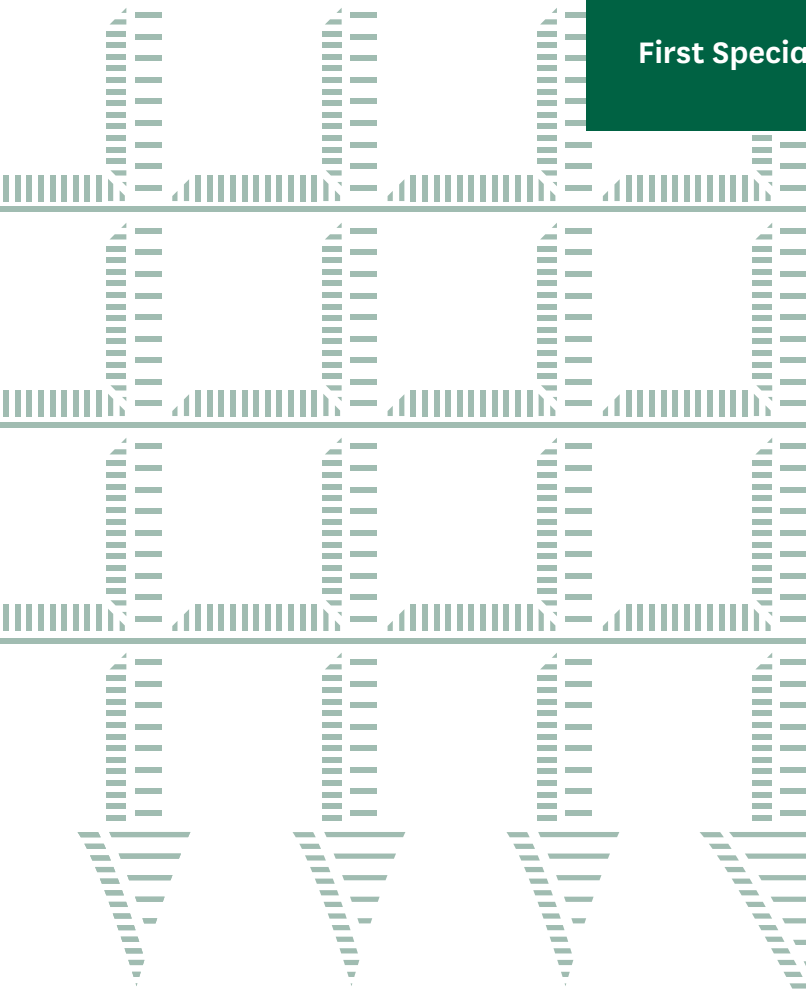


Procedure Committee

**Written Parliamentary
Questions: Departmental
performance in Session
2022–23: Government
responses**

First Special Report of Session 2024–25

HC 325



Procedure Committee

The Procedure Committee is appointed by the House of Commons to consider the practice and procedure of the House in the conduct of public business, and to make recommendations.

Current membership

[Cat Smith](#) (Labour, Lancaster and Wyre) (Chair)

[James Asser](#) (Labour, West Ham and Beckton)

[Bambos Charalambous](#) (Labour, Southgate and Wood Green)

[Sir Christopher Chope](#) (Conservative, Christchurch)

[Mr Lee Dillon](#) (Liberal Democrat, Newbury)

[Graeme Downie](#) (Labour, Dunfermline and Dollar)

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Powers

The powers of the Committee are set out in House of Commons Standing Orders, principally in SO No. 147. These are available on the internet via www.parliament.uk.

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Second Special Report

Our predecessor Committee published its Second Report of Session 2023–24, [Written Parliamentary Questions: Departmental Performance in Session 2022–23](#) (HC 676), on 13 May 2024. The Committee received responses from the Leader of the House of Commons, Rt Hon Lucy Powell MP, on behalf of the Government, on 18 October 2024, and the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, Rt Hon Wes Streeting MP, on behalf of the Department of Health and Social Care on 12 September 2024, and are appended below as Appendix 1 and Appendix 2

Appendix 1: Government Response: Letter from the Lord President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons the Rt Hon Lucy Powell MP, dated 18 October 2024

Dear Cat,

Written Parliamentary Questions: Departmental Performance in Session 2022-23 (Second Report of Session 2023-24)

In May 2024, the Procedure Committee published its report regarding Departmental performance in responding to [Written Parliamentary](#)

[Questions \(PQs\) in the 2022-23 Parliamentary Session](#). I am happy to enclose the Government's response to that report.

