



# Department of Health & Social Care

*Edward Argar MP  
Minister of State for Health*

The Rt Hon Karen Bradley MP  
Chair, Procedure Committee  
House of Commons  
London  
SW1A 0AA

6 August 2021

Dear Karen,

Following my appearance before the Procedure Committee in July, I am writing to provide a further update on the Department of Health and Social Care's response to Written Parliamentary Questions, in light of what was discussed. As this letter focuses on the outstanding questions following my appearance before the Committee this update will follow a slightly different format to my usual letters.

## **PQs received**

Volumes of PQs received remain very high. In July we received 1,052 PQs, which was slightly higher than July 2020 in which we received 1,035. So, as the pandemic continues Parliamentary interest remains exceptionally high.

As I have stressed throughout our PQ recovery, a significant challenge for us is that the officials who are dealing with the operational response to the pandemic are also responsible for our accountability to Parliament, for example ensuring the quality and accuracy of our PQ responses to support Ministers and uphold parliamentary accountability.

## **Response rate**

Since I met with the Committee, our PQ performance has improved slightly. In June our average on-time response rate was 50.7% and in July we reached 52.5%. While I recognise this is only a small improvement, I am pleased to be maintaining our upward trajectory. In terms of the number of PQs answered, in June we answered 543 on time, whereas in July we answered 589. This is almost 50 more PQs getting through our systems on time.

## **Overdue PQs**

At the end of July we had 162 PQs overdue. This is below the 170 PQs we had overdue at the end of June and is also lower than the 179 prorogation answers we gave in April. From the start of the session to summer recess we have managed to maintain the size of our backlog and have ensured it has not increased.

## **PQs answered by each Minister**

During my appearance before the Committee you were interested in understanding the performance of Ministers and the breakdown of the number of PQs allocated to each. This is set out in Annex A.

Please note that due to portfolio areas and Commons Ministers being unable to answer questions in the Lords (and vice versa), the number of Ministerial clearances exceeds the number of PQs answered in Parliament.

## **PQ Process in the department**

The Committee was interested in knowing more about the process a PQ follows through the department and the average time spent at each stage. A diagram setting this out is in Annex B.

## **Support for policy teams**

Throughout our recovery I have shared the challenges we have faced with particular policy teams receiving heavy volumes of topical PQs. This was true for Test and Trace last year, moving to the vaccines policy team, and more recently to the team responsible for our Managed Quarantine Service. I am aware that, as we progress through the pandemic, more teams are likely to receive large volumes of PQs rather than an even spread across the Departments policy areas. To mitigate this, the PQ team have put in place a plan for supporting policy teams that receive extremely large numbers of PQs and this is summarised in Annex C.

## **Length of time PQs are overdue by**

You mentioned that the Committee was exploring how PQ performance is measured and were interested in any information we have on the length of time PQs are overdue by, as oppose to simply whether they met their target date or not. We would be extremely supportive of using an amended tool. Throughout the pandemic we have shown significant improvements in the length of time taken to respond to overdue PQs and it can be demotivating for our teams that our headline performance figure does not demonstrate these improvements in our recovery.

To set this out in more detail, of PQs that we answered in July, we answered 15 PQs late but within 12 hours of the deadline. A further 60 were answered within 24 hours of the deadline. A further 49 were answered within 48 hours of the deadline, and 25 more within 72 hours.

If the deadline for PQs had been extended by one day, we would have answered an additional 6.5% of PQs on time. If it had been extended by two days we would have answered an additional 11.5% of PQs on time. Please see this data displayed in Annex D.

I am proud of the improvements we have made as a Department and believe this should not be overlooked as we continue to work hard to recover performance in order to meet the necessary but strict parliamentary deadlines. I have asked officials to ensure that the recess period is used to enable the Department to further reduce its backlog of overdue PQs.

I will of course continue to share our progress throughout this session. I am copying this letter to Mr Speaker and the Leader of the House of Commons. As always, please feel free to let me know if you require further information.



