



Factsheet P1 Procedure Series

Revised August 2010

House of Commons Information Office

Parliamentary Questions

Contents

Introduction	2
Background	2
Content and format of Questions	3
Drafting	3
Applying the Rules: Orals and Writtens	4
Tabling Questions	4
<i>Tabling Oral Questions</i>	4
<i>The Shuffle</i>	5
<i>Tabling Written Questions</i>	5
Departmental Action	5
<i>Publication of Questions</i>	5
<i>Transfer of Questions</i>	6
Cost of questions	6
Oral Questions	7
<i>Procedure at Question Time</i>	8
<i>Supplementaries</i>	8
<i>Deferred Questions</i>	8
Topical Questions	9
<i>Role of the Speaker</i>	9
Prime Minister's Questions (PMQs)	9
<i>PMQ Supplementaries</i>	10
Questions for Written Answer	10
<i>Types of written questions</i>	10
<i>Answers to written questions</i>	11
<i>'Will writes'</i>	11
<i>Questions during recess</i>	11
Urgent Questions	12
Cross-cutting questions	12
Questions at the end of the Parliamentary Session	13
Devolved Matters	13
Further reading	14
Contact information	14
Feedback form	15

Parliamentary questions have a significant role in the House of Commons. They allow Members of Parliament to hold the Government to account, using either **oral questions** to Ministers in the Chamber of the House of Commons or **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>

December 2008 FS No.P1 Ed 3.8
ISSN 0144-4689

© Parliamentary Copyright
(House of Commons) 2010
May be reproduced for purposes of
private study or research without
permission.

Reproduction for sale or other
commercial purposes not permitted.

Introduction

Parliamentary questions are tools that can be used by Members of Parliament to seek information or to 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 easily accessible.

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

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

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 asked 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.

Using questions to encourage debate was a fairly uncommon practice until well into the 19th Century. Prior to this time, other methods were employed to bring pressure to bear on Ministers. In 1833, the practice of giving a Minister notice of a question by printing it in the House's Notice Paper of future business began. These notices appeared under the heading "Notices of Motions", and were 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 again. In the sessions 1987-88 to 1989-90 the sessional average was around 50,000; in the late 1990's this figure was 35-40,000 and in the most recent complete session of Parliament (2009-10) 1924 questions appeared on the Order paper for oral answer and 25,467 for written answer.¹

¹ Sessional Returns 2009 - 2010

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, 2002, 2007 and 2009.

Although some resulting changes have been striking - such as the introduction of 'Prime Minister's Questions' and the introduction of 'Topical Questions' - the practice and purpose of Question Time is not, in essence, any different from over 50 years ago.

Content and format of Questions

Before a question can be accepted by the Table Office and placed on the Order of Business it must be orderly and satisfy the rules of the House; the main principles of which are set out in Erskine May (pp.345-354, 23rd Ed.). 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 pertinent; 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 courteous language and respect for the Crown, 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 they also offer advice on style, content or clarity) under the authority of the Speaker. 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 question 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 Minister or during topical questions).
Cannot have been answered within the previous 3 months (unless on a 'moving target').	Cannot have been answered in the last relevant Question Time (unless on a 'moving target').
Cannot seek information that is readily available elsewhere e.g. annual report.	The 'readily available' rule is not applied strictly to enable supplementaries to be indicated.

Tabling Questions

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).

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 appropriate for any necessary discussions between Members and clerks to take place outside the Chamber.

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.

Tabling Oral Questions

Each Member may table one question for each Department answering, subject to an overall maximum of two on a single day. A Member may also hand in one unsigned question on behalf of another Member. Since the introduction of e-tabling, oral questions have also been accepted, if signed, by post or hand delivery.

All oral 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 Prime Minister 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.

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.

On the last day of tabling, questions must reach the Table Office by 12.30pm to be included in the random computer shuffle. 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.

The Shuffle

The order in which questions appear on the Order of Business 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 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.

Tabling 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 the Member's behalf, 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 Parliamentary Network account.

Departmental Action

Publication of Questions

The first formal notification of written and oral questions 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). This is published on the morning after the question has been tabled. There is likely to be informal notification from the Table Office too with regards to oral questions following 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.

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.

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 Parliamentary Question. The DCT for written answers is currently £750. In terms of expenditure incurred and the time and effort spent, as at December 2007 the average cost was £140 for a written question and £385 for an oral question². From December 2008 the average cost of a written question was £149 and for an oral question £410³. The latter figure takes into account the additional research and briefing for possible supplementary questions. 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

² Info taken from SN/PC/04148

³ HC Deb 8 December 2008 c24WS

pursuit of Ministerial accountability.

Oral Questions

Oral questions are questions asked and answered on the floor of the House of Commons. Oral question time is divided into two parts. In the first part, the Minister, or appointed government spokesperson, will answer questions that have been tabled in advance (this gives them an opportunity to prepare a response) and, in the second part, they will answer untabled 'topical' questions. They will usually have to anticipate topical questions that may be asked and have responses prepared. Members need to enter a ballot for both types of question.

Standing Order 21 sets out that questions will be taken in the first hour of business from Mondays to Thursdays. The Departments, Ministers and other members who answer such questions are organised into a rota by the Government; the document listing this information is known as the 'Order of Questions'.⁴ 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.

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 five week cycle on a particular day of the week and the Prime Minister 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. 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).

