



House of Commons  
Public Accounts Committee

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# Specialist Skills in the civil service

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**Thirty-Second Report of  
Session 2019–21**

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

*Ordered by the House of Commons  
to be printed 7 December 2020*

**HC 686**

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## The Committee of Public Accounts

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Powers of the Committee of Public Accounts are set out in House of Commons Standing Orders, principally in SO No. 148. These are available on the Internet via [www.parliament.uk](http://www.parliament.uk).

### Publication

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### Committee staff

The current staff of the Committee are Bradley Albrow (Second Clerk), Jessica Bridges-Palmer (Media Officer), Ameet Chudasama (Committee Operations Manager), Richard Cooke (Clerk), Ben Shave (Chair Liaison), Rose Leach (Committee Operations Assistant), Damith Rajakaruna (Committee Operations Officer) and Wafia Zia (Assistant Clerk).

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## Summary

The lack of specialist skills in the civil service affects both the efficiency and the effectiveness of government projects. Frustratingly, this is something we regularly see evidence of. Many of the projects and programmes across Whitehall which we scrutinise are afflicted by delays, inefficiencies and budgetary overruns—the root issue of which is often a lack of specialist skills amongst officials. Despite us repeatedly highlighting the root cause of these issues, government has consistently failed to adequately address the lack of skills, which undermines repeated assurances by government that they are committed to tackling the issue.

‘Functions’ were introduced by the Cabinet Office in 2013 to develop and manage specialist skills within the civil service. However, the pace of change has been frustratingly slow. In the past seven years only one of the fourteen functions has produced a detailed plan to help them understand the skills they need. Inadequate data means that government still does not know exactly what skills it has or where gaps exist. These gaps can lead to an increased reliance on external contractors, which the Cabinet Office estimates has cost the taxpayer £980m in 2018/19. Meanwhile, this lack of skills has been exacerbated by civil service pay restrictions and significant salary disparities between departments, which has led to difficulties with both the recruitment and the retention of specialists.

Despite slow progress, there have been some positive developments in how functions have supported cross-government working, improved their data and developed specialist skills through tailored training programmes. For example, departments are now encouraged to work with functions during the spending review process to draw on cross-government expertise. The Project Delivery function has also developed a better understanding of what skills people have, with 7,000 individuals now assessing their own skills against the Project Delivery Capability Framework. The planned introduction of clear recruitment standards and pay exception processes may also go some way towards improving internal capability and diversity in the civil service.

## Introduction

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Government has for many years recognised the need to recruit and develop people with specialist skills in order to deliver better public services. From 2013 onwards, it has used fourteen ‘cross-government functions’ to build specialist skills in the civil service. Functions give expert advice, set and assure standards, develop capability and deliver required services. Functions often have a central unit or organisation, for example to set standards and coordinate training across government, but much of the work of functions is carried out by staff working in departments, for example in finance teams or as commercial practitioners. The Cabinet Office oversees all but five of the government functions. It holds joint responsibility with HM Treasury for the Project Delivery function and HM Treasury is solely responsible for the Finance and Internal Audit functions. In the past few years new oversight and governance arrangements have been introduced for the functions. The current focus on civil service reform provides further context for government to consider how best to develop specialist skills in the civil service.

## Conclusions and recommendations

1. **Skills shortages in the civil service are responsible for delays, inefficiencies and increased costs in government projects.** We repeatedly see evidence of this in the projects and programmes we scrutinise—some of which continue to be plagued by the same issues year after year. For example, a lack of skills in the Home Office was at least partly responsible for the 3-year delay now facing the Emergency Services Network programme. The Cabinet Office acknowledges that the civil service has major skills gaps in the science, commercial and digital sectors, as well as in the management of large projects. These gaps impede progress and can necessitate the use of high-cost consultants, as has been the case for High Speed 2 and Crossrail. Despite us repeatedly highlighting the root cause of these issues, government has consistently failed to adequately address the lack of skills, meaning delays, inefficiencies and budgetary overruns have continued to proliferate. This lack of progress undermines repeated assurances by government that they are committed to tackling the issue. In our recent report on Whitehall preparations for EU Exit we drew attention to how government can also be too quick to spend money on consultants to undertake work that could actually be better done by existing civil servants. The Cabinet Office estimates the current cost of using consultants across government is £980m. This amount is likely to increase in 2020–21 because of the need to fill gaps in capacity and skills as a result of covid-19 and EU exit. The Cabinet Office plans to minimise this cost in future by making the upskilling of the civil service a key focus of its current civil service reform process.

