.

In terms of additional sources of information, throughout the pandemic we have sought to be as transparent as we can. Looking back at what the data dashboard looked like back in March of last year, and at the richness and extent of the data on a whole range of things that is now available routinely on the data dashboard on the Government website, there is a lot more out there and a lot more routinely published, hopefully in formats that are accessible and usable. But with the nature of some of the technical data, there is obviously always more we can do to refine that.

We have sought, particularly with parliamentary colleagues, to engage not just through the formal channels, but through informal all-MP briefing calls. I have done a number of them, and other Ministers have done the same, to try to provide information and other opportunities outwith the formal process to ask questions. I suspect that, given his question in the session with the Leader of the House, Mr Elmore may turn to correspondence and letters as another facet of this. It may not be directly within the Committee's remit, but I suspect that it comes to scrutiny, holding Ministers to account and getting answers, so we may get to that. We have tried both to recognise these formal routes and the value they add, and to provide Members with other routes by which to ask questions of us. That is a slightly long answer to a very short and succinct question—I apologise, Suzanne.

Q4 Suzanne Webb: No, it's fine. Just one more on that one. You have a new Secretary of State, and he has been made aware of all this, which is brilliant. Has he suggested that he will come up with his own targets and measurements, in terms of timelines of how and when he will be reducing it all down, and does he have any thoughts on how he will measure the success of that?

Edward Argar: At the moment, we have the departmental plan that Hugh and the team have come up with, which I am content with and have signed off on. The Secretary of State has had initial conversations and briefing around this and has emphasised—this clearly shows the importance he attaches to it—that for him it is absolutely vital that we use the time we have to get back up to speed and to get that performance where we would expect it to be. He recognises the importance of parliamentary questions as a tool of parliamentary scrutiny of the Department.

I have not had any indication yet that he wishes to fundamentally change the plan, but it has always been an iterative plan, and at regular intervals Hugh and I go through it and see, checking against performance, whether we need to be more ambitious or whether there are particular areas we need to press harder on. I have no doubt that the Secretary of State and I—virtually, at the moment, rather than in person, for obvious reasons—will discuss that in the coming days and weeks.

Q5 Chair: Can I ask, on top of that, whether this is an agenda item at the



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departmental management board meetings?

Edward Argar: I will defer to Hugh, but I believe it is, because I have had regular updates from the permanent secretary when he has raised it and asked about its progress. I have not spoken to him about this in the past few weeks, but I suspect Hugh will nod if it is still at that level and is still an item considered as appropriate by the senior officials.

Hugh Harris: The core statistics go to the monthly ExCo and to the quarterly board, and actually—somewhat duplicatively, given the people who sit on the committee—to the performance and risk committee, so there are quite a lot of opportunities to have the conversations. I referenced earlier that we break down our performance at all levels. If the data comes out of sequence from some of the aggregate statistics, I can raise the issue at the weekly conversations we have at DG level.

Q6 **James Gray:** Minister, thank you very much for all that. Very briefly, could you just run me through what happens? I go to the Table Office behind the Speaker's Chair in the House of Commons and fill out my written PQ form—what then happens?

Edward Argar: When it enters the Department—I can give you some average times for each stage—

James Gray: I want procedure, not times. I want to know what happens to it.

Edward Argar: I will talk you through the process, if I may, and also how long it takes in the Department, and why some are overdue. It gets into the Department. It will then go to our parliamentary team, where it is formally logged as a PQ and then allocated to a relevant policy official to consider. The average time there is up to one day—basically 24 hours or so. Once it has been allocated an official, it is considered, and a draft response is sent to the PQ team within the Department, having been written and cleared by the relevant senior official, which takes between—

Q7 **James Gray:** I am sorry—what is the level of that official? Is it a senior deputy secretary or a grade 3 or something?

Edward Argar: Deputy director is the term we use. Hugh will clarify in a minute if I have misspoken there.

Q8 **James Gray:** So that senior person is not the person who sits down with the pen and actually writes it. Presumably that senior person delegates the actual writing or research to—

Edward Argar: The policy expert, for want of a better way of putting it, who deals with that area of policy will write—

Q9 **James Gray:** How many layers are there? It goes from the parliamentary branch to the deputy director. How many further layers down does it go before we actually get to the person who gets out a quill pen and writes the answer?



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Edward Argar: It goes to the parliamentary branch. It will then be allocated to a policy official who will write the answer. That answer will then be cleared and will then go up. It will then go to—

- Q10 **James Gray:** Forgive me. Let us not go back up again; I am still going down here. It has gone from me to the parliamentary branch. The parliamentary branch has given it to a grade 3, as I used to call it in the old days when I was doing this job; they are now called deputy directors. I want to know how many more rungs it goes down.

