



Parliamentary Questions



Parliamentary Questions are one of the tools used by MPs to hold the Government to account. By questioning government ministers, Members can oblige them to provide information, explain policy decisions or defend the actions of their departments. Prime Minister's Question Time is a high profile example of this, but Cabinet ministers and their junior colleagues answer departmental questions in the Commons Chamber on most sitting days. More frequently, questions are put to ministers in writing and answered a few days later. All parliamentary questions and answers are printed in the Official Report of proceedings (Hansard) and are available on Parliament's website: www.parliament.uk

Tabling questions

MPs can table Questions to Ministers for answer either orally (in the Commons Chamber) or in writing.

MPs tabling questions for oral answer must give Ministers at least 3 days advance notice of a question for oral answer (five days for questions to the Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales Offices). This is to allow government departments sufficient time to collate information and draft a reply. Questions to be asked have to be submitted (tabled) by MPs in writing, even if they are to be answered orally in the Commons Chamber, but no advance notice of the supplementary questions is required. In cases of exceptional urgency Members may also request the Speaker to allow them to ask an **urgent question** (see below).

The term 'tabling' is still used, although the practice of MPs handing their questions to the Clerk sitting at the Table of the House, in front of the Speaker, ceased during the Second World War when the Table Office was established.

An MP can submit up to two questions for oral answer at Question Time on each sitting day (but not more than one to each department). On each sitting day an MP can table up to five questions for written answer on a 'named' day. There is, however, no limit to the number of questions for written answer an MP may submit if the answer is not required on a specific date.

The Table Office will only accept a submitted question if it is 'in order'. The House has established certain rules and conventions to be followed and the Table Office will advise an MP if a question does not comply. These rules flow from the acknowledgment that there are two purposes for parliamentary questions: to seek

information from ministers and to press them for action. Apart from the conventions relating to the use of concise, courteous language and a requirement for neutral phrasing of questions, rules have been established to avoid unnecessary work or duplication of effort: for example, a question that asked for information that was already readily available would not usually be accepted, nor would a question that had already been asked and answered fewer than six months earlier in the same parliamentary session. Certain matters cannot be asked about, such as cases in which legal proceedings are active or policy areas where responsibility has been devolved to the Scottish Parliament or the Assemblies of Northern Ireland and Wales. MPs may also not normally ask for information which goes back more than 30 years.

Questions are always addressed to the Secretary of State, or the most senior Commons minister of a department, although they are often answered by a more junior minister. Questions may be transferred by one department to another if they fall within another minister's responsibilities.

Interests

Members of Parliament must declare any personal or financial interest they may have in an issue under debate in Parliament which might reasonably be thought by others to influence the nature of their participation. This extends to questions for oral and written answer. Where such a declaration has been made, an 'R' appears next to the Member's name when it appears on the Order Paper.

All financial interests required to be registered by MPs under the rules of the House are published in the Register of Members' Financial Interests which is available on Parliament's website: **www.parliament.uk**

Questions for Oral Answer

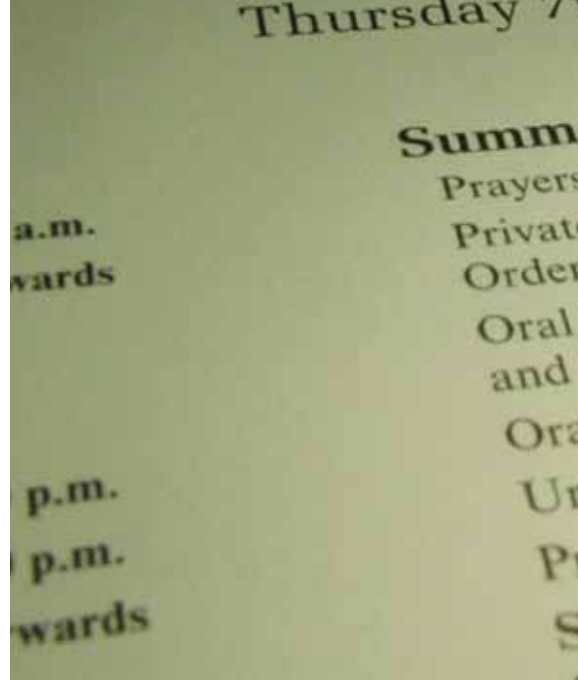
Questions for oral answer are questions asked and answered on the floor of the House of Commons. Oral question time is divided into two parts. In the first part, the minister, or appointed government spokesperson, will answer questions that have been tabled in advance (to which a response will have been prepared) and will then have to answer related supplementary questions. In the second part, ministers answer 'topical' or spontaneous questions they have no advance notice of. Ministers will have to anticipate questions that may be asked and have responses prepared.

Many more MPs wish to ask questions in the Chamber than there is time available. For each oral question time a random ballot, or 'shuffle' therefore takes place to select the MPs who will have their questions printed on the Order Paper. The deadline for Members to enter the ballot is 12.30pm on the last permitted day of tabling. As time is limited in the Chamber, only a certain number of questions are printed: for a question time lasting for 60 minutes, the substantive questions tabled by the first 25 MPs drawn in the ballot are printed, along with the topical questions tabled by the first 10. Those questions printed which are not answered orally (for lack of time) receive a written answer on the day. Questions that are unsuccessful in the shuffle are not printed and do not receive any answer.

A separate ballot is held for MPs who wish to ask topical questions. MPs wishing to enter simply write the letter 'T' in place of the text when they submit their questions to the Table Office.