**Recommendation:** *The Cabinet Office should work with functions and departments to identify skills gaps and should prioritise resolving these as part of the Civil Service Modernisation and Reform process.*

*The current cost of using consultants to fill these gaps should be considered as part of this work. The Cabinet Office should outline in its Treasury Minute response how it plans to reduce reliance on external consultants and mitigate these costs in future.*

2. **The civil service struggles to attract and retain specialist staff.** Since 2010 the civil service has been subject to pay restrictions, which have limited its ability to offer progressive pay packages to staff. Areas such as Digital and Commercial have struggled to recruit and retain specialists because there is strong external competition for these skills. Functions have introduced their own pay flexibility measures to attract external talent and increase skills retention. However, pay flexibility creates pay disparities between departments and an internal market for specialists which risks some government departments and projects missing out on the skills they need. Some functions, such as Digital, have introduced measures to ensure that pay is consistent for similar roles across all departments.

**Recommendation:** *The Cabinet Office, HM Treasury and functions should outline in the Treasury Minute response how, and by when, they will review pay exception case processes across the functions to address current pay disparities and avoid creating an internal market for specialists.*

3. **There is still a long way to go to ensure the civil service retains and promotes those from different backgrounds.** The more diverse an organisation, the better decisions it makes. The civil service has made a commitment to be more diverse at all levels across both departments and functions. To achieve this the Cabinet Office says it has made its recruitment processes fairer. This includes changes to how and where jobs are advertised, and to how interviews and selections are conducted. Functions are also now setting clear standards in relation to recruitment in order to try and address inconsistencies in the process. The Cabinet Office believes these changes will help to ensure that people from different backgrounds are encouraged into the civil service. Alongside this, the Cabinet Office is aware of the need to improve the retention and progression of minority groups. Whilst we welcome the Cabinet Office's commitment to diversifying the civil service, more needs to be done to improve the intake and retention of minority groups and those with different socio-economic backgrounds.

**Recommendation:** *The Cabinet Office should write to us within three months setting out detailed and broken-down information on the retention and progression of staff from different backgrounds and its plans for further reform in this area.*

4. **Departmental data is not good enough to support functions' development of comprehensive workforce plans.** The Cabinet Office acknowledges it does not have the data it needs across all functions to accurately assess what skills the civil service has and where these should be deployed to maximise impact. Departments each have their own systems for collecting data on their staff, and as a result departmental workforce data quality and content vary. Some functions have undertaken their own data collection exercises with departments to get around the problem of workforce data quality. Dealing with dynamic challenges such as EU Exit and covid-19 has forced the Cabinet Office to improve its workforce planning and improve the quality of data available to functions. This exercise would see even greater improvement if the Cabinet Office had access to more granular workforce data.

**Recommendation:** *The Cabinet Office should set out how it will work with departments to make sure workforce data is collected at the right level, to better address skills gaps and shortages.*

5. **Seven years on from their introduction, functions still have not developed clear plans to help maximise their impact, and lack strategic direction.** The Department requires all functions to put in place their own 'capability blueprint'. Blueprints should include a clear operating model and set out the organisational capacity for each function. They are also an important tool in managing coordination between functions and departments. So far, only the Commercial function has a blueprint, with the HR, Finance and Communications functions currently developing theirs. The Department believes that the Commercial function's blueprint has made great inroads in improving commercial capability across government. Without clear plans, it is difficult for departments to fully exploit functional expertise.

