House of Commons

Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee

Ministerial Statements and the Ministerial Code: Government Response

First Special Report of Session 2026–27 HC 178

Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee

The Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee is appointed by the House of Commons to examine the reports of the Parliamentary Commissioner for Administration and the Health Service Commissioner for England, which are laid before this House, and matters in connection therewith; to consider matters relating to the quality and standards of administration provided by civil service departments, and other matters relating to the civil service; and to consider constitutional affairs.

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First Special Report

The Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee published its Fourth Report of Session 2024–26, Ministerial Statements and the Ministerial Code (HC 1036), on 9 January 2026. The Government Response was received on 14 May 2026 and is appended below.

Appendix: Government Response

1. The Government is grateful to the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee for its report *Ministerial Statements and the Ministerial Code*. The Government's response to that report is set out below.

2. The Government takes its obligations to Parliament seriously. The Prime Minister and the Leader of the House regularly remind Cabinet of the importance of these obligations, and of the associated need to ensure that Parliament is respected, that members on all sides of the House are well informed and that the Government is able to be scrutinised effectively.

The Ministerial Code

Conclusion, paragraph 19. ***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.***

3. The Government agrees that the wording of the 'General Principle' in Chapter 9 should be broadened to reflect the principles of ministerial accountability to Parliament which are already set out in Chapter 1 of the

Ministerial Code. These principles mirror those contained in the House of Commons Resolution on Ministerial Accountability, which was agreed by the House on 19 March 1997 (Official Report columns 1046–47). We agree that the description of ministerial accountability should be consistent throughout the document to ensure there is no ambiguity regarding the expectations placed upon Ministers. The Government will look to update the language in Chapter 9 of the Ministerial Code to reflect the definition established in Chapter 1 at the next available opportunity.

Conclusion, paragraph 24. ***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.***

Recommendation, paragraph 25. ***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.***

4. The Government partially accepts this recommendation and agrees with the Committee's definition of 'in session'. As the Committee has recognised, it is not always possible to notify the House of the most important announcements first, for example where the Government is responding to events during recess. On such occasions the Government remains committed to ensuring that the details of announcements are made available to the House at the earliest opportunity, including through oral and written ministerial statements. Where necessary or appropriate, the Government will seek to update the House through alternative channels as soon as possible, such as sending letters to the relevant select committee chairs and opposition spokespeople.

Conclusion, paragraph 29. ***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.

5. The Government fully recognises that the House should have the opportunity to scrutinise and debate decisions, particularly those which are important to Parliament and the public. The Speaker's role in granting Urgent Questions is another important mechanism in enabling that scrutiny.

6. The Government takes a number of factors into consideration when making decisions about oral statements, including the interests of the House, and the business of the day. The Leader of the House of Commons, alongside the Chief Whip and No.10, will continue to work with Ministers across government to ensure departments are updating the House in the most appropriate and timely ways. In addition to oral statements, there are a number of ways that the Government keeps the House updated, including written ministerial statements, responses to oral and written parliamentary questions, debates, and responses and appearances at select committees.

Conclusion, paragraph 34. I***n 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.***

Recommendation, paragraph 35. ***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.***

Conclusion, paragraph 39. ***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 40. ***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.

7. The Government welcomes the Committee's recognition of the changing media environment and the importance of the Government being able to effectively communicate policies to the public they serve. We recognise a balance must be struck between the constitutional role of our Sovereign Parliament in holding the Government to account and allowing it to scrutinise and debate policy, particularly the most important announcements of government policy, and ensuring that the elected government can inform the public of policy changes in the most timely and effective manner.

8. The Government acknowledges the Committee's concerns about the Code as currently drafted, and will look to update the language.

9. The Government rejects the recommendation at paragraph 35. As the Committee itself has recognised, it is not always possible for the Government to make announcements to the House first, for example, when the House is not sitting.

