



House of Commons
Procedure Committee

**Written parliamentary
questions:
Departmental
performance in Session
2021–22**

Second Report of Session 2022–23

*Report, together with formal minutes relating
to the report*

*Ordered by the House of Commons
to be printed 20 July 2022*

Procedure Committee

The Procedure Committee is appointed by the House of Commons to consider the practice and procedure of the House in the conduct of public business, and to make recommendations.

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Powers

The powers of the Committee are set out in House of Commons Standing Orders, principally in SO No. 147. These are available on the internet via www.parliament.uk.

Publications

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Committee staff

The current staff of the Committee are Paul Connolly (Media Relations Manager), Jim Lawford (Committee Operations Officer), Ffion Morgan (Second Clerk), Silas Scott (Senior Media Relations Officer) and Richard Ward (Clerk).

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1 Written parliamentary questions: Departmental performance in Session 2021–22

1. In this report we publish data on departmental answering performance in the 2021–22 Session of Parliament, accompanied by a table showing comparable data since the 2015–16 Session. We have continued our work in evaluating statistics on the timeliness with which written answers to parliamentary questions have been provided. We have also, through the Chair, offered Members of Parliament a means by which unsatisfactory or late answers may be challenged. Following our last report on performance in the 2019–21 Session, we have also turned our attention to the causes of poor performance and the ways in which they can best be tackled.¹

2. In our last report, we noted that the number of parliamentary questions for written answer (WPQs) had risen sharply against a benchmark of the previous Session. Over the Session that followed, the number of WPQs tabled by Members of Parliament stabilised at around 330 each sitting day, the level last seen when routine monitoring was started by our predecessor committee.² We are pleased, therefore, to record a modest increase in the proportion of answers provided by Government departments on time over the 2021–22 Session, up from 79% to 85% of Ordinary questions and 74% to 79% of questions for answer on a Named Day. In the 2017–19 Session, 92% of Ordinary questions and 89% of Named Day questions were answered on time, so there is still some way to go before pre-pandemic levels of performance are reached.

Table 1: Number of questions successfully tabled to all answering bodies per sitting day, Session 2010–12 to 2021–22

Session	Number of sitting days	WPQs tabled per sitting day	Change from previous Session
2010–12	295	333	-
2012–13	145	299	-10%
2013–14	162	150	-16%
2014–15	134	226	-10%
2015–16	158	237	+5%
2016–17	142	249	+5%
2017–19	349	282	+13%
2019	15	231	-18%
2017–19 + 2019	364	279	+12%
2019–21	209	331	+18%
2021–22	149	334	+1%

Source: 2010–12 to 2014–15: memorandum from the Leader of the House of Commons, November 2015; 2015–16 to 2022: Q&A system

1 Procedure Committee, [Written parliamentary questions: Departmental performance in Session 2019–21](#), First Report of Session 2021–22

2 Table 1

Table 2: Overall rates of timeliness in written answers from Government departments, Session 2010–12 to 2019–21

Session	Ordinary written	Named day
2010–12	69%	69%
2012–13	76%	73%
2013–14	85%	78%
2014–15	87%	81%
2015–16	92%	86%
2016–17	92%	87%
2017–19	92%	89%
2019	91%	85%
2019–21	79%	74%
2021–22	85%	79%

Source: 2010–12 to 2014–15: memorandum from the Leader of the House of Commons, November 2015; 2015–16 to 2022: Q&A system

3. We believe that it is reasonable for the House to expect to receive at least the same level of performance from Government more than two years after the start of the pandemic, and well beyond the point at which Government departments could be expected to have adjusted their operations. We are pleased that both the current Leader and his predecessor have accepted that the pandemic is no longer a reason for poor WPQ performance.³ The House should not accept a permanent reduction in ministerial accountability, and it is important that the improvements in performance continue in the 2022–23 Session.

