



## Procedure Committee

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From the Rt Hon Karen Bradley MP, Chair of the Committee

Rt Hon Matt Hancock MP  
Secretary of State for Health and Social Care  
Department of Health and Social Care  
39 Victoria Street  
London SW1H 0EU

*Sent by email only*

19 May 2020

Dear Secretary of State —

As I expect you know, the Procedure Committee in each Parliament back to 2010 took on the role of monitoring, on behalf of backbench colleagues, the timeliness and quality of written answers to Parliamentary questions. At its first meeting in this Parliament the Committee undertook to carry on that work, both in considering complaints about the quality of individual answers provided to colleagues and in raising with Ministers instances where the average time taken to provide a written answer falls below what the Committee considers an acceptable standard.

The Committee recognises the exceptional burden which the current pandemic has placed on the work of your Department, and appreciates that this has necessitated substantial reallocation of resource and reprioritisation of work. The Committee has nevertheless asked me to write to you to draw to your attention the situation which has apparently been allowed to develop in respect of holding replies issued by your Department. As you will be aware, the matter was raised by the Speaker in the House on Monday last week, and also earlier today, following earlier discussions with Committee members and others who were concerned at the time taken to respond to their questions for named day answer.

According to the data on holding answers contained in the Parliamentary Search database, on Wednesday 13 May, the day of the Committee's last meeting, your Department was responsible for 156 of the 175 questions to all Departments for priority named day answer recorded as having received a holding answer only this session. Of those questions, five were due for answer on a date before the Easter recess and a further 36 were due for answer before the end of April.

This is evidently not an acceptable position, and it was on that basis that the Committee asked me to write to you. I asked for an update on the figures and was pleased to note that the number of holding answers in place was, according to the records in the database, down to 113 as of Friday 15 May. While a considerable improvement on the situation, you will agree with me that this figure remains too high.

In previous sessions your Department has had an enviable reputation for providing answers to a very large volume of questions within the required timescales for ordinary written and named day questions alike, almost without exception. The Committee has yet to receive the latest figures on overall performance by Department which inform its regular monitoring work, but having been made aware of the figures cited above had no option but to raise the matter with you as soon as possible.

You will recognise that colleagues on the backbenches on all sides of the House expect prompt and full answers from Ministers to our questions to enable us to represent our constituents properly. I am sure you will want to reassure the Committee of the commitment which you and your Department's Ministers have to proper parliamentary scrutiny of the actions of the Government, especially during this challenging period. It would therefore be helpful if you would arrange for an explanation to be sent to the Committee of the reasons the backlog in answering was allowed to arise, together with details of the steps which are to be taken to provide the outstanding substantive answers, and the date by which you expect the backlog to be cleared.

I would appreciate it if a response could be sent to arrive with the Clerk of the Committee not later than **Thursday 28 May**. The Committee will consider the response at its subsequent meeting and may invite a Minister to provide further explanation.

May I, in closing, ask you to pass on the Committee's thanks to the officials of your Department? The vital and extraordinary work they are doing to support the Government's response to the pandemic is appreciated across the House.

I am copying this letter to the Speaker and to the Leader of the House.

Yours ever —



**Karen Bradley MP**