



Procedure Committee

Oral evidence: [Written Parliamentary question answering performance in 2015–16](#), HC 953

Wednesday 27 April 2016

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Members present: Mr Charles Walker (Chair); Edward Argar; Bob Blackman; Nic Dakin; Patricia Gibson; Patrick Grady; Sir Edward Leigh; Ian C. Lucas; Holly Lynch; Mr Alan Mak; and Mr David Nuttall

Questions 1–34

Witnesses: **Rt Hon David Evennett MP**, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Sport, Tourism and Heritage, Department for Culture, Media and Sport, and **Ben Dean**, Principal Private Secretary, Department for Culture, Media and Sport, gave evidence.

Q1 Chair: We are not going to detain you long, Minister, and we are going to be gentle because we know you are stepping in for a colleague. Let me just briefly set the scene of why we summoned the Department quite quickly.

In the 2014–15 Session, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport was humming along nicely. You were streets ahead, winning the Grand National without use of the whip. Ordinary written, you were answering 96.4% within five working days, and named days 94.2%. That is pretty impressive. We then went to the 2015–16 Session and that collapsed to 64.5% and 56.5%—that is a really, really rapid drop-off. We then started off in the new Parliament and it dropped to 56.9% for ordinary written; there was a slight recovery in named day. We then had a very small recovery for the September to December period, when ordinary written went back to 61.4% but named day fell back to 46%, but now we have seen a sign of life: five working days for ordinary written is now 77% and named day is 63.5%. Now, the average for Departments is 87% for ordinary written within five working days and for named day it is 81%. You did say in the evidence you provided us that the Department recognised there had been quite a dramatic fall-off in timeliness in answering questions but remedial measures were being taken, and it does

seem that there is some improvement. That is the opening comment from the Chairman. If you would like to respond to that, then I will let colleagues come in.

David Evennett: Mr Walker, thank you so much. Can I thank you for the opportunity to appear before your Committee today? I would like to begin with an apology for the past performance of the Department in the area of written questions. We fully acknowledge that statistics for timeliness have not been good enough. After implementing an improvement plan, we have seen our performance dramatically improve, and it is a key aim of the Department to maintain this and to improve. We welcome the opportunity to come here. We have noted and we apologise for poor performance in that Session that you have highlighted. We are on an improving curve, but we are determined to do better.

Chair: That is a really encouraging opening.

Q2 Edward Argar: Good to see you here, Minister. I hesitate to draw the conclusion that in the past few months, since you have been an acting Minister, the performance has considerably improved. I can only suggest that as a possibility—you are well known as a House of Commons man, so that will be appreciated. What do you think affected the timeliness of responding to questions? I note the Secretary of State indicated that sometimes a new ministerial team and the change that goes with that can have an impact. You are very experienced in this House and in Government. What do you think affected performance?

David Evennett: That is a very good question and I think there are many and various reasons. There is the situation we had a new team come in. We had priority to implement the manifesto after the election. I think that we did not perhaps have the process adapted to be as effective with the new team as we would have liked. I think that we perhaps took our eye off the ball and took it on to other things because it had done so well in the past, and possibly we reprimanded ourselves for that. Now we have the eye back on the ball. It is a variety of things: new people coming in, new styles of working, an element of learning obviously, and the Department was focusing very heavily on policy areas to implement the Prime Minister's agenda on things like the sport strategy and tourism and making that as our priority. I think, regrettably, we did not do as well on the questions, but I am determined we will, certainly under my tenure over the time I am there, continue to improve. I am grateful for what the officials have done to speed up.

Q3 Holly Lynch: Can I probe a little bit further in that area? When you have a change of ministerial team, can you take me through the relationship between the ministerial team, the special advisers and the civil servants at the Department that may have been there for some time? How do those changes and that transition come into effect? How long will some of those civil servants have been there and be quite used to the process anyway?

David Evennett: I think the Department's civil servants are brilliant. I would like to put on record that since I have been there in January I could not have seen a more efficient and effective team of civil servants. However, I was not there for when the ministerial team came in and there are new special advisers who have come in. Of course, it is the parliamentary division of the civil service that draft the answers and it is down to the ministerial team to force a timetable in line with what we expect, Mr Walker, and that is acceptable for Parliament.

Having been an MP for quite some time, I value written questions for getting information, for probing Ministers and so forth if you cannot do it in oral questions. It is very, very important. I think that obviously any new team that comes in has to get used to the Department, the civil servants and the special adviser that comes in. It is a building again after the coalition Government and the changes that inevitably have priority for a new Government. It is in my opinion a good working relationship, but it does need to bed down.

Q4 Mr Nuttall: I have one or two questions. To start with, do you have a Minister who is specially responsible for and in charge of the questions? Is that you?

David Evennett: We did not, but we do now. I am doing the maternity leave for Tracey and she was the Minister who was tasked with the job of improving this situation. That is what she started to do and that is what I am doing now with officials.

Mr Nuttall: Right, so the answer here is yes, there is someone, a Minister, and it is you at the moment?

David Evennett: Yes.

Mr Nuttall: We appreciate you are covering for Tracey, yes.

David Evennett: That is why I am here, because I am the Minister responsible.

Q5 Mr Nuttall: You have not mentioned the computer system at all, I am in some ways pleased to hear, because very often we have had Ministers who have blamed the computer system. I assume there is a computer system. Do you use a computer system? Is the computer system working all right? Is it a matter of staffing?

David Evennett: Can I ask Ben—

Mr Nuttall: Yes, by all means.

David Evennett: As far as I am concerned, I do not want to put a blame game on this—

Mr Nuttall: Mr Dean is before us.

David Evennett: Could I just say before that, Mr Nuttall, that I do not want a blame game and I am not going to say the computers are the problem.

Mr Nuttall: No, but if it is a problem, I need to know that.

David Evennett: Of course, and that is why I would like Mr Dean to answer that one, because he was here and he knows more about the computer system than I do.

Ben Dean: I certainly would not blame our computer system. It was a human issue. Our computer system is quite old—2003—so we are looking to replace it to have a better one on correspondence, but that has not particularly impacted the PQs.

Q6 Mr Nuttall: You are looking to change the system, yes. I hope that in a couple of years' time no one is sitting before us blaming the new computer system. I strongly advise you speak to other Departments and find out which systems they use that work, because as I have now pre-warned you, it will not be a good excuse to say, "We changed the system," because we hear that all the time.

It is a relatively simple process. A question comes in. It asks for some factual information—by definition, it has to be factual. Somebody gets that information and it is then replied to. There will be occasions when it is so complicated that it cannot be dealt with in time because it is asking for such a wealth of information that genuinely it cannot be answered in time. It is not clear from the numbers that are before us how many of those questions have been replied to with the answer that all MPs hate to receive, "We are dealing with it. We will write to you in due course. We are not able to supply this at the present time". As a matter of interest, how do you deal within your own system with a question to which you have to give that reply? Do you tick it and say, "Yes, we have dealt with

it. We have written back to them,” or do you say, “No, it is not properly replied to until we have actually given them the information”?

David Evennett: As far as I am concerned, I have made the questions and the letters top priority since I have been in the Department. I do not want answers like that. I want constructive answers because otherwise it is a cop-out and I will not have that. I am very definite that questions should be answered with an answer. It may be a holding answer, not as you have suggested but there is some fact in it, because everyone deserves a proper answer and a proper answer soon. That is what we are endeavouring to do and not having the answer you said, “We will write to you,” or something like that. I personally loathe that. I think people have the right to have an answer, a factual answer. Sometimes they are very complicated and the drafting, therefore, has to go back because we want a correct answer. We do not want something that is not accurate. Secondly, the team are very well aware that I am a stickler for getting things done within time or yesterday if possible, because I like things done sooner, not later, as you know. Is there anything you wanted to add?

Ben Dean: No.

Q7 Mr Nuttall: Just to be clear on that point then—I think you have clouded it very nicely there—do you use the stock reply, “We will let you have this information in due course”—

David Evennett: I am not aware that any questions that I have seen—

Mr Nuttall: —or, “We will write to you”? You do not use that?

David Evennett: No, I am not aware. I did not mean to cloud it. I really do not mean to do that.

Mr Nuttall: Well, I was not clear. You do not use that phrase? You do not use holding answers in your Department?

David Evennett: As far as I am concerned we do not. I will double check, but I am not aware of any that have come through my desk that have that because I do not want that. What I want is an answer. I do not want a holding answer and I want both the officials and the parliamentary team to come up with answers so that we can give Members of Parliament on all sides of the House the best answer that we can. They may not like the answer, Mr Walker, but they must have a substantive answer.

Chair: Mr Nuttall, if the Department was to find that it was the occasional use I think we would spare them that. It is the routine use that concerns you most, isn't it?

