MANAGING GOVERNMENT SPENDING AND PERFORMANCE

Thank you for your letter of 27 April, following the publication of Managing government spending and performance (Cm 9429).

Treasury officials spoke to the Clerk ahead of the summer recess and advised him that, because of the General Election, our response would be delayed and we would update the committee after the summer recess. Since the election we have had to consult Ministers on their intentions in this area, and this and the work to make improvements for 2017/18 and 2018/19 have taken longer than expected. As a result, we are only now able to provide a full response: we apologise for the delay in doing so.

As the Committee’s inquiry relates to the joint work of HM Treasury and the Cabinet Office, we wanted to provide a single response from us both.

We welcome your recognition of our intentions to improve the quality of business planning across government. Since your letter, and following the General Election, our ministers have confirmed their support for maintaining Single Departmental Plans (SDPs) as the enduring basis for the Government’s planning and performance framework, which we hope you will welcome. We have also set out progress against our response to the Committee’s recommendations in the Treasury Minute Progress Report, in October. It is our intention to publish updated versions of SDPs by the end of the year. We will take this opportunity to improve the presentation of departments’ objectives, delivery milestones and performance information and to further iterate the plans when we update them for the 2018/19 financial year and annually thereafter.

In your letter, you asked us what more the government can do to increase the cohesiveness and transparency of the framework. As you recommended, we will set out how the Government’s performance and planning framework works overall, alongside the updated SDPs. This will explain how the collective
processes, alongside existing forums such as Cabinet sub-committees and Implementation Task Forces, support the government’s approach to delivering its objectives and providing value for money for the taxpayer. It will also explain how public information can be used to understand government’s planning, spending and performance. The intention is precisely, in your words, to “help the public and Parliament to see what information they have at their disposal to understand how taxpayers’ money is being used to deliver public services.”

When we met the Committee last year, we were clear in our commitment to promoting continuous improvement to the government’s current approach. We continue to engage closely with the National Audit Office and welcome their ongoing guidance. We will keep the interaction between these collective processes under review and continue to develop them to improve their use as tools for transparency and accountability.

Turning to the transparency of the framework, we agree that the Government should publish a comprehensive and balanced set of information on performance. The aim of the public versions of SDPs is to provide an accessible, forward-looking view of the Government’s objectives and to allow the public and Parliament to monitor progress against them during the year. Annual Reports and Accounts (ARAs) are the main accountability mechanism to allow Parliament and the public to scrutinise government’s performance. We have committed to improving the quality of the public versions of SDPs, including updates to performance information at least twice a year; clearer signposting of further performance information; and a clearer reflection of where departments are working together to achieve shared objectives. This information is available in conjunction with existing official statistics on performance, workforce and public spending.

This does not quite match your aspiration for a single publicly available version of the truth on government performance. As we said in our original response to the Committee’s report, the government’s aim when publishing performance information is to balance the need for a clear, transparent and comprehensive view of the performance of vital public services with the need for allowing departments a safe space to manage their own affairs. Also, the framework does not always provide the same detailed management information that is used in the running of government bodies and public services. But we are, as you suggest, looking to see where we can supply more to close the gap between what is published and what is used within government. This was recently recognised in the results of the first International Civil Service Effectiveness (InCiSE) Index, which highlighted the good quality of the UK government’s data availability and accessibility.

We are copying this letter to the Comptroller and Auditor General and the Treasury Officer of Accounts.

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