**Recommendation:** *The Cabinet Office and functions should work together urgently to complete capability blueprints. The Cabinet Office should write to us by April 2021 at the latest to confirm that these have been finalised.*

6. **Only a few of the fourteen functions have been able to demonstrate the benefits of their activities.** Most functions have not been able to quantify their costs and benefits. The Cabinet Office admits there are difficulties measuring the impact of some functions, such as the HR function. Progress has been made in some areas: the Commercial function regularly collects data on the cost and benefits of its work and has a mature process for evidencing benefits; and the Digital function has undertaken analysis of the cost savings of moving to inhouse specialists rather than relying on external contractors. The Government Internal Audit Agency is currently working on compiling comparative data on costs and benefits for the functions. When complete this will allow the Cabinet Office to better benchmark functions' performance and identify best practice. However, the quantification of costs and benefits and the measurement of impact is not yet common practice across the functions.

***Recommendation: The Cabinet Office, HM Treasury and functions should agree a consistent methodology for measuring costs, benefits and impacts across all functions by July 2021 and report to the Committee on functions' performance.***

# 1 Impact of skills shortages in government

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1. On the basis of a report by the Comptroller and Auditor General, we took evidence from Cabinet Office and HM Treasury on specialist skills in the civil service.<sup>1</sup>
2. The Cabinet Office has lead responsibility for increasing capability across the civil service, although departments are responsible for identifying and meeting the skills needs of staff and its own workforce. This means that the Cabinet Office is responsible for ensuring that the civil service gets the right people with the right skills in place at the right time. One of the main ways in which the Cabinet Office aims to develop specialist capability is through the 14 cross-government ‘functions’ which were introduced in 2013.<sup>2</sup> The Cabinet Office is responsible for all but 5 of them and holds joint responsibility with HM Treasury for the Project Delivery function. HM Treasury is solely responsible for a further 2 functions.<sup>3</sup>
3. Functions are ‘areas of specific expertise’ that provide professional support and services to departments, such as finance, commercial and project delivery. They generally have a central unit to set standards and coordinate training, but much of the work of functions is carried out by staff working in departments. Typically, functions set cross-government strategies, set and assure standards, develop capability, give expert advice, drive continuous improvement, and develop and deliver commonly required services.<sup>4</sup> Functions aim to deliver a coherent approach to recruiting, developing and deploying specialists, and creating broader cross-government career paths.<sup>5</sup> New oversight and governance arrangements have been introduced in recent years including functional user boards and a greater focus on functions’ work at the Civil Service Board.<sup>6</sup> Recruiting and training more specialists within the functions is also a key priority of the Civil Service Reform agenda.<sup>7</sup>

## The impact of skills shortages

4. We regularly see the impact skills shortages has on government projects and the costs the taxpayer incurs as a result. For example, a lack of skills in the Home Office was at least partly responsible for the long delays now facing the Emergency Services Network programme.<sup>8</sup> We asked the Cabinet Office what the key specialist skills gaps are in government. It currently believes the science, commercial, digital and project management areas face the most noticeable skills shortages. The Cabinet Office acknowledged that these shortages can affect the delivery of major projects—such as High Speed 2 and Crossrail—and can also lead to very high remuneration packages being offered to people to run these projects.<sup>9</sup> The National Audit Office’s recent report on the cost of EU Exit preparations drew attention to the fact that Departments used consultants to both fill specific skills

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1 C&AG’s report, *Specialist skills in the civil service*, HC 575, Session 2019–21, 17 July 2020

2 C&AG’s report, *Capability in the civil service*, HC 919, Session 2016–17, 24 March 2017

3 C&AG’s report HC 575, figure 2

4 C&AG’s report HC 575, figure 1

5 C&AG’s report HC 919, paras 1,1.8

6 C&AG’s report HC 575, para 1.4

7 Q 92

8 C&AG’s report, *Progress delivering the Emergency Services Network*, HC 2140, Session 2017–19, 10 May 2019

9 Qq 28, 33

gaps and meet immediate staffing needs, driven in part by long-standing skills shortages in relevant areas such as Project Delivery and Commercial.<sup>10</sup>

