



House of Commons  
Procedure Committee

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**Written Parliamentary  
questions: progress  
report for Session  
2016–17, monitoring in  
the 2017 Parliament,  
and electronic tabling**

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**Second Report of Session 2017–19**





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**Second Report of Session 2017–19**

*Report, together with formal minutes relating  
to the report*

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## Procedure Committee

The Procedure Committee is appointed by the House of Commons to consider the practice and procedure of the House in the conduct of public business, and to make recommendations.

### Current membership

[Mr Charles Walker MP](#) (*Conservative, Broxbourne*) (Chair)

[Bob Blackman MP](#) (*Conservative, Harrow East*)

[Mr Peter Bone MP](#) (*Conservative, Wellingborough*)

[Dan Carden MP](#) (*Labour, Liverpool, Walton*)

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[Alison Thewliss MP](#) (*Scottish National Party, Glasgow Central*)

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### Powers

The powers of the Committee are set out in House of Commons Standing Orders, principally in SO No. 147. These are available on the internet via [www.parliament.uk](http://www.parliament.uk).

### Publication

Committee reports are published on the Committee's website at [www.parliament.uk/proccom](http://www.parliament.uk/proccom) and in print by Order of the House.

### Committee staff

The current staff of the Committee are Martyn Atkins (Clerk), Leoni Kurt (Second Clerk), Jim Lawford (Committee Assistant), and Alasdair Rendall (Media Officer).

### Contacts

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## Summary

The Procedure Committee in the 2017 Parliament has taken up the work of monitoring the timeliness and quality of Parliamentary questions for written answer, building on the work of its predecessors in the 2010 and 2015 Parliaments.

### **Written Parliamentary questions: monitoring report for Session 2016–17**

We report on the data on the timeliness of written answers in the last session of the previous Parliament, and the performance in that session of Departments whose record in 2015–16 merited comment by our predecessors.

- Improvements in performance made by the Home Office were offset by issues arising from failures in IT systems. The Department’s performance in the present session will be monitored and improvements will be expected.
- The Department for Culture, Media and Sport has improved its performance in the timeliness of answering markedly.
- The performance of the two new departments established in July 2016—the Department for Exiting the European Union and the Department for International Trade—has not given the Committee cause for concern.

Departments exhibiting particularly poor performance in 2016–17—the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the Department for Education and the Ministry of Justice—will be subject to an assessment of their performance in the present Parliament to date. If the performance has not improved, the departments will be invited to account for their record and propose an improvement plan.

### **Monitoring in the 2017 Parliament: quality of answers**

The Committee is continuing with its scheme to afford Members a means of complaining about inadequate answers and seeking redress.

In addition the Committee plans to launch an exercise to monitor the quality of answers. It will be seeking the views of Members on answer quality.

### **Developments in tabling questions: the MemberHub**

The Table Office has recently introduced a new system for the electronic tabling of parliamentary questions. The Committee notes the new security and login arrangements which apply. It reiterates that the right to table questions is personal to a Member and Members, when delegating tasks to their staff, must always bear this in mind. The Committee will be reviewing the use of digital channels for the tabling of questions and other items of a procedural nature in due course.

# 1 Written Parliamentary questions: monitoring report for Session 2016–17

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1. The Procedure Committees in the 2010–15 and 2015–17 Parliaments assumed a role in monitoring the answering of Parliamentary questions for written answer by Government departments. Those Committees undertook two tasks: investigating complaints from Members about answers which they considered to be unsatisfactory, and receiving and evaluating statistics from the Government, provided in a standard format, setting out the performance of each department in answering questions for written answer to the generally accepted standards for timeliness.<sup>1</sup>

2. The purpose of the Committee’s work in this regard to date was set out by the Procedure Committee in the 2005–10 Parliament:

It is in order to uphold [the] system of WPQs and reiterate the responsibilities of those involved in it that we have put our Committee forward to act as a monitoring body. Not only will this allow us to gauge the extent of any problem, it will also send a clear signal to Government that apparently inadequate answers to questions will not go uninvestigated. [...] We are determined to ensure that the WPQs system is treated with due respect by Government departments and that the questions asked by the public’s elected representatives receive the answers they deserve.<sup>2</sup>

## Timeliness of answers

3. We report below on the performance of Departments in providing timely answers to questions for written answer in the 2016–17 Session, which ran from 18 May 2016 to 3 May 2017.

4. From the start of the 2015–16 Session, data on the timeliness of answering has been captured from the Q&A system. This system transmits the text of questions tabled by Members and processed by the Table Office to Government departments, and transmits the texts of answers to Members and to the House for publication. The system can be used to generate data for the tabling and answering of questions between specific date ranges.

5. We have received data on the timeliness of answering in 2016–17 directly from the Table Office. Tables indicating departmental performance in 2016–17, listed by number of questions tabled and timeliness of answering, are annexed to this report. As in 2015–16, we publish alongside this report the full dataset from which our figures are drawn, in .csv and .xls formats.<sup>3</sup>

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1 Second Report of Session 2010–12, *Improving the effectiveness of parliamentary scrutiny:(a) Select committee amendments; (b) Explanatory statements on amendments; (c) Written parliamentary questions*, HC 800; Seventh Report of Session 2012–13, *Monitoring written Parliamentary questions*, HC 1095; Fourth Report of Session 2013–14, *Written Parliamentary questions: monitoring report*, HC 1046; First Report of Session 2016–17, *Monitoring of written Parliamentary questions: progress report for Session 2015–16*, HC 191.

2 Third Report of Session 2008–09, *Written Parliamentary Questions*, HC 859, paras 104, 103.

3 [The detailed datasets are published on the Committee’s website.](#)

The locations of the datasets on timeliness of answering in Sessions 2010–12 to 2014–15 are listed in our First Report of Session 2016–17, *Monitoring of written Parliamentary questions: progress report for Session 2015–16*, HC 191, para 9, footnote 10.



**Table 1: Overall rates of timeliness in written answers from Government departments, Session 2010–12 to 2015–16**

	Ordinary written	Named day
2010–12 Session	69%	69%
2012–13 Session	76%	73%
2013–14 Session	85%	78%
2014–15 Session	87%	81%
2015–16 Session	92%	86%
2016–17 Session	92%	87%

Sources:

2010–12 to 2014–15: memorandum from the Leader of the House of Commons, November 2015  
 2015–16 and 2016–17: data drawn from Q&A system operated by House of Commons Table Office

**Table 2: Number of questions tabled to all answering bodies per sitting day, Session 2010–12 to 2015–16**

	Number of sitting days	WPQs tabled per sitting day
2010–12 Session	295	333
2012–13 Session	145	299
2013–14 Session	162	260
2014–15 Session	134	226
2015–16 Session	158	237
2016–17 Session	142	249

Sources:

2010–12 to 2014–15: memorandum from the Leader of the House of Commons, November 2015  
 2015–16 and 2016–17: data drawn from Q&A system operated by House of Commons Table Office

6. We note with approval the overall maintenance of the standards of timeliness in answering. In the last Parliament on average over nine out of ten questions for ordinary written answer received a response within five sitting days, and over eight out of ten received a response on the day named.

7. We also note the upward trend in the number of questions tabled for written answer per sitting day over the last Parliament: some 250 questions for written answer were tabled on average each sitting day, against the 226 tabled on average in Session 2014–15. This is still well short of the 333 per sitting day tabled in Session 2010–12.

## Performances of individual departments in 2016–17

8. As our predecessors reported in July 2016, the commissioning of in-year information on Departmental answering performance has substantially aided the monitoring process and has led to earlier and more productive engagement with Departments whose performance in timely answering has given cause for concern.

9. As a rule our predecessors considered that persistent failure to answer more than 80% of questions to time (within five working days for ordinary written questions, and by the day named for named day questions) would lead the Committee to require an explanation for the poor performance and evidence of an improvement plan.

## *Departments featured in the 2015–16 monitoring report*

### *Home Office*

10. The concerns raised by our predecessors over the performance of the Home Office in providing timely answers, and the patchy performance of that Department in improving the timeliness of its answers, led the Committee to invite the then Home Secretary to appear in April 2016 to explain the measures which were being put in place to ensure that questions were answered more swiftly. As that Committee reported in July 2016, improvement in the timeliness of answering was made over the 2015–16 session as a whole.<sup>4</sup>

11. The then Minister for Crime, Safeguarding and Vulnerability, Sarah Newton MP, wrote to the Chair of the Committee early in the new Parliament to draw to his attention a failure in the Department’s IT system which had led to the loss from the system of seven questions, which could therefore not be answered. Flaws in the system also led to a general drop in timeliness of answering. The Minister assured the Chair that by the end of the 2016–17 Session the IT flaws had been addressed and that departmental performance had improved to the extent that, by the Department’s account, “over 85%” of questions were being answered on time. This improvement was in part attributed to the Department’s adoption of a better system for the tracking of questions and submissions.<sup>5</sup>

12. The Home Office performance figures for 2016–17 show improvement over the previous session, but from a very low base: while in 2015–16 fewer than half of the questions for named day answer were being answered on time, in 2016–17 the figure was 62.2%. 76% of ordinary written questions were being answered within five days in 2015–16, compared to 79.2% in 2016–17.

**13. While the continued challenges faced by the Home Office in meeting standards of timeliness of answers cause us concern, we appreciate the positive engagement and frank and open approach of the then departmental Parliamentary Champion, the Minister for Crime, Safeguarding and Vulnerability, Sarah Newton MP. We expect this open engagement to continue under her successor, and we shall continue to monitor the Department’s performance for evidence of the benefits which have been promised.**

### *Department for Culture, Media and Sport*

14. The performance of the Department for Culture, Media and Sport<sup>6</sup> attracted the attention of our predecessors in April 2016 and the acting Ministerial champion, Rt Hon David Evennett MP, was required to come and explain the Department’s poor performance. We are pleased to be able to report that in the subsequent session the Department showed a dramatic improvement in timeliness: figures for timely answers to ordinary written and named day questions increased from 67.6% to 90.9% and from 60.2% to 93.3% respectively. **We congratulate the Secretary of State, the Ministerial team and the Departmental**

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4 [HC \(2016–17\) 191](#), para 17.

5 Letter from the Minister for Crime, Safeguarding and Vulnerability, Sarah Newton MP, to the Chair-elect of the Committee, Mr Charles Walker OBE MP, 14 July 2017 (published in Annex 2)

6 The Department was renamed the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport in July 2017. See “[Change of name for DCMS](#)”, DCMS news release, 3 July 2017

**parliamentary champion for the impressive improvements in performance made at the end of the last Parliament. We trust that the improvements will be sustained into the present Parliament.**

### *Department for International Trade and Department for Exiting the European Union*

15. The two new departments created on 18 July 2016 attracted the attention of our predecessors: in the monitoring report for 2015–16 published in July 2016 both departments were put on notice that they must prioritise their mechanisms for Ministerial accountability to Parliament.

16. We are encouraged to report that the overall performance of both departments has been strong: the Department for Exiting the European Union ensured that 95.3% of named day questions and 82.1% of ordinary written questions were answered to time in 2016–17, while the corresponding figures for the Department for International Trade were 89.5% and 93.9%. Again, we look to both Departments to sustain this trend in the new Parliament.

### *Departments causing concern in 2016–17*

17. A number of departments demonstrated weak performance in 2016–17: should their performance not improve in the present session we will have no hesitation in requiring explanations and improvement plans from Ministers.

18. In some cases the departments were subject to reorganisation as part of the machinery of government changes in July 2016, and subsequently: for instance, the functions of the former Department for Business, Innovation and Skills in respect of higher and further education policy, apprenticeships and skills were transferred to the Department for Education, and the functions of the former Department for Energy and Climate Change were merged into the new Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy.<sup>7</sup> While a dip in performance arising from organisational change may be understandable, such changes cannot excuse persistent poor performance.

19. We set out in the table below the departments whose performance we intend to monitor as the present session develops, together with the headline performance figures for timeliness of answering.

**Table 3: Performance of selected Departments in answering WPQs to time, Session 2016–17**

Department	Questions for ordinary written answer answered within 5 sitting days		Questions for written answer on a named day answered on day named	
	2016–17	2015–16	2016–17	2015–16
Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy	902/1106 81.6%	<i>n/a</i>	548/756 72.5%	<i>n/a</i>
Department for Education	1066/1370 77.8%	1286/1387 94.1%	814/1351 60.3%	733/850 86.2%
Ministry of Justice	919/1183 77.7%	1033/1147 90.1%	353/500 70.6%	686/817 84.0%

Source: Table Office Q&A data

### Continued monitoring of timeliness

20. We will continue to monitor Departmental performance on the timeliness of answering questions at termly intervals during the present Session, on the basis of data provided by the Table Office. Departments exhibiting poor performance over a sustained period can expect to be held to account.

## 2 Monitoring in the 2017 Parliament: quality of answers

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21. The provision of timely answers is one means whereby the quality of Ministerial accountability to Parliament is ensured. It ought to go without saying that the content of such answers is as important as the speed with which they are provided.

22. The monitoring of timeliness undertaken by our predecessors since 2010 has been complemented by a scheme which gives Members a route to raise concerns about the quality of answers received to their questions and to seek redress. We plan to maintain and expand this scheme over the course of this Parliament.

### Quality monitoring: the Procedure Committee complaint scheme

23. The outline of our quality monitoring scheme is as follows:

- Members may refer to the Committee individual answers which they regard as inadequate to the question asked, together with any background material which might help the Committee reach a decision on whether to take further action in that particular case.
- Late answers may also be referred to the Committee in a similar way.
- The Committee has delegated to the Chair the responsibility for evaluating individual complaints.
- The Chair will consider each answer submitted. Where he judges the answer to be unsatisfactory, he will ask the relevant department for observations within a set time, and will copy the correspondence to the Member concerned.
- In the case of **late answers**, the Chair will consider the extent of the delay and seek observations from the Government where he deems it appropriate to do so.
- When observations from the Department are received, the Chair will decide whether further action is necessary. Such further action may include a reference to the Committee, which may consider seeking further explanations orally or in writing.
- The Chair will pass on all observations to the relevant Member in cases where the Department has not already done so.
- Where the Chair identifies trends in bad practice, he will refer the matter to the Committee for further consideration. The Committee may then ask the department concerned to comment, either by means of a memorandum or in oral evidence.
- It is not anticipated that all answers referred to the Chairman will be judged unsatisfactory. In such cases Members will be informed of the Chairman's decision.

## Quality monitoring: trends in answering behaviour

24. In their last monitoring report our predecessors drew attention to the very high rates of timely answering achieved by several departments with exceptionally high volumes of questions. In the 2016–17 Parliament, such Departments included:

- the Department for Transport (3 out of 2336 questions answered late)
- the Department for Work and Pensions (18 out of 2209 questions answered late)
- the Department of Health (18 out of 5716 questions answered late)
- HM Treasury (17 out of 2013 questions answered late).

25. The punctuality of such Departments is laudable, particularly when other departments receiving far lower volumes of questions appear to struggle to provide answers on time. We nevertheless consider it prudent to ask whether the remarkably and consistently high performance of some departments on grounds of timeliness is being achieved at the expense of the overall quality of answers; and whether some departments are at an advantage, for instance in being able to score high marks for timeliness by providing brief substantive responses while forwarding the question to an agency or another arms length body not directly responsible to Parliament which may then provide a response via correspondence.