4. In our last report, we identified areas where poor practice by departments had been identified in complaints made by Members in respect of answers they had received.⁴ We stated our intention to make recommendations for revisions to the Cabinet Office’s Guide to Parliamentary Work,⁵ and made recommendations to the former Leader in writing on 10 November 2021.⁶ Our recommendations for areas for improvement were as follows:

Recommendations for changes to the Guide to Parliamentary Work

1. Clearer statement of the principle of ministerial accountability to Parliament
2. Improved explanation of the interaction between the Freedom of Information Act 2000 and parliamentary accountability
3. Improved guidance to officials on when reference to published material is appropriate
4. Recalculation of the disproportionate cost threshold
5. Clarification of the extent of ministerial responsibility for the work of arm’s-length bodies
6. Greater detail on the procedural rules relating to written questions

3 [Written parliamentary questions: Departmental performance in Session 2019–21](#), Appendix 1; Oral evidence, [25 May 2022](#), Q37 [Rt Hon Mark Spencer MP]

4 [Written parliamentary questions: Departmental performance in Session 2019–21](#), para 7

5 [Written parliamentary questions: Departmental performance in Session 2019–21](#), para 12

6 [Chair of the Committee to the Leader of the House, 10 November 2021](#)

5. Our recommendations were accepted by the former Leader at the beginning of December 2021,⁷ so it is a matter of great disappointment that more than six months revisions to the Guide have not been made and no new Guide has been issued. We challenged the new Leader of the House, Rt Hon Mark Spencer MP, on the matter at his first appearance before us on 25 May 2022. He told us that:

We are working on that. We have your recommendations in hand. We are certainly working our way through that and hopefully we will be in a position to respond to you around the summer recess. We will get there as soon as we can, but certainly we are grateful for your recommendations and my office are munching their way through that.⁸

6. **It is clearly unacceptable that more than half a year should have passed without action since the Government accepted our recommendations for changes to the Guide to Parliamentary Work.**

7. ***The Government should, as part of its response to this report:***

- a) ***Publish a revised Guide to Parliamentary Work making the changes we have recommended to the section on parliamentary questions; and***
- b) ***Make a written statement with details of the calculation and revalorisation of the disproportionate cost threshold, in line with the recommendations of the Chair's letter of 10 November 2021.***

8. Our last report was published on 18 July 2021, the day before we held a further oral evidence session with the then Minister of State for Health, Edward Argar MP. In correspondence with the Minister, we advised the Department not to predicate its PQ recovery on diminishing levels of parliamentary interest in its work. The experience of the 2021–22 Session has borne that out. In the 2021–22 Session the Department for Health and Social Care received precisely one fewer WPQ each sitting day, 64.6 rather than 65.6, demonstrating that parliamentary interest has been sustained well beyond the acute phase of the pandemic. We have kept a close eye on the Department for Health and Social Care's performance as part of our regular monitoring of departmental performance throughout the Session.⁹ We reviewed departmental performance in detail for the period to December 2021 at the end of March 2022. We identified six departments whose performance was either not of an acceptable standard or whose performance had declined in the first half of the Session. The Chair wrote to the relevant Secretary of State to ask for an explanation, and in the case of the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, to give oral evidence.¹⁰

7 Leader of the House to the Chair of the Committee, [1 December 2021](#)

8 Oral evidence, [25 May 2022](#), Q36

9 Minister of State for Health to Chair of the Committee, [6 August 2021](#)

10 All correspondence is [published on the Committee's website](#).

Table 3: Departments in which poor performance was identified in the first half of the Session

Department	Reason given	Action taken	Performance at end of Session
Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy ¹¹ <i>Reduction in performance</i>	“new and challenging issues that required more time to prepare accurate and substantial responses”	1. New processes for drafting and clearance 2. Support from the Parliamentary Unit to policy teams 3. Greater focus on PQs within the Department	Ordinary 87% Named Day 85%
Department for Work and Pensions ¹² <i>Reduction in performance</i>	No explanation offered	1. Discussed with Ministers 2. Streamlined processes 3. Training for civil servants	Ordinary 86% Named Day 83%
Home Office ¹³ <i>Reduction in performance (Named Day only)</i>	“predominantly as a result of the fast evolving and complex situation in Afghanistan” “a large number of Ukraine related PQs”	“looking at ways to streamline clearance of Named Day questions, particularly during a crisis situation”	Ordinary 74% Named Day 72%
Department for Health and Social Care ¹⁴ <i>Insufficient progress</i>	High volume of WPQs relating to the pandemic	No new measures in addition to existing plan	Ordinary 68% Named Day 41%

