



Office of the Leader
of the House of Commons

1 Horse Guards Road
London
SW1A 2HQ

Tel: 020 7276 1005
Fax: 020 7276 1006
leader@commonsleader.x.gsi.gov.uk

Our Ref: IDC324022
14 January 2013

Dear Charles,

E-tabling of Written Questions

I am responding to the report of the Procedure Committee, E-tabling of written questions (HC775), published on 18 December 2012.

I believe that Written Parliamentary Questions are a crucial part of how the Government are held to account. An effective system of Parliamentary Questions is an important element of the House's scrutiny toolkit over the executive. As Leader of the House, I am keen to play my part in seeking to improve both the timeliness and quality of Government answers to Parliamentary Questions, whilst also supporting the Committee's previously stated aim of encouraging members to table fewer, better questions.

The House resolved unanimously on April 16 2012, to make permanent the pilot arrangements for a restriction (of five) on the number of questions permitted to be tabled electronically. This followed the recommendation of the Procedure Committee in its report, published in February 2012 (HC1823). That report noted the positive results of the evaluation of the pilot undertaken by the Table Office. These included an increase in the number of Members delivering their PQs to the Office in person, reducing the need for request to Members to visit the office to discuss problems with their proposed PQs, and also a reduction in the proportion of PQs tabled after 6.30pm, which has enabled the Table Office to process PQs more efficiently. It is important that these positive outcomes are protected in any future proposed changes to the system.

The report published in February 2012, ahead of the decision taken by the House, also noted the fact that "there has been no significant level of concern expressed over the five-Question limit on e-tabling", with only two Members expressing an objection in principle. An EDM expressing opposition to the changes also attracted no supporters apart from the tabling Member. Against this background I find it surprising that the Committee felt it necessary to return to the issue so quickly after it had been resolved by the House, following several reports and opportunity for debate.

The evidence considered by the Committee consists mainly of written and oral evidence given by Chris Ruane MP. The Committee has not been persuaded by the arguments presented by Chris Ruane MP that the restriction on the number of questions which could be e-tabled has caused a significant reduction in the number of written questions, such as to represent a significant restraint on the ability of Members to hold the Government to account. I agree that the argument that the restriction represents a significant restraint on Members to hold the Government to account is unfounded.

However, the Committee recommend that the limit on the number of written questions which may be e-tabled by an individual Member each day be raised from five to 20. The Government does not take a view on this, which is essentially a technical amendment to the current process, as opposed to new policy. The issue of increasing the number of questions which may be tabled electronically from five to 20 is very much a matter for the consideration of the House itself. On that basis, the next step should be for the Committee to seek an opportunity for the proposal to be put to the House for decision. I agree with the Committee that it is sensible that, if the change is agreed by the House, it should take effect from the first meeting of the House following the next periodic adjournment after it is agreed.

Finally, I am pleased that the Table Office has now been able to deliver on the commitment to provide Members with a 'basket' facility as part of a technical upgrade of the e-tabling system. This will enable Members who wish to submit questions that are either, in excess of the number limit imposed by the House, or after the 6.30pm deadline, to do so. These questions will then be stored and automatically tabled at the next available opportunity. This improvement should address what was identified as an inconvenience to Members following the introduction of the restriction on the number of questions that could be tabled electronically.

Yours ever,


Rt Hon Andrew Lansley CBE MP
Leader of the House of Commons