

Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs
Committee

Ministerial Statements and the Ministerial Code

Fourth Report of Session 2024–26

HC 1036

Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee

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Summary

The Speaker wrote to us in May 2025 requesting that we consider whether the Ministerial Code spells out adequately what the House should properly be able to expect of Ministers and whether its requirements are observed with sufficient rigour by Ministers. This followed representations from Members across the House about “the failure of Ministers to make major policy announcements to the House before they make them to the media”. We focused our inquiry on the relationship between statements and the Ministerial Code, including the expectation set out in the Code that, when Parliament is in session, the most important announcements of government policy should be made in the first instance in Parliament.

We share the concerns of the Speaker about the Government’s failures to adhere to the Code in this Parliament and note this is a longstanding issue for which successive governments have been criticised. We believe the current situation where the Ministerial Code sets a high bar for expectations which is regularly subject to accusations of being breached is undesirable.

The responsibility for complying with the Code rests with the Government. An active commitment from the Government to adhere to the Ministerial Code and the ‘Parliament first’ principle is the easiest and most optimal solution to address the dissatisfaction of Parliament and the subsequent question of what constitutes adequate sanctions for breaches.

Alternatively, our Report concludes that the Government could, in consultation with Members across the House, seek agreement on any changes to the Ministerial Code it feels are necessary to reflect a modern media age. Although it is the Prime Minister’s document, we expect that any substantial re-writing of the Code in this area should be done in consultation with Members of the House and that the House should then be given an opportunity to consider any implications that flow from the changes for its own resolutions.

If the Code remains unchanged then major planned policy announcements when the House is not in session should be restricted to those which are time sensitive or otherwise exceptional. In the circumstances where it is necessary to make a major announcement when the House is in session but not sitting, we recommend that a minister should come to the House at the earliest opportunity to inform the House and allow for scrutiny and

consideration. The content of this statement should acknowledge that the normal practice of making the announcement first to Parliament was not followed and provide an explanation.

The term ‘most important’ in the principle is inevitably subjective. However, our Report concludes that it is the responsibility of ministers individually and the Government collectively to be aware of the expectations of Parliament and maintain the confidence of the House. We do not believe that it is practical to produce rigid criteria to make decision-making more objective but believe the membership of the House can assess the Government’s compliance with this aspect of the principle on a case-by-case basis.

Our Report concludes that, subject to the Government making proper attempts to be open and transparent with Members (preferably through the timely and proper use of written ministerial statements) and by refraining from substantive prior trailing of the contents of statements in the media, then the general principle could be met through the publication of documents associated with major policy announcements. At all times we would expect the Government to follow the ‘Parliament first’ principle. We believe that scrutiny is improved when Members have greater access to relevant information, and we support attempts to achieve this improved access within the context of the general principle on major announcements.

We conclude that urgent questions are the most effective and timely remedy currently available to Members to hold ministers to account in the absence of an oral statement. The Speaker holds important powers to protect the interests of the House and, despite the concerns expressed about the onus this puts on the Speaker to ensure a reasonable level of accountability, we recognise that urgent questions are a vital mechanism to help hold the government of the day to account. By adhering to the general principle in the Ministerial Code and making the most important announcements of government policy in the first instance in Parliament, the need for Members to seek redress through the mechanism of the urgent question will likely reduce.

1 Introduction

1. Announcements of major government policy are a regular feature of the Parliamentary day. Ministers usually make such announcements, including those on important events at regional, national or international level, or changes to the arrangement of public business, by way of an oral statement. Ministers must give notice to the Speaker of their intention to make an oral statement but require neither his permission nor the leave of the House to do so. Less significant announcements may be made to the House of Commons by means of a written ministerial statement. The Ministerial Code sets an expectation that the most important announcements of government policy should be made in the first instance in Parliament.¹
2. On 23 May 2025, the Speaker wrote to us following representations from Members across the House about “the failure of Ministers to make major policy announcements to the House before they make them to the media”.² Citing several recent examples of such failures, the Speaker requested that we consider whether the Ministerial Code spells out adequately what the House should properly be able to expect of Ministers and whether its requirements are observed with sufficient rigour by Ministers. He further asked that we consider the circumstances when a written ministerial statement might be appropriate and when an oral statement would instead be expected, allowing the House the opportunity to question and scrutinise in addition to merely being informed. We subsequently launched our inquiry with terms of reference reflecting these considerations.
3. We have focused our inquiry on the relationship between the Ministerial Code and ministerial statements. This necessitates consideration of the decision-making process within government and matters of procedure as they specifically relate to these issues. We have not considered wider procedural issues to do with statements in Parliament. We note that a predecessor Procedure Committee conducted a wide-ranging inquiry into Ministerial Statements in 2011, following a resolution of the House inviting it to consider how the rules of the House could be better used or changed

1 Cabinet Office, [Ministerial Code](#), October 2025, Chapter 9

2 Letter from the Speaker of the House of Commons to the Chair regarding Ministerial statements and the Ministerial Code, [23 May 2025](#)

to ensure compliance with the principle that ministers make important announcements to Parliament first. We have considered its findings as part of our own scrutiny.³

4. The process of making major policy announcements to Parliament usually involves a statement to the House of Commons that is repeated in the House of Lords. It has previously been the case that where a Secretary of State is a Member of the House of Lords, statements were made in the Lords first and repeated in the Commons. There are currently no Secretary of State posts held by a Member of the House of Lords and subsequently this has not been the case in this Parliament. For the purposes of our report, although we make references to Parliament, the focus of our work has been on the House of Commons.
5. During the inquiry, we took oral evidence from the Leader of the House of Commons, who at the time was the Rt Hon Lucy Powell MP, and from the Shadow Leader of the House, the Rt Hon Jesse Norman MP. We were also grateful for the written response to specific questions from Sir Laurie Magnus CBE, the Independent Adviser on Ministerial Standards. We are very grateful to all those who provided evidence to our inquiry.⁴

3 Procedure Committee, First Report of Session 2010–12, [Ministerial Statements](#), HC 602

4 Letter from Sir Laurie Magnus CBE, Independent Adviser on Ministerial Standards, to the Chair regarding Ministerial Statement and the Ministerial Code, [30 June 2025](#)

2 The Ministerial Code

The Ministerial Code and the general principle

6. The Ministerial Code sets out the standards of behaviour expected of ministers and provides guidance to ministers on how they should act and arrange their affairs to uphold those standards. The Ministerial Code is the Prime Minister's document and the contents of the Code and any changes to it are entirely at the Prime Minister's discretion.⁵ First published in 1997, the latest version of the Ministerial Code was published by the Prime Minister in October 2025.
7. Chapter 9 of the Ministerial Code concerns the relationship between ministers and Parliament. The current 'general principle' is set out as follows:

When Parliament is in session, the most important announcements of government policy should be made in the first instance in Parliament.⁶
8. Similar principles in relation to the making of important announcements of government policy in Parliament are longstanding and predate the Ministerial Code, appearing in its predecessor document *Questions of Procedure for Ministers*.⁷ As stated previously, these documents are published by the Government and the contents, and consideration of any breaches, are a matter for the Prime Minister. However, they reflect and articulate a much wider understanding of Parliamentary sovereignty and ministerial accountability.

5 HM Government ([MSM0005](#))

6 Cabinet Office, [Ministerial Code](#), October 2025, Chapter 9

7 Cabinet Office, 'Questions of Procedure for Ministers', May 1979, [para 96](#)

Box 1: Current relevant text of the Ministerial Code

Chapter 9: Ministers and Parliament

General principle

9.1. When Parliament is in session, the most important announcements of government policy should be made in the first instance in Parliament.

Timing and form of announcement

9.2. Even when government announcements are not of major importance, their timing may require careful consideration in order to avoid clashes with other government publications, statements or announcements, or with planned parliamentary business. The offices of the Leader of the House of Commons, the Chief Whip and the Prime Minister should be given as long an opportunity as possible on all important announcements. Bids for oral statements should be co-ordinated via the Leader of the House of Commons.

9.3. Every effort should be made to avoid leaving significant announcements to the last day before a recess.

Oral statements

9.4. Ministers should not give undertakings, either in or outside the House of Commons, that an oral statement will be made to the House until the agreement has been given by the private secretaries to the Prime Minister, the Leader of the House of Commons and the Chief Whip. The Leader of the House of Lords and Lords Chief Whip should be consulted where a statement is to be made in the House of Lords in the first instance.

