



House of Commons
Public Administration Select
Committee

**Skills for Government:
Government Response
to the Committee's
Ninth Report of
Session 2006–07**

**Second Special Report of Session
2007–08**

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The Public Administration Select Committee

The Public Administration Select Committee is appointed by the House of Commons to examine the reports of the Parliamentary Commissioner for Administration, of the Health Service Commissioners for England, Scotland and Wales and of the Parliamentary Ombudsman for Northern Ireland, which are laid before this House, and matters in connection therewith, and to consider matters relating to the quality and standards of administration provided by civil service departments, and other matters relating to the civil service.

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The Reports and evidence of the Committee are published by The Stationery Office by Order of the House. All publications of the Committee (including press notices) are on the Internet at <http://www.parliament.uk/pasc>.

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Second Special Report

The Public Administration Select Committee reported to the House on *Skills for Government* in its Ninth Report of Session 2006–07, published 6 August 2007 as HC 93. The Government Response was received on 13 November 2007 and is published below as an Appendix to this Report.

Appendix

The Government welcomes the Committee's focus on the work of the Civil Service which, as they rightly point out, affects every British citizen. We are grateful for the Committee's recognition of the professionalism and commitment of civil servants against a background of increasing public expectations and the continuing need for efficient use of resources.

The Government, the Cabinet Secretary and all Permanent Secretaries are committed to developing a culture of excellence that continually improves skills and capability. That is why the programme of Capability Reviews was introduced. The establishment of the National School of Government (NSG) and Government Skills—the Sector Skills Council for Central Government—the development of Professional Skills for Government (PSG), and the Capability Reviews have all been major steps forward.

There is real progress in developing professionalism in the Civil Service. PSG is already improving the skills of the top 30,000 and is now being rolled out to all. The swift action by all central departments to sign the Skills Pledge recommended by Lord Leitch and supported by Ministers, commits them to support staff to gain qualifications, and demonstrates the determination to act further.

The Government agrees with the Committee that strong evidence to underpin activity is essential to ensure targeted and effective action. Improving the evidence base has been a key priority this year. Government Skills have recently completed major surveys of both staff and employers to ensure that we have a full and accurate picture of skills gaps and strengths that will inform the Skills Strategy for Central Government to be published next year. This will support departmental strategies by identifying the key actions to strengthen skills development across the Civil Service as a whole.

Capability Reviews were likewise designed to provide strong, independent and consistent assessments of departments' abilities to meet current and future delivery challenges. They have found evidence of strong delivery in complex environments, for example, the Department for International Development (DfID) is recognised as a world leader in their field. The reviews have been clear on the areas that need to improve to ensure the Civil Service can meet future challenges.

The Government and senior leaders are very clear that there is much more to be done and agree with the Committee that collective and coherent action is critical if the Civil Service is to deliver the services the public expect now and into the future.

The Permanent Secretaries Management Group (PSMG), which provides corporate leadership for the Civil Service as a whole, has been working over recent months to

agree the issues that would benefit from being tackled collectively, rather than being managed separately by departments. One such area is, as the Committee identified, a common set of reward principles.

PSMG recently agreed to draw all this work together under a Civil Service people framework. Building on the cross-cutting capability review findings and complementing departmental people strategies, the framework will bring together issues that need collective action and will provide drive and coherence across the skills and capability agenda. The Cabinet Office and departments are taking this forward together.

The Government's response to the Committee's conclusions and recommendations is set out below.

Although this report will look at ways in which performance can, and must, be improved, we should not lose sight of the very many excellent things that are done by excellent people every day. It is a sign of the professionalism of the existing Civil Service that we take so many of these for granted. (Recommendation 1, paragraph 11)

The Government welcomes and endorses the Committee's recognition of the excellence, professionalism and commitment of civil servants.

We welcome both the concept and the execution of the Departmental Capability Reviews. It is particularly valuable that their findings are being published; it gives us a benchmark against which to measure future performance. We hope that they will be repeated at regular intervals. (Recommendation 2, paragraph 22)

The reviews were designed to be open and demanding assessments of a Department's future capability. They are intentionally broad and recognise the importance of skills as one of the factors that contribute to a department's capability. The reviews are published to ensure the process is open to scrutiny, and the Government will publish a progress report on the first four reviews later this year. We will also publish an independent assessment of the programme.

