



10 DOWNING STREET
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4 April 2024

THE PRIME MINISTER

Dear Sir Denzil,

During my appearance before the Liaison Committee on 26 March, I said that I would write on a number of issues that were raised with me.

Question 3

Dame Harriett Baldwin asked about debt projections. The OBR confirms we are on track to meet our fiscal rules, with Public Sector Net Debt excluding the Bank of England, or underlying debt, falling to 92.9% of GDP in 2028-29. This meets our fiscal rule with £8.9 billion headroom.

Headline debt, which I also mentioned during the Committee session, is a broader measure of debt that accounts for the public sector's total stock of debt liabilities, including the Bank of England. The OBR forecast headline debt to peak in 2024-25, falling in each year thereafter.

Question 5

Dame Harriett also asked if there has been a leak inquiry following the media coverage of the National Insurance cut on the morning of the Spring Budget. It is a long-standing principle under successive Governments not to comment on leak inquiries. As I said during my appearance, there are strong information security practices in the Treasury, particularly around ensuring that information relating to Budget measures is shared on a need to know basis. The Treasury continues to abide by the recommendations set out in the Review into the pre-release of Budget information published in 2013 and led by the then Permanent Secretary, Sir Nicholas Macpherson.

Questions 28 – 31

Sir Bob Neill was concerned about unusable courtrooms and prison cells and asked what was being done to improve maintenance contracts in the criminal justice system. While the loss of a courtroom day is disruptive and to be avoided, less than 0.1% of available sitting days are lost as a result of either planned and unplanned maintenance. HM Courts and Tribunals Service (HMCTS) is investing £220 million in the two years to March 2025 for essential modernisation and repair work across the court and tribunal estate. This will make a difference to the resilience, reliability, accessibility, comfort and environmental impact of court and tribunal buildings.

And as I told the Committee, this Government has committed to the biggest prison build programme since the Victorian era. We have set about building 20,000 new prison places backed by £4 billion which I signed off when I was Chancellor of the Exchequer. Around 5,800 of these places have already been delivered.

HM Prison and Probation Service has been actively reviewing the way maintenance contracts are procured for prisons and has established the *Prison Transformation Programme* to identify lessons learned and design a new structure for Facilities Management (FM) delivery. One of the key deliverables is to reprocure FM contracts with more robust contract management. This will be tendered in the coming months. The new system aims to ensure sufficient flexibility and efficiency for the rapid delivery of reactive repairs as well as greater autonomy for Governors.

Sir Bob also asked about delays in civil cases, particularly in the county courts which he said still operate an entirely paper-based system.

Civil jurisdiction is vitally important to the rule of law, enabling citizens and business to uphold and protect their rights. It plays a crucial role in the prosperity of the UK economy. While over 97% of county court claims resolve without the need for a trial, HMCTS is taking action to ensure those that do are dealt with quickly. As part of that HMCTS has launched the biggest ever judicial recruitment drive for district judges and is holding more remote hearings and increasing the use of mediation. It is also digitising court processes which will reduce the time taken for claims that require one to reach trial.

HMCTS's £1.3 billion reform programme will digitise and reform the civil jurisdiction as well as the criminal and family courts, and tribunals. Its conclusion will include providing a digital service for 86% of county court claims. The Chief Executive of HMCTS recently wrote to the Public Accounts Committee setting out its plans for the final phase of the programme. This is available at:

<https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/43496/documents/216255/default/>

Question 72

Will Wragg asked about the appointment of a permanent Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman. As the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State in the Cabinet Office told the House on Monday 25 March (Hansard column 1358), given the importance and profile of the role, it is vitally important that the right candidate is selected and has the confidence of the House, the Government and the wider public. It is therefore right that this is a rigorous process. In the meantime, the Government very much supports Rebecca Hilsenrath's appointment as interim Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman. Ms Hilsenrath is currently the Chief Executive Officer of the Ombudsman and her role will ensure continuity while the appointment process continues.

Question 80

Will Wragg also asked about the recommendations for the appointment of Non-Party Political Life Peers to the House of Lords by the House of Lords Appointments Commission. Given retirements and other departures, some new members will continue to be needed to keep the expertise and outlook of the Lords fresh – including crossbenchers.

As I told the Committee, it is not the case that the Commission has not been able to make such recommendations. Two peerages were nominated by the Commission in 2021, and two in 2022. In November 2023, I invited the Chair of the Commission to recommend a further two peerages. This is in line with established conventions. I look forward to the Commission's recommendations.

Your sincerely,