Q8 Mr Nuttall: It is, but it is also a matter of comparing the performance of DCMS with other Departments in that if other Departments routinely used that device in order to try to answer questions and to keep the statistics up and you do not, then you are being unfairly singled out. That is why it is important that we are clear about the method that you use.

David Evennett: Of course. I agree with that. Routinely, we would not do that. There may be the odd occasion. I deplore that approach, personally.

Q9 Mr Nuttall: Can I move on to what is being done about driving up these figures because that is the nub of the problem here? They have gone down. The performance has decreased from the 90% to, even if we take the most recent period of 18 December to 24 March, 63.5% for named day and 77% for ordinary written. I understand that these figures might not be entirely agreed, but they are roughly agreed by the Department, is that right?

David Evennett: Yes.

Mr Nuttall: There might be 1% or 2% difference, I understand.

David Evennett: The most recent ones, which are April, I believe the ordinary PQs were answered 100% in time—that is the latest figure from the Department—and the named days are 98% in April.

Mr Nuttall: That is a much better performance.

David Evennett: It is, because we have set up a steering group, which Ben is in charge of under my guidance and encouragement, to make sure that people are trained. We have regular sessions for policy officials that are drafting the answers making sure that they are targeted in the policy areas. We want quality, we want speed, but we want accuracy. I do not know if you would like Mr Dean to say to the Committee—

Q10 Mr Nuttall: No, your evidence is accepted. You have said that that is what the April figure is. We will see in the fullness of time when we get the annual figures how that impacts.

David Evennett: Of course.

Mr Nuttall: It will inevitably have the effect of driving up the overall average. Obviously, it is impossible at this late stage to recover this year's average.

David Evennett: Regrettably, yes. It is fact.

Mr Nuttall: As a matter of statistics, it is impossible to do that. Even if you had 100% across the board between now and the end of the Session it would be impossible. I appreciate that as a matter of statistics. Nevertheless, it does give perhaps hope for the next parliamentary Session that if the April performance continues, then it will not be necessary for this Committee to perhaps do what we have done with other Departments and the Secretary of State be called. The Home Secretary is next.

Q11 Chair: We could help you improve your averages in this Parliament because we could all take it upon ourselves to table 50 questions each this afternoon in what remains of the Session, but we will not do that.

David Evennett: I am grateful.

Chair: I bet you would answer them all in time as well.

David Evennett: I would make very sure that we did, Mr Walker.

Chair: We are going to go to Patricia and then Bob.

Q12 Patricia Gibson: Minister, you talked about the important work carried out by the civil servants and you have put that on record. Is it possible that some of the delays that have been talked about this afternoon is due to perhaps special advisers monitoring draft responses or do they not have a role here?

David Evennett: Special advisers do have a role and they do monitor some of the questions if they can add value to them. The main is the civil service.

Patrick Grady: Or take value away.

David Evennett: Well, value is a value judgment, isn't it? There is an involvement, but I am not sure that is where the delays have been. I think it has been a combination of factors. That may have been one.

Q13 Patricia Gibson: Apart from obviously the changes in personnel you have talked about, are there any other factors that may cause delays?

David Evennett: My view is what I said at the beginning: we were focused on the policy areas and I think perhaps we did not have as much pressure on the various individuals involved to get the answers as quickly as I would want and as you, Mr Walker, and the Committee would want.

Q14 Bob Blackman: David, could you talk us through the process that you went through to improve the service? I am looking more from the perspective of other Departments that may be struggling so that maybe we could learn from that.

David Evennett: I can tell you but, of course, part of this started before I got into the Department. I am happy now with the procedure that we have—the committee, the training for the people who are working in policy areas to do written parliamentary questions—and I am also keen that the training and the monitoring and the committee works. Could I ask Mr Dean to say a couple of words because he spans both what Tracey has done and what I have been trying to do?

Ben Dean: In brief, in July it was brought to our attention at official level that our statistics were not good enough. We then put in place a revised training programme for staff—all the key staff who work on parliamentary questions—as well as updating our guidance. We had a look at how that impacted the statistics by—

Q15 Bob Blackman: Can I just stop you? Was the view then that the drafting of answers was the problem rather than—

Ben Dean: Both the quality and the timing was not good enough.

Bob Blackman: Okay.

David Evennett: Both, I think, if I could emphasise that: quality and timing not good enough.