**EDWARD ARGAR MP**

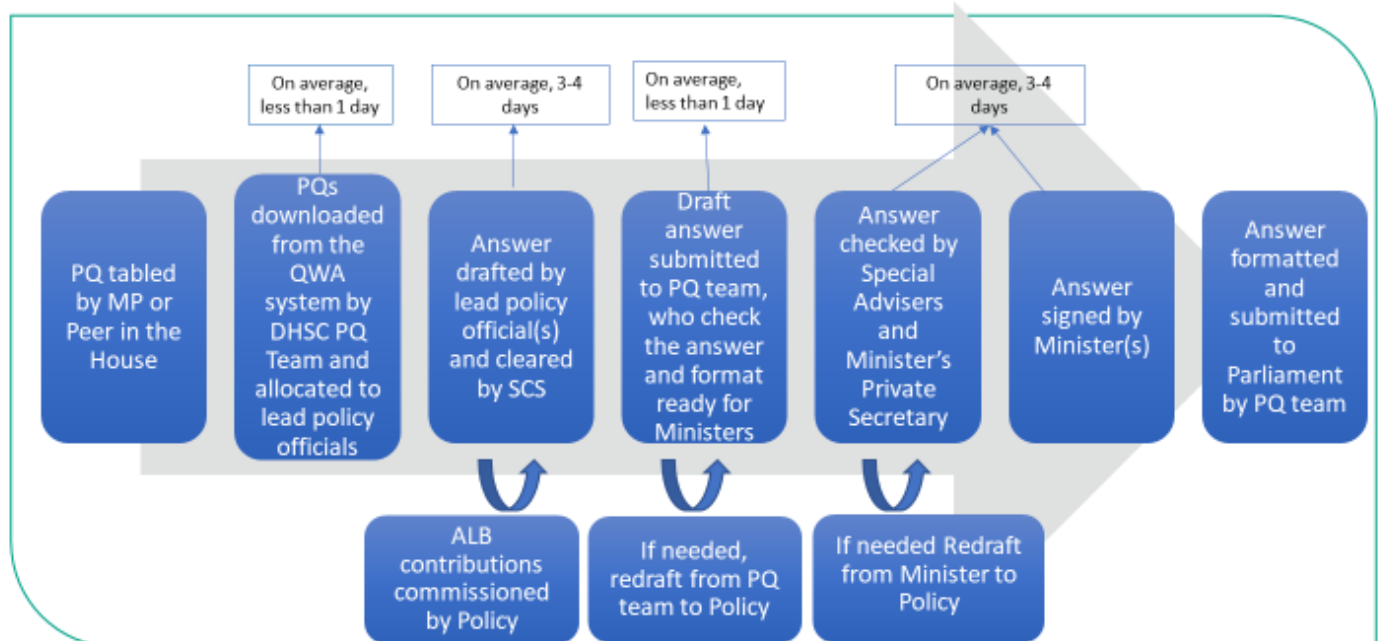
## Annex A

PQs answered in this parliamentary session by Minister (11 May – 30 July).

Minister answering PQ in parliament	Number of PQs answered
Jo Churchill	1,140
Nadine Dorries	383
Helen Whately	377
Ed Argar	317
Nadhim Zahawi	238
Lord Bethell	220

## Annex B

Life Cycle of a PQ



Written Parliamentary Questions

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## Annex C

### Summary of PQ support provided to policy teams receiving a high number of PQs

1. Heads of DHSC Parliamentary Team have an introductory meeting with Deputy Director of the team requiring support.
2. Ensure that all members of the team have access to the PQ system in the Department.
3. PQ Team deliver a training session for the team on the DHSC PQ process and drafting tips.
4. PQ Team circulate departmental guidance on the use of the PQ system.

5. PQ Team put new team Deputy Director/ officials leading on PQs in touch with other team(s) that have recovered performance to share experience and lessons learned.
6. PQ team hold a Q&A session two weeks after the training sessions to ask any questions that come up frequently.
7. PQ Team and Head of DHSC Parliamentary Team discuss team performance with the Deputy Director/PQ management team 2 weeks after the initial training.
8. PQ Team continue to monitor performance of the team and arrange a meeting if performance begins to drop.

## Annex D

This data set uses PQs that were due in July.

Length of time overdue by or less (not accumulative)	Number of PQs	Percentage of total number of overdue PQs	The percentage of PQs that would have been on time if the deadline were extended by this amount (compared to the 52.5% achieved)
12 hours	15	3%	54% (1.5%+)
24 hours	60	11%	59% (6.5%+)
48 hours	49	9%	64% (11.5%+)
72 hours	25	5%	66% (13.5%+)