

Questions to Ministers

Asking Ministers questions about their areas of responsibility is a very important way in which the Assembly fulfils its function of scrutinising the Executive. Questions oblige Ministers to explain the work, policy decisions and actions of their Departments. They are tools that can be used by MLAs to raise issues of concern to constituents, by seeking information from the Minister or pressing for action.

Questions must satisfy certain rules regarding content. They must relate to a matter for which the Minister has responsibility. They should not state or seek an opinion, be made in a spirit of mockery or designed merely to annoy. They should not contain statements of facts or names of individuals, unless they are strictly necessary for the question to make sense and can be verified.

Standing Orders

These are the rules governing the operation of the Assembly. Standing Orders No 19 and 20 deal with Questions. To read in full, go to <http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/assembly-business/standing-orders/>

The Member asking the question must declare any interest in the matter, so that they cannot be seen to be using their position as an MLA to further their own interests outside the Assembly. For example, if a Member is a Director of a company developing renewable energy sources, they would have to declare this interest before asking the Minister for Infrastructure what his/her Department is doing to promote renewable alternatives to fossil fuels in the production of electricity for Northern Ireland. The Register of Members' Interests is where Members declare any interests that they hold outside the Assembly, such as jobs, gifts or membership of organisations that might affect their position in the Assembly.

Questions are tabled (submitted) in the Business Office. They can be emailed, posted or faxed by a Member, or the one other person who has been authorised to act on their behalf.

There are 5 types of question: **Questions for Oral Answer**, **Topical Questions**, **Questions for Urgent Oral Answer** (to Ministers in the Chamber), **Written Questions** and **Priority Written Questions**.

Questions for Oral Answer

Questions for oral answer are those to which the Minister has to reply during a plenary meeting of the Assembly in the Chamber. This is known as **Question Time** and is a very public way of getting Ministers to explain what they and their Department are doing.



Question Time takes place in the Chamber between 2.00pm and 3.30pm on Mondays *and* Tuesdays. A rota is agreed in advance to determine which Ministers are due to answer questions. Each Minister is subjected to oral questions for 30 minutes, followed by 15 minutes of Topical Questions and 4 Departments will answer questions each week. Due to the reduction in the number of Government Departments, Ministers are now on the rota more often. It used to be every 4 weeks, now it is every 2 weeks. Ministers will have to face questions more often but this also means MLAs will have to come up with more oral questions to ask! The First Minister or deputy First Minister is subject to questions once a fortnight. They can also ask a Junior Minister to answer the question if it is in their area of responsibility.



Members who wish to table a question for oral answer must submit their names to the Business Office by Tuesday at 1pm. Members' names are then put into a random **ballot** and 15 Members are selected to ask questions of the Minister at Question Time. The 15 successful Members will then have until Thursday at 1pm to submit their questions. The 15 questions submitted are then put into a random **shuffle** on Thursday afternoon to determine the order in which they will be taken during Question Time. While there will be 15 questions listed per Minister, it is unlikely that more than 10 questions will be answered on the day, usually it is only 6. The rest will receive written answers. The first question to each Minister may not be from a Member of the same Party as the Minister. If a Member is not present in the Chamber when his/her question is asked, the question will be passed over and will receive a written answer.

The questions for oral answer are published every Friday and will be answered in the Chamber on the Monday (11 days later) and Tuesday (12 days later). Therefore, Ministers have just under 2 weeks to prepare answers. Civil Servants draft answers for approval by Ministers.

Questions will be taken by Ministers in the order in which they are published. Each Member whose listed question is called can then pose a **supplementary question** if time permits. This is a follow-up question which is not known by the Minister in advance. The Speaker decides whether further supplementary questions will be allowed (usually no more than 4). Members must rise in their places to indicate that they wish to ask a supplementary question. Members can use supplementary questions to further scrutinise a Minister in more detail on a particular issue. A supplementary question must be relevant to the original question. The Minister needs to be very well briefed to deal with every possible question that might arise from the original. Ministers must answer questions as clearly and as fully as possible. Answers to original and supplementary questions may be no longer than two minutes, but this may be extended to three minutes at the discretion of the Speaker.

Topical Questions

Introduced in September 2012, Topical Question Time is an extra 15 minutes of Questions for Ministers following their regular Question Time on current or 'topical' issues. Ministers will be informed 3 working days in advance of the names of Members selected to ask topical questions. However, there is no requirement on the Member to inform the Minister of the content of the question. A topical question can be about a constituency or regional matter. Ministers will require very up-to-date briefings on all issues within their area of responsibility. One supplementary question is allowed from the Member asking the original question but no other Members will be allowed to ask a supplementary during Topical Question Time.

