



Factsheet P1 Procedure Series

Revised June 2005

House of Commons Information Office

Parliamentary Questions

Contents

Introduction	2
Background	2
Oral Questions	3
<i>Tabling Questions</i>	3
<i>Content of questions</i>	4
<i>Drafting</i>	4
<i>Procedure at Question Time</i>	5
<i>Supplementaries</i>	5
<i>Role of the Speaker</i>	5
<i>Rota of Ministers Answering</i>	6
<i>Prime Minister's Questions</i>	6
<i>Devolved Matters</i>	6
<i>Number and order of questions</i>	7
<i>The Shuffle</i>	7
<i>Publication and Departmental Action</i>	8
<i>Transfer of Questions</i>	8
<i>Deferred Questions</i>	8
Prime Minister's Questions	9
<i>Procedure</i>	9
<i>Supplementaries</i>	9
Urgent Questions	10
Cross-cutting questions	11
Questions for Written Answer	11
<i>Types of Written Questions</i>	11
<i>Tabling of written questions</i>	11
<i>Answers to written questions</i>	12
<i>'Will writes'</i>	12
Cost of questions	12
Contact information	14
Feedback form	15

Parliamentary questions have a significant role in the House of Commons today. They are a way for Members of Parliament to hold the Government to account, either in the form of **oral questions** to Ministers in the Chamber of the House of Commons or in the form of **written questions**. This Factsheet explores, in detail, the different types of questions asked in parliament and the way questions are tabled, answered and traced.

This Factsheet is available on the Internet through:
<http://www.parliament.uk/factsheets>

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Introduction

Parliamentary questions are tools that can be used by Members of Parliament to seek information or press for action. They oblige Ministers to explain and defend the work, policy decisions and actions of their departments. All questions, whether transcribed from the Chamber or recorded from a printed format, are recorded in **The Official Report (Hansard)** and so they are widely available and accessible.

There are four categories of question in the House of Commons:

- Questions for Oral Answer (Oral Questions or OPQs)
- Urgent Questions
- Cross-cutting questions
- Questions for Written Answer (Written Questions or WPQs)

Of the 40,000 or so questions asked each year, only about 3,000 are oral questions answered by a Minister in the Chamber. The procedures relating to parliamentary questions were recently altered as part of the Government's plans to modernise the House of Commons. The Select Committee on Procedure's Third Report of 2001-02 and the Select Committee on Modernisation's Second Report of 2001-02 both reviewed the system of parliamentary questions and proposed alterations. These proposed changes were debated and approved in the House of Commons on 29 October 2002¹.

This Factsheet outlines the development of questions before looking at each type in turn.

Background

The incomplete nature of the records of Parliament makes it impossible to be certain about the origins of Parliamentary questions. It is generally thought that the first recorded question was put in the House of Lords. In 1721, Earl Cowper asked the Government whether there was any truth in the report that the Chief Cashier of the South Sea Company, Robert Knight, had fled the country and had been arrested in Brussels. A reply providing the facts of the case was given by the Earl of Sunderland, the Prime Minister of the day.

Questions as a procedure developed slowly. Other methods were popularly used to bring pressure to bear on Ministers; until well into the nineteenth century, there was a tendency to regard questions as an irregular form of debate. In 1833, the practice began of giving a Minister notice of a question by printing it in the House's Notice Paper of future business. These notices appeared under the heading "Notices of Motions", mixed up with many other items. In 1849, they were all brought together and printed at the beginning of the Notices and in 1869 a special heading "questions" was assigned to them. Question Time dates from this time.

Since then, the use of the questions procedure has grown significantly. In the session of 1847, there were 129 questions or an average of one per day. In 1900, there were 5,106 or 41 per day. By 1920, 10,602 were put down for oral and 2,615 for written answer - a daily average of 111. After a period of decline in the late 1920s and again after 1945, the numbers rose to a

¹ HC Deb 29 October 2002 cc689-839

daily average of more than 240. In the three sessions 1987-88 to 1989-90 the sessional average was around 50,000; the figure was 35-40,000 in the late-1990s. In the first session of the last Parliament (2001-2002), 6,528 questions appeared on the Order Paper for oral answer and 72,905 for written answer.