**26. In the coming session we plan to undertake a more systematic exercise to assess the quality of answers given to written questions and to press for improvements in standards where we consider this is merited.**

27. This activity will be undertaken in two ways:

- a) An analysis, by random sampling, of the answers given by departments receiving high numbers of questions for written answer and achieving very high scores for timeliness of response
- b) A survey of the views of Members, to determine in a more systematic fashion levels of satisfaction with answers given by Departments

**28. We will begin to sample the quality of answers early in 2018, when we will also survey Members for their views. We will report our findings to the House in due course. Should we identify any systemic issues with the quality of answers we will discuss improvements with the Department concerned. Should we identify any practices which appear to give advantages to certain departments when timeliness of answering is being evaluated, we will adjust our reporting framework accordingly.**

### 3 Developments in tabling questions: the MemberHub

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29. Electronic tabling of questions, or e-tabling, was first introduced in 2002 in response to a recommendation from a predecessor committee. Its operation has been evaluated periodically since.

30. E-tabling offers convenience to Members, who are able to table questions for oral and written answer remotely and without having to submit questions in hard copy to the Table Office either by hand or through the post. It operates alongside these traditional means of tabling questions as an alternative, rather than a replacement. It is a highly popular means of tabling: the Table Office has indicated that up to 80 per cent of Parliamentary questions are now tabled by electronic means.<sup>8</sup> A predecessor Committee recommended that the number of questions which may be tabled by each Member by this route each tabling day should be limited to 20. The number of questions which may be submitted in hard copy remains unlimited.

31. The e-tabling interface was originally developed by a third party developer as a browser-based application not fully integrated into Parliamentary IT systems. This system has reached the end of its life and is now not a good fit for the new suite of systems managing parliamentary data which have been developed by the Parliamentary Digital Service as part of the Parliamentary Data Programme.

32. The House Service has taken the opportunity to introduce a modern system for the submission and processing of parliamentary questions. This system—the MemberHub—was introduced in November 2017 to replace the old e-tabling interface.

33. Our predecessors discussed plans for the development of the MemberHub with the Principal Clerk, Table Office in December 2016 and we discussed the implementation of the new system with her in November 2017. The Table Office told us that the new MemberHub system would bring the following benefits:

- Online submission of questions via secure web browser
- Online searching for and tracking progress of questions
- Online receipt of notifications from the Table Office concerning issues with questions, and online resolution of issues
- Online editing and submission of questions for publication: significant efficiency and cost savings through removing the requirement to re-key e-tabled questions with or without manuscript editing

34. The new MemberHub system for tabling parliamentary questions will provide greater flexibility for Members, and appears likely to deliver benefits for the House Service in terms of efficient ways of working. **We shall monitor the initiative taken by the House Service and the Parliamentary Digital Service in developing the new MemberHub system and assess its capacity to host further digital functions, and the desirability of extending such functions to other items of House business, in due course.**

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8 Note from informal meeting with Principal Clerk, Table Office, November 2017 (not published)

## The MemberHub and delegated authority

35. The new MemberHub system allows the staff of Members to log in with their own Parliamentary accounts in order to table questions with the express authority of their employer. This is a new feature, introduced to avoid the security risks inherent in staff sharing a Member's login so that they can e-table questions.

36. Members' staff may now access the MemberHub system via their own login with the written authority of their employer, and on the express understanding that their use of the system is at their employer's direction. The activity of staff given access to the system is now capable of being tracked and audited with far greater accuracy. This ought to increase the integrity of the system and reduce the temptation for misuse or abuse. Table Office and Digital Service staff will monitor the system for any evidence of unauthorised use.

**37. The ability to table questions for oral and written answer to Ministers is a right which is personal to elected Members. The integrity of the questions system rests on the responsible exercise by Members of that right. The Committee will take very seriously any act which risks that integrity. We are confident that our colleagues understand this and will ensure that no parliamentary question is tabled through the new system without the express authority of a Member of Parliament.**



## Conclusions and recommendations

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### Written Parliamentary questions: monitoring report for Session 2016–17

1. We note with approval the overall maintenance of the standards of timeliness in answering. In the last Parliament on average over nine out of ten questions for ordinary written answer received a response within five sitting days, and over eight out of ten received a response on the day named. (Paragraph 6)
2. We also note the upward trend in the number of questions tabled for written answer per sitting day over the last Parliament: some 250 questions for written answer were tabled on average each sitting day, against the 226 tabled on average in Session 2014–15. This is still well short of the 333 per sitting day tabled in Session 2010–12. (Paragraph 7)
3. While the continued challenges faced by the Home Office in meeting standards of timeliness of answers cause us concern, we appreciate the positive engagement and frank and open approach of the then departmental Parliamentary Champion, the Minister for Crime, Safeguarding and Vulnerability, Sarah Newton MP. We expect this open engagement to continue under her successor, and we shall continue to monitor the Department's performance for evidence of the benefits which have been promised. (Paragraph 13)
4. We congratulate the Secretary of State, the Ministerial team and the Departmental parliamentary champion for the impressive improvements in performance made at the end of the last Parliament. We trust that the improvements will be sustained into the present Parliament. (Paragraph 14)
5. We will continue to monitor Departmental performance on the timeliness of answering questions at termly intervals during the present Session, on the basis of data provided by the Table Office. Departments exhibiting poor performance over a sustained period can expect to be held to account. (Paragraph 20)

### Monitoring in the 2017 Parliament: quality of answers

6. The provision of timely answers is one means whereby the quality of Ministerial accountability to Parliament is ensured. It ought to go without saying that the content of such answers is as important as the speed with which they are provided. (Paragraph 21)
7. The monitoring of timeliness undertaken by our predecessors since 2010 has been complemented by a scheme which gives Members a route to raise concerns about the quality of answers received to their questions and to seek redress. We plan to maintain and expand this scheme over the course of this Parliament. (Paragraph 22)
8. In the coming session we plan to undertake a more systematic exercise to assess the quality of answers given to written questions and to press for improvements in standards where we consider this is merited. (Paragraph 26)