5. The Cabinet Office told us that in 2018/19, government spent an estimated £980 million on management consultant fees to fill the skills gaps across government. It noted that external contractors were being increasingly relied upon to deal with the challenges of EU Exit and the Covid-19 pandemic, which means this amount is likely to increase further in 2019/20 and 2020/21.<sup>11</sup> The Cabinet Office acknowledged that it should be doing more to ensure that specialist capability is brought in-house and that it needs to consider more skills, such as project management and digital expertise, core disciplines in the civil service.<sup>12</sup> The upskilling of the civil service is a key aim of the Civil Service Reform process, alongside the ability to rely on good data.<sup>13</sup>

6. The Cabinet Office told us there had already been progress in some areas to reduce reliance on contractors. It believes the Digital function was dependent on contractors for 50% of its staff ten years ago, but this figure has now fallen to 20%. The Cabinet Office attributed this fall to the Digital function's work on recruitment, training and pay. Progress in these areas is something it would like to replicate across other functions.<sup>14</sup>

### Difficulties attracting and retaining specialist staff

7. The Cabinet Office recognised that rules introduced in 2010 on civil service pay make it difficult to attract and retain skilled specialists in some areas.<sup>15</sup> Some skills, such as the ability to lead large projects, are particularly scarce. The Cabinet Office told us the areas which experience the highest levels of turnover are those with a strong external market, such as Commercial and Digital. These functions can often find themselves bidding against external competitors who can offer more money.<sup>16</sup>

8. Some functions, such as the Commercial function, have introduced pay flexibility in order to try and increase recruitment of specialists. The Cabinet Office told us that the use of flexibilities in the Government Commercial Organisation had been an effective way to bring in external talent and to consolidate internal talent. It said the turnover rate within the Commercial function had fallen from 25% to 7%, a figure that is lower than the average rate of turnover within the civil service. The Cabinet Office believes this marks a dramatic improvement in the rate of retention and that the pay arrangements introduced have successfully encouraged staff to remain in the civil service.<sup>17</sup>

9. Pay flexibilities can however lead to disparities in specialist pay, which can create an internal market between departments for those with specialist skills. To tackle this, the Cabinet Office explained how it is managing the issue. For senior civil service pay grades, pay exception processes have been put in place and the Heads of Functions now actively share and assess salary information across both functions and departments. The Cabinet Office told us it has also put in place restrictions to limit the ability of people to move

10 C&AG's report, *The cost of EU Exit preparations*, HC 102, Session 2019–21, 6 March 2020

11 Qq 38–39

12 Qq 42–43

13 Q 92

14 Q 14

15 C&AG's report, *Central government staff costs*, HC 79, Session 2015–16, 5 June 2015

16 Q 51

17 Q 51

between departments to jobs at the same level but for more money. For lower grades, the Cabinet Office explained that in the Digital function a framework of salary allowances has been put in place which allowed them to level pay across departments for the same type of job. It is also looking into the cohesion of pay across different geographical locations.<sup>18</sup>

### Retaining and promoting a diverse workforce

10. The more diverse the people in an organisation, the better run it is and the better decisions it makes. As part of the Civil Service Diversity and Inclusion Strategy the civil service has committed to setting and working towards targets to increase the flow of ethnic minority and disabled staff into the senior civil service. The Cabinet Office explained that the functions play an important role in improving diversity by setting clear standards for recruitment and career pathways. It also told us that it had made broader changes to how and where it advertises jobs to bring about a better balance of internal and external recruits, and that it had made changes to how it carried out interviews. The Cabinet Office said it has made particular changes to the processes in place for the civil service fast stream, such as making sure the mix of assessors for roles was more diverse.<sup>19</sup>

11. The Cabinet Office also recognised the importance of retention. One of its key aims is to look at how people progress within the civil service once they are in post. The Cabinet Office acknowledged it can take three to five years for someone to fully understand their role, and stated that this is the minimum amount of time they would like to see individuals stay in a post if possible.<sup>20</sup> The Cabinet Office told us that introducing pay flexibilities had greatly improved retention levels within the Commercial function.<sup>21</sup>

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18 Q 52

19 Qq 65, 89, 92

20 Q 51

21 Q 51

## 2 Planning and data

### Departmental data and workforce plans

12. Ideally, all functions would have access to workforce statistics from a consistent civil service-wide data set. However, functions are still largely reliant on departmental data on staffing, which is variable in quality and is not always detailed enough for functions to use.<sup>22</sup> The Cabinet Office told us that while it has more workforce data than ever before, it still has a way to go until the data available is granular enough to identify individual skills and shortages. It is keen to make sure that the functions are using standardised data, which is subject to the same definitions and approaches.<sup>23</sup>