Conclusion, paragraph 41. ***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.***

10. The Government acknowledges the Committee's concerns about the Code as currently drafted, and will look to update the language. The Code sets out the Prime Minister's expectations of all who serve in government. The contents of the Code are a matter for the Prime Minister, rather than Parliament - and successive governments have taken that approach.

11. The Government remains committed to working constructively with Members to ensure any changes continue to allow Parliamentarians to uphold their role in scrutinising and debating the Government's policies effectively.

Conclusion, paragraph 43. ***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.

Recommendation, paragraph 44. ***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.***

12. The Government partially accepts this recommendation. As the Committee has recognised, it is not always possible to notify the House of the most important announcements first. For example, there are occasions when developments or announcements will occur when the House is not sitting, or will develop later in the day and the events or context change. By convention, oral statements are also avoided where possible on Opposition days, and it is generally not appropriate to make planned oral statements at certain times - for example, during the debate on the King's Speech. However, on such occasions the Government remains committed to ensuring that the details of announcements are made available to the House at the earliest appropriate opportunity.

Practice during this Parliament

Conclusion, paragraph 56. ***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 57. ***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.***

13. The Government welcomes the Committee's recognition that the timely publication of documents and the use of written ministerial statements are an important means for keeping the House updated. However, as noted above, it is not always possible to notify the House of the most important announcements first, for example where the Government is responding to events during recess. On such occasions the Government remains committed to ensuring that the details of announcements are made available to the House at the earliest opportunity, including through written ministerial statements.

14. While the Government strives to provide the House with as much notice as possible, the current procedural requirements for written ministerial statements can sometimes create challenges for the timely release of information, particularly in fast-moving situations. Under the existing guidance, the Government must give notice of their intention to make a written statement in the House of Commons before the House rises the previous day, or by 3pm on Friday for Monday. By comparison, in the House of Lords, written statements may be made when the House is sitting by Ministers or the Senior Deputy Speaker. Notice is not required. The Government would welcome the views of the House, and specifically the Procedure Committee, on whether current notice requirements for written ministerial statements remain optimal and enable Parliament to be updated at the earliest opportunity. We are keen for the House to explore whether more flexible or modernised notice arrangements in exceptional circumstances could better facilitate the "timely and proper" use of written statements as advocated by the Committee.

Conclusion, paragraph 61. ***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 62. ***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.***

Recommendation, paragraph 64. ***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.***

15. The Government notes this recommendation. When arranging oral statements the Government tries to ensure this is balanced with the main business of the day, other upcoming relevant parliamentary business and the interests of the House. By convention, oral statements are avoided where possible on Opposition days. However, there are occasions where statements are unavoidable and it is important that the Government makes such announcements to the House. The granting of Urgent Questions is a matter for the Speaker.

16. It is important to ensure there is as much certainty as possible of sitting times for Members as they seek to balance the different aspects of their role. The Government would not wish to unintentionally undermine this certainty by overusing ad hoc business motions that provide for business to run later into the day. Where there have been unavoidable oral statements on Opposition days, the Government has always looked to protect time for the business.

Written Ministerial Statements

Recommendation, paragraph 72. ***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.***

17. The Government accepts this recommendation. The Government is committed to updating the House and written ministerial statements remain an appropriate mechanism for doing so. As set out in the Guide to Parliamentary Work, Departments bidding for an oral statement are encouraged to also table a written ministerial statement for the same day, ensuring departments fulfil their obligations to Parliament.

Ministerial Accountability and Sanctions

Recommendation, paragraph 81. ***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.***

18. The Government disagrees with this recommendation. As set out above, the Ministerial Code sets out the Prime Minister's expectations of all who serve in government. The contents of the Code is a matter for the Prime Minister, rather than Parliament - and successive governments have taken that approach.

19. The Prime Minister is already regularly held to account by Parliament for their decisions. There are established and robust mechanisms for the House to scrutinise such matters, most notably through Prime Minister's Questions (PMQs) and appearances before the Liaison Committee. These forums provide ample opportunity for Members of Parliament to question the Prime Minister on their determinations regarding ministerial conduct and the rationale behind any sanctions.