However, if future reviews are conducted in the same way as the current ones, there will be doubts about their objectivity. Any assertion of improvement will be questioned on grounds of the reviewers' potential vested interest. We recommend that future review teams should be externally managed. (Recommendation 3, paragraph 23)

The Capability Reviews paint a bleak picture of Civil Service performance. They suggest a lack of leadership and serious deficiencies in service delivery. But these results do at least expose the scale of the challenge. Departments now have a benchmark against which to measure progress. Ensuring civil servants have the right skills will be essential to improving services in future. (Recommendation 4, paragraph 33)

The Government does not share the Committee's view of the Capability Reviews. By assessing the capabilities required for future delivery of Government priorities, the reviews naturally point starkly to the areas where the Civil Service needs to improve. However, they also clearly articulate and lend credibility to its strengths; the CPS review

praised the department for “actively engaging with historically under-represented, excluded and disadvantaged communities”; and the DFES/DCSF review highlights “the passion and commitment” of staff to improving outcomes for children, pupils and learners.

The Government is confident of the independence and objectivity of capability reviews. The majority of reviewers are senior and experienced leaders in the private, voluntary and wider public sectors. They have no vested interest in the results. Review teams include just two civil servants, who are not members of the department in question, to provide in depth knowledge of the Civil Service and the imperatives of public administration. The reviews are exactly the kind of self-improvement activity all organisations should be involved in. As the Committee note, they have been described as “rigorous to the point of self-flagellation”. In his evidence to the Committee Professor Colin Talbot remarked that he was “surprised at how rigorous they were”, and Mr David Walker commented that they “substantially delivered a shock to the system”.

There is a clear consensus that the Civil Service is weak in its performance management. We accept that this problem is not unique to the Civil Service. Nonetheless, it is clear that the way poor performance is currently managed is not acceptable. A radically different approach may be needed, and it should be a top priority for the Cabinet Office to find one (Recommendation 5, paragraph 37).

The Government accepts there is room for improvement in performance management and this is indeed a top priority for the Civil Service. The Cabinet Secretary is working with Permanent Secretaries to improve accountability. The Civil Service Capability Group (CSCG) has introduced a new performance management system for the Senior Civil Service (SCS) with 5 key elements:

- Business delivery objectives
- Corporate objectives, which contribute to the effective corporate management and coherence of the department and the Civil Service as a whole
- Capability objectives which ensure that staff, the department and the Civil Service have the right capability to deliver business outcomes now and in the future
- Personal development objectives
- Leadership behaviours

Guidance is being drafted for dealing with poor performance. This will include work on exit routes and how redeployment pools should and should not be used. Senior leaders are examining the skills and behaviours needed to make performance management work more effectively at all levels, based on the PSG framework which sets out the skills staff need to deliver effective services.

There may well be scope to expand the use of accredited qualifications in the Civil Service, but we should not lose sight of the crucial importance of practical experience. The skills learnt through experience should be borne in mind before Civil Servants without professional qualifications are dismissed as “amateurs” (Recommendation 6, paragraph 56).

The Government agrees absolutely with the Committee on the value of practical experience and is proud of the vast array of skills civil servants possess. Practical experience is one of the core strengths of the Civil Service and absolutely critical to its success and, where appropriate, accredited qualifications can help demonstrate that people have gained valuable, transferable skills. The PSG competence framework was designed to describe the skills needed in the modern Civil Service—project management; financial and people management; leadership and change management—in a way which is comparable to other sectors. There are of course areas where professional training is vital. Finance Directors in Departments are ultimately accountable for the expenditure of more than 40% of national income. So it is right that we addressed the historic lack of professional financial qualifications in this area.

Nonetheless, while we should not underestimate the Civil Service's existing skills, there ought to be some way of measuring them more formally. It is clear that the Government cannot currently assess its existing skill levels, let alone identify how to fill gaps. Government Skills needs to concentrate on developing a robust means of assessing individuals' skills. Accredited vocational qualifications would certainly help, and there may also be a case for expanding the use of academic qualifications in assessing the skills of people at the higher levels of the Service. (Recommendation 7, paragraph 57)

Since Government Skills became the Sector Skills Council for central Government in 2006, its main priority has been to improve what was a limited evidence base on skills across government. Through two major surveys—one covering Civil Service staff and one aimed at Departments/Agencies as employers—it has collated detailed information on existing skills levels; current and future skills needs; identified gaps and the reasons they exist; and gathered views on learning and development provision.

