HM Treasury, 1 Horse Guards Road, London, SW1A 2HQ

Sir Bernard Jenkin MP
Chair of the Liaison Committee
House of Commons
Palace of Westminster
Westminster
SW1A 0AA

14 May 2024

Dear Sir Bernard,

SCRUTINY OF SUPPLEMENTARY ESTIMATES

1. Thank you for your letter of 30 April 2024 on providing sufficient time for the scrutiny of Supply Estimates. I take the role the House of Commons has in scrutinising government spending extremely seriously, and you are completely right that Supply Estimates are a key part of the public spending control framework.

2. Ensuring that departmental spending controls included in Supply Estimates are of a high standard is extremely important. This includes taking sufficient time to meet the parliamentary requirement of *tautness and realism*. However, I of course recognise that the more time that this takes, the less time there is for Parliamentary scrutiny.

3. I acknowledge that scrutiny time between the laying and voting of Supplementary Estimates has on occasion been more limited in recent years. Combined with the proximity of the end of the financial year, this can impact on the time available for the Backbench Business Committee to select debates. I very much appreciate the role of this Committee and the Parliamentary Scrutiny Unit in ensuring select committees have high quality briefing and advice to assist with financial scrutiny of Supply Estimates. They should of course have sufficient time to perform this role.

4. HM Treasury worked closely with both the House of Commons Business Managers and the Parliamentary Supply Clerk on timings for Supplementary Estimates 2023-24, which were laid on 27 February, 16 days ahead of the vote. Whilst this met the Standing Order requirement of two weeks, I recognise that this timetable can add pressure to the scrutiny and organisation of Estimates Day debates. In recent years, Supplementary Estimates has consistently been published and voted in line with the Standing Order requirements, 15 days ahead of the vote in 2022-23 and 2021-22; and 16 days in 2020-21. The publication in these years was against the backdrop of significant events such as the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020-21 and 2021-22, and the cost-of-living response in 2022-23; where we had already delivered an emergency and Out-of-Turn Supplementary Estimate in October, ahead of the more usual Supplementary Estimate in February.

5. Historically, there has always been a balance to be struck between providing the most up-to-date, high-quality numbers to Parliament, and publishing early enough for the House to consider the Estimates. Events in recent years have led us to weight more heavily the most up-to-date, high-quality Estimates.

6. I appreciate you highlighting the need for as much time as possible for scrutiny and the administration around selecting debates. HM Treasury seeks to always ensure a taut and realistic publication across all departments, and we are committed to continually improving the quality and timeliness of Supplementary Estimates wherever possible; to ensure we provide the highest quality Estimates in a timely fashion to maximise parliamentary scrutiny and debate.

7. My officials will continue to work closely with the Parliamentary Scrutiny Unit, providing underlying data as soon as it is ready to facilitate analysis. In addition, we will remind departments to deliver the Estimates Memoranda to the Scrutiny Unit and select committees.

8. This response has been copied to the Rt Hon Penny Mordaunt MP, Leader of the House of Commons (who you also wrote to). She has confirmed that the House of Commons Business Managers will continue to work closely with HM Treasury

to ensure suitable voting dates, whilst taking necessary account of other government business.

9. Thanks once again for writing to me and for the work of your fellow Select Committee Chairs in scrutinising the Estimate.

Yours ever,

THE RT HON LAURA TROTT MP
CHIEF SECRETARY TO THE TREASURY