9. We will begin to sample the quality of answers early in 2018, when we will also survey Members for their views. We will report our findings to the House in due course. Should we identify any systemic issues with the quality of answers we will discuss improvements with the Department concerned. Should we identify any practices which appear to give advantages to certain departments when timeliness of answering is being evaluated, we will adjust our reporting framework accordingly. (Paragraph 28)
10. We shall monitor the initiative taken by the House Service and the Parliamentary Digital Service in developing the new MemberHub system and assess its capacity to host further digital functions, and the desirability of extending such functions to other items of House business, in due course. (Paragraph 34)
11. The ability to table questions for oral and written answer to Ministers is a right which is personal to elected Members. The integrity of the questions system rests on the responsible exercise by Members of that right. The Committee will take very seriously any act which risks that integrity. We are confident that our colleagues understand this and will ensure that no parliamentary question is tabled through the new system without the express authority of a Member of Parliament. (Paragraph 37)

## Annex 1: answering performance by Department, Session 2015–16

Table 1: Departments listed alphabetically

	Ordinary written			Named day		
	Questions tabled for answer	Number (%) answered substantively within 5 working days		Questions tabled for answer	Number (%) answered on named day	
Attorney-General's Office	135	120	97.6%	48	44	91.7%
Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy	1106	902	81.6%	756	548	72.5%
<i>Business, Innovation and Skills ‡</i>	190	161	84.7%	149	113	75.8%
Cabinet Office	616	571	92.7%	361	300	83.1%
Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster	6	1	16.7%	1	0	0%
Communities and Local Government	876	759	86.6%	620	508	81.9%
Culture, Media and Sport	702	638	90.9%	538	502	93.3%
Defence	1324	1316	99.4%	774	774	100%
Education	1370	1066	77.8%	1351	814	60.3%
<i>Energy and Climate Change †</i>	153	141	92.2%	62	42	67.7%
Environment, Food and Rural Affairs	1019	972	95.4%	591	564	95.4%
Exiting the European Union §	403	331	82.1%	232	221	95.3%
Foreign and Commonwealth Office	1528	1446	94.6%	778	732	94.1%
Government Equalities Office	110	95	86.4%	64	51	79.7%
Health	3457	3443	99.6%	2259	2255	99.8%
HM Treasury	1221	1211	99.2%	852	845	99.2%
Home Office	1830	1450	79.2%	1022	636	62.2%
International Development	684	681	99.6%	316	300	94.9%
International Trade §	506	475	93.9%	248	222	89.5%
Justice	1183	919	77.7%	500	353	70.6%
Leader of the House	20	19	95.0%	8	8	100%
Northern Ireland Office	169	153	90.5%	64	61	95.3%
Prime Minister	73	73	100%	55	55	100%
Scotland Office	157	157	100%	61	61	100%

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	Ordinary written			Named day		
	Questions tabled for answer	Number (%) answered substantively within 5 working days		Questions tabled for answer	Number (%) answered on named day	
<b>Transport</b>	1404	1403	99.9%	932	930	99.8%
<b>Wales Office</b>	108	108	100%	66	65	98.5%
<b>Work and Pensions</b>	1249	1246	99.8%	960	945	98.4%

Source: data from the Q&A system provided by House of Commons Table Office

§—department established on 18 July 2016

†—merged with the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills on 18 July 2016 to form the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy

‡—higher education functions transferred to the Department for Education on 18 July 2016: the remainder merged with the Department for Energy and Climate Change to form the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy

**Table 2: Departments ranked by number of questions for ordinary written answer received**

	Ordinary written			Named day		
	Questions tabled for answer	Number (%) answered substantively within 5 working days		Questions tabled for answer	Number (%) answered on named day	
Health	3457	3443	99.60%	2259	2255	99.80%
Home Office	1830	1450	79.20%	1022	636	62.20%
Foreign and Commonwealth Office	1528	1446	94.60%	778	732	94.10%
Transport	1404	1403	99.90%	932	930	99.80%
Education	1370	1066	77.80%	1351	814	60.30%
Defence	1324	1316	99.40%	774	774	100%
Work and Pensions	1249	1246	99.80%	960	945	98.40%
HM Treasury	1221	1211	99.20%	852	845	99.20%
Justice	1183	919	77.70%	500	353	70.60%
Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy	1106	902	81.60%	756	548	72.50%
Environment, Food and Rural Affairs	1019	972	95.40%	591	564	95.40%
Communities and Local Government	876	759	86.60%	620	508	81.90%
Culture, Media and Sport	702	638	90.90%	538	502	93.30%
International Development	684	681	99.60%	316	300	94.90%
Cabinet Office	616	571	92.70%	361	300	83.10%
International Trade §	506	475	93.90%	248	222	89.50%
Exiting the European Union §	403	331	82.10%	232	221	95.30%
<i>Business, Innovation and Skills ‡</i>	190	161	84.70%	149	113	75.80%
Northern Ireland Office	169	153	90.50%	64	61	95.30%
Scotland Office	157	157	100%	61	61	100%
<i>Energy and Climate Change †</i>	153	141	92.20%	62	42	67.70%
Attorney-General's Office	135	120	97.60%	48	44	91.70%
Government Equalities Office	110	95	86.40%	64	51	79.70%
Wales Office	108	108	100%	66	65	98.50%
Prime Minister	73	73	100%	55	55	100%
Leader of the House	20	19	95.00%	8	8	100%
Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster	6	1	16.70%	1	0	0%

