



Department
for Environment,
Food & Rural Affairs

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Cat Smith MP
Chair of the Procedure Committee
House of Commons
London
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30 June 2025

Dear Cat Smith,

As promised at the recent evidence session on Defra Written Parliamentary Questions (PQs) performance, we have looked into the issue you raised in the session about Defra's approach to pursuant questions. I am grateful to the Committee for raising this issue, which has been a helpful component in our overall work to raise standards on PQs in particular, and Parliamentary work in general.

Your question was whether pursuant questions were asked owing to a lack of relevant or complete information being provided by the department in our first PQ answer. Our examination did not reveal this to be a consistent issue across all 'pursuant' questions sent to Defra. For example, follow-up questions can occur because the Member has simply decided to follow another line of inquiry that could not necessarily have been predicted when answering the original question. However, we identified a small number of cases where - with hindsight - a slightly fuller answer may have been more helpful and reduced the likelihood of follow-up questions. We will use these, and any other cases the Committee would care to highlight to us, to educate staff with the aim of reducing repetitions.

As I am writing I thought the Committee would also like to be reassured of the action Defra has taken to improve performance. These include:

- Weekly reporting to SCS on timeliness of draft responses
- Daily reporting to Private Offices on clearance rates
- Discussions have been had with other, high PQ performing departments to look at how they handle the process, so we can consider the most efficient process changes we could make
- Daily PQ meetings to discuss and action any that are at risk of missing deadlines
- Some Private Offices are trialling PQ clearance slots in their diaries

Early indications are these, combined with the Committee's attentions in this space, are producing the desired result. Since the Oral Evidence session on 4 June (from 4-23 June), Defra's internal case management system shows that we have published 88.7% of Commons PQs on time. We are therefore hopeful of meeting the Secretary of State's publicly declared aim of consistent 85% or better performance by the end of July this year.

Yours sincerely,

REBECCA SHRUBSOLE