Edward Argar: It comes into the parliamentary branch. It will then go to the relevant policy official who understands that policy area. They will draft the response. It will then be cleared, and then it will go up—

James Gray: I see—it goes straight from the parliamentary branch to the actual drafter.

Edward Argar: Yes. It is delegated to the appropriate official. The parliamentary branch knows who the policy official who leads on that is, so it will go to them.

James Gray: They then pass it back up through—

Edward Argar: It will get cleared and then come back up to the PQ team, who will pass it to the special advisers office. They review it, and then it goes to Ministers' private offices and is put in front of a Minister for signature or redraft.

- Q11 **James Gray:** How long have Spads had a role to play? When I was a Spad, I never once saw a PQ. I wouldn't have had time to. Given these are entirely factual questions—they cannot be political and they cannot be opinion—why does a special adviser have any role to play?

Edward Argar: To your first point, James, in my entire time as a Minister, which has only been about three years, throughout that period, special advisers have seen all the PQs that have come up to me, both in the Ministry of Justice and the Department of Health and Social Care.

- Q12 **James Gray:** That is just yesterday; I am talking about 25 years ago! What is the purpose? Surely a written PQ is entirely factual. It is incapable of political spin—incapable of commentary or argument. It is a purely factual question. What role, therefore, do special advisers have?

Edward Argar: In my limited experience, they can add significant value. I have seen some PQs where the Spads have done it and their corrections are actually saying, "That doesn't answer the question." Officials' answers may be factual, but do not actually answer what is being asked, and the Spads have often sent it back, saying, "You have missed the point of the question."

- Q13 **James Gray:** It isn't the point of a special adviser to have a quality control role to play in checking up that the Department is doing its stuff. The special adviser's job is to advise the Secretary of State on political matters that the civil servants are not allowed to do. Since when has it



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been their job to look at the bits of paper coming up from the Department and say, "Well, actually, that is not quite up to scratch—do it again"? Who gave them that role?

Edward Argar: I can only speak for my time, and it has been in place ever since I have been a Minister, which is three years, in different Departments.

Q14 **James Gray:** How many Spads are there?

Edward Argar: In the Department of Health at the moment, I believe—I could be wrong, because there is a bit of change at the moment, with a new Secretary of State—that there are five.

Q15 **James Gray:** How many secretaries have they got?

Edward Argar: In terms of private secretary?

Q16 **James Gray:** One secretary per Spad, is it? Or what?

Edward Argar: Again, I don't know. Hugh may be able to answer. I think there is one private secretary for the Spad team, but I could be wrong.

Q17 **James Gray:** So you are talking about five or six individuals. What is the total number of PQs in the last 18 months?

Edward Argar: Over the last 18 months? Hugh has probably got the exact figure to hand.

Q18 **James Gray:** Or the last period for which you have figures to hand.

Hugh Harris: The last year has been 12,887.

Q19 **James Gray:** Okay. So you have six people—five Spads and one secretary—dealing with 12,500 PQs. If I have done my sums correctly, that is 2,500 each. You are telling me that they check those questions for quality as well as for speed, and they still get them back to the MP within three days. That seems virtually impossible. Perhaps they are not doing anything else. Are they full-time PQ checkers?

Edward Argar: I don't think that the special advisers' office is where the delay occurs.

Q20 **James Gray:** That was not my question. My question was why they are doing it and how many there are. You told me there are five Spads and one secretary—

Edward Argar: I believe—I could be slightly out there.

Q21 **James Gray:** Maybe it is six, we don't know. But they have dealt with 12,500 PQs in the last year or 18 months—whatever the figure might be. So you are talking about each Spad doing, let's say, 2,000 or 3,000 written PQs. That is not what they are paid to do.

I find this absolutely astonishing. These people are supposed to be highly paid political advisers to the Secretary of State, to point out the political downsides and things, but they are actually doing a very mundane,



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factual-checking, quality assessment role, of looking at written PQs. I find this an absolutely astonishing admission. What a ridiculous waste of manpower—of person power. Is it not?

Edward Argar: I think it is a reflection of the seriousness with which the Department treats PQs and the accountability and the need for accuracy that flows through them.

- Q22 **James Gray:** I can feel some more PQs coming up, which will be on how many written PQs each Spad has dealt with. If we find that they are actually doing this more or less full-time, that is a disgrace. If, on the other hand, they are ticking them off and sending them up without doing much of a check, which I suspect is actually the correct answer, that is a link that you could remove from the chain, isn't it?