**Table 3: Departments ranked by proportion of questions for ordinary written answer receiving substantive response within five working days**

	Ordinary written			Named day		
	Questions tabled for answer	Number (%) answered substantively within 5 working days		Questions tabled for answer	Number (%) answered on named day	
Scotland Office	157	157	100%	61	61	100%
Wales Office	108	108	100%	66	65	98.50%
Prime Minister	73	73	100%	55	55	100%
Transport	1404	1403	99.90%	932	930	99.80%
Work and Pensions	1249	1246	99.80%	960	945	98.40%
Health	3457	3443	99.60%	2259	2255	99.80%
International Development	684	681	99.60%	316	300	94.90%
Defence	1324	1316	99.40%	774	774	100%
HM Treasury	1221	1211	99.20%	852	845	99.20%
Attorney-General's Office	135	120	97.60%	48	44	91.70%
Environment, Food and Rural Affairs	1019	972	95.40%	591	564	95.40%
Leader of the House	20	19	95.00%	8	8	100%
Foreign and Commonwealth Office	1528	1446	94.60%	778	732	94.10%
International Trade §	506	475	93.90%	248	222	89.50%
Cabinet Office	616	571	92.70%	361	300	83.10%
<i>Energy and Climate Change †</i>	153	141	92.20%	62	42	67.70%
Culture, Media and Sport	702	638	90.90%	538	502	93.30%
Northern Ireland Office	169	153	90.50%	64	61	95.30%
Communities and Local Government	876	759	86.60%	620	508	81.90%
Government Equalities Office	110	95	86.40%	64	51	79.70%
<i>Business, Innovation and Skills ‡</i>	190	161	84.70%	149	113	75.80%
Exiting the European Union §	403	331	82.10%	232	221	95.30%
Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy	1106	902	81.60%	756	548	72.50%
Home Office	1830	1450	79.20%	1022	636	62.20%
Education	1370	1066	77.80%	1351	814	60.30%
Justice	1183	919	77.70%	500	353	70.60%
Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster	6	1	16.70%	1	0	0%

**Table 4: Departments ranked by number of questions for written answer on a named day received**

	Ordinary written			Named day		
	Questions tabled for answer	Number (%) answered substantively within 5 working days		Questions tabled for answer	Number (%) answered on named day	
Health	3457	3443	99.60%	2259	2255	99.80%
Education	1370	1066	77.80%	1351	814	60.30%
Home Office	1830	1450	79.20%	1022	636	62.20%
Work and Pensions	1249	1246	99.80%	960	945	98.40%
Transport	1404	1403	99.90%	932	930	99.80%
HM Treasury	1221	1211	99.20%	852	845	99.20%
Foreign and Commonwealth Office	1528	1446	94.60%	778	732	94.10%
Defence	1324	1316	99.40%	774	774	100%
Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy	1106	902	81.60%	756	548	72.50%
Communities and Local Government	876	759	86.60%	620	508	81.90%
Environment, Food and Rural Affairs	1019	972	95.40%	591	564	95.40%
Culture, Media and Sport	702	638	90.90%	538	502	93.30%
Justice	1183	919	77.70%	500	353	70.60%
Cabinet Office	616	571	92.70%	361	300	83.10%
International Development	684	681	99.60%	316	300	94.90%
International Trade §	506	475	93.90%	248	222	89.50%
Exiting the European Union §	403	331	82.10%	232	221	95.30%
<i>Business, Innovation and Skills ‡</i>	190	161	84.70%	149	113	75.80%
Wales Office	108	108	100%	66	65	98.50%
Northern Ireland Office	169	153	90.50%	64	61	95.30%
Government Equalities Office	110	95	86.40%	64	51	79.70%
<i>Energy and Climate Change †</i>	153	141	92.20%	62	42	67.70%
Scotland Office	157	157	100%	61	61	100%
Prime Minister	73	73	100%	55	55	100%
Attorney-General's Office	135	120	97.60%	48	44	91.70%
Leader of the House	20	19	95.00%	8	8	100%
Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster	6	1	16.70%	1	0	0%

