

In office and in power?

A Minister is appointed to office. He or she has to work out how to exercise the powers available in that position. Some fail to do so, just signing the documents and attending the meetings their officials place before them. It takes energy, persistence and understanding for a Minister to impose a new agenda, change things or improve the ways government works.

In a democracy Ministers are rightly circumscribed to prevent potential power going to their ahead and to avoid abuses. There are three main controls on Ministerial actions. Firstly, they must not break UK law. Secondly they have to stick by collective responsibility, requiring other Ministers support within a department or the wider government to pursue the path they wish. Thirdly, everything they do is subject to the court of public opinion. If they and their policies become too unpopular they may be changed.

Ministers nonetheless can exercise considerable power for the good. They have powers by virtue of collective control of the massive public sector purse, calling up resources and investments nationally. They have stated powers in extensive Statutes requiring or enabling Ministers to do things, regulate things and supervise the public sector. They appoint a large number of people to run vast areas of the public services.

All too often Ministers who lack clarity and understanding about what would be a good direction for the department they are in are buffeted by events and dependent on inconsistent or unreliable civil service advice. From day one the new Minister is held responsible for everything that goes wrong in their department or section of a department, though often the first they knew of the problem was when it was reported to them as a problem. It is often not the result of their actions and may be a case of officials not carrying out the general aim of their stated policy or even worse breaking the clearly stated intention of a Minister. There are also, of course, occasions where Ministers make poor choices or announce things that are not going to work, where they are rightly held to blame.

This government needs to review where it wishes to exercise powers and where it wants to make a difference. With a majority of 80 it can change the law where it thinks the law impedes progress. It needs to move on from policy dominated by responding to the pandemic, and being about decarbonisation alone. Levelling up, a faster and stronger recovery and making and growing more of what we need at home should be priorities that shape public policy in helpful ways.

Government information

If you wish to govern well you need access to good quality information about public services, budgets and outcomes. If you wish to do the job of holding government to account for its actions and inactions you need access to good quality information to come to fair judgements about how well government is performing and what needs improving.

It is currently difficult to get simple factual information from the civil service machine. I and others have not been given good factual answers when we have asked how much extra the NHS will spend, what it will spend it on, what its manpower budget is for the year ahead and how it will bring down the waiting lists. I have also been refused a factual answer to the simple question how many Chief Executives are there in the various structures of NHS England? I have also received no answer to the question how much the government is spending this year on hotel accommodation for illegal migrants pending processing of their cases.

The briefing from NHS England seems to say that in short term the waiting lists will go up as more people engage with the NHS after the intense period of the pandemic and discover they need treatments and procedures. They have declined to tell us how much extra work they can do for the promised extra money, or how much of the one off costs of Covid can now be spared and redirected.

The Treasury as custodian of the budgets should insist on more detailed plans and link these to reporting outcomes so that taxpayers see they are getting value for the extra cash being committed.

How will the extra cash for the NHS be spent?

The Department of Health and Social Care has provided the following answer to your written parliamentary question (56363):

Question:

To ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, how much and what proportion of the £36 billion announced by the Government to tackle waiting lists as a result of the covid19 outbreak will be spent on the salaries of additional medical staff. (56363)

Tabled on: 15 October 2021

This question was grouped with the following question(s) for answer:

1. To ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, how many additional nurses and doctors he plans to recruit for his Department's waiting list initiatives. (56708)

Tabled on: 15 October 2021

Answer:

Edward Argar:

The Department is working closely with NHS England and NHS Improvement to develop a plan for how that funding will be used, including the recruitment and salaries of additional medical staff.

The answer was submitted on 22 Oct 2021 at 10:44.

[What is the cost of hotel accommodation for illegal migrants?](#)

Question:

To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, what the 2020-21 budget is for housing illegal migrants. (77354)

Tabled on: 18 November 2021

Answer:

Tom Pursglove:

Accommodation costs are commercially confidential; therefore, the Home Office does not publish this information.

The answer was submitted on 24 Nov 2021 at 15:42.

[Fighting the virus](#)

Yesterday the Commons passed the latest pandemic controls, which had been introduced the previous night. As always the Opposition parties all wanted the current controls and recommended more. The Conservative benches were more divided, with a minority questioning the value and wisdom of these further restrictions on our liberties.

We have now seen that a Labour government in Cardiff and an SNP government in Edinburgh have not been more successful than England at getting case and

hospital rates down more and keeping them down by enforcing stricter regulations for longer. The controls are now going on around the world against air travel from southern Africa where the latest variant was first detected, only to discover that the new mutant has already broken out and is present in countries around the world well beyond southern Africa. Some think this new mutant is likely to spread more rapidly but to be mild. Let us hope it is not a new lethal killer.

I have raised the issues of whether the NHS has now improved airflows, introduced more UV filters and cut the chances of cross infection. I have also asked about better treatments. During the debate others raised the question of why past forecasts of rising case numbers and deaths have often been inaccurate, how much virus the masks do actually contain and whether these rules will be lifted before Christmas when Parliament is no longer in session.

The NHS senior management needs to make sure the pace and distribution of more vaccinations is fair and achievable and tell us more about treatments and infection control.