11 Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to the Chair of the Committee, [6 June 2022](#)12 Secretary of State for Work and Pensions to the Chair of the Committee, [22 June 2022](#)13 Secretary of State for the Home Department, [21 June 2022](#)14 Secretary of State for Health and Social Care to the Chair of the Committee, [15 June 2022](#)

Department <i>Reason</i>	Reason given	Action taken	Performance at end of Session
COP26 ¹⁵ <i>Poor performance in the context of low volume of WPQs</i>	Impact of ministerial absence during preparations for COP26	1. COP26 WPQs integrated within Cabinet Office 2. Support provided by Cabinet Office officials	Ordinary 56%
			Named Day 71%
Women and Equalities ¹⁶ <i>Poor performance in the context of low volume of WPQs</i>	Slow transfers of WPQs in from other departments	Work with the Cabinet Office and Table Office on attribution of PQs at the point of tabling and transfer	Ordinary 78%
			Named Day 82%

9. The nature of the responses we received to the Chair’s letters varied significantly. Some letters referred to good performance at other times, including early 2022. The strongest theme of the cause of poor performance was new issues, some of which such as the withdrawal from Afghanistan, could be regarded as exceptional. Other reasons given were less persuasive. The President of COP26 attributed poor performance to his absence (on ministerial business) from the Department. Ultimately neither crises nor routine business should lead to reductions in WPQ performance. We note the role played by the Cabinet Office in coordinating training and process issues across Whitehall and welcome the proactive approach that its Ministers have taken to maintaining its own performance.¹⁷

10. *Written parliamentary questions are a core means by which Ministers demonstrate their accountability to Parliament and should be treated as a core delivery task by Departments. Secretaries of State should anticipate heightened parliamentary interest in high-profile situations and instruct Permanent Secretaries to resource teams accordingly.*

11. Unfortunately the response that we received from the former Secretary of State for Health and Social Care on 15 June left much to be desired.¹⁸ His letter cited performance in periods other than the one in question, and highlighted May 2022—a month during half of which the House did not sit—as a period of good performance. More than a year after the Department was first warned to not expect levels of parliamentary interest to decrease, it troubled us that the Department appeared to be treating higher levels of PQs as temporary. We were also surprised that the Secretary of State declined our invitation to be accountable for his Department’s performance.

12. While it is normal for Secretaries of State to delegate aspects of departmental management or operations to other members of a Ministerial team, it is the task rather

15 COP26 President to the Chair of the Committee, [6 June 2022](#)

16 Minister for Equalities, Local Government, Faith and Communities to the Chair of the Committee, [31 May 2022](#)

17 Parliamentary Secretary to the Cabinet Office to the Chair of the Committee, [22 July 2021](#); Paymaster General to the Chair of the Committee, [16 December 2021](#)

18 Secretary of State for Health and Social Care to the Chair of the Committee, [15 June 2022](#)

than the responsibility which is delegated. Our invitation to the former Secretary of State for Health and Social Care was alsoprecedented. On 12 December 2012 a junior Minister at the Department for Education gave evidence to our predecessors following prolonged poor answering performance. Our predecessors reported that:

Regrettably, that session raised for us more questions than it provided answers about the reasons for the department’s poor performance. [...] We were also unconvinced that the department was on top of the problems or that any improvements could be expected. We therefore invited the Secretary of State and the Permanent Secretary for a follow-up session.

The Secretary of State gave evidence on 23 January 2013, accompanied by his Permanent Secretary and a Senior Policy Adviser.

13. The Chair replied to the former Secretary of State on 29 June, calling for increased resources and political leadership within the Department.¹⁹

14. We reiterate our invitation, this time to the newly-appointed Secretary of State for Health and Social Care to give oral evidence on how his Department will reach an acceptable level of WPQ performance.