Since the Second World War, the various aspects of Parliamentary questions have been examined by select committees in 1946, 1958, 1965, 1970, 1972, 1976, 1990, 1993, 1994, 1995, 1997 and 2002. Although some resulting changes have been striking - such as the introduction of Prime Minister's Questions - the practice and purpose of Question Time is not, in essence, different from over 50 years ago.

A Member "tables" i.e. gives notice of, a question by handing it or sending it to the Clerks in the Table Office. In the 2003-04 session, a total of 58,562 questions were tabled, of which 3,687² appeared on the Order Paper for oral answer and 46,163 were put down for ordinary written answer. Questions, motions, amendments and the like used to be "tabled" by being handed to the Clerk sitting at the Table of the House directly in front of the Speaker. During the Second World War, as a result of the greater pressure of business, the Table Office was established to handle questions and motions and to offer general procedural advice. It is easier for Members to discuss points with the Clerks in an outside office than it is at the Table of the House. Nevertheless, Members may still hand documents in at the Table and in certain circumstances are obliged to do so. Bills, for example, are always presented formally at the Table.

Oral Questions

In straightforward terms, oral questions are questions asked and answered on the floor of the House of Commons. Standing Order 21 sets out that questions will be taken in the first hour of business on Mondays to Thursdays. The Departments that will answer questions are organised into a rota.

A certain procedure must be followed in order to ask and receive an answer to an oral question. First a Member must **table** a question. All questions tabled to a particular Department are then subject to a random computer **shuffle**. The successful questions are printed in the "Blue Pages" of the Vote Bundle in the Order Paper the next day in the order in which they will be called. The question will then be **asked** on the relevant day and the Member will also be able to ask a **supplementary** question. The Minister will **answer** both the original and the supplementary question in the Chamber, in person. The following sections look at this in more detail.

Tabling Questions

One question per Member may be tabled for each department answering on a particular day, subject to an overall maximum of two questions per day. A Member may hand in one question on behalf of another Member. Questions must be tabled at least three days (excluding Fridays and weekends) in advance of the session for that Department but can be put down at any time after the previous session for that Department. This three day period is regarded as the least time that Ministers and their advisers should reasonably be given in which to prepare the answer

² Of which 2,206 received an oral answer in the House on one of the 224 days on which such answers were given

to a question. However, in the case of questions to the Secretaries of State for Northern Ireland and Scotland and Wales, the Standing Orders stipulate that the question must appear in the Notice Paper at least four days (excluding Friday, Saturday and Sunday) before the question is to be answered. This is to take into account the additional time these Departments might need to obtain information from the devolved assemblies.

Content of questions

Before a question can be placed on the Order of Business it must satisfy a comprehensive set of rules governing its content. These are set out in Erskine May but the main rules are as follows:

- A question should either seek information or press for action; it should not offer or seek expressions of opinion, though it may be based on facts, for the accuracy of which the Member is responsible.
- A question must relate to a matter for which the Minister to whom it is addressed is responsible as a Minister. It may not, for example, touch on activities in his capacity as a party leader or member. Nor may he be asked to confirm or comment upon a report or rumour for which he can have no responsibility. Ministers are not responsible for the activities of local authorities or nationalised industries, although they do answer questions on national statistics.
- Questions seeking an expression of opinion on a question of law are not in order, since this is for the courts to decide.
- It is not permissible to ask for information readily available elsewhere.

Drafting

- Questions should be drafted as concisely as possible.
- Questions must conform to the normal Parliamentary conventions regarding decorous language and respect for the Crown, the judiciary and Members of both Houses.
- Questions may not touch on any matter which is currently the subject of legal proceedings (the sub-judice rule).
- A question which has already been asked and fully answered cannot normally be asked again in that session. Where a Minister has refused to take some action or to provide information, the same question may be asked again after three months.
- Questions on subjects such as the security services or matters of commercial confidence are matters on which Ministers have consistently refused to answer. A refusal prevents a question being admitted on such a subject, though Ministers may be asked once each Session if they will now answer questions on a subject previously blocked.