The surveys show the Civil Service exceeds Lord Leitch's targets on accreditation at NVQ levels 3 and 4 and is close at level 2. Qualifications are about more than simply measuring skills, they help people develop. The Civil Service is keen to use them at all levels for this purpose and to exceed Lord Leitch's targets. The development of a number of vocational qualifications for government is a priority for Government Skills—for example a refreshed NVQ in public services will be available in 2008. However, as the Committee acknowledges, many people are skilled without holding formal qualifications.

It is not clear how the National School of Government can simultaneously be “demand-led” and focus on providing the professional skills set out in PSG. The Capability Reviews indicate that most departments are poor at “building capability”, which in turn suggests that they have not been effective in identifying the skills they need. The NSG should work closely with departments and the centre to ensure a coherent strategy is maintained based on identified skills gaps. (Recommendation 8, paragraph 65)

The development of PSG was led by heads of departments and agreed by all Permanent Secretaries. The National School of Government (NSG) supports the implementation of the initiative as a cohesive approach to improving and benchmarking skills and capability across the Civil Service. The NSG, through its network of Strategic Relationship Managers, ensures that its services are aligned to both the business needs of individual departments and the strategies of the centre. It is fully engaged with Government Skills on the Skills Strategy.

In identifying those skills gaps, the Government should look both to Government Skills and to the Sunningdale Institute. Both of these are potentially worthwhile innovations; but both should look for more ministerial input, to make sure that the Civil Service can respond to Ministerial needs. (Recommendation 9, paragraph 66)

The Government agrees with the Committee on the value added by both organisations. Government Skills has significantly improved the evidence base on current and future skills gaps and consideration has already started within the Sunningdale Institute into the idea of recruiting a set of associate Fellows who are experienced political leaders.

Measuring the success of training is not easy. The goal of training is to change behaviours over time, but it will be difficult to detect whether this is happening and to what extent it is attributable to training. Monitoring the demand for courses is still a relevant judge of the effectiveness of provision; revenue is surely one of the major tests of a demand-led organisation, and reputation is a relevant factor in determining demand. Success should be measured by both reputation and revenue. (Recommendation 10, paragraph 67)

We agree with the Committee's conclusion that success should be measured by both reputation and revenue. Output-based targets had previously incentivised the NSG to deliver high volume courses on a narrow set of subjects. This led to criticisms of the relevance of the provision to organisations' strategic objectives. Whilst revenue and repeat business are important indicators of performance, in giving increased emphasis to reputation and impact, the NSG is now measuring its success against more than revenue alone. The NSG is currently developing a series of key performance indicators that reflect this new focus and we acknowledge there is more to be done in this area.

We recognise the commitment of the Civil Service to training. We have seen ourselves that staff are broadly positive about the opportunities open to them, and this is commendable. However, there is no point in offering training if there is insufficient time to take it. Staff complements should be calculated in such a way as to allow staff to make any necessary time commitment to personal development (Recommendation 11, paragraph 73).

We welcome the Committee's acknowledgement of the Civil Service's commitment to training. Earlier this year government departments were the first national employers to sign up to the Skills Pledge, which commits employers to offering time off and training to all staff to gain their first qualification at NVQ level 2 (5 GCSEs at A*-C or vocational equivalent). Alongside that, PSG is helping to develop a stronger business case for training and development and having an impact on decisions taken by individuals and line managers about allowing time off for training.

If career Civil Servants have limited opportunities of getting to the top, the Government will not get the benefits of talented people joining lower down the service (Recommendation 12, paragraph 85).

The Committee is right to emphasise the importance to the Civil Service of growing its own internal talent. Opening up competition for positions enables the Civil Service to validate the calibre of its own talent against the market. However, it is not the case that career civil servants have limited opportunities of getting to the top, 62% of new entrants into the SCS in the year ending April 2007 were promotees.¹

The Civil Service aims to strike a balance between importing some of the best talent from outside to fill skills gaps, and developing and retaining our own skilled, capable and versatile workforce. There are a number of programmes in place to achieve this. CSCG runs corporate career management programmes such as the Fast Stream graduate recruitment programme; Leaders UnLtd and the High Potential Development Scheme. The NSG also offers a number of development programmes to further support this goal.

