



## Factsheet P1 Procedure Series

Revised March 2007

House of Commons Information Office

# Parliamentary Questions

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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 tabled are published provisionally in the blue pages of the **Order Paper** (the 'blues') and thereafter appear in the Question Book (the 'whites') and on the **Parliamentary Information Management System (PIMS)**. All answers (and the original questions), whether transcribed from the Chamber or recorded from a printed format, are set out in **The Official Report (Hansard)** and **PIMS** so they are widely available and accessible.

There are four categories of question in the House of Commons (in order of volume):

- Questions for Written Answer (Written Questions or WPQs)
- Questions for Oral Answer (Oral Questions or OPQs taken in the Chamber)
- Cross-cutting questions (taken in Westminster Hall)
- Urgent Questions (formerly Private Notice Questions, taken in the Chamber)

Of the 80,000 or so questions asked each year, only about 3,000 are oral questions that are reached for answer by a Minister in the Chamber. The procedures relating to parliamentary questions were 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 2002.<sup>1</sup> The Procedure Committee has recently announced an inquiry into the rules for written questions (8 December 2006). This Factsheet will be revised to take account of the House's opinion of any further Report.

This Factsheet outlines the development of questions and the rules governing their substance 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 and 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

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<sup>1</sup> HC Deb 29 October 2002 cc689-839

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 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 most recent complete session of Parliament (2005-06) 5353 questions appeared on the Order paper for oral answer and 95,041 for written answer that continued an upward trend in the number of written questions over the past ten years.

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 (although the question is not formally tabled until accepted as orderly by the Table Office). In the financial year 2005-06 (as sessions can vary in length) nearly 86,000 questions were submitted by Members of which about 78,000 were or were made, orderly, 17,000 for oral answer and 61,000 for 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 also more efficacious for any necessary discussion of questions between Members and clerks to take place outside the Chamber. 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.

### **Content and format of Questions**

Before any question can be placed on the Order of Business it must be orderly and satisfy the rules that the House has set. The main principles are set out in Erskine May (pp.345-354, 23<sup>rd</sup> Ed.) and some of the key rules are as follows:

A parliamentary question must:

- either (a) seek information ('what, how many, when...') or (b) press for action ('if he will...');
- not offer or seek expressions of opinion;
- not convey information nor advance a proposition, an argument or debate;
- have a factual basis for which the tabling Member is responsible (it may not, for example, seek confirmation or denial of rumours or media reports);
- relate to a matter for which the Minister addressed is responsible as a Minister (it may

not, for example ask about: activities in a Minister's capacity as party leader or member; reports or research by independent organisations, no matter how germane; or matters which are the statutory responsibility of the devolved administrations);

- not seek an expression of opinion on, or an interpretation of, a question of law, since this is for the courts to decide;
- not refer to a matter active before a UK court or court martial (including a coroner's court), as this is prohibited by the House's *sub judice* rule;
- not ask for information: readily available elsewhere (including in Hansard); or provided or blocked / otherwise denied by the same Minister in the same session
- not be hypothetical or obviously about opposition policy

### Drafting

Parliamentary questions must:

- be drafted as concisely as possible.
- conform to the existing parliamentary conventions regarding decorous language and respect for the Crown, the judiciary and Members of both Houses.

It is the duty of the Table Office clerks to help Members ensure that the questions comply with these and other rules of the House (and offer advice on style, substance or clarity) under the authority of the Speaker. Their method is to advise a Member, if his or her question appears to breach a rule, how it can be brought into order. If a Member is not satisfied with the advice given to them, they may have their 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.

### Applying the rules: orals and writtens

Having set out the rules it is worth noting that there are differences in the way they are applied to oral and written questions.

| Written   | Oral   |
|---|--|
| Can be a composite, complex with no limit on the data required (subject to refusal to answer) | Must be a single question not requiring a lengthy answer (such as reams of data)           |
| Transfers of written questions between Departments are common and painless                    | Departmental responsibility is crucial as a transfer turns it into a written question      |
| Can be open but Members are usually advised against questions that are too vague              | Cannot be open but must indicate the subject of the supplementary (unless for the Prime M) |
| Cannot have been answered within 3 months (unless on a 'moving target')                       | Cannot have been answered in last relevant Question Time (unless on a 'moving target')     |
| Cannot seek information that is readily available   | 'Readily available' rule not applied strictly to   |

Elsewhere, e.g. annual report

enable supplementaries' to be indicated

## Oral Questions

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, Ministers and other members who answer such questions are organised into a rota by the Government; the 'Order of Questions'.<sup>2</sup>