It is the duty of the Clerks to ensure that the questions comply with these and other rules of the House. Their method is to advise a Member, if his question appears to breach a rule, how he can bring it into order. If a Member is not satisfied with the advice given to him, he may have his question submitted to the Speaker, whose decision about admissibility is final. Very few questions in each session are referred to the Speaker in this way.

Procedure at Question Time

Question Time currently takes place in the House of Commons at about 2.35pm on Mondays and Tuesdays, 11.35am on Wednesdays and 10.35am on Thursdays, after Prayers. In practice, the question period lasts about an hour on each of these days. Oral questions are not taken on Fridays.

The Speaker sets the process in motion by calling the Member whose question is first on the printed Order of Business. The Member stands up and says, "Number one, Mister Speaker". As the text of the question is set out on the Order of Business it is not necessary for the Member to read it out. To follow the proceedings clearly it is necessary to have a copy to hand. The Minister then answers the question. When the larger Departments, such as the Home Office or Trade and Industry, answer questions, the Secretary of State will be accompanied by several junior Ministers who will share the task of responding to Members.

Supplementaries

From that point further exchanges are unscripted. The Member who asked the original question is normally the first to be called to ask a follow-up question, or supplementary, on the same subject. When that supplementary has been answered by the Minister, the Speaker may call other Members to put supplementaries, usually alternating between the Government and Opposition sides of the House.³ Quite often, Members will rise from their seats in order to attract the Speaker's attention. This is known as "catching the Speaker's eye". Sometimes, a Minister chooses to give a single reply to several questions on the Order Paper relating to the same topic. In that event, the Speaker will usually call for supplementaries from those Members whose questions have been answered together.

When the Speaker decides that enough supplementaries have been asked, he calls the Member who has question number two on the Order of Business. The process begins again and continues to the end of Question Time. Any oral question on the Order of Business that has not been answered by then receives a written answer that is printed in a subsequent issue of Hansard. Oral questions excluded at the time of the shuffle (see below) do not receive any answer.

Role of the Speaker

The Speaker controls the pace of Question Time. If he calls too many supplementaries the Minister will be put under close scrutiny on a few questions but the total number of questions answered orally will be small. However, if he calls too few supplementaries, more questions will be answered orally but the Minister may be given too easy a passage. A balance has to be struck and it is likely to be struck differently by different Speakers. Currently approximately 14 questions are answered orally on an average day.

The Speaker can also ensure progress by periodic appeals to Members and Ministers to keep their supplementary questions and answers short and succinct. He also has powers to check a Member or Minister who is either too lengthy or is using Question Time as an opportunity for debate. It is also the practice for a Minister who wishes to give a lengthy answer either to give it

³ On 18 November 2002 the Speaker reminded the House that he may in certain circumstances ask a Member to put a second supplementary question (HC Deb 18 November 2002 c345)

after Question Time, if its importance so justifies, or to circulate it in the Official Report.

Rota of Ministers Answering

Ministers are questioned on a rota agreed by the Government and Opposition parties through the "usual channels". Each major Department is allocated to a particular day of the week, together with three or four others. Smaller departments, such as the Solicitor General or the Leader of the House, will also answer questions for a short period on a particular day at regular intervals, usually every four weeks or so. Private Members are also included in the rota, in their capacities as the Members answering for the Church Commissioners, the House of Commons Commission, the Public Accounts Commission, the Finance and Services Committee and the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission. All Departments, apart from the Prime Minister, answer roughly once a month.

Following devolution, the House decided to halve the amount of time given to questions to the Secretary of State for Scotland to thirty minutes. The time available for Welsh questions remained unchanged at thirty minutes.

The rota of oral question times is distributed within the House of Commons every half term. This gives dates and times of Departments answering questions and also final dates for tabling questions. The details of Departments answering questions are also published in the Weekly Information Bulletin in the week that the rota is printed.