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. 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

⁴ The Order of Questions includes the 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.

though they had very little chance of being asked on the floor of the House.

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 for government departments 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 Department for Health, answer questions, the Secretary of State will be accompanied by several junior Ministers who will share the task of responding to Members.

Supplementaries

After the Minister has responded to the original tabled question, the MP who asked that question is normally the first to be called to ask a follow-up (supplementary) question on the same subject. When that supplementary has been answered by the Minister, the Speaker may call other Members to put forward supplementaries, usually alternating between the Government and Opposition sides of the House. 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 until 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 do not receive any answer.

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.

Topical Questions

The House of Commons Modernisation Committee published a report called 'Revitalising the Chamber: The Role of the Back Bencher' on 20th June 2007. They proposed that question time be split into two. In the first part, Members would ask oral questions following the standard procedure. In the second part Members would be given an opportunity to ask open 'topical' questions. The Government supported the recommendation and endorsed proposals for open questions to last for 15 minutes for those departments that answered questions for 60 minutes and 10 minutes for those answering questions for 40 minutes. The first topical question session was held on 12th November 2007. The Department for Families, Children and Schools was the answering department. A total of ten back bench Members and the Conservative shadow spokesman asked questions; and three Ministers replied in the 15 minute session.

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.

The Speaker can also encourage more progress down the list by periodic appeals to Members and Ministers to keep their supplementary questions and answers short and succinct. He also has powers to challenge 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 Hansard.

Prime Minister's Questions (PMQs)

The Prime Minister 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 when Harold Macmillan was Prime Minister. Between 1961 and 1997, Prime Minister's Question Time ('PMQ's) 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. Presently the Prime Minister answers questions between 12noon and 12.30pm each sitting Wednesday.

The first Member on the questions list begins the PMQ's process by saying 'Number One' (to reflect the question's position in the order of business), then asks about the Prime Minister's engagements for the day. The Prime Minister lists his engagements and then the Member asking the question is given the opportunity to ask a supplementary question. Essentially, the original, indirect question is simply a peg on which to hang the actual question which they want to ask. Subsequent Members are called only to ask their supplementary question.

PMQ Supplementaries

This form of question undoubtedly has advantages for Members. The scope of a supplementary question is normally limited by the rule that it has to arise out of the original question, and 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 seeks 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.

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. In the parliamentary session 2007-08 Members tabled over 57,000 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 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.

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 the introduction of Written Ministerial Statements (WMS). 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.

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.

'Will writes'

Occasionally, questions may be answered 'I will write to the Hon Member' Some replies are now published in Hansard, others (usually the longer ones) are placed in the House of Commons Library for Members' use. Latterly these have been added to the deposited papers collection. All deposited papers received since November 2007 have been posted on the Parliament website at: <http://deposits.parliament.uk/> 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'.

Questions during recess

Until recently, it was not possible for written 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 written 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.⁵ In 2008 Members could table questions on 3rd, 8th and 10th September for answers on 10th, 15th and 17th September 2008 respectively.

Urgent Questions

At times Members may want to put an urgent question to a Minister. Besides being subject to the standard rules for questions, Urgent Questions (UQ) are also judged against two additional and special criteria laid down in the rules of the House: they must be urgent and 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 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 the day in question, to put forward such a question. The relevant government department would be informed at once. It is up to the Speaker to decide whether or not to allow an Urgent Question, and if it is allowed such questions will be 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.

Members are informed that an urgent 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. The 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.

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. On 28th October 2004 a cross-cutting question session took place on anti-social behaviour. The procedure has not been used since then.

⁵ HC Deb 28 March 2007 c1552

Questions at the end of the Parliamentary 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 would give "I will write" answers only rarely, when there was 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

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.

⁶ 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 through: Publications &
Records

The House of Commons Commission
Annual Report
Available on the parliament website
www.parliament.uk through the index
<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm/cmcomcom.htm>

Contact information

House of Commons Information Office
House of Commons
London SW1A 2TT
Phone 020 7219 4272
Fax 020 7219 5839
hcinfo@parliament.uk
www.parliament.uk

House of Lords Information Office
House of Lords
London SW1A 0PW
Phone 020 7219 3107
Fax 020 7219 0620
hlinfo@parliament.uk

Education Services
Houses of Parliament
London SW1A 2TT
Enquiry line 020 7219 2105
Booking line 020 7219 4496
Fax 020 7219 0818
education@parliament.uk

Parliamentary Archives
Houses of Parliament
London SW1A 0PW
Phone 020 7219 3074
Fax 020 7219 2570
archives@parliament.uk

Parliamentary Bookshop
12 Bridge Street
Parliament Square
London SW1A 2JX
Phone 020 7219 3890
Fax 020 7219 3866
bookshop@parliament.uk

Factsheets P1 Parliamentary Questions

It would help greatly to ensure that Factsheets fulfil their purpose if users would fill in and return this brief pre-addressed questionnaire, or email a response. Negative responses can be as useful as positive.

For your purposes, did you find this Factsheets

- | | | | | | |
|----------------|--------------------------|------------------|--------------------------|----------------|--------------------------|
| 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?

Please write to:
Head of Section
House of Commons Information Office
London SW1A 2TT

If you prefer, please email to:
hcinfo@parliament.uk

If you require a reply, please print your name and address below

Name

Address