13. The Cabinet Office is looking to put in place measures that will allow it to identify what skills an individual has so that they can be best deployed to maximise impact. The Cabinet Office noted that the Project Delivery function is ahead of the other functions in this regard, as it has introduced its own Project Delivery Capability Framework which includes an assessment tool for users to evaluate their skills. Some 7,000 individuals have recorded and assessed their skills against this framework. The Cabinet Office aims to replicate this model across the other 13 functions.<sup>24</sup> It has also, for the first time, included functional membership as one of the questions in the Annual Civil Service Employment Survey in an attempt to understand functional data at an employee level.<sup>25</sup>

14. The Cabinet Office told us that the challenge of EU exit and EU transition, alongside the concurrent risk of the covid-19 pandemic, has sharpened its thinking about skills and has improved the effectiveness of strategic workforce planning across the civil service. The current situation has forced the Cabinet Office to introduce new ways of working, such as cross-civil service campaigns and hubs to move people between departments, and to explore more innovative ways of managing staffing needs.<sup>26</sup> Alongside this the Cabinet Office said it had been building capacity and skills within the HR function to carry out better strategic workforce planning. It has drawn on examples from other organisations that already do this well, such as the military and the Metropolitan Police.<sup>27</sup>

### Creating plans to help maximise impact

15. Developing detailed plans for each function—also known as ‘capability blueprints’—is fundamental to the effective operation of the functional model in government. The National Audit Office report found that without capability and capacity plans in place it is difficult for functions to understand their own impact, or for departments to fully exploit functional expertise.<sup>28</sup> The Cabinet Office acknowledged that these blueprints are the starting point for all functional work but confirmed that only one of the 14 functions currently had its capability blueprint in place. For the Commercial function, having this blueprint in place has allowed them to build commercial capability and improve the function’s processes. The Cabinet Office could not explain why the other 13 functions

22 C&AG’s report HC 919, para 6

23 Q4 6

24 Q 76

25 Q 46

26 Qq 30–31, 92

27 Q 82

28 C&AG’s report, HC 575, para 10

are taking so long to publish their own plans but did tell us that blueprints were now also underway for the HR, Communications and Finance functions.<sup>29</sup>

16. We believe blueprints are a key part in setting out the operating model for each function, and an important control tool for managing the relationships between functions and departments. Once they are in place it will be easier for functions to collaborate and share best practice, as well as work together on common issues. The Cabinet Office told us that the development of blueprints across all the functions will be an important part of the next year and that it already has a lot of activity underway to ensure that these are not delayed further.<sup>30</sup>

17. Despite the lack of capability blueprints in place, HM Treasury shared with us positive examples of cross-government collaboration. The Treasury told us it had integrated functions into major investment decisions, with all functions involved in the appraisal of capital programmes throughout the Spending Review process. HM Treasury also told us it was a priority to integrate the functions into the wider Spending Review process and it has been working with the Cabinet Office to develop guidance on how departments should interact with functions throughout this process. This included designing specific templates to ensure the functions input in the process.<sup>31</sup>

### Demonstrating the benefits of the functions

18. The Cabinet Office's 'blueprint' exercise in 2018 set consistent expectations for functions and introduced more regularised reporting from functions on their performance, costs and benefits.<sup>32</sup> The National Audit Office noted that data quality would be central to the success of these reporting initiatives but found cross-departmental data to be poor.<sup>33</sup> We asked the Cabinet Office whether it agreed with the National Audit Office's assessment that data on impacts was poor. The Cabinet Office told us it had a long way to go in this area before costs and benefits data is robust enough to support the value of the functions.<sup>34</sup> It noted specific difficulties in measuring impact in functions such as HR which, unlike the Commercial function, does not have clear savings figures associated with it.