Prime Minister's Questions

The main exception to this routine is the Prime Minister, who currently answers questions every Wednesday from 12.00noon to the end of Question Time soon after 12.30pm. Thus the Prime Minister will answer questions for about two hours a month, compared with about one hour's questioning of most of his chief colleagues and their junior ministers. This regular and frequent questioning of the Prime Minister is fairly new, having been introduced in 1961. Normally the questions were not reached or, if they were, it was rare for them to take up more than five or ten minutes. Between 1961 and 1997, Prime Minister's question time took place twice a week, on Tuesdays and Thursdays, from 3.15pm to 3.30pm. From 1997 to the start of 2003 it was on Wednesdays at 3.00pm until 3.30pm. More details are given in a later section.

Devolved Matters

The rules governing parliamentary questions require that questions should relate to matters for which Ministers are responsible. In July 1999, following the establishment of the Scottish Parliament and the National Assembly for Wales, various matters became the responsibility of ministers answerable to those bodies. The Commons Procedure Committee recommended that the rules on questions should be revised to take account of devolution, and on 25 October 1999 the House approved a motion on this subject. The effect of the resolution is that, in general, parliamentary questions may not be tabled at Westminster on matters that have been devolved to Scotland and Wales. This has been taken as also applying to Northern Ireland whenever the Assembly is sitting (the Northern Ireland assembly is currently suspended).

Number and order of questions

Until 1909, Members could table an unlimited number of questions for oral answer on any day. In that year, a limit of eight for answer on each day was introduced; a number which had been reduced to two by 1960. Since 1972, the ration for each Member has been a maximum of two on any one day; with the additional limitation that only one question may be put to one Minister on any day. A limit of eight questions in any period of ten sitting days was also established in 1972, although this was abolished in 1993 as the system of limiting the number of questions printed (see below) made it very unlikely that this limit would be exceeded.

In October 1990, the House adopted a number of recommendations of its Procedure Committee that were designed to right a number of difficulties which had arisen over the previous few years. One of these was the process of 'syndication', where large numbers of identical questions were handed in by whips or Parliamentary Private Secretaries, each in the name of different Members from their party. This had led to a proliferation of questions down for oral answer. The Committee recommended and the House agreed that Members should in future hand in all oral questions personally at the Table Office (save that a colleague might act for a Member away on a parliamentary delegation, for instance) and that no Member should be permitted to table more than two oral questions - one for him/herself and one for a colleague, as above - to any Department. This limit was reduced to one per Department subject to a maximum of two for answer on any one day.

The Shuffle

The order in which questions appear on the Order of Business and are called is of great importance, as only those at the beginning of the list are guaranteed to be reached. Priority used to be decided at random in the Parliamentary Press where questions were printed in the order in which the printer picked them up from his desk. A more formal ballot, known as the "shuffle", was subsequently used, reflecting the close interest that Members take in the order of priority. The time of this shuffle has varied but from January 2003 it has taken place at 12.30pm. The procedure is that all the oral questions received up to that time for the Departments due to answer three days ahead (five for Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland), not including Fridays, are put into the ballot. The questions are then shuffled electronically and all numbered consecutively up to the quota. From January 2003, the number of questions to each Department was reduced to new quotas which will be reviewed regularly by the Speaker. These are:

Duration of questions	Quota
55 minutes	25
50 minutes	20
45 minutes	20
30 minutes	15
15 minutes	10
10 minutes	8

The quota reflects the number of questions likely to be reached in the available time with a few extra to allow for withdrawals. Prior to 1993, all questions that went into the shuffle were printed and numbered and any added after the shuffle were placed at the end of the list, even though they had very little chance of being asked on the floor of the House.

Publication and Departmental Action

The first formal notification of an oral question which the answering Department usually receives is when the question appears on the Notice Paper of the House (the blue "Notices of Questions" pages in the Vote Bundle) published on the morning after the question has been tabled. There is likely to be informal notification from the Table Office on the day of the shuffle. The officials who are responsible for the Department's parliamentary business extract their own questions from the Notice Paper and send them, in specially marked folders, to the officials within their Departments who deal with the subject matter of the questions. The answers are then drafted for Ministers to consider. If the Minister approves the draft answer, it goes forward for inclusion in the answer file which is used on the day when the Department's questions are taken in the House. If not, the answer goes back for redrafting until a satisfactory answer is produced. Oral questions give departments much work since they have to provide not only an answer to the question itself but also full background briefing on which the Minister can base his answers to supplementary questions. Supplementaries can vary from the factual to the highly political in content and so the briefing must anticipate every ramification of the original question. While some questions are genuinely seeking information or action, others will be designed to highlight the alleged shortcomings of the Minister's department or the merits of an alternative policy. But not all questions are hostile. Many, especially those "inspired" by the Minister or otherwise put down by party colleagues, will enable popular decisions to be announced and government successes to be advertised.