Conclusions and recommendations

1. It is clearly unacceptable that more than half a year should have passed without action since the Government accepted our recommendations for changes to the Guide to Parliamentary Work. (Paragraph 6)
2. *The Government should, as part of its response to this report:*
 - a. *Publish a revised Guide to Parliamentary Work making the changes we have recommended to the section on parliamentary questions; and*
 - b. *Make a written statement with details of the calculation and revalorisation of the disproportionate cost threshold, in line with the recommendations of the Chair's letter of 10 November 2021. (Paragraph 7)*
3. *Written parliamentary questions are a core means by which Ministers demonstrate their accountability to Parliament and should be treated as a core delivery task by Departments. Secretaries of State should anticipate heightened parliamentary interest in high-profile situations and instruct Permanent Secretaries to resource teams accordingly. (Paragraph 10)*
4. We reiterate our invitation, this time to the newly-appointed Secretary of State for Health and Social Care to give oral evidence on how his Department will reach an acceptable level of WPQ performance. (Paragraph 14)

Annex: timeliness of answers by Department, Session 2021–22

Table 4: Departments listed alphabetically

	Ordinary written			Named day		
	Questions tabled for answer	Number (%) answered substantively within 5 working days		Questions tabled for answer	Number (%) answered on named day	
Attorney General	94	92	98%	63	61	98%
Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy	2,326	2,032	87%	1,721	1,462	85%
Cabinet Office	698	592	85%	707	551	78%
COP26	126	70	56%	92	65	71%
Defence	1,317	1,270	96%	1,215	1,156	95%
Digital, Culture, Media and Sport	1,255	1,139	91%	609	546	90%
Education	2,052	1,821	89%	1,240	1,078	87%
Environment, Food and Rural Affairs	1,572	1,284	82%	809	693	86%
Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office	2,550	2,399	94%	2,000	1,777	89%
Government Equalities Office	110	86	78%	74	61	82%
Health and Social Care	5,859	3,981	68%	3,772	1,543	41%
Home Office	2,098	1,562	74%	1,885	1,366	72%
International Trade	716	613	86%	357	273	76%
Justice	1,143	1,054	92%	816	683	84%
Leader of the House of Commons	14	14	100%	6	6	100%
Levelling Up, Housing and Communities	1,629	1,539	94%	1,096	1,016	93%
Northern Ireland Office	116	98	84%	99	74	75%
Prime Minister	56	55	98%	58	54	93%
Scotland Office	76	76	100%	46	46	100%
Transport	2,121	2,116	100%	1,300	1,300	100%
Treasury	1,764	1,756	100%	1,217	1,210	99%

	Ordinary written			Named day		
	Questions tabled	Number (%) answered		Questions tabled	Number (%) answered	
Wales Office	96	95	99%	35	34	97%
Work and Pensions	1,648	1,422	86%	1,136	938	83%

Source: data from the Q&A system provided by the House of Commons Table Office

Table 5: Departments ranked by number of questions for ordinary written answer received

	Ordinary written			Named day		
	Questions tabled for answer	Number (%) answered substantively within 5 working days		Questions tabled for answer	Number (%) answered on named day	
Health and Social Care	5,859	3,981	68%	3,772	1,543	41%
Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office	2,550	2,399	94%	2,000	1,777	89%
Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy	2,326	2,032	87%	1,721	1,462	85%
Transport	2,121	2,116	100%	1,300	1,300	100%
Home Office	2,098	1,562	74%	1,885	1,366	72%
Education	2,052	1,821	89%	1,240	1,078	87%
Treasury	1,764	1,756	100%	1,217	1,210	99%
Work and Pensions	1,648	1,422	86%	1,136	938	83%
Levelling Up, Housing and Communities	1,629	1,539	94%	1,096	1,016	93%
Environment, Food and Rural Affairs	1,572	1,284	82%	809	693	86%
Defence	1,317	1,270	96%	1,215	1,156	95%
Digital, Culture, Media and Sport	1,255	1,139	91%	609	546	90%
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Northern Ireland Office	116	98	84%	99	74	75%
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Wales Office	96	95	99%	35	34	97%
Attorney General	94	92	98%	63	61	98%