9.5. Ministers should provide clear titles to both oral and written statements wherever possible. A copy of the text of an oral statement should usually be shown to the Opposition shortly before it is made. For this purpose, copies of the statement and associated documents should be shared electronically with the Chief Whip's office at least 45 minutes before the statement is to be made. At the same time, a copy of the final text of an oral statement should in all cases be sent in advance to the Speaker.

9.6. Every effort must be made to ensure that where a former minister or a ministerial colleague and/or a fellow MP/Peer is mentioned in a statement or report which prompts a ministerial statement, he or she is given as much notice as is reasonably possible.

Source: Cabinet Office, *Ministerial Code*, October 2025.

Ministerial accountability to Parliament

9. Ministerial accountability to Parliament is long-established, but, following criticisms of failure of ministerial responsibility, particularly arising from the Scott inquiry,⁸ the House of Commons in March 1997 agreed a Resolution on Ministerial Accountability.⁹ The Resolution clarifies the role of ministers in relation to Parliament. It contains principles relevant to the making of ministerial statements, namely that “ministers have a duty to Parliament to account, and be held to account, for the policies, decisions and actions of their departments” and that “ministers should be as open as possible with Parliament, refusing to provide information only when disclosure would not be in the public interest”. Although similar principles are repeated in the Ministerial Code, it is clear that the expectations of the House on this issue, as set out in the Resolution and clarified through various Speaker’s rulings, are well established irrespective of the inclusion of the general principle in the Ministerial Code.

Box 2: Resolution on Ministerial Accountability

‘That, in the opinion of this House, the following principles should govern the conduct of ministers of the Crown in relation to Parliament: ministers have a duty to Parliament to account, and be held to account, for the policies, decisions and actions of their departments and Next Steps Agencies; it is of paramount importance that ministers give accurate and truthful information to Parliament, correcting any inadvertent error at the earliest opportunity. Ministers who knowingly mislead Parliament will be expected to offer their resignation to the Prime Minister; ministers should be as open as possible with Parliament, refusing to provide information only when disclosure would not be in the public interest, which should be decided in accordance with relevant statute, and the government’s Code of Practice on Access to Government Information (second edition, January 1997); similarly, ministers should require civil servants who give evidence before parliamentary committees on their behalf and under their directions to be as helpful as possible in providing accurate, truthful and full information, in accordance with the duties and responsibilities of civil servants as set out in the Civil Service Code.’

Source: HC Deb, 19 March 1997, [Cols1046–47](#) (Erskine May, Para 11.40)

8 *Report of the Inquiry into the Export of Defence Related Equipment and Dual Use Goods to Iraq and Related Prosecutions*, Session 1995–96, HC 115

9 Erskine May, *Erskine May’s Treatise on The Law, Privileges, Proceedings and Usage of Parliament*, 25th edition, para 11.40 (hereafter Erskine May)

10. We invited the Leader of the House to consider whether it is for government or Parliament to decide whether ministers are failing to honour their obligations to the House. The then Leader of the House of Commons and Lord President of the Council (the Rt Hon Lucy Powell MP) told us that “whether or not this particular matter is in the Ministerial Code, it would still be an expectation of the House that ministers make themselves available to the House regularly and often, particularly when they have something new to say”.¹⁰ In describing the breadth of the Ministerial Code, the Independent Adviser on Ministerial Standards, Sir Laurie Magnus CBE, explained that “the Ministerial Code is a wide-ranging document, incorporating both high-level principles and guidance that is more operational in nature”. He also confirmed that the wording of paragraph 9.1 was “consistent with the level of detail found elsewhere in the Code.”¹¹ Despite a commitment from the Government to give “careful consideration to any articulation by Parliament of its expectations around the way in which Government announcements to Parliament should be made”,¹² there is no indication of a desire from the Government to either reword the general principle or to remove it altogether from the Code.

A House Protocol?

11. We have not considered in detail whether the principle enshrined in the Ministerial Code should be developed into a specific House of Commons Protocol to better enable the House itself to hold ministers to account. The idea of a further Resolution of the House, with a process to determine the sanctions for future breaches of the Resolution, was recommended by the Procedure Committee following its inquiry in 2011.¹³ We note that a motion to bring into effect the establishment of a Protocol and a sanctions process, based on the recommendations of the Procedure Committee report, was defeated by 228 votes to 119 when considered by the House in December 2011.¹⁴ No new evidence has been received that would suggest that there is an appetite for such a proposal to be reconsidered at this time. However, we return to the issues of the balance of accountability between the government and Parliament and appropriate sanctions later in this report.

10 [Q37](#)

11 Letter from Sir Laurie Magnus CBE, Independent Adviser on Ministerial Standards, to the Chair regarding Ministerial Statement and the Ministerial Code, [30 June 2025](#)

12 HM Government ([MSM0005](#))

13 Procedure Committee, First Report of Session 2010–12, [Ministerial Statements](#), HC 602

14 HC Deb, 5 December 2011, [Col38](#)

12.

CONCLUSION

The general principle in the Ministerial Code relating to important announcements of government policy has recently been reaffirmed when the Prime Minister republished the Code in October 2025. We concur that the Ministerial Code is a suitable document to contain such a principle for ministers and the guidance associated with it.

13.

CONCLUSION

Ministerial accountability to Parliament is well established irrespective of its inclusion in the Ministerial Code. Nevertheless, it is uncertain whether there is a current appetite to replicate the principles in relation to ministerial statements in the form of a new House Protocol. We note that a proposal for such a Protocol was rejected by the House when put to it for decision in a previous Parliament.

3 Is the general principle in the Ministerial Code clear and adequate?

14. When we asked the Leader of the House whether she felt the general principle contained in para 9.1 of the Ministerial Code was sufficiently clear and well understood, she said: “I do, because we also produce for ministers a guide to making legislation and a guide to Parliament, and they set out a clear process by which ministers should consider these things and the steps they should take”.¹⁵ However, when assessing the wording of the principle she conceded that “there are quite a few subjective words in that”.¹⁶ Sir Laurie Magnus thought the wording of paragraph 9.1 to be “clear”, but noted that “the wording requires a degree of interpretation as to what constitutes the most important announcements.”¹⁷ The Constitution Society agreed that the term ‘most important’ is ambiguous but added that “there appears to be a broad consensus about what this constitutes across the House of Commons”. More broadly, they contended that “it is difficult to argue that the Code is not clear about Ministers’ duty to Parliament when making major policy announcements.”¹⁸
15. The Shadow Leader, the Rt Hon Jesse Norman MP, thought the general principle outlined in para 9.1 of the Ministerial Code was “relatively clear”¹⁹ to him, but argued that any ambiguities could be resolved by the issuing of a clarifying written ministerial statement by the Leader, with the aim of expanding on current guidance on the mechanisms and assumptions when making statements, suggesting that, “from an institutional standpoint, including the civil service, that would be taken on board, and it would then become part of the proper procedure by which Ministers accounted to Parliament.”²⁰

15 [Q24](#)

16 [Q7](#)

17 Letter from Sir Laurie Magnus CBE, Independent Adviser on Ministerial Standards, to the Chair regarding Ministerial Statement and the Ministerial Code, [30 June 2025](#)

18 The Constitution Society ([MSM0004](#))

19 [Q92](#)

20 [Q92](#)

16. During the inquiry it became apparent to us that there was no common agreement as to whether either the spirit or letter of the principle was being met. When asked whether there was a problem with ministerial breaches in this Parliament, the Leader of the House asserted there was not, saying: “I certainly do not feel that there has been a breach of the Ministerial Code”.²¹ She challenged us to give her “an egregious example of where one of the most important Government announcements has not been made to the House.”²² Her position appears to conflict with the basis for the invitation we received from the Speaker to consider these matters, founded as it was on representations from Members across the House. The disparity between these positions suggests that, at the very least, the provision of further clarity around what the principle currently means, and the expectations which flow from it, would be a welcome outcome from this inquiry.

17. **CONCLUSION**

Even though the Ministerial Code is a government document, it is in everyone’s interest for there to be general agreement of the expectations flowing from its letter and spirit.

18. **CONCLUSION**

We believe the current situation where the Code sets a high bar for expectations which is regularly subject to accusations of being breached is undesirable.

19. **CONCLUSION**

We believe that as currently drafted the Ministerial Code does not encapsulate effectively the general principle governing the relationship between ministers and Parliament. The general principle would be better framed around general government and ministerial accountability to Parliament. Any direction about the making of policy announcements is simply an articulation of how this principle should operate in practice.