Ben Dean: We saw a little bit of improvement, but by September it was clear the improvement was not enough. At that point, the Secretary of State asked for an improvement plan to be put in place, which we worked on throughout October and it was signed off by our official executive board in November and December, which meant a new management structure was put in overseeing parliamentary questions and correspondence. I started doing a weekly meeting on it. We started having monthly performance data going up to all deputy directors and the Permanent Secretary. From December/January we did start to see improvements and then a shortening of the timelines from February really helped. In the last couple of months, the statistics have

been above 95%. I think it is that shortening of timelines and the other incremental benefits that have—

Q16 Bob Blackman: Did you do any analysis, for example, on ordinary questions where if a certain percentage were answered within five days, how many were done in six, seven, 10 days, say, obviously giving an answer but giving an answer late, which might be a better quality answer but not within the expected timeframes? Did you do any of that analysis?

Ben Dean: I do not have any data on that. The majority of answers were only a couple of days late rather than substantially late.

David Evennett: None the less, we wanted deadlines to be met but the quality as well. It is a pincer movement to improve it and that is what I have been monitoring since January.

Q17 Bob Blackman: Was there any need to increase staff or just ensure that the staff involved are properly trained and able to do the job that they are being asked to do?

David Evennett: I think more the latter. The training is very, very important and to make them realise deadlines had to be met.

Q18 Bob Blackman: Was there any change in the number of staff involved?

Ben Dean: We changed the management but not the actual total number.

David Evennett: There was no increase in numbers.

Q19 Patrick Grady: Is there any monitoring of the kind of questions that are being asked? For example, if people are frequently asking for a certain kind of statistic or information about grants awarded or whatever, that information that is frequently being requested could just be made routinely available and that might help with the whole bureaucratic process.

David Evennett: There is an element of that, but there is an element in our Department of having a huge diversity of questions because it covers such a wide field. The ones that I see are not repetitious; they tend to be different. Of course, there are certain times when you have campaigns and people do write in and they are similar, but they are not all the same. The great thing I think about Members of Parliament is that they are creative and do things differently. It is quite difficult. In some Departments I think you could ask what the statistics were in your county or your constituency. We do not get those type of

questions. We tend to get more detailed, specific policy and it is not replicated by other colleagues. I think it is quite difficult to do that. If it was, I think it might speed up the system.

Q20 Nic Dakin: I was going to ask where blockages were, but I have to say I have been impressed by the commitments that have been made. The proof of the pudding will be in the eating, Mr Walker.

Chair: Excellent.

David Evennett: We are determined, Mr Walker.

Chair: We can see that. That has been demonstrated. Well, Minister, Mr Dean, can we thank you for coming to see us today? It is very good of you to be so fulsome in your response. We hope that the performance continues to improve and you get back to the sunlit uplands that saw you scoring an aggregate of well over 95%. We hope we never have to see you again, at least not in the next four years. Thank you very much.

David Evennett: Thank you very much, Mr Walker.

Examination of Witness

Witness: **Rt Hon Theresa May MP**, Secretary of State for the Home Department, gave evidence.

Q21 Chair: Home Secretary, it is extremely good of you to come and see us. We have had your Minister, Karen Bradley, before us on two occasions. By the way, she has been outstanding—more than helpful. In fact, the reason we have waited so long to see you is that we wanted to give Karen maximum opportunity to turn things around. She very kindly organised an opportunity for me to visit your Department and meet with your civil servants, so we have had nothing but warm words and good discussions.

What we have not had, until coincidentally about two months ago when we invited you, was a dramatic improvement in the timeliness of the Home Office answering questions. For the 2014-15 Session—you will be aware of these figures but I will just do it for the record—you answered 66% of ordinary written questions within five working days next to a departmental average across the piece of 87%, and named day was 38% next to an 81% cross-departmental average. Then for the Session up to 24 March the number improved for ordinary written from 66% to 74.5%, round up to 75%, and from 38% to 47%. For this quarter, we have got to 85% on ordinary written next to a cross-departmental average of 87%,

but named day is still at 56% next to a departmental average, as I said earlier, of 81%. Things are going in the right direction, Home Secretary. Can you tell the Committee why this is and what you are doing to ensure that it continues? Thank you very much.

Mrs May: Thank you very much, Chairman. I will not suggest that it is anything to do with you inviting me to come before the Committee. If I could pay tribute to the work that Karen Bradley has done—

Chair: She is excellent.

