

Procedure Committee

Written Parliamentary Questions – Departmental performance in Session 2023–24: Government Response

Second Special Report of Session 2024–25

HC 793

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)

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The following Member was a Member of the Committee during the inquiry:

[Frank McNally](#) (Labour, Coatbridge and Bellshill)

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.

Publication

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Contacts

All correspondence should be addressed to the Clerk of the Procedure Committee, House of Commons, London SW1A 0AA. The telephone number for general enquiries is 020 7219 3351; the Committee's email address is proccom@parliament.uk. You can follow the Committee on X (formerly Twitter) using [@CommonsProcCom](https://twitter.com/CommonsProcCom).

Second Special Report

The Procedure Committee published its First Report of Session 2024-25, [Written parliamentary questions: Departmental performance in Session 2023-24](#) (HC 461), on 14 January 2025. The Government Response was received on 11 March 2025 and is appended below.

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 11 March 2025

Dear Cat,

Written Parliamentary Questions: Departmental Performance in Session 2023-24 (First Report of Session 2024-25)

Thank you for your Committee's report published on 14th January 2025 regarding departmental performance in responding to Written Parliamentary Questions (PQs) in the 2023-24 Parliamentary Session. I am pleased to enclose the Government's response to that report.

I expect Members to receive both timely and helpful responses to their parliamentary questions. At the start of this Parliament I wrote to all Members of Cabinet to remind departments and ministers about the importance of providing responses to parliamentary questions within the agreed deadlines. During UK Parliament Week my office published an updated Guide to Parliamentary Work which outlines the expectations on departments in providing answers to PQs. I also took part in a Q&A session with Civil Servants where I further reiterated this message.

I am committed to raising Members' questions with departments where there are delays or unsatisfactory responses, and I look forward to working with you and the Committee on this important matter.

Yours,

The Rt Hon Lucy Powell MP

Government Response

The Government is grateful to the Procedure Committee for its report, [Written Parliamentary Questions: Departmental Performance in Session 2023–24](#). The Government's response to that report is set out below.

Parliamentary questions (PQs) are an important way in which Members of the House hold the Government to account. The Government is fully committed to ensuring that timely and accurate responses are provided to PQs. We welcome the overall improvement in timeliness of responses compared to previous sessions but recognise the need for continuing this upward trend as the volume of written questions increases and will continue to work with the Committee going forward on this.

Where departmental performance falls below the standard that we and other Members of the House expect, the Procedure Committee has successfully called Ministers in to look at performance and we would encourage the Committee to continue this and challenge departments directly. In this vein, we note the Secretary of State for the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs' recent response to the Committee regarding their departments' performance. This scrutiny, alongside the sessional reporting, continues to be an effective tool in measuring and maintaining performance across Whitehall.

The Government notes the one recommendation from the Committee and the report has been shared with all government departments:

In light of the expected increase in the number of written questions tabled this Session relative to the 2023–24 Session, we recommend that Ministers take active steps now to assess the processes and resourcing currently

in place within their departments, to ensure that high quality responses can continue to be provided to Members in a timely manner. In particular, Ministers should ensure that their departments are equipped to respond to Named Day questions within the expected timeframe and look to reduce any performance gap between responses to Named Day and Ordinary questions. As part of its response to this report, in order to improve transparency and aid understanding of this matter, we ask the Government to set out the internal processes currently in place for responding to written parliamentary questions, including an indication of current and planned levels of resourcing. (Recommendation, Paragraph 9)

It is vital that departments ensure they are deploying adequate resources to answer all PQs within the agreed deadlines. Each department has its own internal processes for responding to PQs. However, there is consistent senior level oversight across government before draft responses reach Ministers.

Levels of resourcing will vary across departments due to a number of factors, including the size of parliamentary teams and volumes of PQs submitted. It can also shift rapidly where policy resources are stretched within departments in response to major events, for example the global pandemic or the war in Ukraine.

The Committee may be interested to note some recent examples of steps departments have taken to improve performance and processes:

- **Department for Business and Trade:** Following the Machinery of Government changes, the Procedure Committee noted the “unsatisfactory answering performance” of the Department for Business and Trade, since then the department has taken swift action to ensure improved performance. Actions include streamlining processes, developing regular reporting practices and the creation of a comprehensive training package. These changes enabled a 33% increase in Named Day PQ Performance between 2022–23 Session and 2023–24 Session.
- **Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office:** In order to reduce the number of re-drafts to PQ responses being requested by Ministers, the department has instituted a monthly feedback session to highlight trends and improve internal processes which has reduced the numbers of re-drafts.
- **Ministry of Justice:** During the summer recess last year the department reviewed and streamlined its processes. This has enabled it to consider a bespoke clearance process for each PQ which has led to increased timeliness.

Ultimately, Ministers need to account for their department's PQ performance and departments should ensure that they are deploying adequate resources to provide helpful answers to all PQs from Members within the agreed deadlines.

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>). The Office will continue to work with all departments to ensure best practice is followed.

We note the Committee's intention to look at the quality of responses to PQs in greater depth at a later point in the Parliament and the Government welcomes this additional level of scrutiny.

The Government recognises that the significant increase in the number of PQs tabled to some departments since the start of the current Parliament will put pressure on the Government's performance. Recent data shows there were c.5,000 additional PQs tabled at the start of this session compared to the same period at the end of the last session. While action is being taken within departments to seek to continue delivering timely and high quality responses, this increase does necessitate significant government resource from policy officials, parliamentary teams, private offices and ministers across government. Alongside assessing the quality and timeliness of government responses, the Committee may wish to consider whether the right balance is being struck between thorough scrutiny through PQs and the appropriate use of the House's and government's resources. We note the written evidence provided by the House Administration to the Modernisation Committee's 'Call for Views' which raises some concerns about the ability of Members to table unlimited numbers of questions in hard copy and on non-sitting days.¹

The Government is grateful to the Committee for its work and looks forward to continuing to work together closely on this and other important matters.

1 Written evidence submitted by the House of Commons Administration ([WOC0345](#))