19. The Cabinet Office explained that the Digital function has made progress identifying the cost savings of moving to permanent staff from contract labour and, as part of this, the function has recognised the indirect cost benefit of retaining skills within the organisation. It also told us that the maturity of the Commercial function meant that it is able to point to direct savings as a result of its work, and told us that the increasing standardisation of processes across government—particularly in the Finance and HR functions—will generate future savings which are likely to stem from increasing automation.<sup>35</sup>

20. The Cabinet Office told us that the Government Internal Audit Agency (GIAA) is in the process of developing a new project to allow comparison of impact assessments across the functions. As part of this, the GIAA has developed a standardised methodology and metric so that the functions are able to measure impact in the same way, so like-for-like comparisons can be made. The aim is for this work to be completed by Spring 2021.<sup>36</sup>

29 Qq 45, 69–71

30 Qq 69–70, 72, 74

31 Q 72

32 C&AG's report HC 919, para 5

33 C&AG's report HC 515, paras 5, 9

34 Qq 46–47

35 Qq 45, 47

36 Qq 48

# Formal minutes

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## Monday 7 December 2020

Virtual meeting

Members present:

Meg Hillier, in the Chair

Mr Gareth Bacon

Peter Grant

Olivia Blake

James Wild

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown

Draft Report (*Specialist Skills in the civil service*), proposed by the Chair, brought up and read.

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

Paragraphs 1 to 20 read and agreed to.

Summary agreed to.

Introduction agreed to.

Conclusions and recommendations agreed to.

*Resolved*, That the Report be the Thirty-Second 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, in accordance with the provisions of Standing Order No. 134.

[Adjourned till Thursday 10 December at 9:15am

## Witnesses

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The following witnesses gave evidence. Transcripts can be viewed on the [inquiry publications page](#) of the Committee's website.

### Monday 02 November 2020

**Alex Chisholm**, Chief Operating Officer for the Civil Service, Cabinet Office;  
**Rupert McNeil**, Government Chief People Officer, Cabinet Office; **Cat Little**,  
Head of the Government Finance Function, HM Treasury

[Q1-101](#)

## Published written evidence

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The following written evidence was received and can be viewed on the [inquiry publications page](#) of the Committee's website.

SCS numbers are generated by the evidence processing system and so may not be complete.

1 Prospect ([SCS0001](#))

# List of Reports from the Committee during the current Parliament

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All publications from the Committee are available on the [publications page](#) of the Committee's website.

## Session 2019–21

Number	Title	Reference
1st	Support for children with special educational needs and disabilities	HC 85
2nd	Defence Nuclear Infrastructure	HC 86
3rd	High Speed 2: Spring 2020 Update	HC 84
4th	EU Exit: Get ready for Brexit Campaign	HC 131
5th	University technical colleges	HC 87
6th	Excess votes 2018–19	HC 243
7th	Gambling regulation: problem gambling and protecting vulnerable people	HC 134
8th	NHS capital expenditure and financial management	HC 344
9th	Water supply and demand management	HC 378
10th	Defence capability and the Equipment Plan	HC 247
11th	Local authority investment in commercial property	HC 312
12th	Management of tax reliefs	HC 379
13th	Whole of Government Response to COVID-19	HC 404
14th	Readying the NHS and social care for the COVID-19 peak	HC 405
15th	Improving the prison estate	HC 244
16th	Progress in remediating dangerous cladding	HC 406
17th	Immigration enforcement	HC 407
18th	NHS nursing workforce	HC 408
19th	Restoration and renewal of the Palace of Westminster	HC 549
20th	Tackling the tax gap	HC 650
21st	Government support for UK exporters	HC 679
22nd	Digital transformation in the NHS	HC 680
23rd	Delivering carrier strike	HC 684
24th	Selecting towns for the Towns Fund	HC 651
25th	Asylum accommodation and support transformation programme	HC 683
26th	Department of Work and Pensions Accounts 2019–20	HC 681
27th	Covid-19: Supply of ventilators	HC 685
28th	The Nuclear Decommissioning Authority's management of the Magnox contract	HC 653

<b>Number</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Reference</b>
29th	Whitehall preparations for EU Exit	HC 682
30th	The production and distribution of cash	HC 654
31st	Starter Homes	HC 88