Question Time

Commons Question Time is the first item of business each sitting day from Monday



to Thursday, and takes place immediately after Prayers. Questions for oral answer are not taken on Fridays. Questions are answered by government ministers sent by their departments over a cycle of five weeks. Question time lasts for one hour after the House has assembled on each day.

Question Time begins when the Speaker calls the MP whose question is listed first on the Order Paper. The MP simply stands up and says "Number One, Mr Speaker", as the text of the question is printed on the Order Paper. After the minister has responded to the original tabled question, the MP who asked that question is normally allowed to ask a second 'supplementary' question, which must be on the same subject as the tabled question. When that has been answered by the minister, the Speaker may call other Members to ask supplementaries on the same subject, usually alternating between the Government and Opposition sides of the House, before calling the Member whose question is next on the Order Paper. MPs who want to speak will rise from their seats in order to attract the

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Speaker's attention. This is known as "catching the Speaker's eye".

For questions for oral answer, departments provide not only an answer to the question itself but also a 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 supplementary 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.

Prime Minister's Question Time

The Prime Minister answers questions for half an hour each week, more frequently than the one hour per month spent by most of his Front Bench colleagues and junior ministers. This session takes place between 12 noon and 12.30pm each sitting Wednesday. Unlike

questions tabled to other ministers, there is no requirement to provide advance notice of the question to be asked: the majority of MPs merely request the Prime Minister to 'list his engagements for the day'. Supplementary questions may fall in any area within the Government's responsibilities. This means that questions to the Prime Minister are usually very topical, though it is unlikely that he will have detailed responses available to specific questions.

The Leader of the Opposition is permitted six supplementary questions in total, and will indicate to the Speaker when he wishes to be called. When in opposition, the Leader of the Liberal Democrats was allowed two questions: now that party is in government, the convention no longer holds, though the leaders of smaller parties may be called to put supplementary questions. Due to the highly topical nature of the questions asked, the Prime Minister may take the opportunity to make a statement of government policy or to give an official reaction to a recent event.

Urgent Questions

Urgent questions are questions for oral answer which have not been printed on the Order Paper but which, in the Speaker's opinion, are of an urgent character and relate to matters of public importance. Any MP may apply to the Speaker on any sitting day (before noon on Monday or Tuesday, 10.30am on Wednesday, 9.30am on Thursday or 10am on Friday) to put an oral question to a minister later that same day, on a matter that they feel meets the criteria. The Speaker will consider the MP's representations and will also take into account the minister's view of the urgency of the matter before making his decision, which is final. If the application is successful, the Urgent Question

is taken immediately after Question Time in the Commons between Monday and Thursday, or at 11am on a Friday. A minister is expected to attend to answer the question, and supplementary questions may be called until the Speaker is satisfied that debate has been exhausted or that it is time to move on to the next business. Debate on urgent questions will often last for over half an hour.

Questions for Written Answer

Questions for written answer are used by Members of Parliament to extract more detailed information from the Government than would be practical in an oral answer or to press for action. In the most recent full parliamentary session (2008–09) over 56,000 questions for written answer were successfully tabled.

Questions for ordinary written answer are formally set down for answer two sitting days after the date of tabling and MPs can expect an answer within a working week of the date for answer. On each sitting day MPs may request that no more than five questions for written answer are answered on a named day (no earlier than three sitting days after the day of tabling), and they are entitled to expect an answer to the question on that day.

Written answers

Answers are sent directly to the Member who asked the question, and are also printed in Hansard. Written answers given on a sitting day are usually published on the internet at the same time as the main Hansard debates for that day (i.e. the following day at 8am) although occasionally there are delays due to the volume of answers. Answers continue to be given during recesses: special editions of Hansard containing answers are published during the summer recess.

Under the Ministerial Code, ministers are under a duty to “give accurate and truthful information to Parliament”, and to “be as open as possible with Parliament”. This requirement governs the answers ministers provide to parliamentary questions. Ministers can refuse to provide information where its release would prejudice national security. Ministers also have the discretion not to provide answers to questions where the estimated cost of the work required in providing the answer exceeds the cost considered by the Treasury to be disproportionate (currently £800).

Sometimes the answers to questions are not published in full within Hansard:

Will Writes

Occasionally a minister's answer to a question is 'I will write to the Hon Member'. This is often because the information requested is too long for inclusion in Hansard (for instance, pages and pages of tables). In these cases, the full reply is sent to the asking Member and deposited with the House of Commons Library for other Members to read. Since November 2007, all deposited papers have been available on the Parliament website at: <http://deposits.parliament.uk> The House of Commons Information Office can also supply single copies of those not available on the website.

Chief executive replies

Sometimes ministers will refer a question to the chief executive of a government agency, or another non-departmental body, for reply. These answers appear in Hansard in the normal way.

→ Some statistics about Parliamentary Questions in the House of Commons

Questions appearing on the Order Paper	2008–09	2009–10 (short session)
Appearing on the Order Paper for Oral Answer	4,113	1,924
Put down for Written answer on a named day	8,907	4,307
Put down for ordinary Written Answer	47,285	21,160
Total	60,305	27,391

Of which **962** received an oral answer in the House in 2009-10 and **1,314** in 2008–09.

The total number of urgent questions (excluding Business Questions) was **12** in both 2009–10 and 2008–09

The total number of supplementary questions (excluding tabled questions) was **1,743** in 2009–10 and **3,365** in 2008–09.

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