Mrs May: I think it is that she has really recognised this issue, gripped it and been pushing the Department on it. I might just say that my understanding is that for named day questions, in February the figure was 74%, in March 83%, and we expect the April figure will be around 80%. I would hope that in the most recent three-month period we will be if not hitting what is the average for Departments, at least very close to that. We have been able to do it because we have put some better procedures in place inside the Home Office. We have put some time limits down for the various stages of consideration of responses to parliamentary questions, so that people now know very clearly that they have to do something within a particular time in terms of getting that to the next stage of the process.

I recognise that it is all very well to sit here and say that I think for the last three months it has been very good, but we have to carry that on into the future. I recognise there is more for us to do to make sure that those procedures are embedded. Of course, what can sometimes happen in areas is that staff who recognise the importance of this change. We need to make sure that this is embedded in the whole Department, not just in a group of people who happen to be doing this work at this point in time.

Chair: Thank you very much for that answer.

Q22 Edward Argar: I have two very quick questions, Home Secretary. You have said that you hope that the changes will be embedded and, therefore, these changes and these improvements in performance will be sustained. Your Department is an extremely complex one in the nature of what it does and the nature of the information we all often ask for. My two questions are: what lessons do you think, assuming that is sustained, other Departments can learn from what you have done in the past few months to effect this improvement in performance? The second one is: given the complexity of what is often asked of your Department, do you feel there is ever a risk of a trade-off, given that information, between completeness of answers and the ability to provide those answers quickly?

Mrs May: In response to the first point that you raised, as part of the process of changing our procedures we have looked at other Departments. By and large, we see that our procedures are not that different from good-performing Departments. Two things I will mention. First of all, I think there is an issue around training staff and that is part of the embedding process, but there is also accountability in terms of them being very clear that there is a Minister who is looking at this who regularly—weekly—will be looking at these figures, that it is dealt with at board level within the management board that the Permanent Secretary has, and the departmental board is aware of this as an issue so that the message is there in the whole Department of its importance.

On the issue of named day questions and the complexity of issues, I think it is one of the challenges for us. It has been one of the problems for us is that very often the sort of data, the complexity of data we are being asked to provide in named day questions, is perhaps greater than it would be in some other Departments. That is why it has been particularly challenging. We could simply, as you know, respond with an acknowledgement on the named day and then respond at a future date. I know from 13 years in opposition how frustrated I got when I got those sorts of responses, so we try not to do that. We try to provide the answers in a timely fashion, but sometimes it can be complex and difficult.

Q23 Mr Nuttall: It is all going in the right direction; it is just a question of keeping it up. If these figures for April are continued, you will be near the top of the league table. I think it is perhaps just important to place on the record that this is not some arcane matter of procedure. Very often Members put down questions because they are being prompted to do so by constituents, who may well be raising very serious matters. I am very conscious of the fact that you have just spent two hours on your feet answering questions about the Hillsborough disaster. Over the years many, many questions will have been asked on the Hillsborough disaster to your Department, and it is on behalf of those Members of Parliament and the constituents that they represent that we as a Committee charged with this responsibility by the House are doing what we are doing today. It is not arcane, it is linked with real life about having timeliness of answers to matters that are raised by Members of Parliament on behalf of their constituencies and very often for matters that, as the numbers of questions that have been asked on Hillsborough over the years will testify, are of huge import to the constituents and, indeed, sometimes on a national level.

Mrs May: Chairman, I absolutely take that point. I think that is, in a sense, part of the process we have to do in terms of embedding better

procedures within the Department. I have to say if we came top of the league I think it would be a red letter day indeed for the Home Office. Part of what we have to do is to ensure that everybody who deals with parliamentary questions understands exactly the point that you have made, Mr Nuttall, that people are coming through with questions; sometimes they are questions that people are asking because they have a particular interest in a subject and wish to pursue it, but more often than not it is because constituents have raised issues for them. It is the public that have voted for us all who want the answer to those questions.

Mr Nuttall: Thank you, Home Secretary.

Chair: Home Secretary, we are going to be looking at the very top of the league just to make sure that they are legitimate answers. We have not done that before. We are going to have a little look at these ones scoring 98% and 99% just to make sure they are being entirely honest with those asking the questions.