	Ordinary written			Named day		
	Questions tabled for answer	Number (%) answered substantively within 5 working days		Questions tabled for answer	Number (%) answered on named day	
Scotland Office	76	76	100%	46	46	100%
Prime Minister	56	55	98%	58	54	93%
Leader of the House of Commons	14	14	100%	6	6	100%

Source: data from the Q&A system provided by the House of Commons Table Office

Table 6: Departments ranked by proportion of questions for ordinary written answer receiving substantive response within five working days

	Ordinary written			Named day		
	Questions tabled for answer	Number (%) answered substantively within 5 working days		Questions tabled for answer	Number (%) answered on named day	
Transport	2,121	2,116	100%	1,300	1,300	100%
Treasury	1,764	1,756	100%	1,217	1,210	99%
Scotland Office	76	76	100%	46	46	100%
Leader of the House of Commons	14	14	100%	6	6	100%
Wales Office	96	95	99%	35	34	97%
Attorney General	94	92	98%	63	61	98%
Prime Minister	56	55	98%	58	54	93%
Defence	1,317	1,270	96%	1,215	1,156	95%
Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office	2,550	2,399	94%	2,000	1,777	89%
Levelling Up, Housing and Communities	1,629	1,539	94%	1,096	1,016	93%
Justice	1,143	1,054	92%	816	683	84%
Digital, Culture, Media and Sport	1,255	1,139	91%	609	546	90%
Education	2,052	1,821	89%	1,240	1,078	87%
Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy	2,326	2,032	87%	1,721	1,462	85%
Work and Pensions	1,648	1,422	86%	1,136	938	83%
International Trade	716	613	86%	357	273	76%
Cabinet Office	698	592	85%	707	551	78%
Northern Ireland Office	116	98	84%	99	74	75%

	Ordinary written			Named day		
Environment, Food and Rural Affairs	1,572	1,284	82%	809	693	86%
Government Equalities Office	110	86	78%	74	61	82%
Home Office	2,098	1,562	74%	1,885	1,366	72%
Health and Social Care	5,859	3,981	68%	3,772	1,543	41%
COP26	126	70	56%	92	65	71%

Source: data from the Q&A system provided by the House of Commons Table Office

Table 7: Departments ranked by number of questions for written answer on a named day received

	Ordinary written			Named day		
	Questions tabled for answer	Number (%) answered substantively within 5 working days		Questions tabled for answer	Number (%) answered on named day	
Health and Social Care	5,859	3,981	68%	3,772	1,543	41%
Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office	2,550	2,399	94%	2,000	1,777	89%
Home Office	2,098	1,562	74%	1,885	1,366	72%
Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy	2,326	2,032	87%	1,721	1,462	85%
Transport	2,121	2,116	100%	1,300	1,300	100%
Education	2,052	1,821	89%	1,240	1,078	87%
Treasury	1,764	1,756	100%	1,217	1,210	99%
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Work and Pensions	1,648	1,422	86%	1,136	938	83%
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Environment, Food and Rural Affairs	1,572	1,284	82%	809	693	86%
Cabinet Office	698	592	85%	707	551	78%
Digital, Culture, Media and Sport	1,255	1,139	91%	609	546	90%
International Trade	716	613	86%	357	273	76%
Northern Ireland Office	116	98	84%	99	74	75%

	Ordinary written			Named day		
	Questions tabled	Number (%) answered		Questions tabled	Number (%) answered	
COP26	126	70	56%	92	65	71%
Government Equalities Office	110	86	78%	74	61	82%
Attorney General	94	92	98%	63	61	98%
Prime Minister	56	55	98%	58	54	93%
Scotland Office	76	76	100%	46	46	100%
Wales Office	96	95	99%	35	34	97%
Leader of the House of Commons	14	14	100%	6	6	100%

Source: data from the Q&A system provided by the House of Commons Table Office

Table 8: Departments ranked by proportion of questions for written answer on a named day answered on the day named