A certain procedure must be followed in order to ask and receive an answer to an oral question. First a Member must **table** an orderly question. All such questions tabled to a particular Department or Minister are then subject to a random computer ballot or **shuffle** to decide which questions will be published and, importantly, in what order they will be taken. 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 (if reached in the time available) and the Member will be able to ask the **supplementary** question (which is often the main point of the exercise). 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 question time slot on a particular day, subject to an overall maximum of two questions per day. A Member may also hand in one unsigned question on behalf of another Member. Since the introduction of e-tabling (see below) oral questions have also been accepted, if signed, by post or hand delivery. Questions must be tabled at least three days (excluding Fridays and weekends) in advance of the session for that Department or Minister (with the exception of questions for the PM which can be accepted as soon as the deadline has passed for the previous shuffle). 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 to a question and, crucially, briefing on possible supplementaries. 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 Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays) 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. Tabling deadlines for other Departments are as set out below:

|                |        |       |       |        |
|----------------|--------|-------|-------|--------|
| Tabled on:     | Mon.   | Tues. | Wed.  | Thurs. |
| For answer on: | Thurs. | Mon.  | Tues. | Wed.   |

The daily deadline for submitting a question for oral answer is the first stroke of 12.30pm. Members present in the Table Office and engaged in drafting and/or discussion with the clerks at this time may finish the question they have started.

<sup>2</sup> The Order of Questions includes the Deputy Prime Minister, Leader of the House and the Minister for Women and Equality. It also includes time for non-Government slots such as the private Members who represent: the Church Commissioners; the House of Commons Commission; the Public Accounts Commission; and the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission.

### **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.<sup>3</sup> 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 two or more 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 encourage more progress down the list by periodic appeals to Members

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<sup>3</sup> 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)

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

### **Order of Questions**

Ministers are questioned on a rota agreed by the Government and Opposition parties through the "usual channels". In practice, Departments and others who answer questions appear once in a four week cycle on a particular day of the week and the PM once a week on a Wednesday. By convention some Departments have the whole hour (Treasury, Foreign and Home offices, Defence and Health) the rest split the available hour in different ways (for instance Transport with Constitutional Affairs and a number of different departments with the PM). Some slots are shared (for instance the Members representing the Church Commissioners, the Public Accounts Commission and the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission all appear together for 15 minutes).

This rota, the **Order of Questions**, is published by the Vote Office in tabular form giving the dates and times of Departments and others answering questions and also the deadlines for tabling questions. Departments answering questions are also published in the *Weekly Information Bulletin* and can be accessed from the contents page in every edition.

A new rota of oral question times is issued on, or just before, tabling can start for the Question Time following the one for which the last deadline is given on the previous rota (i.e. ensuring that as soon as Members are allowed to table for a Question Time, the necessary information is published).

### **Prime Minister's Questions**

The main exception to this routine is the Prime Minister, who currently answers questions every Wednesday from 12.00 noon to the end of Question Time soon after 12.30pm. The Prime Minister therefore answers 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 relatively recent, 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 (or 'PMQ') 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.

### **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. In the last Parliamentary Session (2005-06) 5,353 questions appeared on the order paper for oral answer. Excluding supplementaries 2,734 Oral Questions received a reply on the floor of the House; including supplementaries, 8,014 received a reply.

### **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. This ballot, or **shuffle**, is a lottery and blind to considerations of party, seniority, method of tabling, time of submission or the results of previous shuffles. Two distinct, sequenced and individually random processes (one physical and one electronic) produce the final list. Once the questions have been shuffled they are 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 | Departments (2007) |
|-----------------------|-------|--------------------|
| 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. The number printed is significant to Departments because the quota limits the burden of producing briefing material for the oral session covering the questions and possible supplementaries. 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) which is 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 their 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 their 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 and instead will receive a written reply. By contrast, when written questions are transferred the Member asking the question loses very little.

### **Deferred Questions**

On occasion, now extremely rare, Ministers may, after having notified the Speaker's Office, defer their response to a particular question for oral answer until the end of questions (i.e. 3.30pm on Monday or Tuesday, 12.30pm on Wednesday or 11.30am on Thursday). 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 the 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. In answer to this, the Prime Minister summarises his main engagements for the day. At that point, the questioning Member can put, as a supplementary, virtually 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" approach 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 their "shot in the dark" question three days ahead in order to stand a chance of an oral answer, if successful they need not compose their 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 their 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 they have to for an ordinary question: indeed, they 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 (UQ) 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 Secretary of State for Health regarding learning disability services in Cornwall.<sup>4</sup> In practice UQs invariably take the form of a question asking a Minister to “make a statement” on whatever matter has arisen.

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. The Urgent Question procedure is also used, on most occasions, to provide the Business Statement on a Thursday. A Business Question is asked, usually by the shadow Leader of the House, after all other Urgent Questions have been answered. After the responding statement, a range of supplementary questions are permitted.

