

INTRODUCTION

9.1 Twice a year the House debates the reports produced by the Committee and the Government's responses to them. The debates should take place before the Christmas and summer Recesses, but can take place at any time. For example, in 2004, they were held in February and late June. The motion that is put to the House is in terms of taking note of the numbered recent reports and their accompanying Treasury Minutes. Only the reports to which the Government has responded through a published Treasury Minute are included in the debate motion and only the Reports and TMs published since the previous debate are included in the motion for the next debate. However, this does not prevent MPs from raising other issues or referring to Committee Reports that have been published but where the Government has yet to respond.

9.2 Each debate lasts about three hours. The Chairman of the Committee introduces the motion for debate. Then individual Committee Members speak about particular issues, themes and concerns that they have discovered through their membership of the Committee. The Financial Secretary to the Treasury gives the Government response, and finally, the Chairman closes commenting on the main issues debated.

BRIEFING FOR THE DEBATE

9.3 TOA drafts the speech for the Financial Secretary. The speech tends to concentrate on general issues and themes that have a broad read-across to wider value for money and/or regularity and propriety across Government. TOA will have drafted or commissioned briefing on these issues beforehand. But the Financial Secretary may also wish to respond immediately to the Chairman's or other Members' concerns about specific reports and it is important that the Minister has speaking notes in order to do so.

9.4 About a month before the debate, TOA will commission briefing on the specific reports that will be covered by the motion to be debated, including those where the Treasury Minute response has not yet been published but will have been in time for the debate. Depending on the subject, TOA may also commission briefing on those reports that have been published but where a Treasury Minute response will not be published before the debate. Briefing should be received in TOA no later than two weeks before the debate.

9.5 Clearly the Financial Secretary will not have time to wade through reams of briefing on each of the reports, simply to pick out one or two detailed issues that Members may mention in their speeches. TOA will not, therefore, be asking for detailed briefing on each report, rather it is more helpful to have one or two pages at the most that cover the following:

- The main accusation in the report;
- A response that the Financial Secretary could read verbatim;
- A short background note; and
- Any facts and figures that may be used in support of the Government's position.

THE AFTERMATH OF THE DEBATE

9.6 When the transcript of the debate is published on the PAC website, TOA will bring it to the attention of all those that provided briefing, and also to the Accounting Officers of the departments and bodies that were specifically mentioned in the debate. If the Financial Secretary has promised to write to a Member on a particular issue through lack of time or if the answer was not immediately to hand, TOA will ask the relevant body for a draft letter or paragraphs that could be used in a follow-up letter. It is preferable if the issue is not left to fester, so TOA would wish to put a draft to the Financial Secretary within three weeks of the debate and it will set the timetable for a draft letter or paragraphs accordingly.