Transfer of Questions

A Member addresses a question to a particular Minister at the head of a Department and in most instances a Minister from that Department will answer the question because its subject matter falls squarely within its responsibilities. Problems arise, however, where the subject matter of the question touches the responsibilities of more than one Department or where it is unclear which Department is primarily responsible. The decision as to who is to answer will turn on which Minister has the closest responsibility for the subject matter. That is a decision that can only be taken by Ministers themselves. The Government has a collective responsibility to Parliament and it must be for Ministers to decide which of them is best able to answer the question. If a Member has addressed his question to the "wrong" Minister, it will be transferred by the Department to whom it was addressed.

When a question is transferred, a formal notice is sent by the Department to the Member concerned and to the Table Office. When an oral question is transferred, the change of Minister to answer the question will usually mean that the Member loses the chance of getting an oral answer on the chosen day.

Deferred Questions

Ministers may, after having notified the Speaker's Office, defer their response until the end of questions (i.e. 3.30pm on Monday or Tuesday, 12.30pm on Wednesday or 11.30am on

Thursday) the answer to any oral question which stands on the Order Paper for that day. They may also choose to answer orally a question down for written answer that day. Questions which have not been answered because of the absence of the Minister to whom they are addressed may be answered after questions if the Minister is then present.

Although there is no explicit provision for such procedures in the Standing Orders, these practices have by convention been allowed as being subsumed within the provisions for making ministerial statements.

Prime Minister's Questions

Procedure

In its present form the origin of questions to the Prime Minister can be traced to an experiment begun on 18 July 1961 when Harold Macmillan was Prime Minister. Today, one question predominates, asking if the Prime Minister will list his official engagements for the day on which the question is to be answered. This is actually done by the first Member who asks a question saying 'Number One' to reflect the question's position in the order of business. It is usually a standard question asking about the Prime Minister's engagements for the day. In answer to this, the Prime Minister lists the main engagements for the day. At that point, the questioning Member can put, as a supplementary, almost any question that relates to Prime Ministerial responsibilities or to almost any aspect of Government policy. In other words, the original, indirect question is simply a peg on which to hang a supplementary. Subsequent Members with engagements questions are called only to ask their supplementary question.

This practice arises out of the two-fold nature of the Prime Minister's responsibilities:

- 1) The Prime Minister has an overall responsibility for the whole range of government which overlaps the responsibilities of each and every Minister.
- 2) There are only a few specific responsibilities - matters of national security and top appointments are some of them - on which he can be directly questioned.

If Members were to confine themselves to questioning the Prime Minister about this limited range of specific responsibilities they would be hard put to fill up the question period. So they mostly use the indirect or "shot in the dark" question as it has been described by a former Speaker.

Supplementaries

This form of question undoubtedly has advantages for Members. The scope of a supplementary is normally limited by the rule that it has to arise out of the original question, although since it is hidden by that question, an element of surprise is given to the supplementary. But if the original question is about the Prime Minister's engagements, the scope for supplementaries is almost unlimited, since he or she can be asked questions on anything which relates to the Prime Minister's responsibilities. The element of surprise therefore extends not only to the first but to all other supplementaries. Moreover, although a Member has to table his "shot in the dark" question three days ahead in order to stand a chance of an oral answer, if successful he need not compose his supplementary until the day on which it is to be put. It can thus be right up to

date, and, if desired, bear on a pressing issue of the moment. A Member has, in fact, all the advantages of putting a question without notice, a procedure which is used in several other Parliaments.