We do not see any evidence that external recruitment is a threat to the traditional Civil Service values of permanence and impartiality. No organisation should be closed—outsiders can bring different skills and perspectives which should be welcomed. Every organisation can benefit from some degree of “ventilation”. This should not, however, automatically lead to recruitment from the private sector. Much of the relevant skills and expertise for the Civil Service is likely to be found in the wider public sector (Recommendation 13, paragraph 87).

We do not understand why the target is that “about half” of postings in the Senior Civil Service should be externally advertised. This particular target seems arbitrary and inexact, and does not seem to be based around identified skills gaps. If the Government does want to set a target, there should be a clear evidence base for it. (Recommendation 14, paragraph 88).

The Government supports the Committee's views that external recruitment can make a valuable contribution to the Civil Service. It is true that historically, the highest proportion of external joiners to the SCS has come from the private sector. However, the proportion coming from the voluntary and wider public sector has been increasing annually. The latest available figures (April 2007) show that 45% of all external joiners to the SCS came from the wider public and voluntary sectors, up from 37% in 2004.

It is in this context that the 50% target should be seen. The Government's approach to SCS recruitment is determined on a case by case basis according to the particular skills and experience required for the job. Therefore, the target is kept under continuous review.

We believe there are difficulties with the current practice of recruiting directly to very senior posts. The current pay differentials may serve to de-motivate internal staff and discourage talented staff entering the Civil Service early in their career. It is also problematic that new entrants can take a considerable amount of time to find their feet in the Civil Service, if those new entrants have important responsibilities. We believe many of these difficulties would be alleviated if external recruitment was

¹ Source: SCS Database 2007, Cabinet Office

focused slightly lower down the management chain. (Recommendation 15, paragraph 89)

The Civil Service undertakes external recruitment at all levels. A wide range of financial and non-financial benefits are offered to attract the best talent whilst ensuring value for money for the tax payer. It is important to retain a degree of flexibility in pay determination, particularly to recruit specialist skills. SCS pay levels are continually monitored to consider any equal pay differentials and departments are encouraged to address anomalies through the annual pay cycle. The Civil Service is developing a strengthened induction programme including the first SCS foundation programme for new entrants and a corporate induction programme for new board members.

Interchange between sectors is laudable; Whitehall can only benefit from first-hand knowledge of the private, voluntary and wider public sectors. Sir Gus O'Donnell has been an advocate of interchange between the Civil Service and voluntary sector organisations—as he says, this is increasingly important in a world where those organisations are being encouraged to provide public services. We hope that Government is also encouraging civil servants to get experience of other parts of the public sector. (Recommendation 16, paragraph 92)

We agree with the Committee on the importance of ensuring Civil Servants get a broad range of experiences. In 2007 over 80% of the SCS seconded out of the Civil Service joined the voluntary and wider public sector. Specific examples include efforts to formalise secondments to the Third Sector as part of the Fast Stream accelerated development scheme with the Prince of Wales' Charities; and the National School's highly successful cross-sectoral Top Management and Leaders UK programmes. Moreover, the introduction of PSG encourages individuals to look beyond their departments or agencies to identify ways of broadening their experience. Departments and agencies have Interchange Managers responsible for promoting and advising on interchange as a development tool, and facilitating secondments in and out of the Service. Organisations in the wider public sector are also able to publicise interchange opportunities directly on the Civil Service Gateway website, to which all civil servants have access.

Staff development should not be at the expense of doing the job properly. We are concerned that the current emphasis on wide experience is affecting the Civil Service's ability to carry out some of its core functions. A four year norm should be just what it says; it emphatically should not be a four year maximum. Although individuals should not stay forever in one post, we need to recognise that some stability is also necessary (Recommendation 17, paragraph 98).

We recognise the distinction that the Committee makes and we fully support their emphasis on a four year norm, rather than a maximum period, for SCS postings. The policy was designed as much to ensure that SCS stayed in post long enough to deliver a specific programme of work as it was to encourage refreshment of skills. Indeed, there is an increasing emphasis in Departments on ensuring longer tenure in SCS posts, particularly because of the need for stability in leadership teams. PSG has brought an increased emphasis on developing 'depth' of skills and experience in a particular professionalism. The emphasis on broader experience is aimed at those in, or aiming at, the SCS who need the right mix of policy and delivery skills and experience to manage large and complex organisations.

