Northern Ireland Assembly
Education Service

Questions to Ministers

Asking Ministers questions about their areas of responsibility is an important way in which the Assembly fulfils its function of scrutinising the Executive. Questions ask 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 seek an opinion, or contain arguments, ironical expressions, or hypothetical matters. 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 to 20C deal with Questions. To read in full, go to the Northern Ireland Assembly website. www.niassembly.gov.uk

MLAs must declare any relevant interests when asking questions (or in any approach to a Minister, or public official or public body). The Register of Members' Interests is where Members declare interests, such as jobs, gifts, or membership of organisations.

Questions are tabled (submitted) in the Business Office. Members can submit questions by hand, by post or electronically. Members can authorise one other person to table questions on their behalf. There are 4 types of question: **Questions for Oral Answer**, **Topical Questions**, **Questions for Urgent Oral Answer** (asked of Ministers in the Chamber), and **Written Questions**.

Questions for Oral Answer



Questions for oral answer are those to which the Minister replies 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 between 2.00pm and 3.30pm on Mondays and between 2.00pm and 2.45pm on Tuesdays. A rota is agreed in advance to determine which

Ministers are due to answer questions on which dates. Each Minister is scheduled to answer listed oral questions for 30 minutes, followed by 15 minutes of Topical Questions and 3 Ministers will answer questions each week (2 on a Monday and one on a Tuesday). The First Minister or deputy First Minister are scheduled to answer questions once a fortnight. During Question Time, they may 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. The successful Members will then have until Thursday at 1pm to submit their questions. The 15 questions are then put into a random shuffle on Thursday 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 and, usually, it is only 6. In the 2022-27 mandate, Speaker Edwin Poots MLA has encouraged Ministers to try to answer more questions. Questions which are not answered in the Chamber will receive written answers. If a member is not present in the Chamber when their question is reached, they will also receive a written answer. Questions for oral answer are published every Friday and will be answered 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 follow-up question is not known by the Minister in advance. The Speaker decides whether further supplementary questions will be allowed (usually no more than 4) and which Members are called to ask them. Members must rise in their places to indicate that they wish to do so. Supplementary questions enable more detailed scrutiny on a particular issue. They must be relevant to the original question and answer.

(Note: In March 2022, the Assembly considered a range of proposals to change Standing Orders to provide for speaking rights for an Official Opposition, including during Question Time. Proposals to provide that the official opposition be entitled to ask the (i) first listed oral question to a Minister; and (ii) first supplementary question after the tabling member for (a) the first three listed oral questions and (b) urgent oral questions did not receive the necessary cross-community support.

However, when there are listed oral questions to Ministers it is for the Speaker to decide which Members are then called to ask supplementary questions. The Speaker may use this discretion to allow the Opposition to ask these supplementary questions.)

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 should be no longer than two minutes, but this may be extended to three minutes at the discretion of the Speaker, following a request by the Minister.

Topical Questions

Introduced in September 2013, Topical Question Time is an extra 15 minutes of questions to a Minister on current or 'topical' issues, following regular Question Time. Names of Members selected to ask a topical question are published on the Wednesday before the scheduled Question Time. There is no requirement on the Member to inform the Minister of the content of the question.

When there is an official opposition, the first topical question must be asked by a member of the Opposition.

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. Only one supplementary question is allowed from the Member asking the original question.

Publication of Questions & Answers

- Written questions tabled each day are published on the *Daily List of Written Questions*
- 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
- Written answers are recorded in a separate *Written Answers Booklet*
- 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 decides if a submitted question 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. These questions are usually answered immediately after Question Time. If more than one MLA submits a question on the same topic, the first one received by the Business Office will be asked.



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. However, a Member may table one **Priority Written Question** per day to be answered between 2 and 5 working days later. Priority questions should not request large amounts of historical or statistical information.

How Many Questions?

2022 - 2027 Mandate (5 February 2024 to 29 September 2026)

- There were 47,957 written questions to Ministers.
- The 3 Departments which received the most questions were:
- Health 11,246
- Infrastructure 7,517
- Education 6,210
- 4,067 oral questions were tabled for Question Time in the Chamber. Not all get answered due to time limits, but those not answered orally receive a written answer.

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 listed 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 party balance. 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 making statements.
- The Speaker will also watch the timing of answers by Ministers. Answers should

usually be no more than 2 minutes long, but the Speaker may allow an extra minute, following a request by the Minister.

Speaker Edwin Poots has stressed the importance of questions as a tool for the Assembly to hold Ministers to account. He has sought to make Question Time more dynamic by encouraging Ministers to answer more questions. When an MLA raised a concern about the Justice Department not answering a written question - saying it did not hold information in relation the PSNI - the Speaker told Ministers that they should make every effort to answer Assembly questions and that he would do everything within his power to ensure that MLAs get answers to their questions, so that the Assembly can hold the Executive to account.

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 an official Opposition impact on the effectiveness of Question Time?