Edward Argar: The question of the Spad role in this process and whether that would save time is certainly something that could be looked at, but on the basis of our analysis of what each stage takes in terms of turnaround time, it would make, if anything, a marginal impact on turnaround time.

- Q23 **James Gray:** In which case, they are not doing a very good job, are they?

Edward Argar: I believe they are just a very efficient team, James.

- Q24 **James Gray:** Very, very hard-working people—they work 24/7.

Alright, another question then: are they responsible for quality? Who is responsible for the quality of the answers?

Edward Argar: Ultimately, the Minister who signs it, would be my view.

- Q25 **James Gray:** Yes, but we are talking about 12,500—unless he is not doing anything else, that must be presumably a bit difficult. Who in the Department—is it the permanent secretary or the Spads or the policy department? Who has the responsibility for the quality of the questions? Very often, as you will know, the quality is extremely poor. What I want to know is who carries the can for poorly replied to written PQs?

Edward Argar: Ultimately, as I say, the Minister, because we are responsible—responsible as I am talking to you. Within the Department, with those that draft them, there is a multi-layer due process, as I set out, whereby each civil servant, at each stage, takes responsibility for the quality of their answers. They will then come up through the parliamentary questions team, which will check that they are robust, and then they will come up to Ministers via our special advisers, who play an important role in horizon-scanning as well as in checking that we are actually answering the question the Member has asked. But ultimately, it is me—in my case, and other Ministers—so I will read every parliamentary question I get and I will also have with it, normally, a background sheet saying, "Here is the background to this question; here is the question," and I will check it.

- Q26 **James Gray:** So how many boxes do you get at the weekend?

Edward Argar: It is normally one box a night, basically.



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Q27 James Gray: And how many PQs do you get in each box?

Edward Argar: In my area, I would suggest that I probably have a slightly lower run rate than some other Ministers just based on my portfolio, but I will probably tend to answer between half a dozen and a dozen a day on a normal working day.

Q28 James Gray: That does not tot up to 12,500 in the last year, does it?

Edward Argar: No, that is my current run rate with PQs. There were times last year when I would have done 30 or 40 a day. There are some other Ministers in the Department. We can try to get this, if it is helpful to the Committee, to break down that 12,500. Jo Churchill, for example, given the nature of her responsibilities—public health, dentistry, general practice, cancer care and other conditions—has had a much higher run rate on those, and at times, other Ministers have helped cover off some of those.

Q29 James Gray: A note would be very helpful, running through how many there are and how they have been dealt with. The workload that you have described simply does not tot up—unless you are doing nothing else. Who deals with them, and how much time is devoted to each question? If it is 10 minutes for a question, you would be here until Christmas and still you would not have done half of them. A little note about how these things are handled would be extremely helpful—not just statistics on what you are doing now, 97%, and so on, but where they go, who writes them, who checks them, who corrects them, how many each Spad does, and how many each Minister does.

Edward Argar: Would a process diagram be helpful, James, to show exactly what we have just talked through? For example, showing from day one, “Here is what happens in the first day. Here is where it goes and how long it is there. Here is where it goes after each policy official”, to map the process.

Q30 James Gray: Together with the numbers of PQs. My suspicion is that in your description of the vast numbers of PQs you have had—it has been a huge job for you; I am not holding you to blame—there are, apparently, six people in the Spads office doing it. I just cannot imagine it. Either some people in the Department are doing nothing else and are absolutely flat out on this morning, noon and night, or the quality control is not all that great. You cannot have both.

Edward Argar: I would say two things, briefly, if I may. The PQ team who work for Hugh have been working phenomenally hard over the past year in doing this. They have been working flat out. We have increased the size of that team and they have been working incredibly hard.

One of the challenges, in fact, and why performance has perhaps been less stellar than we would have wished, is that, in the nature of it, to get an accurate answer, it often has to be written by the policy official who is also, at the same time, coming up with the policy and the regulations. Inevitably, therefore, their workload has been challenging at particular points—you are right—meaning delays in the system.



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In terms of the amount of time Ministers and others spend on PQs, we recognise their importance, and each day when I do my box, my PQs are probably the first thing I work through because I am conscious, first, of their importance, and secondly, of the consequences of getting it wrong. We do want an accurate answer; I would rather give you an accurate answer a day late than a holding answer a day earlier—

- Q31 **James Gray:** Forgive me, Minister. I am not being flippant, but on this clash between your important work, which is actually being on television explaining covid, and vast piles of PQs, I remember when Jacob Rees-Mogg asked, if I remember rightly, 10,000 questions on the subject of TB in badgers. I hope that Ministers were not reading each of those questions carefully because they would not be doing much else. I am not being flippant, but the nature of my line of questioning is to try to understand the importance of written PQs, which we all accept, and how much of your very valuable time is diverted into doing something that is actually not taking the sum total of human happiness all that much further forward.