Q24 Ian C. Lucas: Home Secretary, following on exactly from your last observation, which is very true, a constituent raised a number of issues with me concerning domestic violence and I put down some questions to the Home Office about incidents of prosecutions for domestic violence in North Wales, the area I represent. I was very surprised to receive an answer that these figures were not collected centrally, which is quite a common response in my experience that comes from the Home Office. Does it surprise you that those figures are not collected centrally? Can you tell us how it is determined which figures are collected centrally?

Mrs May: First of all, I will go away and look at the question if you could let me know when it was that that question was asked. I will go away and look at that. There are, of course, general overall figures for numbers of prosecutions, which will be a matter not for the Home Office necessarily—obviously convictions and prosecutions are generally matters for the Ministry of Justice. Whether it was that the regional breakdown is different or whether that regional breakdown is not available centrally I do not know, so if I may I would like to investigate that.

The overall point that you make, though, is about who decides when figures are collected centrally. Obviously, there are a variety of types of body that are collecting figures of various sorts. The Office for National Statistics is independent and will determine how they undertake statistical collection and what they publish. The Home Office will have certain figures that we will require centrally. I am, for example, at the moment asking police forces to record incidents of the use of tasers

and other restraints so that we have better information. When we identify something that we feel it is appropriate to collect centrally, then we will do that. On other occasions, there will be figures that I think are more beneficial to people at a local level. On police.uk, for example, the crime maps are very much showing people at their local level what is happening in their local area.

Ian C. Lucas: You will appreciate one of the reasons I was interested in the figures is a comparison between different areas is of interest. I would imagine that, for example, the taser issue that you raised would be an interesting parallel to make with different areas of the country. That was why I was surprised, but I will certainly contact you. Thank you.

Mrs May: Yes.

Chair: I think, Patrick, you want to come in on a similar point, do you?

Q25 Patrick Grady: On the point of statistics, when Karen Bradley was in front of us she said that this was an issue of data not being held centrally and there is the time that it can take to get data back from police forces or Border Force or whatever. I wondered what steps the Department was taking to monitor the kind of questions that are coming in and the kind of statistics that are being asked for regularly and if, therefore, it could just make that available routinely. Do you see what I mean? If you are regularly getting requests for updates of particular statistics on particular types of crime reported or so on, it should not be a surprise to Border Force or the police departments to be getting those questions. Therefore, is there not a way that they can make that statistic either available openly anyway or provide it in a more timely fashion?

Mrs May: I completely understand the point you are making. Obviously, if you look at the sort of statistics that the Department will deal with, there is some management information that is not generally made public that the Department might have for its own internal purposes, for example. If I may, I will go away and reflect on the point that you have made.

What I would say is I have a natural disinclination just to require extra levels of bureaucracy to collect extra figures in case we may be asked questions about those figures. If we are going to ask police forces and others to give us figures at the centre, we have to be very clear that there is a purpose for that that is going to be of value. I understand the point that was made earlier about constituents asking questions and being able to respond to those questions, but that does not necessarily mean that we should all the time be putting a process in place that is bureaucratic and requires people to put extra resource and work into

providing those figures if all we do is sit on them in case there is a question coming.

Q26 Patricia Gibson: Home Secretary, earlier this afternoon we had in the Minister for DCMS, the right hon. David Evennett, and he was talking about dips in performance for meeting targets for parliamentary questions and written questions. He pointed out that sometimes this can be an issue of personnel being embedded into the Department and, therefore, the expertise being available and the Department running smoothly as a consequence. The dips in performance for the Home Office, have there been any particular personnel issues in that regard in your Department? On a related question, is there a sense in which special advisers monitoring answers that are going out from civil servants could perhaps be a cause of some of the delays that we have seen?

Mrs May: In response to the issue of the dips in performance, I am conscious, for example, that we had a dip in performance at the end of last calendar year between September and December, which was because we had a lot of questions coming in about our new resettlement scheme for vulnerable refugees from Syria. The team were having to get embedded in terms of the new work that they were doing, the new system that they were putting in place, at the same time as answering quite a lot of questions, so performance in that area did dip at that point. Yes, it can be that if a particular topic suddenly becomes an issue on which a lot of questions come in, particularly if it is in a new area where a team is just getting to grips even with the work that they are doing to put it in place, let alone answer questions, that can lead to a dip in performance.

On the role of special advisers, one of the things that we have done very clearly in the Home Office is set a time limit for special advisers looking at the parliamentary questions. There is a timetable for the civil servant who is drafting the reply and for the special adviser, and then the expectation is that the Minister will look at the response overnight in their box or, if possible, in office hours. That role should not hold up the process, but if the timetable goes beyond the time that has been set for the special advisers, then the answer will go to the Minister so that it does not hold up the process.