‘When Parliament is in session’

20. The current principle includes wording that articulates when it is considered to be in operation, that being when Parliament is in session. A session of Parliament runs from one period of prorogation (or a dissolution) to the next. Within each session, periods of adjournment, commonly called ‘recesses’,²³ are proposed by the government and agreed to by the

21 [Q54](#)

22 [Q42](#)

23 Strictly speaking the term recess only applies to the time during prorogation.

House.²⁴ Within this wider calendar, the Standing Orders of the House of Commons prescribe the time and days of the week that the House sits.²⁵ The substantial amount of control of the parliamentary timetable held by the executive helps the government to plan its business, including when to make statements. The Leader of the House told us how the ‘business managers’²⁶ and No. 10 use the ‘grid’ as a tool to help make decisions: “for example, during recess or on Fridays and so on, we try to avoid things that really should be published to the House first as best we can.”²⁷

21. It is accepted that the business of government continues during recess periods and that ministers will need to respond to events in the UK and around the world. However, in a statement during this session of Parliament, the Speaker made it clear that “it is frustrating for hon. Members on both sides of the House when major planned announcements are scheduled during periods when the House is not sitting, particular towards the end of recess.”²⁸ There is an even greater expectation that on weekends (including non-sitting Fridays) when the House is in session, where major statements are planned and not time sensitive, it is reasonable for them to be delayed until when the House is sitting the following week.
22. In evidence to us, the then Leader of the House explained that there were challenges at the weekend or “when the House is not yet sitting, such as first thing on a Monday morning”.²⁹ This was later clarified as follows:

I was not saying that that was a reason not to make a statement; just that it is a reason not to make a statement first, necessarily. If a Minister made an announcement on a Monday morning, for example, I would expect them to come to the House on a Monday afternoon, at the first opportunity.³⁰
23. We will consider in greater detail later in the report, what constitutes the ‘first instance’ as set out in the general principle, and what the commonly acknowledged exceptions to the general principle might be.

24 Similarly, the 13 sitting Fridays provided each session for consideration of Private Members’ Bills are proposed by the government and agreed to by the House.

25 Standing Order No. 9

26 Collective term for the Leader of the House of Commons and the Chief Whip (and their offices).

27 [Q27](#)

28 HC Deb, 7 October 2024, [Col45](#)

29 [Q4](#)

30 [Q6](#)

24.

CONCLUSION

We consider the House to be ‘in session’ at all times outside of recess, prorogation and dissolution, not just when it is sitting. It is accepted that the business of government continues during recess and ministers will need to respond to events.

25.

RECOMMENDATION

However, major planned policy announcements when the House is not in session should be restricted to those which are time sensitive or otherwise exceptional. Where it is necessary to make a major announcement when the House is in session but not sitting then a minister should come to the House at the earliest opportunity to inform the House and allow for scrutiny and consideration. The content of this statement should acknowledge that the normal practice of making the announcement first to Parliament was not followed and provide an explanation.

‘The most important announcements of government policy’

26. What constitutes the ‘most important’ announcements of government policy is inevitably ambiguous and subjective. The Leader of the House described the ‘most important’ as “a collective decision made every day, every week”.³¹ Written evidence from the Government noted that the term was “open to a degree of interpretation”.³² The Shadow Leader of the House encouraged us to propose a definition for what the ‘most important’ means in this context, suggesting various criteria for assessing importance including: whether it relates to something in the election manifesto; whether it is a matter of national security; how much public money is involved; and how many people an announcement will impact.³³ However, when questioned on how to determine what should be announced as a written rather than an oral statement, the Shadow Leader expressed concern about a process that was too rigid and failed to take account of nuance, for example, an issue being of enormous local importance,³⁴ thereby implicitly acknowledging the difficulty of applying clear objective criteria to these decisions.

31 [Q12](#)

32 HM Government ([MSM0005](#))

33 [Q85](#)

34 [Q114](#)

27. Beside some well preceded set-piece statements, such as the budget, decisions on what constitutes ‘the most important’ announcements must be made on a case-by-case basis, taking into account the other announcements and events taking place, and wider demands on the House’s time. Any attempt to categorise importance or to provide a set of criteria as a basis for decision-making is bound to fail to cover all possible eventualities and be susceptible to change over time.
28. However, accepting that what constitutes ‘most important’ in this context is subjective does not limit there being broad disagreement from Members of the House with individual decisions of the Government. We will consider later in the report both when written ministerial statements might be most appropriate and the remedies available to the House when it disagrees with the government on what constitutes ‘most important’.

29. **CONCLUSION**

The term ‘most important’ is inevitably subjective. However, it is the responsibility of ministers individually and the Government collectively to be aware of the expectations of Parliament and maintain the confidence of the House. We do not believe that it is practical to produce rigid criteria to make decision-making more objective but believe the membership of the House can assess the Government’s compliance with this aspect of the principle on a case-by-case basis. Government should pay close attention to the mood of the House and, where concern is raised, give serious consideration to adjusting the thresholds they are using to evaluate the importance of policy or other announcements.

‘Should be made in the first instance in Parliament’

30. The presumption that major policy announcements should be made in the first instance to Parliament is well recorded outside of the Ministerial Code. Erskine May references occasions when the “Speaker has expressed support for the principle that statements on important matters should be made in the House first”³⁵ and that the “Speaker has made it clear that the media should not be informed about the content of statements before they have been made to the House (and that the same principle applies to written ministerial statements)”.³⁶ We consider the wider media context in further detail later in this report. In 2011, the Procedure Committee listed all the ways that the principle of ‘Parliament first’ could be breached. These included Ministers making an important announcement outside Parliament

35 Erskine May, Para 19.21

36 Erskine May, Para 19.21

and not seeking to make a written or oral statement in Parliament, releasing information overtly before making a statement to the House or covertly leaking information directly or by giving instructions to officials to do so. That Committee summarised all such breaches as follows:

It is our view that all of the actions described above are grave discourtesies to Parliament.³⁷

- 31.** The Government said in written evidence to us that, while it “strives to notify the House of the most important announcements first, this is also not always possible”.³⁸ The Leader of the House expanded on this during her evidence, saying:

When it comes to important statements - Budgets or the strategic defence review ... - I am strongly of the view that the reports should be laid to the House first and those statements made to the House first. With other announcements made to the media and so on, you just need to make sure that you are coming to the House at the earliest opportunity later that day.³⁹

- 32.** There is a balance to strike between when an announcement is important enough to be made to the House as an oral statement, but is not amongst ‘the most important’, such that a level of prior discussion outside Parliament is permissible under the Code. The Shadow Leader of the House told us: “I do not think “in the first instance” means at “the earliest opportunity”; I think it means “first to Parliament”, not to anyone else before it comes to Parliament, and I think that is what the doctrine of parliamentary sovereignty has always implied.”⁴⁰

- 33.** The Shadow Leader also argued that there was a case for strengthening the language of the principle in this aspect. He told us that the scope for disagreement about the expectations arising from the principle could be reduced by replacing the permissive or directive ‘should’ with a mandating ‘must’. This change could be made while still acknowledging the exceptions to the general principle explored below.

37 Procedure Committee, First Report of Session 2010–12, [Ministerial Statements](#), HC 602

38 HM Government ([MSM0005](#))

39 [Q6](#)

40 [Q85](#)

34.

CONCLUSION

In the context of the Code as currently drafted, making the most important statements in the first instance to Parliament means doing so before they are made to the media and not at the first available opportunity thereafter. Apart from exceptional circumstances it should be considered a breach of the general principle, and disrespectful to the House, for an announcement considered to be one of the most important to be made to the media first, even if it is repeated to the House later that same day.

35.

RECOMMENDATION

We consider the word ‘should’ in the general principle to be ambiguous without good cause. Replacing it with the word ‘must’ would send a clear signal to Ministers and others about the expectations of the House and give confidence to the electorate that Members can do their scrutiny jobs effectively.

