‘To ask the Secretary of State’: parliamentary questions in 2015-16

Despite the upheaval of the past month– the EU referendum, the new Prime Minister, Shadow Cabinet tumult, and more – the processes of government continue. Parliamentary questions (PQs) are an important tool in holding ministers to account. There were over 37,000 questions tabled in 2015/16. Examining both the recent data from the Procedure Committee, and daily Parliament reports, we look at how these questions fared, examining Commons questions only, and looking at ordinary and named day questions together. New departments already facing scrutiny

The new departments – DEEU, BEIS and DIT – will need to find their feet quickly in many respects, and responding to PQs is one. The general list of questions and responses published by Parliament shows that DEEU already received 104 questions from MPs in the last four days of Parliament. DIT received 35 questions, while BEIS received 112. It’s understandable that new departments might experience early problems (DEEU and BEIS both already have 39 late questions between them), as systems and Brexit policy are established but all three departments are likely to receive considerable scrutiny. Watching how they respond to this (especially their performance after Parliament returns) will be an important measure of their success – will DEEU, a small but politically key department, respond quickly? What about BEIS – a department with most of its functions already in place, but formed of a partial merger of two departments with ‘substandard’ timeliness? PQs continue to address an extremely broad range of issues. Of the 1008 PQs answered 6-11 June (the last full week before the referendum):

- 89 questions addressed Europe (46 addressing the ‘Return to Sender’ campaign).
- 61 addressed refugees, asylum, and immigration
- 52 addressed specific health issues, from obesity to MRSA to HPV
- 91 primarily addressed local, regional, and subnational issues, from the HS2 railway line to Dartford Crossing tolls
- 57 addressed armed conflict or human rights overseas

The remainder addressed everything from tax evasion to tanks – a wide range of topics determined by MP (and constituent) interests. How do departments compare? The total number of questions submitted to departments increased from 30,095 in 2014-15, to 37,561 in 2015-16 (an increase of 25%). This change is less significant than it looks, however, as the 2015-16 parliament sat for more days than 2014-15 (158 versus 134) – meaning that the number of questions per sitting day only increased from an average of 225 to 239. The number of questions asked per day to each department varied comparatively little from one year to another.

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<th>Number of written parliamentary questions submitted to each department, 2015-2016</th>
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<td>DH</td>
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<td>Ordinary Written Questions</td>
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<td>Named Day Questions</td>
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Source: Institute for Government analysis of documents published by the House of Commons Procedure Committee

[6] In terms of individual departments, DH received the most PQs by far, an average of around 35 a day – nearly twice as many (5,526) questions as second-place DfID. DfID saw the fewest (995) of the ‘core’ departments. Despite some differences in ordering, this is broadly similar to 2014-2015 (7).
The number of questions each department has received per day has changed negligibly for most departments over the past year. Departments don’t always respond on time.

The Wales Office (Wal), Defra, DfID, DH, DfT, MoD, and No10 (PM) responded to over 98% of requests within five days, while DCMS, HO, BIS, DECC, and the Scotland Office (Scot) all did so in less than 80% of cases. Some high-performing departments (such as DfT) remained high-performing in 2015/16. Others, like MoD, have dramatically improved their response rate. Oddly, DCMS’s timeliness in responding has dramatically declined, even below HO (typically one of the worst performers).
Even discounting DH – which receives nearly twice as many PQs as the next department, but is in the top-four for timeliness – several departments had similar workloads but highly varying timeliness. *Reasons for differences in timeliness* PQs aren’t tabled regularly. Political developments can spark more questions on a specific issue, greater stresses on departments and in some cases decreased performance. For example, Theresa May – when Home Secretary – *said* that HO timeliness had dipped in late 2015 because of a surge in questions about the Syrian refugee resettlement programme. But that’s not to say ‘peak periods’ always cause delays – between 23 and 29 November 2015, for example, MoD received 136 questions, 236% of their 2015-16 weekly average, but answered all within 5 working days. May offered other explanations for delays, including the need to embed better practices and improve training in responding to PQs. David Evenett, Minister for Sport, Tourism and Heritage (representing DCMS, another poorly performing department) highlighted the problem of complacency about excellent past performance, and staff/ministerial turnover. At the same time, Evenett *laid out* (Q7-Q10) how, after DCMS’ initial rapid decline, measures including weekly management meetings led to a rapid recovery. There are *cultural* as well as *workload* factors behind delays – but they can be addressed by a willing department. In a Ministers’ Reflect *interview* (Q11), Jo Swinson – former Women and Equalities Minister – mentioned that she ‘had a rule that … I never once answered a written Parliamentary Question late … once you set that expectation the Civil Service just responds’. With proper prioritisation, ministers can improve responsiveness dramatically.

Links
[4] http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-questions-answers/?page=1&amp;max=100&amp;questiontype=AllQuestions&amp;house=commons