Q27 Holly Lynch: Returning to the issue about the various places that the Home Office might have to go in order to retrieve data, whether it is from police forces or Border Force, for example, do you think that that places an extra pressure in terms of time on the Home Office compared with other Government Departments?

Mrs May: I think there is an issue for the Home Office, particularly more perhaps around the number of arm's length bodies that we deal with that we respond for—I think it is 29 arm's length agencies and public bodies that we have. I am conscious that sometimes a Department will take the view that all they will do is answer by saying that they are sending the letter on to that body and letting that body respond. I think that it is right that we take the view that we get the information from the body concerned and then respond properly rather than it being a letter in the library, for example, but respond properly through the normal process of responding to written questions to the Member. Of course, because that is an arm's length remove, it is at arm's length, one of the things we have been doing is trying to ensure that we get a better process when we are requesting that information so that those bodies recognise the importance of responding in a timely fashion for us. For example, we have been providing training to staff in the National Crime Agency on parliamentary questions and the importance of Parliament and the importance of responding to these.

Q28 Holly Lynch: Because that process will presumably take place before the initial drafting by civil servants, would that drafting be done by the agency or would the information be provided and then the drafting of the response would begin by the civil servants at the Home Office?

Mrs May: I think the information will be requested from the body and the drafting would be done by the civil servant, but I cannot guarantee that there might not be occasions on which the process would be different.

Chair: I think there is a bit of vigorous nodding behind you, Home Secretary.

Mrs May: Good. This is the moment at which one prays that there will be nodding behind me.

Chair: You were spot on there. Holly, is that all right?

Holly Lynch: Yes, thank you.

Q29 Sir Edward Leigh: Obviously, it is good that you are here and you are getting a grip on it, but we have been looking at this since September 2013. Karen Bradley told us that the Home Office policy responsibilities are sensitive and complex, but so are the responsibilities of the Treasury, the FCO, Defence, Culture, Media and Sport—every other Department. I think it is a cultural thing in the Home Office that civil servants believe they should provide a Rolls-Royce service to Ministers, quite rightly, but they view Parliament as a constitutional necessity and, frankly, a crashing bore. I do not think that there has been a culture in the Home Office of

meeting a deadline. If you have a deadline, you just meet it. There is no excuse.

I would like to ask you about this package of measures that Karen Bradley told us about. You are at the top of the tree, and I think they will listen to you because ultimately their career depends on you. Are you going to ensure that all these things are done and heads will roll if they do not happen? For instance, tasking a member of the Home Office board with specific responsibility for improving parliamentary accountability, he is responsible. As in the private sector, if he does not do his job and his first and most important job is reporting to Parliament, he goes. Greater senior level engagement with the Department's existing network of officials, weekly performance assurance—again, this happens in the private sector. If you do not do your primary function, there are career consequences. All these sorts of things, I think if you just lay down the law it will happen. What the Home Office officials should be told is that you answer the question, substantively, on time; that is your duty. Is that a fair comment?

Mrs May: It is certainly a fair comment to say that, as I indicated earlier, one of the things that I am trying to do is to ensure that there is embedded throughout the Home Office a culture of recognition of the importance of parliamentary questions and of responding to parliamentary questions accurately and within a timely fashion. I am tempted to say that in my years in Parliament—Sir Edward has been in Parliament longer than I have—the Home Office has never really been one of those Departments that has been at the top of the league in responding to these questions. I think that may be a reflection of certain complexities in some of the data and the issues that we deal with.

On the issue of deadlines, it is important, but there is a question, I think, for the House in terms of named day questions, because it is possible to respond to a named day question simply by saying that the information is not available at this point in time and it will be available, in which case it ceases to be a purposeful named day question. We do try to ensure that we are providing substantive answers at those points in time so that we are genuinely meeting deadlines, but obviously it is not always possible to do that.

Sir Edward Leigh: Maybe we have to look into this named day thing. There is no point having a named day that is not achievable. Better to have a later named day and then we get the culture in Whitehall that if there is a named day that is a serious length of time you will meet it. I think it is something that we could look at because there is no point having a system that is just inoperable.

Q30 Nic Dakin: Home Secretary, we believe that Karen Bradley has been championing this. How valuable do you think it is to have a champion for parliamentary questions within a Department—a political ministerial champion? Do you believe that now, having made the improvements you have described to us, this is going to be sustained into the future?