We recognise there is room for improvement upon the record of the previous government, and we are committed to doing things differently. As Leader of the House of Commons, I am writing to all Members of Cabinet to ask that departments and Ministers will consider how performance can be improved in this Parliament.

I look forward to working with you and the Committee on this and other such matters.

Yours ever,

The Rt Hon Lucy Powell MP

Government response

The Government is grateful to the Procedure Committee for its report in the previous Parliament, [Written Parliamentary Questions: Departmental performance in Session 2022-23](#). Written questions are an important part of the scrutiny of government, allowing MPs and Peers to ask government ministers for information on the work, policy and activities of government departments. As a new government, we are committed to ensuring that Members receive full and timely responses.

Timeliness of answers

Ministers and their departments should regard timely responses to Written Parliamentary Questions as a crucial means for maintaining transparency and ministerial accountability to Parliament. We expect all departments—particularly those we have identified as having issues in the 2022-23 Session—to demonstrate a sincere commitment to improving their answering performance and meet the cross-Whitehall performance standards. Should departments fail to live up to this expectation, we and our successors will continue to hold them to account for their failure to show proper regard for the importance of transparency and accountability to Parliament via Written Parliamentary Questions. (Paragraph 7)

It is vital that Members receive full and timely responses to PQs. The Office of the Leader of the House of Commons produces the Guide to Parliamentary Work which is available on Gov.uk and outlines the expectations of departments in providing timely answers to PQs (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/guide-to-parliamentary-work>).

We recognise there is room for improvement from the previous government's record. Before the Conference recess, the Leader of the House of Commons took part in a briefing event for new Ministers on working with Parliament where she reiterated the importance of departments providing timely and helpful responses to Members PQs.

It is ultimately for Ministers to account for their Department's PQ performance, and regular reporting of performance will continue to be an effective tool. The Procedure Committee has successfully called Ministers in to look at performance in the past, and will no doubt look to do so should performance fail to improve.

Performance of the Department for Health and Social Care

While we note that it is neither alone, nor the worst performing department, across the 2022–23 Session, it is disappointing that the Department for Health and Social Care remains unable to meet the expected cross-Whitehall performance standard for Written Parliamentary Questions despite the repeated interventions by this Committee. (Paragraph 9)

We recommend that the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care write to us within 28 days of publishing this report, setting out in detail her long-term plans to address the chronic challenges regarding the department's answering performance to Written Parliamentary Questions to ensure sufficient and consistent responses across the entirety of the current Session and beyond into the next Parliament. (Paragraph 10)

We recommend that our successor Committee in the next Parliament closely monitor the performance of the Department for Health and Social Care over the course of this Session when they come to perform their analysis, and, if performance issues persist, for the relevant Secretary of State to come before the Committee to explain the steps they are taking to address these issues. (Paragraph 11)

As recommended by the report, the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care has written to the Committee in order to outline, in detail, the Department's plans for further improvements. A summary of this information can be found below.

In the last few months prior to prorogation, the Department's internal data shows that DHSC exceeded its targets for Ordinary PQs. Although Named Day performance improved in the months prior to the election, it is still not at the level it should be and so the Department is embarking on a further improvement programme, specifically focused on Named Day PQs.

This has been informed by meetings with teams in other departments who were identified in the Procedure Committee report as having recently improved their performance. This improvement programme includes:

- Introducing an ‘early intervention’ system, allowing the Department to escalate Named Day PQs to senior leaders as soon as they fall behind internal deadlines.
- Running a number of well-attended capability sessions on PQs in the period between the election and PQs returning. This included a session on drafting best practice and a bespoke session for senior leaders on their responsibilities relating to PQs.
- Refreshing the Department’s internal PQ guidance in order to make it more accessible, with a specific focus on how to reduce the redrafts and delays that can hinder Named Day performance.
- Adapting the Department’s regular tables on PQ performance, that are published monthly and broken down by Director and Deputy Director group, so they will now include extra data on Named Day performance. The Department will use this to offer additional support to teams who are experiencing issues with Named Days.
- Meeting with teams in other departments who were identified in the Procedure Committee report as having recently improved their performance, in order to learn from best practice across Government.
- The introduction of a new system by NHS England, which provides contributions for a large number of our Named Day PQs, to track and monitor Named Day responses, along with additional managerial oversight of compliance.

Through taking these steps, the Department is determined to make the final steps in this recovery programme in order to reach the standards expected by the Committee.

Machinery of Government changes

As shown by the commendable performances of the Department for Culture, Media and Sport and the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero, unsatisfactory answering performance is not an inevitable outcome for newly established departments, or those departments affected by Machinery of Government changes. It is important that new departments are equipped with adequate resourcing and training from the point of their establishment to ensure a high level of WPQ answering performance from day one.