There are some drawbacks, too, for Members. Because supplementaries can range so widely, it is impossible to submit the Prime Minister to a searching examination by putting a number of supplementaries on the same topic. The Leader of the Opposition is permitted three or four supplementaries in succession to follow up his first supplementary and the leader of the next largest opposition party is allowed two. But more often than not, the discussion becomes diffuse because such a variety of points are raised. The Prime Minister's office seek briefings from other departments on all possible supplementaries which may arise; and since they usually touch on highly topical matters, the Prime Minister may take the opportunity to make a statement of Government policy or to give an official reaction.

Urgent Questions

These arise when a problem needs to be raised at once with the Minister concerned. To provide for this contingency, there is a special procedure for questioning Ministers called Urgent Questions. A Member is not required to give advance notice of this kind of Question as he has to for an ordinary question: indeed, he cannot do so because the matter has arisen suddenly and urgently. Instead, notice is given to the Minister concerned. In order to ask an Urgent Question, a Member must apply to the Speaker before noon on Monday or Tuesday, 10.30am on Wednesday, 9.30am on Thursday or 10am on a sitting Friday on which an answer is wanted. The Department concerned is at once informed. It is up to the Speaker to decide whether to allow an Urgent Question. Where allowed, Urgent Questions are taken immediately after question time, or at 11am on a Friday. Prior to the 2002-03 session of Parliament, this procedure was known as a Private Notice Question.

Besides being subject to the same rules as to form and content as for ordinary questions, an Urgent Question is judged against two additional and special criteria laid down in the rules of the House (known formally as the Standing Orders): it must be urgent, and it must be of public importance. A variety of sudden developments or emergencies fulfil these criteria, although these can quite often be covered in the form of a ministerial statement. A recent example was an Urgent Question directed to the Attorney-General regarding advice on Iraq.⁴

Members are informed that a question will be asked by notices posted in the House and on the in-House annunciator. The information is usually available to the House of Commons Information Office approximately an hour before the House begins sitting. Procedure on Urgent Questions is similar to ordinary oral questions. The main question will be asked, the Member who has put the question down is then allowed to ask a supplementary. Other Members will then be called to ask further questions on the same subject.

⁴ HC Deb 24 March 2005 c999

Cross-cutting questions

On 23 January 2003, the first of a new session of cross-cutting questions was held in Westminster Hall. These cross-cutting question times are to enable questions to be asked on a topic that covers the responsibilities of a number of Government Departments. The first session was on youth policy and was attended by Ministers from the Departments for Culture, Media and Sport, Education and Skills, Health, and the Home Office. More recently, on 28th October 2004 a cross cutting question session took place on Antisocial behaviour.

Questions for written answer

Questions for written answer are used by Members of Parliament to try and extract more detailed information from the Government than would be available from an oral question. They are subject to the same rules of order as oral questions and the vast majority of questions answered in each session are questions of this kind. In the 2004-05 session; a total of 23,552 questions were printed in Hansard and the number of written parliamentary questions printed was 21,176.

Types of written questions

There are three different types of written question:

- 1) Questions originally tabled for oral answer which were not reached at Oral Question Time
- 2) 'Ordinary' – These are questions that do not have to be answered on a specific date although a Member will date a written question for two days after he or she has tabled it. The convention is that the Member can expect it to be answered within seven days of the question being tabled although there is no parliamentary rule which states that ordinary written questions have to be answered by a certain date.
- 3) 'Named Day' – These questions must receive an answer on the date specified by the Member tabling the question. The Member must give a minimum of two days' notice for these types of question.

Before the 2002-03 session, there was a class of questions referred to as 'planted' or 'inspired' questions. These were questions which were printed in the Order Paper for the first time on the day they were due to be answered, having only been tabled on the previous sitting day. These have now been mainly replaced by Written Ministerial Statements. The statements that are due to be provided that day are printed in the Order Book and the statement is printed in full in the following day's Hansard.

Tabling of written questions

Questions for written answer may be handed in at the Table Office by Members or persons acting on their authority, or sent by post. The Member may also table the question electronically using the parliamentary intranet. Questions may be electronically tabled only if the Member has provided signed authority that questions may be accepted from a given Parliament email address. Unless handed in by a Member in person, questions must bear the signature of the MP, but a Member may sign on behalf of another.