There is scope for more active career management in the Civil Service. We are encouraged by some of the schemes being implemented in individual departments and agencies. Departments should identify and nurture their own talent, beyond the confines of the centrally administered fast stream. The centre should do more to encourage and support such departmental initiatives (Recommendation 18, paragraph 100).

We agree with the importance the Committee places on active career management in the Civil Service. It is important the Civil Service ensures the right people are in the right jobs at the right time. CSCG performs succession planning for the Top 200 Civil Service posts to align talent to roles across departments at the most senior levels. CSCG also administers the High Potential Development Scheme which helps those at or just below board level to prepare for the most senior jobs. The professions in government manage their people's careers, including promoting mobility, to ensure they get the right experiences. For example, the IT profession has its own version of the Fast Stream and the HR profession is taking a new approach to professional development with plans to develop a HR academy for Government.

Below this all departments now have talent management functions to manage the careers of their own staff, and the centre is working closely with senior leaders and talent management functions to disseminate best practice and to establish common frameworks. A team of officials within the restructured CSCG is making this area of work a priority. However, the Government recognises that there is more to do in this area.

The current system of delegating pay and grading arrangements to individual departments may have its merits, but it can also be a barrier to staff development. Care should be taken that such arrangements do not militate against the free movement of talented staff across the Civil Service to develop their skills. (Recommendation 19, paragraph 105)

The Government welcomes the Committee's recognition that there is merit in the current system of delegation and agrees that there are areas that need addressing such as staff mobility. A framework for reward across the Civil Service is a step closer following Permanent Secretaries' recent agreement on a Civil Service-wide framework of reward principles, including the need for a common approach to some conditions of employment. In addition, the Government is working with key stakeholders, including Trade Unions, to deliver more consistent reward arrangements for some professional and workforce groups identified by similar roles, skills and grades.

There may well be substantial scope for efficiency savings in the Civil Service, but headcount cuts are a poor tool for achieving those savings. Setting numerical targets for departments is crude and counterproductive. (Recommendation 20, paragraph 112)

As the NAO has said, the Gershon Efficiency Programme is more serious and more systematic than any previous attempt to achieve efficiency in Government. The Government agrees that, in isolation, headcount targets are an inadequate tool for delivering lasting efficiencies. The 2007 Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR), published 9 October 2007, does not include headcount targets. However, all

departments have committed to reducing their administrative budgets by 5% a year throughout the CSR period.

Dramatic changes to the Cabinet Office are underway, not least the seemingly complete rebirth of its Corporate Development Group. We welcome this development. When compared to the efficiency programme, the Government's policies on skills and capability are lacking in cohesion and lacking in drive from the centre. Yet they are just as important. To rectify this imbalance, the Cabinet Office needs an effective replacement for the Corporate Development Group, with both the credibility to influence other departments and the power to direct. (Recommendation 21, paragraph 122)

Capability and skills are closely linked. The Government needs a co-ordinated approach to tackling both issues. If the responsibility within government for both now sits within the same Group, then that is a significant step in the right direction. (Recommendation 22, paragraph 123)

The Cabinet Office capability review recognised the need for reform of the Corporate Development Group (CDG) in the Cabinet Office and the Government fully accepts these recommendations. The unit has significantly restructured to better deliver Sir Gus O'Donnell's vision for the Civil Service. It recruited specialist skills including expertise in change management and pay and reward. As the Committee note, capability and skills are closely linked which is why CDG and the Capability Review team were brought together to form CSCG. The reviews provide the strong evidence base that inform and direct the leadership and people interventions. Government Skills works closely with CSCG. The Skills Strategy, being developed by Government Skills, supports CSCG work on workforce change, competences and skills, performance management, employee engagement and wellbeing, and leadership.