(Paragraph 14)

As the department with policy oversight of Machinery of Government changes, we recommend that the Cabinet Office put in place processes and procedures to ensure that mechanisms for Ministerial accountability to Parliament via Written Parliamentary Questions are swiftly established and prioritised in the process of forming new departments, or in those departments affected by Machinery of Government changes. (Paragraph 15)

Machinery of Government changes should not impact Parliament’s ability to scrutinise the Government. The Government informs Parliament of significant machinery of government changes, and the Cabinet Office ensures Departments are aware of their responsibilities following a Machinery of Government change. Implementation of Machinery of Government changes is the responsibility of individual departments and their Ministers. It is for Ministers to account for their Departments’ Written Parliamentary Question performance.

Quality of answers

Equal weight should be placed on prioritising high-quality answers to Written Parliamentary Questions as to providing answers on time. Given that it is Ministers that are ultimately accountable to Parliament, it is incumbent upon them to embed a culture of transparency and cooperation with Parliament within their departments, setting a tone that underscores the importance of providing detailed—as well as timely—answers to Written Parliamentary Questions from Members of Parliament. (Paragraph 19)

We will continue to monitor the implementation of the updated guidance and engage with departments bilaterally where it is found that the guidance is not being followed effectively. (Paragraph 20)

We propose that our successor Committee in the new Parliament investigate the quality of answers to Written Parliamentary Questions in more detail, including investigating the 2023–24 Session as the first Session with the new guidance in place for the entirety. Members should be encouraged to provide examples of alleged poor-quality responses and identify areas for improvement to the Committee, so that it can identify and examine any underlying issues or emerging patterns swiftly. (Paragraph 21)

We agree that the quality of answers provided to Members is of equal importance to the timeliness of the response. The Guide to Parliamentary Work makes clear that “in responding to questions, ministers should follow the principles of the Ministerial Code, making the utmost effort to give accurate and helpful answers”.

The Government would of course consider any recommendations from the new Committee in the usual way and looks forward to working with the Procedure Committee in the new Parliament.

Appendix 2: Letter from the Department of Health and Social Care the Rt Hon Wes Streeting MP, dated 12 September 2024

Dear Cat,

Congratulations on your election as Chair of the Procedure Committee and I am looking forward to working with you in your new role.

I'd like to thank the previous Committee for their report on Departmental performance on Written Parliamentary Questions in the 2022-3 session. The Department was unable to respond to the report as the Committee dissolved shortly after the report was published, however I am grateful for the opportunity to write to you on this important issue.

At my first meeting with all staff from both DHSC and NHS England, I reinforced that as ministers we are first and foremost Members of Parliament; that we respect Parliament and that we want every member of the department to respect Parliament too. This includes making sure that MPs and Peers receive timely and accurate responses to their questions.

Although Named Day performance improved in the months prior to the election, it is still not at the level it should be and so the Department is embarking on a further improvement programme, specifically focused on Named Day PQs. This has been informed by meetings with teams in other departments who were identified in the Procedure Committee report as having recently improved their performance.

Our internal PQ team, which processes PQs and co-ordinates the wider PQ process, is now at full capacity following the conclusion of recruitment campaigns. Since the election, the central PQ team has also run a number of well-attended capability sessions on PQs, including a session on drafting best practice and a bespoke session for senior leaders on their responsibilities relating to PQs.

In addition, NHS England, which provides contributions for a large number of our Named Day PQs, has introduced a new system to track and monitor Named Day responses and is providing greater managerial oversight of compliance.

Within DHSC, we have put in place an 'early intervention' system, allowing us to escalate Named Day PQs to senior leaders as soon as they fall behind our internal deadlines. During the summer recess, we have also refreshed the Department's internal PQ guidance in order to make it more accessible, with a specific focus on how to reduce the redrafts and delays that can hinder Named Day performance.

The Department will also be placing an increased focus on Named Day responses within its departmental communications. Regular league tables on PQ performance, that are published monthly and broken down by Director and Deputy Director group, now include extra data on Named Day performance. This will allow additional support to be offered to teams who are experiencing issues with Named Day PQs.

As the report highlights, DHSC received over double the number of Commons PQs received by the next highest Department during the previous session. However, despite these extremely high volumes, the Department is determined to make the final steps in this recovery programme in order to reach the standards expected of us by the Committee.

Thank you once again for the previous Committee's report and valuable work in promoting transparency and accountability. The findings of this report have been raised at the highest possible level within the Department and I can assure the Committee that our Ministers and I are committed to making the improvements that are necessary.

Yours sincerely,

The Rt Hon Wes Streeting MP