	Ordinary written			Named day		
	Questions tabled for answer	Number (%) answered substantively within 5 working days		Questions tabled for answer	Number (%) answered on named day	
Transport	2,121	2,116	100%	1,300	1,300	100%
Scotland Office	76	76	100%	46	46	100%
Leader of the House of Commons	14	14	100%	6	6	100%
Treasury	1,764	1,756	100%	1,217	1,210	99%
Attorney General	94	92	98%	63	61	98%
Wales Office	96	95	99%	35	34	97%
Defence	1,317	1,270	96%	1,215	1,156	95%
Levelling Up, Housing and Communities	1,629	1,539	94%	1,096	1,016	93%
Prime Minister	56	55	98%	58	54	93%
Digital, Culture, Media and Sport	1,255	1,139	91%	609	546	90%
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	Ordinary written			Named day		
Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy	2,326	2,032	87%	1,721	1,462	85%
Justice	1,143	1,054	92%	816	683	84%
Work and Pensions	1,648	1,422	86%	1,136	938	83%
Government Equalities Office	110	86	78%	74	61	82%
Cabinet Office	698	592	85%	707	551	78%
International Trade	716	613	86%	357	273	76%
Northern Ireland Office	116	98	84%	99	74	75%
Home Office	2,098	1,562	74%	1,885	1,366	72%
COP26	126	70	56%	92	65	71%
Health and Social Care	5,859	3,981	68%	3,772	1,543	41%

Source: data from the Q&A system provided by the House of Commons Table Office

Formal minutes

Wednesday 20 July 2022

Members present

Karen Bradley, in the Chair

Aaron Bell

Jack Brereton

Chris Elmore

Kevan Jones

Owen Thompson

Written parliamentary questions: Departmental performance in Session 2021–22

Draft Report (*Written parliamentary questions: Departmental performance in Session 2021–22*), proposed by the Chair, brought up and read.

Ordered, That the draft report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraphs 1 to 14 read and agreed to.

Annex 1 agreed to.

Resolved, That the Report be the Second Report of the Committee to the House.

Ordered, That the Chair make the Report to the House.

Ordered, That embargoed copies of the Report be made available (Standing Order No. 134).

List of Reports from the Committee during the current Parliament

All publications from the Committee are available on the publications page of the Committee's website.

Session 2022–23

Number	Title	Reference
1st Report	Proxy voting and the presence of babies in the Chamber and Westminster Hall	HC 383

Session 2021–22

Number	Title	Reference
1st Report	Written parliamentary questions: Departmental performance in Session 2019–21	HC 532

Session 2019–21

Number	Title	Reference
1st Report	Procedure under coronavirus restrictions: proposals for remote participation - First Report of Session 2019–21	HC 300
2nd Report	Procedure under coronavirus restrictions: remote voting in divisions	HC 335
3rd Report	Procedure under coronavirus restrictions: the Government's proposal to discontinue remote participation	HC 392
4th Report	Proxy voting: review of pilot arrangements	HC 10
5th Report	Written Parliamentary questions: Departmental performance in the 2017 Parliament	HC 790
6th Report	Procedure under coronavirus restrictions: virtual participation in debate	HC 905
7th Report	Procedure under coronavirus restrictions: call lists and time limits on speeches in debates	HC 1031
8th Report	Back to the future? Procedure after coronavirus restrictions	HC 1282
1st Special Report	Procedure under coronavirus restrictions: the Government's proposal for proxy voting for shielding Members	HC 429
2nd Special Report	Procedure under coronavirus restrictions: Government Responses to the Committee's First, Second and Third Reports	HC 565

Number	Title	Reference
3rd Special Report	Proxy voting: review of pilot arrangements: Government Response to the Committee's Fourth Report of Session 2019–21	HC 836
4th Special Report	Procedure under coronavirus restrictions: Government Responses to the Committee's Sixth and Seventh Reports	HC 1165
5th Special Report	Back to the future? Procedure after coronavirus restrictions: Government Response to the Committee's Eighth Report	HC 1389