



Department of Health & Social Care

*From the Rt Hon Steve Barclay MP
Secretary of State for Health and Social Care*

*39 Victoria Street
London
SW1H 0EU*

30 October 2023

Dear Karen,

Thank you for your letter on the Department's performance in answering Written Parliamentary Questions.

I am grateful that your letter recognised the improvements in performance compared to the previous session, and I am pleased to report that we have seen further improvements since the reporting period referred to in your letter.

In your letter, you noted that "DHSC was almost at the cross-Whitehall performance standard of 85% for Ordinary Questions answered on time". We have continued to improve our performance over the past few months and we exceeded the 85% standard in April (87.1%) and July (93.5%). Our September on-time rate for Ordinary Questions was just short of the target, at 84.4%, which was much improved on previous Septembers, despite significantly higher volumes, and at the time of writing the on-time rate for October is at 89%.

We have also seen improvements in our performance for Named Day Questions, including exceeding the 85% target in July for the first time since the start of the pandemic. However, I recognise that we have more to do to bring Named Day performance up to the same levels as Ordinary Written Questions, and over the past few months we have put in place several measures to further improve performance across the board.

We have implemented a number of changes to our internal systems. The upgrade of our PQ management system, Scribe, took place in March, and as a result we now have greater transparency over performance, especially around the timeliness of ALB contributions. It also contains new features, such as automated e-mail reminders for overdue PQs, which have helped us to drive improvements to our performance.

We recently asked the Government Internal Audit Agency to conduct a review of our governance relating to PQs, along with other areas such as FOIs and correspondence, to ensure that we have the right procedures in place to continue our recovery on PQ performance. Just as the Committee has done, the review commended the "steady improvement in performance" on PQs and reported that there were "adequate governance arrangements in place". However, it also provided some minor recommendations on how to further strengthen the senior governance of PQs, which we will be taking forward.

In addition, we have taken steps to build resilience within the Department's central PQ team, including through a 'surge plan' to draw on extra resource where needed, which has already provided benefits in high-volume months such as September this year.

We have also continued to promote transparency and accountability within the Department on Written Parliamentary Questions. PQ performance is discussed on a monthly basis at the department's Executive Committee, which is led by the Permanent Secretary. As well as this, league tables of PQ performance, broken down by Director and Deputy Director groups, are now published monthly and are made visible throughout our Departmental buildings.

Although there have been clear improvements in recent months, I am determined to keep this momentum going, so that we can continue to improve our performance and meet our important obligations to Parliament.

Yours ever,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Steve', with a stylized flourish at the end.

RT HON STEVE BARCLAY MP
SECRETARY OF STATE FOR HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE