



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 [REDACTED]

12 November 2020

Dear Secretary of State -

Department of Health and Social Care answers to written questions

I am sorry to have to write to you again on the subject of your Department's performance in providing answers to written parliamentary questions.

We last corresponded on the subject in May. On the date I wrote to you, the Department had holding answers outstanding to 156 questions for priority named day answer, out of a total of 175 questions for all Departments, a figure the Committee considered unacceptable. I asked you to 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 were to be taken to provide the outstanding substantive answers, and the date by which you expected the backlog to be cleared.

The Committee noted your response of 28 May, in which you set out the actions undertaken by the Department to keep the House updated on its response to the pandemic. You indicated that you had asked officials of your Department to 'redouble their efforts' to provide answers to questions tabled by MPs.

I have no doubt that Departmental officials are making every effort to address the backlog of unanswered questions. There is, however, little evidence that the situation is improving. The termly statistics for the period from 20 April to 17 July, recently provided to the Committee for review, indicate that during that period it was only possible to answer 16.5 per cent of ordinary written questions within 5 days of tabling, and that only 7.3 per cent of named day questions were answered on the day named.

As of this afternoon, it appears that 460 of the 479 named day questions in receipt of active holding answers were questions asked of your Department: some of these questions were tabled for named day answer at the end of April.

You will no doubt have been made aware of the numerous points of order raised in the Chamber concerning delays in the answering of questions and of Ministerial correspondence. I have received many representations from colleagues on the issue. While I am sure you will understand the serious concern these delays cause to colleagues who are seeking answers on behalf of their constituents, and the risk that the current situation causes in general to principles of Ministerial accountability, you must also recognise that the current situation cannot be allowed to continue.

I propose to put the matter on the agenda of the Procedure Committee for consideration on Wednesday 25 November. I should be grateful if you would respond to this letter not later than Monday 23 November, setting out the steps which have been taken to date to manage the task of answering the volume of questions received, including any changes to your Department's internal procedures and staff complements, together with the details of how your Department proposes to manage the backlog of questions yet to be answered.

I ought to give you advance notice that I am minded to recommend to the Committee that it invite a Minister to appear before the Committee to explain the Department's response in greater detail. Your Parliamentary clerk may wish to make provisional arrangements for such an appearance with the Clerk of the Committee, who will be able to suggest possible dates.

I am copying this letter to Mr Speaker, to the Leader of the House and to the Principal Clerk, Table Office.

Yours sincerely —



Rt Hon. Karen Bradley MP