The media context

36. We questioned the Leader of the House about whether the context in which the Ministerial Code operated had changed over time. The Leader described how governments “now operate in what is not even a 24/7 news environment, but a minute-by-minute one, with stories breaking on social media throughout the day”.⁴¹ However, when asked whether the modern age required the Ministerial Code to be revisited, the Leader suggested that the Code had some flexibility in it and that the expectations of the House had also increased with a greater desire among MPs to discuss topical issues.⁴²

37. The Leader went on to describe the trade-offs between dealing with the media and the House, in the context of the Government trying to get its messages out to the public, offering one possible solution of changing the sitting hours of the House:

If we want the House to start sitting at 6 am so that someone can come here and say something before they appear on the “Today” programme, let’s have a conversation about that.⁴³

41 [Q6](#)

42 [Q57](#)

43 [Q55](#)

She also defended the trailing of announcements saying that, “since time immemorial, Governments have, for various reasons, often to do with laying grounds with the markets and all that kind of thing, trailed aspects of Budgets before they are given to the House, but they are given to the House first.”⁴⁴

38. The Shadow Leader did not agree with the analysis of the Leader in her explanation of the necessary and proper balance between the media and Parliament, telling us that he did not accept “that the 24/7 media world exculpates or excuses the Government—no matter what the 10-year-olds in No. 10 may be saying—from the obligation to account to Parliament.”⁴⁵

39. **CONCLUSION**

Careful regard needs to be given by government to the balance between a legitimate trailing of a statement and the deliberate or inadvertent provision of information to the media that is so substantive that it could be considered a breach of the general principle set out in the Ministerial Code.

40. **CONCLUSION**

However, the media environment has changed significantly in recent years, and the provisions on the need to make the most important statements of government policy to Parliament first have remained substantively the same since the Code was introduced in 1997. It may well be the case that this section of the Code needs to be modernised to reflect the ‘Parliament first’ principle while also recognising that governments must seek to communicate their policies effectively to the public they serve.

41. **CONCLUSION**

The responsibility for complying with the Code rests with the Government. The Government should either make every effort to comply with the Code, or to re-write it. Although it is the Prime Minister’s document, we expect that any substantial re-writing of the Code in this area should be done in consultation with Members of the House and that the House should then be given an opportunity to consider any implications that flow from the changes for its own resolutions.

44 [Q23](#)

45 [Q84](#)

Exceptions to the General Principle

42. There are occasions when Parliament will be sympathetic to the fact that it is not possible for an announcement to meet the expectations of the general principle in the Ministerial Code. We have already considered the operation of the general principle in relation to the House not being in session, but other circumstances arise which meet the criteria for being an exception. The Government raised in written evidence those occasions which “emerge later in the sitting day, for example if they relate to international engagements”.⁴⁶ Additionally, the difficulty of making statements to the House, either orally or in writing, relating to market-sensitive information has been raised.⁴⁷

43. **CONCLUSION**

It is not possible to have an exhaustive list of all the circumstances which could be considered an exception to the normal principles relating to the making of major policy announcements. We accept that there are various such circumstances, including factors beyond the control of the Government, such as where announcements may be international. We expect the House to be sympathetic on those occasions when a good argument is made for an announcement being made exceptionally in breach of the general principle in the Ministerial Code.

44. **RECOMMENDATION**

Where an exceptional circumstance does arise and a major policy is announced first elsewhere, a minister must, as a sign of respect towards Parliament, make a statement to the House at the earliest opportunity, which would include the reasons for breaching the general principle.

46 HM Government ([MSM0005](#))

47 Procedure Committee, First Special Report of Session 2010–12, [Ministerial Statements: Government Response](#), HC 1062

4 Practice during this Parliament

A trajectory of improvement?

45. In comparing the record of the Government in this Parliament with its predecessors, the Leader of the House spoke of a “trajectory of improvement”,⁴⁸ citing an increase in the average number of statements being made per day. However, despite not accepting that there had been any breaches of the principle in the Ministerial Code so far during this Parliament,⁴⁹ she did concede:

Do I feel that, on all occasions, we are as forthcoming as we should be to the House? Are we getting the balance right? Are we getting those judgements right on all occasions? Absolutely not, and we can improve. I want the Committee to be really clear about that.⁵⁰

The Leader also accepted, on the specific case of prisoner recall raised with us by the Speaker, that the Minister had not understood the significance of the statement and that, collectively, the Government “fell short”.⁵¹

46. We accept that there have been more statements per day on average than in recent Parliaments. However, the question for us is not the number of statements that have been made, but rather those that should have been and were not, or those which were made to the media first. The Speaker of the House clarified his view to the House on 2 June 2025, when he stated in response to the publication of the Strategic Defence Review (SDR) that “Back Benchers on both sides should rightly hear it first. I do not care how many announcements have been made in the House; it is those that have not been made here that we should be talking about.”⁵² Noting the subjective nature of the process and the importance of the context at the time, it is impractical to consider all the alleged breaches of the Code this session and

48 [Q10](#)

49 [Q36](#)

50 [Q54](#)

51 [Q17](#)

52 HC Deb, 2 June 2025, [Col26](#)

to retrospectively evaluate the decisions in each. Later in this report we will consider the circumstances of some individual cases where there may be merit in drawing some conclusions from them.

47. Notwithstanding the high average number of statements already this session, there have also been seven Speaker's Statements separately recorded in the Votes and Proceedings of the House⁵³ which mainly relate to: advance notification of the contents of statements to the media; a case where a redacted statement had been advanced to His Majesty's Opposition; and an instance where a copy of a statement had not been circulated 45 minutes in advance of the statement being made, thus breaching section 9.5 of the Ministerial Code and additionally resulting in the suspension of the sitting. We also note that the Speaker has granted four urgent questions this session specifically on matters relating to the announcement of government policy and the Ministerial Code.⁵⁴

48. **CONCLUSION**

The Speaker has represented the dissatisfaction of the House, through statements made in the Chamber and when setting out the concerns of Members across the House when he wrote to us in May 2025. We share his concerns and note this is a longstanding issue for which successive governments have been criticised.

The laying and publication of associated documents

49. In her evidence to us, the then Leader introduced the premise that publishing associated documents which relate to a major policy announcement meets the spirit and letter of the general principle of the Ministerial Code, including coming to the House first.⁵⁵ She adduced in support of this assertion a description of the process of one of the statements where it had been alleged a breach of the Code had occurred. The announcement of the NHS 10-year plan on 3 July 2025 was described as follows:

The 10-year plan, which was a 169-page document, I think, was published to the House first. It was not a press conference about the whole document itself; it was about plans for the NHS. ... These

53 Votes and Proceedings, [7 October 2024](#), [28 October 2024](#), [4 November 2024](#), [2 December 2024](#), [3 December 2024](#), [25 February 2025](#), [15 May 2025](#)

54 HC Deb, 29 October 2024, [Col673](#), 14 May 2025, [Col370](#), 2 June 2025, [Col26](#), 24 November 2025, [Col27](#)

55 [Q68](#) [Q71](#)

are balances to get right, but the plan itself was published to the House. The statement was advertised to the House that morning, so colleagues had time to go to the Vote Office, get the full document, prepare.

50. This raises two related issues. The first is whether the House accepts that the laying of documents before the House, and their subsequent publication, constitutes the making of an announcement in terms that meet the general principle. The second is a more general consideration of whether Members having greater access to associated documents ahead of statements is a welcome development.
51. Ministers have different routes to provide documents to the House. Command Papers, Act Papers and Returns are made available to Parliament formally, an action which is described as being ‘presented or laid upon the Table’.⁵⁶ The process for this is now conducted electronically between government departments and the Journal Office. If a laid paper is in order, it is accepted by the laying offices⁵⁷ and uploaded to a database and considered in receipt of the House and may be distributed in hard copy by the Vote Office or electronically by the Journal Office. The relevant department is responsible for providing hard copies of any laid documents to the Vote Office for distribution, in line with the Speaker’s ruling.⁵⁸ Such papers must not be published online or released in print by the department before they have been laid. By notifying the laying offices in advance, departments can ask for a paper to be prioritised for release at a specific time, such as to coincide with a ministerial statement, subject to it being accepted.⁵⁹ The Ministerial Code also states that associated documents should be shared with the Opposition, in addition to the text of an oral statement, at least 45 minutes before the statement is to be made.⁶⁰ However, the record of the paper being laid forms part of the Votes and Proceedings of the House which only appear after the end of that day’s sitting. It is therefore not obvious to Members what has been laid unless they are proactively inquiring about it, in the right place, at the right time, or the government takes active steps to advertise the process.

56 Strictly speaking, Command Papers are presented, and other papers are laid, but no account is taken of the distinction in the Votes and Proceedings or Journal.

57 A paper is formally laid before Parliament when a copy of it is accepted by the laying offices of both Houses, or just the Journal Office, where laying before the House of Commons only.