### **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 28<sup>th</sup> October 2004 a cross-cutting question session took place on anti-social 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 or to press for action. They are subject to the same rules of order as oral questions (see above) and the vast majority of questions answered in each session are questions of this kind. In financial year 2005-06 Members tabled over 61,000 questions for written answer.

#### **Types of written questions**

There are three different types of written question:

- 1) Questions originally tabled for oral answer which were successful in the shuffle but were not reached at Question Time. These must receive a written answer on the day of the oral session.
- 2) ‘Ordinary’ – Questions that do not have to be answered on a specific date. Such questions are put down for answer on the day after the day on which they are published (i.e. two days after tabling excluding Saturday and Sunday). The notice period has more to do with the need for quality control on the printed material than notice for Departments as the convention is that the Member can expect such a question to be answered within seven days of the question being tabled. There is however, no parliamentary rule which states that ordinary written questions have to be answered by a certain date and little that Members can do about delayed answers except

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<sup>4</sup> HC Deb 11 July 2006 c1253-61

put down more questions.

3) 'Named Day' – Questions that must receive an answer on the date specified by the Member tabling the question. Such questions must be published at least two days before the date named for answer (i.e. three days after tabling, excluding Saturday and Sunday). Answers to such questions may include holding replies which promise a substantive answer as soon as possible.

Since January 2003 there has been a fixed 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 their 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, however, can be to the effect that the Minister will provide a substantive answer as soon as possible; a 'holding reply'. Such answers are not printed although the substantive answer when it appears includes a reference to the holding reply. Between six and seven per cent of written questions receive holding replies.<sup>5</sup>

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 the previous sitting day. Such short notice was allowed because the Minister to whom such a question was addressed had 'given an indication that he or she is prepared to answer it' on that day (i.e. had arranged for it to be asked to facilitate an announcement). This procedure has now been largely rendered obsolete by provision for Written Ministerial Statements (WMS) to be made. 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. Occasional 'planted questions' or 'dailies' still appear, usually at the behest of an answering Member to whom the WMS mechanism is not available.

#### **Tabling of written questions**

Questions for written answer may be handed in at the Table Office by Members or (if the question is signed) by persons acting on Members' authority or via the post. Members may also table questions electronically from their parliamentary offices or more remote locations using the e-tabling system via the parliamentary intranet. Questions may be electronically tabled only if the Member has provided signed authority that questions may be accepted via their account on the system based on their confidential PDVN account. Unless handed in by a Member in person, questions must bear the signature of the tabling Member but one Member may sign on behalf of another. The importance of Members providing for, and maintaining, proper authorisation of their parliamentary questions has been stressed by the Procedure Committee on a number of occasions.

#### **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

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<sup>5</sup> As calculated by the House of Commons Library using their PIMS database

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 2005-06 session; the total number of written parliamentary questions and answers printed in Hansard was 96,016.

#### **'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, or other near-Government bodies, are printed in Hansard but before October 1992 these replies were treated in a similar way to 'Will Writes'.

### **Cost of questions**

There is an advisory cost limit known as the disproportionate cost threshold (DCT) which is the cost level above which Departments can refuse to answer a PQ. The DCT for written answers is currently £700 (the previous level was £600). 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 November 2006 an oral question has been officially estimated to cost an average of £385 to answer and a written question £140<sup>6</sup>. In addition, on 19 January 2005, the Treasury provided figures relating to the cost of oral and written parliamentary questions from the 1994-95 session to the 2003-04 session<sup>7</sup>. 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**

Until recently, it was not possible for parliamentary questions to be answered during recesses. Questions could be submitted throughout recesses but were treated as having been formally tabled on the first sitting day back for answer two days later. However, in July 2006, the Commons agreed to experimental arrangements for the tabling and answering of parliamentary questions during September of the summer recess. The experiment was, in some ways, an alternative to the short sitting period in September trialled in previous years. Under these new arrangements, Members were able to table named day questions on each of three designated tabling days for answer on three designated answering days, all in the first half of September. Ministers were also able to put down Written Ministerial Statements on the answering days. In March 2007, the House passed a motion tabled by then Leader of the House, Jack Straw, to make these arrangements permanent.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> HC Deb 28 November 2006 c87WS

<sup>7</sup> HC Deb 19 January 2005 c986W

<sup>8</sup> HC Deb 28 March 2007 c1552

**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".<sup>9</sup>*

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<sup>9</sup> HC Deb 21 July 2004 cc35-36WS

## Further reading

House of Commons library standard note:  
Parliamentary questions – current issues  
Available on the parliament website  
[www.parliament.uk](http://www.parliament.uk) through: Publications &  
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The House of Commons Commission  
Annual Report  
Available on the parliament website  
[www.parliament.uk](http://www.parliament.uk) through the index

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