**Table 5: Departments ranked by proportion of questions for written answer on a named day answered on the day named**

	Ordinary written			Named day		
	Questions tabled for answer	Number (%) answered substantively within 5 working days		Questions tabled for answer	Number (%) answered on named day	
Defence	1324	1316	99.40%	774	774	100%
Scotland Office	157	157	100%	61	61	100%
Prime Minister	73	73	100%	55	55	100%
Leader of the House	20	19	95.00%	8	8	100%
Health	3457	3443	99.60%	2259	2255	99.80%
Transport	1404	1403	99.90%	932	930	99.80%
HM Treasury	1221	1211	99.20%	852	845	99.20%
Wales Office	108	108	100%	66	65	98.50%
Work and Pensions	1249	1246	99.80%	960	945	98.40%
Environment, Food and Rural Affairs	1019	972	95.40%	591	564	95.40%
Exiting the European Union §	403	331	82.10%	232	221	95.30%
Northern Ireland Office	169	153	90.50%	64	61	95.30%
International Development	684	681	99.60%	316	300	94.90%
Foreign and Commonwealth Office	1528	1446	94.60%	778	732	94.10%
Culture, Media and Sport	702	638	90.90%	538	502	93.30%
Attorney-General's Office	135	120	97.60%	48	44	91.70%
International Trade §	506	475	93.90%	248	222	89.50%
Cabinet Office	616	571	92.70%	361	300	83.10%
Communities and Local Government	876	759	86.60%	620	508	81.90%
Government Equalities Office	110	95	86.40%	64	51	79.70%
<i>Business, Innovation and Skills ‡</i>	190	161	84.70%	149	113	75.80%
Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy	1106	902	81.60%	756	548	72.50%
Justice	1183	919	77.70%	500	353	70.60%
<i>Energy and Climate Change †</i>	153	141	92.20%	62	42	67.70%
Home Office	1830	1450	79.20%	1022	636	62.20%
Education	1370	1066	77.80%	1351	814	60.30%
Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster	6	1	16.70%	1	0	0%



## Annex 2: correspondence with Departments

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### **A: Correspondence with the Home Secretary concerning the findings of the Committee's First Report, Session 2016–17**

#### ***Letter from Mr Charles Walker OBE MP, Chair of the Procedure Committee, to Rt Hon Amber Rudd MP, Secretary of State for the Home Department***

I am writing to draw to your attention the Procedure Committee's recent report on written Parliamentary questions for the 2015–16 Session (HC 191): I enclose a copy.

You will note that the average timeliness of answers from your Department remain well below the performance standards achieved by the majority of Departments.

While I recognise the improvements in performance made by the Department under your predecessor, it remains the case that the timeliness of answers remains below the performance that Members are entitled to expect. I should therefore be grateful if you would ensure that the gains made by the Department in recent months are maintained.

The Committee would of course be happy to discuss informally with Ministers any issues which are hampering the timely provision of answers to Members.

*30 September 2016*

#### ***Letter from Rt Hon Amber Rudd MP, Secretary of State for the Home Department, to Mr Charles Walker OBE MP, Chair of the Procedure Committee***

Thank you for your letter of 30th September 2016, regarding written Parliamentary questions. As you rightly point out, Home Office performance compares most unfavourably with other Government Departments. I would like to apologise for this and reassure you that my team is taking steps to address the issues.

I have recently appointed Sarah Newton, the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Vulnerability, Safeguarding and Countering Extremism, to the role of Parliamentary Champion. Sarah will be responsible for continuing Karen Bradley's work to improve PQ performance and parliamentary capability more broadly across the department. Sarah has already begun to work across the Department and will lead a root and branch review of the way in which we process, consider and answer Parliamentary Questions. We have some way to go to get this right, but I am determined, as I know Sarah is, to turn things around.

Sarah's work will include:

- liaising directly with you and the Committee to update you on our progress and to feedback your concerns and advice back to the department;

- engaging across the Department to explain the importance of providing accurate and timely responses to written Parliamentary questions—in particular Sarah will focus on explaining the context behind what this process means to MPs;
- working with the Parliamentary Team to identify areas across the Department which need the greatest support to improve performance;
- ensuring that the ways of working within the Parliamentary Team, and across the whole of the Private Office team, are fit for purpose and fully optimised to meet our targets;
- making directors accountable for performance and ensuring they receive direct feedback (positive and negative) on performance in their area and that they act on this feedback;
- improving the quality and frequency of training with a particular focus on new starters. The Parliamentary Team has already begun to roll out a new training package with a renewed focus on written Parliamentary Questions.

Sarah will continue to monitor progress on a regular basis to ensure that performance improves and would be happy to meet with you in the near future. I know that you have visited the Department in the past to support our efforts to improve our performance. I would welcome your help and advice, and of course that of other Committee members, in similar future engagements here in the Home Office. Further, I am particularly interested in exploring how we can develop Edward Argar’s thoughts expressed during my predecessor’s appearance before the Committee in April when he asked:

*‘What scope do you think there is, Home Secretary, beyond you and other Ministers emphasising the importance of this for those officials to get a real hands-on sense of what it looks like from this end and to understand how the system works here and how important it is to us, particularly as Back-Bench Members of Parliament?’*

I do think there is considerable merit in seeking to bring this whole process to life for officials. Without such efforts it is all too easy for this to become a rather abstract process. I would very much welcome your thoughts as to how we might progress this.

Finally, I would like to reassure you and the Committee that whilst we will continue to strive for improvements on the timeliness of our response, the quality of the response will remain paramount.

10 November 2016

## **B: Letter from the Minister for Crime, Safeguarding and Vulnerability and Parliamentary Champion, Home Office to the Chair of the Committee**

Following my reappointment as the Minister for Crime, Vulnerability and Safeguarding after the General Election, I am delighted to be able to continue my role as the Home Office’s Ministerial Parliamentary Champion.

It is with regret that my first correspondence of the new parliamentary session must begin with an apology for the Home Office's performance in the previous session when we were unable to answer seven Parliamentary Questions. As my officials discussed with your clerk previously, the Home Office experienced a number of I.T. issues in late 2016/early 2017 which led to the Home Office being unable to answer these questions which became lost in the system.

On a positive note, I am pleased to inform you that these I.T. issues have now been rectified and as a result of this, there was a clear improvement in the final few months of the previous session during which the Home Office was consistently answering over 85% of questions on time.