58 HC Deb, 25 March 2009, [Col307](#)

59 House of Commons, [Guide to laying papers](#), February 2025, para 2.18

60 Cabinet Office, [Ministerial Code](#), October 2025, Chapter 9.5

52. Alternatively, Ministers may deposit papers in the Library of the House following a commitment to do so, but this does not constitute laying before the House or publication.⁶¹ This was the route used to make available to the House the Strategic Defence Review on 2 June 2025. Similar to papers laid upon the table, the process for accepting deposited papers is now conducted electronically between government departments and the Library.⁶² Unlike papers laid with the Journal Office, deposited papers do not appear in the official records of the House, and, while they become immediately available to Members upon being deposited (if Members know to ask for them), they do not necessarily appear on the publicly available database on the day they are deposited.
53. The following three cases were suggested as examples where documents have been made available to the House first in this Parliament, in support of the premise that this arrangement meets the general principle of the Code:
- Restoring Control over the Immigration System (CP 1326) (12 May 2025) - The oral statement to the House launching the White Paper on immigration started at 4.54 pm on Monday 12 May 2025. It was preceded by the laying of the document shortly after 10 am that morning. Ahead of the oral statement, the Chair reported that “Mr Speaker has noted that details of the White Paper have been reported in the media since Sunday morning.”⁶³ This reporting included the then Home Secretary, the Rt Hon Yvette Cooper MP, appearing on Sunday with Laura Kuenssberg on the BBC to announce a range of new government measures, including plans to cut the number of visas for lower-skilled workers by up to 50,000, to end the recruitment of care workers from abroad and to ramp up standards on graduate visas. This appearance was followed by social media posts from her department announcing that “visa thresholds will be returned to degree level”.⁶⁴ The Prime Minister also made a speech on the morning of Monday 12 May at a press conference on the Immigration White Paper and ahead of it being laid before the House, where he confirmed measures including: skill requirements being raised to degree level; the imposition of English language requirements across all routes—including for dependents and the extension of the time it takes to acquire settled status from five years to ten years.⁶⁵

61 Erskine May, 7.28 and 7.37

62 The system for depositing papers is jointly run by the Libraries of both Houses of Parliament.

63 HC Deb, 12 May 2025, [Col47](#)

64 Home Office, post on X, 11 May 2025, (Accessed 8 October 2025)

65 Prime Minister’s Office, 10 Downing Street, [PM remarks at Immigration White Paper press conference: 12 May 2025](#), gov.uk (Accessed 8 October 2025)

- The NHS 10-year plan (3 July 2025) - ‘Fit for the Future: The 10 year health plan for England’ was laid by the Department of Health and Social Care and published as a Command Paper by the department at around 10.30 am. At about the same time, the Health Secretary, the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Prime Minister, spoke at an event to launch the 10 year plan in East London.⁶⁶ The statement to the House was made by the Secretary of State for Health at 11.59 am, where he referenced the earlier press conference: “today, the Prime Minister has set out our prescription to get the NHS back on its feet and make it fit for the future.”⁶⁷
- The Strategic Defence Review (2 June 2025) - The arrangements for the publication of the SDR were complex, including the establishment of ‘reading rooms’.⁶⁸ However, dissatisfaction with the arrangements led to the Speaker making a statement to the House in which he deprecated the “blatant breach” of the principle set out in the Ministerial Code, stating that “the Prime Minister made a speech and held a press conference in Glasgow, in addition to other media appearances. That follows several days of media briefing.”⁶⁹ Both the then Leader of the House and the Secretary of State incorrectly referred on the floor of the House to the fact that the SDR had been ‘laid’ before the House. It had in fact been deposited in the Library of the House and would not have appeared in the official records of the House nor have been available to Members on request from the Journal Office. Hard copies of the document were made available via the Vote Office ahead of the oral statement which was delayed by two urgent questions and started shortly after 5 pm. Reflecting lessons learned, the department has since developed a best practice protocol for large-scale defence announcements, enshrining “an emphasis on the importance of announcements being made to Parliament first”.⁷⁰

66 Prime Minister’s Office, 10 Downing Street, [PM speech at the launch of the 10 year health plan: 3 July 2025](#), gov.uk (Accessed 9 October 2025)

67 HC Deb, 3 July 2025, [Col444](#)

68 These were described by the Leader of the House as embargoed reading rooms established in the Ministry of Defence for security-cleared individuals to read advance copies.

69 HC Deb, 2 June 2025, [Col25](#)

70 Letter from the Secretary of State for Defence to the Chair of the Defence Committee regarding the protocol for forthcoming large-scale Defence announcements and the Defence munitions strategy, [6 August 2025](#)

54. CONCLUSION

It is our assessment that in none of these examples can we be satisfied that the general principle has been met by the publication of relevant documents associated with major policy announcements. It is not clear how Members of the House were meant to be aware that the documents were available, and the use of imprecise terminology further exacerbated that situation. In all cases, there were no accompanying written ministerial statements, which could have been used to provide helpful information about the process around the announcement and the availability of relevant documents. Furthermore, the timing and extent of trailing and pre-briefing of the substance of statements examined by the committee, in our view, could reasonably be concluded to constitute a breach of the general principle set out in the Ministerial Code, regardless of whether the document was properly laid or not.

- 55.** However, in certain circumstances, we believe that the publication of relevant associated documents could meet the spirit of the general principle, if conducted in an open and transparent way and properly communicated to Members. If done correctly, this could allow Members more time to prepare, therefore allowing the statement later in the day to provide an opportunity for more effective scrutiny.

56. CONCLUSION

In the examples cited, we do not agree that the publication of associated documents ahead of statements met the expectations of the general principle of the Code. However, subject to the Government making proper attempts to be open and transparent with Members, preferably through the timely and proper use of written ministerial statements, and to refrain from substantive prior trailing of the contents of these documents in the media, we accept that the general principle could be met through this route, however we would expect an oral statement to follow within a reasonable timeframe to provide Members with an appropriate opportunity to question Ministers. At all times we would expect the Government to follow the 'Parliament first' principle.

57. CONCLUSION

We believe that scrutiny is improved when Members have greater access to relevant information, and we recognise that publication of significant documents in advance of statements could meet the 'Parliament first' principle while allowing Members time to put together more substantive questions for a later oral statement.

The balance of business

58. Time is a finite resource and is at a premium in the House of Commons. While stating that it remains committed to making the most important announcements on the floor of the House, the Government warns that it “inevitably has to strike a balance with other demands on the House’s time.”⁷¹ The Leader of the House gave us the practical example of the impact on Members of a very short time limit imposed during consideration of the Football Governance Bill due to the impact of three statements.⁷² The impact is not only on time available for government legislative business, and the Leader also cited the need to reschedule a well-subscribed Backbench Business debate, which became unviable when the time available for it was condensed by multiple statements. The Leader told us:

Lots of disappointed colleagues who have given time and attention to writing speeches and want to make contributions in later business are inhibited because of the number of oral statements, so that is a big consideration.⁷³

59. The Shadow Leader said it was an open question on whether ministerial statements were crowding out other business in the House but added that it seemed to him proper to ask whether the Government was possibly “drowning the House in statements rather than actually providing specific accountability that is responsive to parliamentarians’ needs”.⁷⁴
60. Subject to the requirement to be “present for the whole of the opening statement”⁷⁵ and any time pressure imposed by subsequent business, the occupant of the Chair ordinarily aims to accommodate all Members seeking to be called to ask a question following an urgent question or statement. To alleviate pressure, the Speaker has asked Members to prioritise the business in which they seek to participate as a way of avoiding not being called or being called very late.⁷⁶

61. **CONCLUSION**

Sitting time is finite and there will always be a tension between the various demands of the House. Statements and urgent questions play an important role in the effective scrutiny of government, but in concentration they can significantly affect the amount of time available for the other business before the House.

71 HM Government ([MSM0005](#))

72 [Q58](#)

73 [Q58](#)

74 [Q111](#)

75 House of Commons, Rules of behaviour and courtesies in the House of Commons, November 2023

76 HC Deb, 17 July 2024, [Col36](#)

62.

CONCLUSION

The House has regularly considered issues relating to sitting times and the prioritisation of business. The Government can propose, and the House can consider, procedural options to mitigate these issues in the short term, for example, notwithstanding Standing Orders or agreeing to Business of the House motions. It is also able to consider the findings of wider reviews, to provide sustainable long-term changes in this area. We believe this is beyond the remit of this inquiry, but it is an issue that another committee of the House may want to address.

Opposition days

63.