Edward Argar: That is a fair point. That is something you touched on with the Leader of the House in the last evidence session at the end of June. Yes, we need to make sure that within the current metrics in the current process we perform as best we can for parliamentary scrutiny purposes and to colleagues, but, without treading on the Chair's toes, there is perhaps some thinking that could be done—I hope we can inform it by giving you that information—by the Committee as to whether the current process is the most effective way of scrutinising; in other words, whether the turnaround times are appropriate or whether the system lends itself to lots and lots of identical questions being asked, and then finding it still requires an answer.

James Gray: That would be helpful. It wasn't Jacob; it was Owen Paterson.

- Q32 **Chair:** I realise I am here to scrutinise the Minister and not defend the Minister, but if I can just make the point that in my experience of Departments, the role that Spads have in horizon scanning and spotting themes is incredibly important. Having a team of people that see all the PQs and the style of PQs coming in and what the issues are is a very helpful way to make sure that, at Secretary of State level, there is an overview of what is coming in and what colleagues' concerns are, so I give an additional defence to the Minister there.

Some really interesting points. Thank you, Minister. I recognise we have kept you slightly longer than we expected to, so just a few points from me before we conclude. First, on the league tables that we referred to earlier and the conversation you have just had with Mr Gray, the Committee would find it very helpful to see how the ministerial portfolio and performance on PQs has worked. It would be really helpful to us to understand how many questions are coming in and to which portfolio they are coming in, because that will help to inform the work that we are doing.



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Likewise, I was interested in your comments about new teams being set up and the difficulties that there might be for a new team. Again, if there is anything that you could provide to the Committee, that would assist us in terms of suggestions. Inevitably, every Government Department will create new teams at times to deal with policy areas. I think the Department of Health and Social Care is the perfect case study for things that have been needed at very short notice in new areas, but it would be useful to know for future reference if there was any learning that we can take from that.

Also, on holding answers, you have referred to preferring to be a few days late than to give a holding answer. Again, the Committee will be keen to see that, because you rightly said that this is something we want to look at. We made that clear when we had the Leader of the House in at the end of June. Obviously, you have seen my article in *The Times* today. We are keen to see how we can make this work better for colleagues. If the only metric that we measure departmental performance on is timeliness of answer, that is perhaps not the best metric, so we are keen to have the evidence that you can perhaps give us from your experience. Accepting that you still have an awful lot of work to do, we understand that we might not be your No. 1 priority at the moment, but if you could provide that information perhaps sometime after the summer recess, that would be helpful.

Edward Argar: With your permission, Chair—I may see a look of horror on Mr Harris’s face—if we can, we will see if we can provide it this month. I cannot promise 100%, but in the spirit of timeliness and helpfulness of answers to questions, Hugh and I will work together to see if we can get something to the Committee before the end of this month to address those points and give some of the extra information that Mr Gray wanted as well to underpin his questioning and his thinking about this.

Chair: Mr Harris did not look at all shocked by that suggestion.

Edward Argar: He is a very experienced senior civil servant.

Chair: Absolutely. I can vouch for that.

From the Committee’s point of view, you have answered our questions and provided a lot of information. As I say, we would like to use this as evidence for our work in the autumn as to how we might better look at this and how it stops being an exercise merely in answering questions on time and actually becomes a meaningful and useful exercise for colleagues that ensures scrutiny, helps Ministers to do their jobs better, and also helps colleagues to represent their constituents, so this piece of work will be very useful to us.

I have no further questions. Thank you once again, Minister and Mr Harris, for your time. I hope that we perhaps will not see you in the same capacity. Clearly, we would love to see you as Minister, but maybe not coming in to talk to us about performance, but to talk about the lessons learned.



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Edward Argar: With your permission, Chair—again, I might see a look of brief concern flit across Mr Harris’s face—in the context of that inquiry you mentioned in the autumn, hopefully by then our performance will be such that you will not need to see me and Mr Harris on that ground. But if we can usefully contribute to that through written evidence and further statistical evidence, or even oral evidence, we would be delighted to do so if that would be helpful to the Committee.

Chair: Thank you very much. I am sure it would be. With that we will conclude this session. Thank you again.