We see merit in Lord Butler's suggestion that there should be a National Performance Office, equivalent to the National Audit Office that scrutinises Civil Service performance in detail on more than a financial basis. It is Parliament's job to hold the Executive to account; therefore the National Performance Office should have the same parliamentary status as the NAO. (Recommendation 23, paragraph 127)

It is intended that the Departmental Capability Reviews will be repeated after two years. We believe they should become a regular feature, and that future reviews should be carried out by the new National Performance Office. Standards of government will be increased both by external audit and greater parliamentary accountability. Such a body could also provide a regular performance report on government, in the spirit of the government's now discontinued annual reports. (Recommendation 24, paragraph 129)

The Government does not see the need for a National Performance Office (NPO) as outlined by the Committee. It is unclear that such an organisation would add sufficient value to justify added layers of cost and administration. The Government is confident that robust, external challenge exists throughout the Capability Review cycle. Review teams and stocktake teams include external reviewers and, as Sir James Crosby, former Chief Executive HBOS and review team member, has commented "the review process is thorough, transparent and fair... I can't imagine any shareholder owned company doing

this in similar circumstances... each review team's work is subject to independent moderation, a process which runs through the review and has real bite".

Capability Reviews are published and open to scrutiny by Parliament, Departmental Select Committees and the public so that departments can be held to account. Furthermore, earlier this year the Sunningdale Institute was commissioned to undertake an independent evaluation of the impact of the Capability Review process. This was published recently and a copy has been made available to the Committee. It will inform the future of the Capability Review programme. The evaluation team stated in the report that 'few previous attempts to reform the civil service...have had such a good start. It is a tribute to the vision and energy of those who led this programme that it has done so well so far.' They also believe that 'with vigorous follow-through...the momentum created by the Capability Reviews will be sustained by the Civil Service itself without the need for external intervention.'

Moreover, much of the work of the proposed National Performance Office is already undertaken by the National Audit Office (NAO). Its value-for-money scrutinies cover many issues of non-financial performance in order to assess effectiveness and efficiency. The NAO's work is respected for its independence and it would be unfortunate to undermine its reputation by narrowing the NAO's remit.

Government does not have to be an entirely HR-free zone. The Prime Minister must bear in mind when managing ministerial moves that these can have a significant effect on Civil Service performance. (Recommendation 25, paragraph 140)

It is for the Prime Minister to determine the shape of the Government and the appointment of individual Ministers. In doing so, the Prime Minister is mindful of a range of factors including the balance of Ministerial teams, the needs of individual departments, and the experience and skills of individuals.

Our witnesses made a compelling case for more professional development for Ministers. We are heartened that the Government has already accepted this case, and we are pleased to see the efforts being made in this direction by several Ministers in conjunction with the National School. These efforts go against the historical grain, and so should be applauded. (Recommendation 26, paragraph 150)

Above all, though, it is the culture of commitment to professional development that needs to be inculcated among Ministers. We have spoken much in this report about how Ministers require a professional Civil Service, and how that can be achieved; but it is a truism that leaders of an organisation should not expect that which they are not prepared to give. Both Ministers and civil servants should be equipped with the right skills for their differing roles. (Recommendation 28, paragraph 152)

The Government agrees with the Committee on the importance of both Civil Servants and Ministers being equipped with the right skills for their roles. We would like to reassure the Committee that encouraging a culture of continuous development for both Ministers and Civil Servants remains a priority for the Government. The NSG has launched a new Centre for Working with Ministers and Parliament that provides training programmes and consultancy to help civil servants serve Ministers and Parliament better. This complements the programme of Ministerial training already provided, for which there is much enthusiasm among Ministers.

There is more, however, that could be done to professionalise the ministerial side of the business of government. We would be interested to see some of the ideas discussed in our evidence sessions put into practice, if only on a trial basis. Exit interviews to find how the support given to Ministers had in fact met their needs seem eminently sensible. Systematic performance appraisal is a worthwhile discipline. We see no reason why the Government could not adopt these and other, similar approaches. (Recommendation 27, paragraph 151)

We agree that Ministers play an important role in the drive to professionalise Government. However, it is important to note that it is the performance of departments and delivery of services that matters most to the public. Permanent Secretaries regularly discuss departmental performance with Ministers, including changes that the department needs to make in order to perform better. The capability reviews are helping departments act on long term key development areas and therefore provide assurance on future delivery. The fact remains that Ministers and their performance are ultimately judged by Parliament and the electorate.

November 2007

List of Reports from the Committee during the current Parliament

The reference number of the Government's response to each Report is printed in brackets after the HC printing number.

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