Under the Standing Orders of the House, twenty days in each session are set aside for debates on subjects chosen by opposition parties. Erskine May records that Speakers have indicated “a preference that oral ministerial statements should not be made on opposition days.”⁷⁷ The Leader of the House confirmed that the Government tries “not to do statements on the days opposition debates are happening”.⁷⁸ She also drew our attention to the fact that on 15 July 2025, due to its need to make an important statement, the Government had acted to protect opposition time by tabling a Business of the House motion for the House to agree. This can be a helpful procedural method of protecting time for the opposition, and can be used for other business, including that set down by the Backbench Business Committee. However, their use must be balanced against other considerations such as, for example, there being less certainty in advance as to when the day’s sitting will end. The Shadow Leader agreed that protecting time for the opposition in this way was “perfectly appropriate”.⁷⁹

64.

RECOMMENDATION

We encourage the Government to always consider the potential for using Business of the House motions to protect non-government business in the House, particularly opposition business, from the impact of planned statements.

⁷⁷ Erskine May 19.21

⁷⁸ [Q4](#)

⁷⁹ [Q112](#)

5 Written ministerial statements

65. Since 2002, Ministers⁸⁰ have been able to make written ministerial statements.⁸¹ Such statements can only be made on sitting days and a list of written statements being published on any given day can be found in the Order Paper. Once made, written statements can be found on the Parliament website, are available in hard copy from the Vote Office, and are printed in the Official Report (Hansard). These statements typically cover publication of reports, the launch or outcome of consultations, terms of reference and membership of government established groups, public appointments, updates on projects and funding allocations. As part of our inquiry, we were specifically asked to consider when a written ministerial statement might suffice in place of an oral statement, the latter of course, unlike the former, giving Members the opportunity to question and scrutinise government ministers immediately after the statement is made.⁸²
66. The Leader of the House described written ministerial statements as “an important tool for making the House aware of issues”,⁸³ informing us that over 800 had already been made in this session of Parliament.⁸⁴ In written evidence, the Government pointed out that the Ministerial Code “does not specify the form that an announcement should take” and, when determining the form of a statement, “a written ministerial statement remains an appropriate mechanism to keep the House informed and to place into the public record information about the work of Government.”⁸⁵ The Guide to

80 Since 2013, the facility has been extended to any Member to whom oral or written questions may be submitted. This resulted in the term ‘written statements’ coming into common usage, alongside ‘written ministerial statements’. Both terms are used interchangeably in this report.

81 Standing Order No. 22A provides that ‘A Minister of the Crown, being a Member of the House, or other Member of the House to whom written questions may be addressed may give notice of an intention to make a statement in written form on a specified day not later than five sitting days after the day on which notice was given: and such statements shall be printed in the Official Report.’

82 Letter from the Speaker of the House of Commons to the Chair regarding Ministerial statements and the Ministerial Code, [23 May 2025](#)

83 [Q24](#)

84 [Q4](#)

85 HM Government ([MSM0005](#))

Parliamentary Work⁸⁶ provides guidance on the process for both oral and written statements. However, its guidance on the criteria for choosing between those two available methods is restricted to the following:

Ministers can make important announcements to the House by either an oral or written statement. Oral statements are preferable for high-profile policy developments.⁸⁷

- 67.** Erskine May notes that the “decision on whether to make a statement orally or in writing is a matter for Ministers.”⁸⁸ The Leader expanded on the collective decision-making process in this regard, describing a recent example of how “a number of bids were made to me for oral statements that people wanted but that had to be made through written ministerial statements because there was a lot of competition for statements on the day, and they could not all be granted.”⁸⁹ While recognising that, ideally, the House would be informed through an oral statement, the Leader highlighted the availability of other mechanisms, including written ministerial statements, and explained that decisions between oral and written statements were part of a government’s wider judgement in trying to get the balance right between allowing Members to question ministers about that day’s policy or other announcements and preserving adequate time for the House’s other business.⁹⁰
- 68.** The Shadow Leader recognised that a range of circumstances for announcing major policies existed and summarised the appropriate response as one where ministers were “showing the courtesies appropriate for accounting to Parliament.”⁹¹
- 69.** We concur with the Constitution Society’s assessment that written statements are often unlikely to provide suitable opportunity for proper scrutiny to occur,⁹² at least in the first instance. However, we note that the House has a range of tools at its disposal to hold Ministers to account, which can, for example, be used in circumstances where the House feels that Ministers have not been properly forthcoming or have not made themselves available. This was adequately demonstrated during this session when an urgent question was granted on the subject of sentencing limits for recalled offenders⁹³ when it was felt that the Government’s written

86 Cabinet Office, [Guide to Parliamentary Work](#), November 2024, gov.uk (Accessed 10 October 2025)

87 Cabinet Office, [Guide to Parliamentary Work](#), November 2024, gov.uk (Accessed 10 October 2025), para 122

88 Erskine May 19.21

89 [Q34](#)

90 [Q55](#)

91 [Q113](#)

92 The Constitution Society ([MSM0004](#))

93 HC Deb, 15 May 2025, [Col491](#)

statement the previous day on prison capacity⁹⁴ had been inadequate, the Speaker recognising that, “Members would want an opportunity to question Ministers on a very important issue.”⁹⁵

- 70.** As we have said earlier in this report, we support the greater use of written ministerial statements to alert members to the publication of associated documents relating to major policy announcements which may themselves be the subject of an oral statement, giving information on how to access them and when they will be available.

71. CONCLUSION

The introduction of written ministerial statements in 2002 has proved to be a considerable success in increasing transparency and making government more open to Parliament and the public. It is for the Government to make a judgement about the correct form for a statement, oral or written, having regard to the general principle in the Ministerial Code and the wider expectations of the House, and in the knowledge that the House has a range of tools at its disposal to hold ministers to account.

72. RECOMMENDATION

We encourage the Government to make more effective use of written ministerial statements to inform Members about the publication of documents related to major government announcements, even when those announcements may themselves be the subject of an oral statement.

94 [Prison capacity](#) HCWS634, 14 May 2025

95 HC Deb, 15 May 2025, [Col489](#)

6 Ministerial accountability and sanctions

73. As part of this inquiry, we were asked to consider whether the Code’s “requirements are observed with sufficient rigour by Ministers.”⁹⁶ This leads inevitably to the question of what sanctions are faced for breaching the Ministerial Code in relation to major policy announcements being made outside the House. The Constitution Society argued that “the Code is not uniformly adhered to” and added that “breaches appear of little consequence”, noting that such breaches “occur with such a regularity that suggests governments of all stripes are largely unconcerned by these apparent breaches of the Ministerial Code.”⁹⁷
74. The Government is clear that “the Prime Minister is the ultimate judge of the standards expected of Ministers who serve in the Government, and of the appropriate consequences of a breach of those standards.”⁹⁸ In relation to a breach of the general principles of paragraph 9.1 of the Code, the Leader of the House was confident there would be action:

If there was a wilful attempt by a Minister to give information to the media that had not been agreed, or if a Minister was absolutely refusing to come to the House on an important matter on which the Prime Minister wanted that Minister to come to the House, then I can tell you - knowing the Prime Minister well, as I do - that he takes an extremely dim view of Ministers behaving in that way.⁹⁹

75. However, decisions as to whether or not to make an oral statement on any given day are not taken individually by Ministers. The Leader of the House confirmed that the process for making an oral statement “is a decision taken collectively by me, the Chief Whip and the Prime Minister on behalf of the Cabinet. They are not therefore decisions for a Minister.”¹⁰⁰ The Independent Adviser on Ministerial Standards, Sir Laurie Magnus CBE, said that he would be unlikely to provide advice on sanctions against such

96 Letter from the Speaker of the House of Commons to the Chair regarding Ministerial statements and the Ministerial Code, [23 May 2025](#)

97 The Constitution Society ([MSM0004](#))

98 HM Government ([MSM0005](#))

99 [Q35](#)

100 [Q35](#)

breaches as he sees his role as “being focused on the conduct of ministers as individuals and not on the actions, policies and collective decisions of the Government.”¹⁰¹

- 76.** It was this clash, essentially the Prime Minister being the architect and enforcer of the rules, that led to a predecessor Procedure Committee recommending a House protocol to better enable the House to hold ministers to account - a proposal which we have given our reasons for again rejecting earlier in this report. The Shadow Leader also cautioned: “If you move the accountability away from the Prime Minister, you share the accountability. As soon as shared accountability occurs, you might get even more wriggling.”¹⁰² Aside from the immediate remedy of the granting of an urgent question in the absence of a statement (which we will return to later in the report), the House has a range of other options for holding ministers to account. The Leader of the House told us about the advice she gives to Ministers to encourage them to make themselves available to the House:

Back Benchers can also apply for SO24 emergency debates. They can table written parliamentary questions. They can raise matters with me at business questions, as they do regularly. They can raise points of order. There are lots of embarrassing ways for the House to bring those things to the fore.¹⁰³

- 77.** Despite the difficulties in the Prime Minister adjudicating on breaches explored above, the Shadow Leader proposed that it was important for there to be a “mechanism that requires the Prime Minister as owner of the code to explain how he has discharged the code, not just in some aggregate and cover-all way”.¹⁰⁴
- 78.** It should be stressed that a breach of the Ministerial Code would not of itself necessarily constitute a contempt of Parliament or have a bearing on Parliament’s own proceedings for contempt (including in relation to its Resolution on ministerial accountability). Erskine May makes it clear that:

Adherence to the Code is a matter for the Prime Minister, not for the Speaker or the House authorities. Nonetheless, actions which may breach the Code may also be contempts and neither the Code nor the additional duty on Ministers to offer their resignation to the Prime Minister provided in the Resolutions affect the right of either House to proceed against them in a case of alleged contempt, as it might proceed against any other Member.¹⁰⁵

101 Letter from Sir Laurie Magnus CBE, Independent Adviser on Ministerial Standards, to the Chair regarding Ministerial Statement and the Ministerial Code, [30 June 2025](#)

102 [Q89](#)

103 [Q33](#)

104 [Q105](#)

105 Erskine May, Paragraph 11.40

79.

CONCLUSION

For most breaches under the Ministerial Code in relation to paragraph 9.1, it is difficult to conceive of the circumstances that would result in sanctions against an individual minister, given that the Code specifies the Prime Minister as being a significant part of the decision-making process and therefore bearing at least shared responsibility. We see no easy fix for this conundrum. However, the House itself has a range of options to hold ministers to account, including its range of disciplinary powers in cases of contempt.

80.

CONCLUSION

An active commitment from the Government to adhere to the Ministerial Code and the ‘Parliament first’ principle is the easiest and most optimal solution to address the dissatisfaction of Parliament and the subsequent question of what constitutes adequate sanctions for breaches. Alternatively, the Government could, in consultation with Members across the House, seek agreement on any changes to the Ministerial Code it feels are necessary.

81.

RECOMMENDATION

We recommend that an addition be made to Chapter 2 of the Ministerial Code to commit the Prime Minister to issuing a written statement upon reaching a final decision where he has determined a breach of the expected standards has occurred. This written statement should set out the basis for the decision and the action he is taking as a result.

Urgent questions

82. The granting of urgent questions remains the most effective and timely remedy currently available to Members to elicit information from Ministers in the absence of an oral statement. Urgent questions are governed by Standing Order No. 21 (2), which provides that questions which are, in the Speaker’s opinion, “of an urgent character” and which “relate either to matters of public importance or to the arrangement of business” may be asked even though they do not appear on the Order Paper. Members wishing to ask an urgent question must apply to the Speaker in advance (in practice, earlier in the day) and notice must be given to the Minister concerned.
83. The Leader of the House attested to how the House had changed in this regard during her time in Parliament:

The use of urgent questions, even when I was first elected 12 years ago, was very rare. The use of urgent questions has now become much more of the norm.¹⁰⁶

It is correct that the average number of urgent questions granted grew substantially after the 2010 general election and has been sustained at a similar level in this Parliament to the last, a change seen as an “immense improvement to the way in which the Commons has functioned” according to the Shadow Leader.¹⁰⁷

84. The Speaker has also made it clear this session that he sees his role as defending “the undoubted right of this House, including the Opposition parties and Back Benchers in all parts of the House, to be the first to hear major Government policy announcements” and that he will use the powers he has “to make sure the House is able to hold Ministers to account”.¹⁰⁸ One mechanism to accomplish this is the urgent question, although the Shadow Leader raised concerns that it could demean the office of Speaker “if he has to be continuously putting in place urgent questions in order to achieve what he takes to be a reasonable level of parliamentary accountability”.¹⁰⁹ We have not considered in any detail whether the current system for consideration of urgent questions could otherwise be improved. This may be a topic that another committee of the House would wish to return to.

85. **CONCLUSION**

Urgent questions are the most effective and timely remedy currently available to Members to hold ministers to account in the absence of an oral statement. The Speaker holds important powers to protect the interests of the House and, despite the concerns expressed about the onus this puts on the Speaker to ensure a reasonable level of accountability, we recognise that urgent questions are a vital mechanism to help hold the government of the day to account.

86. **CONCLUSION**

By adhering to the general principle in the Ministerial Code and making the most important announcements of government policy in the first instance in Parliament, the need for Members to seek redress through the mechanism of the urgent question will likely reduce.

106 [Q11](#)

107 [Q95](#)

108 HC Deb, 28 October 2024, [Col531](#)

109 [Q95](#)

Conclusions and recommendations

The Ministerial Code

1. The general principle in the Ministerial Code relating to important announcements of government policy has recently been reaffirmed when the Prime Minister republished the Code in October 2025. We concur that the Ministerial Code is a suitable document to contain such a principle for ministers and the guidance associated with it. (Conclusion, Paragraph 12)
2. Ministerial accountability to Parliament is well established irrespective of its inclusion in the Ministerial Code. Nevertheless, it is uncertain whether there is a current appetite to replicate the principles in relation to ministerial statements in the form of a new House Protocol. We note that a proposal for such a Protocol was rejected by the House when put to it for decision in a previous Parliament. (Conclusion, Paragraph 13)

Is the general principle in the Ministerial Code clear and adequate?

3. Even though the Ministerial Code is a government document, it is in everyone's interest for there to be general agreement of the expectations flowing from its letter and spirit. (Conclusion, Paragraph 17)
4. We believe the current situation where the Code sets a high bar for expectations which is regularly subject to accusations of being breached is undesirable. (Conclusion, Paragraph 18)
5. We believe that as currently drafted the Ministerial Code does not encapsulate effectively the general principle governing the relationship between ministers and Parliament. The general principle would be better framed around general government and ministerial accountability to Parliament. Any direction about the making of policy announcements is simply an articulation of how this principle should operate in practice. (Conclusion, Paragraph 19)

6. We consider the House to be ‘in session’ at all times outside of recess, prorogation and dissolution, not just when it is sitting. It is accepted that the business of government continues during recess and ministers will need to respond to events. (Conclusion, Paragraph 24)
7. However, major planned policy announcements when the House is not in session should be restricted to those which are time sensitive or otherwise exceptional. Where it is necessary to make a major announcement when the House is in session but not sitting then a minister should come to the House at the earliest opportunity to inform the House and allow for scrutiny and consideration. The content of this statement should acknowledge that the normal practice of making the announcement first to Parliament was not followed and provide an explanation. (Recommendation, Paragraph 25)
8. The term ‘most important’ is inevitably subjective. However, it is the responsibility of ministers individually and the Government collectively to be aware of the expectations of Parliament and maintain the confidence of the House. We do not believe that it is practical to produce rigid criteria to make decision-making more objective but believe the membership of the House can assess the Government’s compliance with this aspect of the principle on a case-by-case basis. Government should pay close attention to the mood of the House and, where concern is raised, give serious consideration to adjusting the thresholds they are using to evaluate the importance of policy or other announcements. (Conclusion, Paragraph 29)
9. In the context of the Code as currently drafted, making the most important statements in the first instance to Parliament means doing so before they are made to the media and not at the first available opportunity thereafter. Apart from exceptional circumstances it should be considered a breach of the general principle, and disrespectful to the House, for an announcement considered to be one of the most important to be made to the media first, even if it is repeated to the House later that same day. (Conclusion, Paragraph 34)
10. We consider the word ‘should’ in the general principle to be ambiguous without good cause. Replacing it with the word ‘must’ would send a clear signal to Ministers and others about the expectations of the House and give confidence to the electorate that Members can do their scrutiny jobs effectively. (Recommendation, Paragraph 35)
11. Careful regard needs to be given by government to the balance between a legitimate trailing of a statement and the deliberate or inadvertent provision of information to the media that is so substantive that it could be considered a breach of the general principle set out in the Ministerial Code. (Conclusion, Paragraph 39)