Mrs May: I certainly hope so and we will be making every effort to make sure that it is sustained into the future. I think it has been absolutely crucial to have a Minister overseeing this and taking this on board for two reasons. First of all, I think if the civil servants see that this is an issue that Ministers are really interested in and want to see action on, then we will see them more likely to respond to that. It is also only a Minister that is able to explain to people in a Department about the significance of parliamentary questions, because if you are a civil servant who is simply answering these parliamentary questions, you do not recognise that, as Mr Nuttall said, they have come from constituents. You have not tabled them. I always used to say that one of the hardest jobs in this building was tabling a parliamentary question so that you got the answer to the question that you wanted to be asking. I think Ministers understand that and can relay that and ensure that those who are doing the work of providing the answers understand it.

Q31 Bob Blackman: Home Secretary, Karen Bradley explained to us that you have a process in place that leads to every question being answered within four days, provided all the ducks are in a row. Clearly, at the moment that is not being achieved, although there has been an improvement. What happens in your Department at the moment about deadlines being passed? At what stage do you and other Ministers get involved in saying, "Hang on, wait a minute, we have not responded to these questions. Why not?"

Mrs May: In relation to the overall responsibility, obviously as the Minister responsible Karen Bradley keeps an eye on this in terms of looking at the figures to see what percentage we are responding to within the appropriate time. There may be very valid reasons why it is not possible to respond within that time. For example, if it does refer to getting information from another body and there is a problem in that process, or if the body sends the answer and it is not the right set of figures that they have sent, which is not unknown, there can be valid reasons why it is not possible to reach 100% in relation to that. I think it is that weekly process of questioning that is right. I indicated earlier that within the timetable if special advisers do not meet it, then the

question will go to the Minister to try to make sure that it is going to meet its timetable.

Q32 Bob Blackman: I am also anxious to understand at what point you get involved, if at all, if questions are not being responded to in a timely manner.

Mrs May: I would get involved in a more overall sense in that Karen Bradley will speak to me when she is concerned about what is happening within the Department. It would not be that somebody necessarily raised—unless it was a question that I was answering, obviously the majority of questions will be responded to by the ministerial team. In overall terms, Karen would come to me and raise with me and, indeed, with other Ministers when the performance is at a point that we should be concerned about. If it started to look as if we were slipping back, then she would raise that and we would put extra effort into restoring our performance.

Q33 Bob Blackman: Are there any particular agencies that are a bottleneck? You have mentioned 29 agencies that respond to you. Are there any that stand out for you as not responding within a reasonable timeframe?

Mrs May: It is a little difficult to name a single agency. I think those who have asked questions in some areas—like the Disclosure and Barring Service—will recognise that sometimes it takes a time to get responses.

Chair: I am trying to read the faces of your officials behind you, Home Secretary, when that question was asked.

Mrs May: They are either looking aghast at my answer or they—

Chair: Some eyes were being averted and cast towards the ceiling.

Q34 Edward Argar: Can I pick up one more time on the points raised by Sir Edward and by Nic in terms of the training and the embedding of the culture among officials? You are well known for your diligence and the respect that you show to Parliament and the courtesy that you show to Parliament, Home Secretary, but I would suggest that is partly because, first, it is in your nature and the way you do business but, secondly, also because as a Member of the House in Opposition and in Government you live it every day, whereas officials do not necessarily. That is not a criticism; their focus is on the work of the Government Department, in the Home Office, and it is very complex work. What scope do you think there is, Home Secretary, beyond you and other Ministers emphasising the importance of this for those officials to get a real hands-on sense of what it looks like from this end and to understand how the system works

here and how important it is to us, particularly as Back-Bench Members of Parliament?

Mrs May: Obviously, there are some things one can do to try to encourage that, but when you are dealing with a Department with a large number of staff and wide geographical spread, I think the best way of doing this is through the training that we take out to staff and, as part of that training, reminding them of the importance of Parliament and why it is that this process of parliamentary questions exists. It is not a nuisance, it is actually important because it is people searching for information.

Chair: Well, Home Secretary, thank you very much. I hope that was not a wholly disagreeable experience coming before us. Thank you for the time you have given us and long may the improvement in performance continue. Thank you very much.

Mrs May: If I may say so, Chairman, and I hope you will take this in the right way, but I would hope our performance will be such that it will not be necessary to come back.

Chair: Absolutely.