From January 2003 there has been a fixed and non-negotiable daily quota of five Named Day

Questions per member. A Member usually dates a written question for two days after he or she has tabled it and can expect the question to be answered within seven days of that date. If, however, the Member desires an answer on a specified day he/she may indicate this when tabling it. This gives his question priority. These priority written questions are now known as questions for answer on a named day - and indicated by the letter "N" in the Question Book. The answer received on the date specified is sometimes only to the effect that the Minister will answer as soon as possible.

Answers to written questions

Answers are sent directly to the Member who asked the question, and as with oral answers, the text of written answers is given in Hansard, although in a separate section. They are usually published on the internet at the same time as the main Hansard debates at 8am, although occasionally there are delays due to the volume of answers. In the 2003-04 session, the total number of parliamentary questions printed in Hansard was 55,853.

'Will writes'

Occasionally, questions may be answered 'I will write to the Hon Member' Currently, such replies are not published in Hansard, but placed in the House of Commons Library for Members' use; however the texts will be published in the future. The House of Commons Information Office can supply single copies of an individual letter to enquirers. Replies from the Chief Executives of Government agencies are printed in Hansard but before October 1992 these replies were treated in a similar way to 'Will Writes'.

Cost of questions

There is currently an advisory cost limit (the cost level above which Departments can refuse to answer a PQ) for written answers of £600 (increased to this level in April 2002). The advisory limit is based on eight times the average marginal cost for written answers rounded to the nearest £50. There is no advisory limit for oral answers. In terms of expenditure incurred and the time and effort spent, as at April 2005 an oral question has been officially estimated to cost an average of £369 to answer and a written question £134⁵. The fact that Members continue to put down questions at the rate of several hundred a day suggests that they regard this as money well spent in the pursuit of Ministerial accountability.

Recent developments

Questions during recess

The Deputy Leader of the House recently responded to a question in which it was stated that there was no intention to allow the tabling of written parliamentary questions during the recess, however it was pointed out questions can be answered in a special edition of Hansard when the House is in recess.

⁵ HC Deb 22 Mar 2005 column 48WS

Questions at the end of the session

The fate of parliamentary questions at the end of a session can vary. The majority of questions fall at the end of the session however several will receive a "will write" answer. On 21 July 2004, the then Leader of the House, the Rt Hon Peter Hain MP made a written statement in which he outlined that where possible, Government departments will continue to make every effort to answer parliamentary questions, and that Departments will give "I will write" answers only rarely, when there is particular reason for delay.

The Leader also announced that:

"At the end of each session, Departments will make every effort to answer questions substantively before prorogation; but, if this is not possible, Ministers will—instead of issuing an "I will write" reply, as in the past—answer the question with the following form of words: "It has not proved possible to respond to the [Right] hon. Member in the time available before Prorogation". It will then be open to the Member concerned to re-table the question in the new session if he or she wishes.

On those occasions where an "I will write" answer is necessary, a copy of the subsequent substantive response will be sent to Hansard and to the Library, and will be printed with the written answers in the next edition of Hansard"⁶.

Electronic Parliamentary Community

On 24 November 2004 the Leader of the House, launched the Electronic Parliamentary Community (ePC) to enable electronic transfer of PQ and Written Statement information between Departments and Hansard/Table Office⁷.

⁶ HC Deb 21 July 2004 cc35-36WS

⁷ HC Deb 24 November 2004 c3WS

Contact information

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Factsheet P1 Parliamentary Questions

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|----------------|--------------------------|------------------|--------------------------|----------------|--------------------------|
| 1. Very useful | <input type="checkbox"/> | Fairly useful | <input type="checkbox"/> | Not much use | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 2. Too long | <input type="checkbox"/> | The right length | <input type="checkbox"/> | Too short | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 3. Clear | <input type="checkbox"/> | Not always clear | <input type="checkbox"/> | Rather unclear | <input type="checkbox"/> |

Any comments?

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