Publication of Questions & Answers

- Written questions tabled each day are available in the *Daily List of Written Questions* the following day.
- The full text of oral questions and answers are recorded in the Official Report (Hansard), published on the Assembly's website www.niassembly.gov.uk from 11.00 am on the day after Question Time. (However the first draft is published and gradually updated through the day.)
- Written answers are recorded in a separate Written Answers Booklet, published on the website every Monday morning.
- All questions and answers are therefore widely available to the public.



Questions for Urgent Oral Answer

Questions for urgent oral answer are oral questions for Ministers which do not appear on the Order Paper, as they have arisen at short notice. The Speaker will decide if a question for urgent oral answer is selected based on whether or not it is of an urgent nature and concerns a matter of public importance. The Minister must have at least 4 hours notice to prepare an answer. Questions for urgent oral answer are usually taken immediately after Question Time. If more than one MLA submits a question on the same topic, the first question received by the Business Office will be asked.

The Role of the Speaker at Question Time

- The Speaker controls the pace of Question Time. If he/she allows too many supplementary questions, the Minister will be under close scrutiny on a few questions but the total number of questions answered will be fewer. However, if the Speaker calls too few supplementary questions, more questions will be answered but the subject may not have been dealt with as fully as possible. The Speaker will try to find the right balance.
- When selecting who gets to ask supplementary questions, the Speaker will try to ensure a cross-community balance over the 45 minutes during which the Minister is subject to questioning.
- The Speaker will also try to ensure the progress of Question Time by periodically appealing to Members to keep their supplementary questions short. He/she may check a Member for being too lengthy or engaging in debate.

Written Questions

The vast majority of questions are written questions. Written questions can be longer and ask for more detailed information from Ministers than would be available in an answer to an oral question.



Members can table up to 5 written questions per day. Departments will have up to 10 working days to answer written questions. However, a Member may table one **Priority Written Question** per day to be answered between 2 and 5 working days later. Such questions should not request large amounts of historical or statistical information.

NB There was a significant increase in the number of written questions since the introduction of an Official Opposition. During the 2011–16 Mandate, on average, **65** daily written questions were tabled in the Business Office. In the first 9 weeks of the new Mandate, it received 4900 questions, which equates to an average of **108** written questions per day.



Impact of Covid-19

Written questions, oral questions and questions for urgent oral answer continued to be asked and answered during lockdown restrictions between 31 March and 21 July 2020. Only one plenary meeting per week was held during this period, therefore reducing by half the number of Ministers questioned in the Chamber. No topical questions were asked during this period. MLAs continued to ask questions in the Chamber and party whips managed attendance to ensure social distancing. Smaller parties worked closely with others to ensure there was adequate space in the Chamber.

How Many Questions?

2011–2016 mandate

- A total of 72,294 questions were asked of Ministers, of which 62,189 (86%) were written questions and 10,105 (14%) were oral questions.
- Of the 10,105 oral questions tabled,
 - 4,344 (43%) were answered by Ministers in the Chamber; and
 - 5,761 (57%) received a written reply (i.e. were not answered in the Chamber).
- The Minister for Health, Social Services and Public Safety was asked the most written questions (16%) and the Minister for Culture, Arts and Leisure, the fewest written questions (5%).
- The highest number of written questions asked by a single MLA is 4260 and the lowest is 32.

2016–2017 mandate

- There were 987 Oral Questions and 9784 Written Questions – an average of 92 per day.
- The Minister of Health received the most Written Questions (2088), followed by Minister of Education (1168). The Minister of Finance received the lowest number (491).
- The highest number of written questions from one MLA was 99. There were three who didn't ask any questions (excluding Ministers, Junior Ministers and Speaker).
- Of Oral Questions; 274 of the 987 were answered in plenary, the rest were answered in writing.

2017–2022 mandate

- Between January 2020 (when the Assembly resumed operating) and end August 2020, the Business Office received 5925 written questions; which equates to 49 written questions per day. There were 549 oral questions tabled between 1 January 2020 – 31 August 2020.



Further research and discussion

For examples of questions and a search facility, go to:
<http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/assembly-business/questions/>

Is Question Time in the Chamber a more effective means of scrutiny than Written Questions?

Do you think that 'topical questions' improve the Assembly's ability to hold the Executive to account?

How might the introduction of an Official Opposition affect Questions?

