



# Department of Health & Social Care

The Rt Hon Karen Bradley MP  
Chair, Procedure Committee  
House of Commons  
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Dear Karen,

I am writing to provide a further update on the Department of Health and Social Care's response to Written Parliamentary Questions. Following prorogation, I am in a position to share an overview of the progress that the Department has made to recover its PQ response times and clear the backlog of overdue PQs during the last parliamentary session.

## **PQs received**

Between May 2020-April 2021 the Department received 12,887 PQs. This is almost double the number of PQs received in the same period the year before (6,560 in May 2019-April 2020).

PQ volumes began to rise from January 2020, peaking at 1,429 in June 2020. We then saw a gradual levelling off in the second half of the year with levels around 1000-1400 each month (compared to a pre-pandemic average of 400 per month in the second half of 2019). While we had slightly lower rates in March and April 2021 more recently, volumes have remained significantly higher than pre-pandemic levels throughout Q4, when we received 3,641 PQs, almost 50% more than in the same quarter last year.

Post-recess spikes in PQ volumes have continued to create pinch points for the Department. Following Easter recess, we received ~300 PQs on a single day. We are exploring how best to manage capacity to address these short-term pressures in the system and mitigate the impact on our response times.

## **Response rate**

Between February and August 2020, the Department's on-time response rate dropped from 97% to a low of 7%. In September, I was appointed the Ministerial lead for PQ recovery and we embarked on our recovery plan which focused on increasing capacity and capability and enhancing the end to end process in order to expedite a return to high quality, on time PQ answers.

I am pleased that this action has steadily borne fruit, with month on month increases in our on-time performance. In October 2020 we answered 11% of PQs on time and by April 2021 we closed the session with a 50% on time response rate. We were able to maintain our performance against the previous month. Were it not for the significant number of PQs received following recess, and our focus on clearing the backlog ahead of prorogation, we would have exceeded our figures from March.

There is much more to do, but I am confident that we are in a position to continue our upwards improvement trajectory when the new session begins.

### **Overdue PQs**

Through the implementation of the PQ Recovery Plan and a steadfast focus on prioritising the oldest PQs in the Department, we were able to bring our PQ backlog down from a high of 1,015 (at the end of November 2020) to a more acceptable level by the end of the parliamentary session. At the end of March, we had 382 overdue PQs. We were able to reduce this even further before the end of the session, whilst improving our in-date response times. In total, 179 prorogation answers were given, approximately 50 of which had not reached their target date meaning that they might still have been answered, were Parliament not prorogued.

### **PQ progress through the Department**

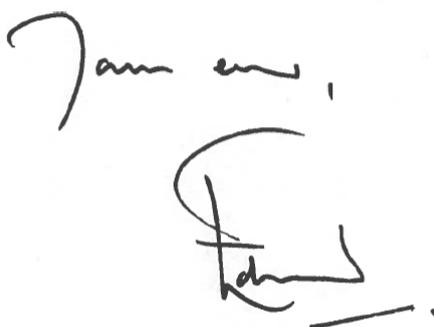
By the time of prorogation, we had answered the vast majority of historic PQs that were received more than 1 month ago. 152 of the prorogation answers that we gave (around 85%) were for PQs due in April or May 2021 and were less than three weeks late.

I hope this update is helpful, and I am looking forward to working with my officials to deliver further improvements and remain committed to returning to the high standards expected of us as soon as possible.

Please do ask your Clerk to let me know if there is any further specific information you would like on performance beyond the above, and I will endeavour to provide it. I will of course continue to share our progress as we enter the next parliamentary session.

As we begin the new session, I am confident that the improvement to processes we have seen in recent months will be sustained, and am determined we start as we mean to go on in this session.

I am copying this letter to the Speaker of the House of Commons.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Edward Argar', with a horizontal line underneath.

**EDWARD ARGAR MP**