To ensure that the Home Office is constantly improving upon last year's performance, we have put in place a number of new measures to ensure that we are in a better position to answer all PQs going forward. One such measure is the introduction of a PQ tracking system which works in combination with our streamlined and simple email submission system. By introducing this process we have been able to identify those areas within the Home Office that required additional support and training. I am now confident that with these new measures in place the Home Office will continue the significant improvement in its overall PQ performance and there will be no repeat questions remaining unanswered at the end of a parliamentary session.

I will of course be continuing my efforts as Parliamentary Champion to emphasise the importance of PQs to the Department, to support the Home Office Parliamentary Team's training programme and to make Directors accountable for the performance of their own business areas. I will continue this work in the months ahead with the support of my ministerial colleagues and officials in the Parliamentary Team.

*14 July 2017*

## **C: Correspondence with the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport concerning the findings of the Committee's First Report, Session 2016–17**

### ***Letter from Mr Charles Walker OBE MP, Chair of the Procedure Committee, to Rt Hon Karen Bradley MP, Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport***

I am writing to draw to your attention the Procedure Committee's recent report on written Parliamentary questions for the 2015–16 Session (HC 191): I enclose a copy.

You will note that the timeliness of answers from your Department in that session was the subject of criticism. We were grateful for the frank and open way in which David Evennett addressed our concerns about the Department's performance in the early months of the new Parliament.

We recognise and applaud the work you undertook at the Home Office as Ministerial champion in this respect, and you will be pleased to note that performance in that Department has now shown improvement. We are confident that you will make your views

on the Department's responsibility to Parliament clear to your Ministers and officials, and we look forward to an upturn when we come to review the Department's performance in the first term of the present Session.

*30 September 2016*

***Letter from Rt Hon Karen Bradley MP, Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, to Mr Charles Walker OBE MP, Chair of the Procedure Committee***

Thank you for your letter of 30 September, drawing my attention to the Procedure Committee's recent report on written Parliamentary questions in the 2015–16 Session.

I wholeheartedly agree with the Committee's assessment that DCMS's performance in answering Parliamentary questions on time in the last Session was not good enough. I know David Evennett and the Senior team at DCMS took the under-performance seriously and set in place an improvement plan last year. I certainly take the matter of our responsiveness to Parliament very seriously. My ministerial team and I review the department's performance on written Parliamentary questions on a monthly basis. I am pleased to say that, based upon figures collated by my officials, we have answered over 95% of question on time so far for this session. A considerable improvement on last year.

I fully intend to ensure that we maintain a high standard and I am committed to earning a more positive assessment from the Committee in its next review of written Parliamentary questions.

*13 October 2016*

***D: Correspondence with the Secretary of State for International Trade concerning the findings of the Committee's First Report, Session 2016–17***

***Letter from Mr Charles Walker OBE MP, Chair of the Procedure Committee, to Rt Hon Liam Fox MP, Secretary of State for International Trade***

I am writing to draw to your attention the Procedure Committee's recent report on written Parliamentary questions for the 2015–16 Session (HC 191): I enclose a copy.

You will wish in particular to note the conclusion at paragraph 21, on the new Departments established on 18 July:

The two wholly new departments announced on 18 July—the Department for International Trade and the Department for Exiting the European Union—both cover policy areas which are of considerable interest to Members. It is important that the process of establishing these new departments should prioritise the mechanisms for Ministerial accountability to Parliament. In the remainder of this session we intend to monitor the answering performance of both new departments.

I am sure you will agree that the provision of timely and accurate information in response to colleagues' questions should be a particular priority for your Department.

*30 September 2016*

***Letter from Rt Hon Liam Fox MP, Secretary of State for International Trade, to Mr Charles Walker OBE MP, Chair of the Procedure Committee***

Thank you for your letter of 30 September. I am aware of your Committee's useful Report and on-going interest in monitoring PQ performance across Whitehall. I would like to reassure you that my colleagues and I take our ministerial obligations to Parliament seriously, and understand the importance of being responsive to MPs. We are putting robust measures in place to ensure that the Department is able to handle PQs effectively, with Ministers and officials working together to ensure deadlines are met.

I am pleased to say that in September we achieved a success rate in getting answers back on time of greater than 85%, and I anticipate that this will improve even further in the coming months.

*12 October 2016*

# Formal Minutes

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**Wednesday 6 December 2017**

Members present:

Mr Charles Walker, in the Chair

Bob Blackman	Mr Ranil Jayawardena
Mr Peter Bone	David Linden
Dan Carden	Melanie Onn
Bambos Charalambous	Nick Smith
Mr Christopher Chope	Alison Thewliss
Nic Dakin	Mr William Wragg
Helen Goodman	

Draft Report (*Written Parliamentary questions: progress report for Session 2016–17, monitoring in the 2017 Parliament, and electronic tabling*), proposed by the Chair, brought up and read.

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

Paragraphs 1 to 37 read and agreed to.

Summary agreed to.

Annexes 1 and 2 agreed to.

*Resolved*, That the Report be the Second 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, in accordance with the provisions of Standing Order No. 134.

[Adjourned till Wednesday 10 January 2018 at 2.30 pm.]

# List of Reports from the Committee during the current Parliament

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

## Session 2017–19

First Report	Scrutiny of delegated legislation under the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill: interim report	HC 386
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