12. However, the media environment has changed significantly in recent years, and the provisions on the need to make the most important statements of government policy to Parliament first have remained substantively the same since the Code was introduced in 1997. It may well be the case that this section of the Code needs to be modernised to reflect the ‘Parliament first’ principle while also recognising that governments must seek to communicate their policies effectively to the public they serve. (Conclusion, Paragraph 40)
13. The responsibility for complying with the Code rests with the Government. The Government should either make every effort to comply with the Code, or to re-write it. Although it is the Prime Minister’s document, we expect that any substantial re-writing of the Code in this area should be done in consultation with Members of the House and that the House should then be given an opportunity to consider any implications that flow from the changes for its own resolutions. (Conclusion, Paragraph 41)
14. It is not possible to have an exhaustive list of all the circumstances which could be considered an exception to the normal principles relating to the making of major policy announcements. We accept that there are various such circumstances, including factors beyond the control of the Government, such as where announcements may be international. We expect the House to be sympathetic on those occasions when a good argument is made for an announcement being made exceptionally in breach of the general principle in the Ministerial Code. (Conclusion, Paragraph 43)
15. Where an exceptional circumstance does arise and a major policy is announced first elsewhere, a minister must, as a sign of respect towards Parliament, make a statement to the House at the earliest opportunity, which would include the reasons for breaching the general principle. (Recommendation, Paragraph 44)

Practice during this Parliament

16. The Speaker has represented the dissatisfaction of the House, through statements made in the Chamber and when setting out the concerns of Members across the House when he wrote to us in May 2025. We share his concerns and note this is a longstanding issue for which successive governments have been criticised. (Conclusion, Paragraph 48)
17. It is our assessment that in none of these examples can we be satisfied that the general principle has been met by the publication of relevant documents associated with major policy announcements. It is not clear how Members of the House were meant to be aware that the documents were available, and the use of imprecise terminology further exacerbated that situation. In all cases, there were no accompanying written ministerial statements, which

could have been used to provide helpful information about the process around the announcement and the availability of relevant documents. Furthermore, the timing and extent of trailing and pre-briefing of the substance of statements examined by the committee, in our view, could reasonably be concluded to constitute a breach of the general principle set out in the Ministerial Code, regardless of whether the document was properly laid or not. (Conclusion, Paragraph 54)

18. In the examples cited, we do not agree that the publication of associated documents ahead of statements met the expectations of the general principle of the Code. However, subject to the Government making proper attempts to be open and transparent with Members, preferably through the timely and proper use of written ministerial statements, and to refrain from substantive prior trailing of the contents of these documents in the media, we accept that the general principle could be met through this route, however we would expect an oral statement to follow within a reasonable timeframe to provide Members with an appropriate opportunity to question Ministers. At all times we would expect the Government to follow the 'Parliament first' principle. (Conclusion, Paragraph 56)
19. We believe that scrutiny is improved when Members have greater access to relevant information, and we recognise that publication of significant documents in advance of statements could meet the 'Parliament first' principle while allowing Members time to put together more substantive questions for a later oral statement. (Conclusion, Paragraph 57)
20. Sitting time is finite and there will always be a tension between the various demands of the House. Statements and urgent questions play an important role in the effective scrutiny of government, but in concentration they can significantly affect the amount of time available for the other business before the House. (Conclusion, Paragraph 61)
21. The House has regularly considered issues relating to sitting times and the prioritisation of business. The Government can propose, and the House can consider, procedural options to mitigate these issues in the short term, for example, notwithstanding Standing Orders or agreeing to Business of the House motions. It is also able to consider the findings of wider reviews, to provide sustainable long-term changes in this area. We believe this is beyond the remit of this inquiry, but it is an issue that another committee of the House may want to address. (Conclusion, Paragraph 62)
22. We encourage the Government to always consider the potential for using Business of the House motions to protect non-government business in the House, particularly opposition business, from the impact of planned statements. (Recommendation, Paragraph 64)

Written ministerial statements

23. The introduction of written ministerial statements in 2002 has proved to be a considerable success in increasing transparency and making government more open to Parliament and the public. It is for the Government to make a judgement about the correct form for a statement, oral or written, having regard to the general principle in the Ministerial Code and the wider expectations of the House, and in the knowledge that the House has a range of tools at its disposal to hold ministers to account. (Conclusion, Paragraph 71)
24. We encourage the Government to make more effective use of written ministerial statements to inform Members about the publication of documents related to major government announcements, even when those announcements may themselves be the subject of an oral statement. (Recommendation, Paragraph 72)

Ministerial accountability and sanctions

25. For most breaches under the Ministerial Code in relation to paragraph 9.1, it is difficult to conceive of the circumstances that would result in sanctions against an individual minister, given that the Code specifies the Prime Minister as being a significant part of the decision-making process and therefore bearing at least shared responsibility. We see no easy fix for this conundrum. However, the House itself has a range of options to hold ministers to account, including its range of disciplinary powers in cases of contempt. (Conclusion, Paragraph 79)
26. An active commitment from the Government to adhere to the Ministerial Code and the 'Parliament first' principle is the easiest and most optimal solution to address the dissatisfaction of Parliament and the subsequent question of what constitutes adequate sanctions for breaches. Alternatively, the Government could, in consultation with Members across the House, seek agreement on any changes to the Ministerial Code it feels are necessary. (Conclusion, Paragraph 80)
27. We recommend that an addition be made to Chapter 2 of the Ministerial Code to commit the Prime Minister to issuing a written statement upon reaching a final decision where he has determined a breach of the expected standards has occurred. This written statement should set out the basis for the decision and the action he is taking as a result. (Recommendation, Paragraph 81)
28. Urgent questions are the most effective and timely remedy currently available to Members to hold ministers to account in the absence of an oral statement. The Speaker holds important powers to protect the interests of

the House and, despite the concerns expressed about the onus this puts on the Speaker to ensure a reasonable level of accountability, we recognise that urgent questions are a vital mechanism to help hold the government of the day to account. (Conclusion, Paragraph 85)

29. By adhering to the general principle in the Ministerial Code and making the most important announcements of government policy in the first instance in Parliament, the need for Members to seek redress through the mechanism of the urgent question will likely reduce. (Conclusion, Paragraph 86)

Formal minutes

Tuesday 6 January 2026

Members present:¹¹⁰

Simon Hoare (in the Chair)

Richard Baker

Markus Campbell-Savours

Charlotte Cane

Sam Carling

Peter Lamb

John Lamont

Michelle Welsh

Ministerial Statements and the Ministerial Code

The following declarations of interest relating to the inquiry were made:

John Lamont declared the following interest: Shadow Deputy Leader of the House of Commons.

Draft report (*Ministerial Statements and the Ministerial Code*), proposed by the Chair, brought up and read.

Ordered, That the draft Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraphs 1 to 86 read and agreed to.

¹¹⁰ 3 September 2025: John Lamont declared a non-pecuniary interest in relation to the inquiry into Ministerial Statements and the Ministerial Code as Shadow Deputy Leader of the House of Commons; and declared that he would take no further part in the inquiry.

Summary agreed to.

Resolved, That the Report be the Fourth Report of the Committee to the House.

Ordered, That the Chair make the Report to the House.

Ordered, That embargoed copies of the Report be made available (Standing Order No. 134).

Adjournment

Adjourned till Tuesday 13 January at 9.30 am

Witnesses

The following witnesses gave evidence. Transcripts can be viewed on the [inquiry publications page](#) of the Committee's website.

Wednesday 16 July 2025

Rt Hon Lucy Powell MP, Lord President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons [Q1-82](#)

Wednesday 3 September 2025

Rt Hon Jesse Norman MP, Shadow Leader of the House of Commons [Q83-118](#)

Published written evidence

The following written evidence was received and can be viewed on the [inquiry publications page](#) of the Committee's website.

MSM numbers are generated by the evidence processing system and so may not be complete.

- | | | |
|---|--|-------------------------|
| 1 | Balakumaran, Mr Ranjan (Journalist, London Conversation) | MSM0002 |
| 2 | HM Government | MSM0005 |
| 3 | Sense about Science | MSM0003 |
| 4 | The Constitution Society | MSM0004 |

List of Reports from the Committee during the current Parliament

All publications from the Committee are available on the [publications page](#) of the Committee's website.

Session 2024–26

Number	Title	Reference
3rd	Appointment of the Registrar of Consultant Lobbyists	HC 1263
2nd	Review of the 2024 general election	HC 487
1st	Appointment of the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman	HC 781
2nd Special	Review of the 2024 general election: Government and the Electoral Commission responses	HC 1348
1st Special	Transforming the UK's Evidence Base: Government, UKSA, ONS and OSR responses	HC 757