

Nationality Instructions

Procedural section

Parliamentary questions

1. Home Office Parliamentary Section publishes guidance in dealing with written and oral PQs (including briefing for PM's Questions). This guidance, "Parliamentary Questions - A Handbook for Official Use" should be consulted when required.

2. General

2.1 Ministers often wish to announce important initiatives or policy changes to Parliament. There are a number of ways of doing this, ranging from making an Oral Statement to arranging for a member to table a written Parliamentary Question (PQ) on the subject. Parliamentary Section or Private Office can advise on the most appropriate method, but should be alerted in good time to the fact that such an announcement will be needed.

2.2 Home Office Ministers answer oral questions in the Commons at monthly intervals when the House is in session. The Home Office spokesman in the Lords can be asked oral questions on any sitting day.

2.3 Parliamentary Section is responsible for identifying and distributing individual PQs to Units. Draft answers and any supplementary briefing are submitted to Parliamentary Section, who will submit them to the relevant Minister's Private Office.

2.4 The objective in drafting replies to PQs is to prepare Ministers to promote, explain and defend Government policy in the areas on which they are questioned.

3. Prime Minister's Questions

3.1 A guidance document, "Briefing on Prime Minister's Questions", is held by all Directors. Although the principles of preparing replies to Prime Minister's Questions are the same as for other questions, reference to this specific guidance should be made when work is being prepared on a Prime Minister's Question.

4. Oral Parliamentary Questions: Procedure in Parliament

4.1 The pace of Oral Questions is quite fast, and replies should be tailored accordingly. The Speaker calls out the name of the Member who stands up and calls out the number appearing against his or her name in the Order Paper. The text of the Question is not read out. The Minister then gives a reply based on what the Department has drafted.

4.2 The Speaker then calls the Member to ask that Minister a supplementary question (which must be relevant to the original Question). The Speaker will then call any other Member whose Question has been grouped with the original Question (either because it was identical or very similar) to ask a supplementary question. Other Members are also usually called to ask supplementary questions. The Minister normally has to answer three or four supplementary questions to each original Question, and these can be on much wider, though related, issues.

4.3 Members whose main Questions have not been reached when time runs out receive written answers that day. Draft replies for Questions that are very unlikely to

be reached should reflect this by providing a fuller answer. Advice can be obtained from Parliamentary Section.

5. Format of briefing

5.1 The preferred format is the setting out, in order, of:

- Draft reply
- Key statistics
- Likely supplementary questions
- Good presentational questions
- Other relevant material, including extracts from Hansard

5.2 Tips on drafting for oral PQs

- Accuracy and openness are essential
- Preparing briefing for oral Questions is a two-stage affair:
 - i. drafting an answer to the tabled Question: this should be very short (two or three crisp sentences at most), accurate and free of jargon; and
 - ii. anticipating what lies behind the Question by giving key supplementary guidance, which can be read out verbatim. This should cover the questions most likely to be asked and raise positive points which, given the opportunity, the Minister should try to make. (Ministers will wish to present Government policy in the best light and not be defensive about it.)
- Answers and lines to take which are going to be read straight out usually need to make more impact than written replies. Keeping sentences short, and to the point, helps. It is therefore always worth reading your draft answers and speaking notes aloud
- Where Ministers have particular drafting or presentational preferences, these are given in the guidance for individual Ministers
- Oral Questions underline ministerial accountability by enabling Government Ministers to be questioned directly in the sometimes pressurised atmosphere of the Chamber of the House. The vast majority of supplementary questions are not notified in advance. These can range widely, and Ministers therefore expect officials to:
 - i. "think behind" the Question, and consider the interests of the MP asking the Question when preparing briefing;
 - ii. provide positive points which, given the opportunity, the Minister should try to make;
 - iii. keep sentences short and to the point, which will help answers to make an impact when they are read out;
 - iv. you should not need to cover more than 10 supplementary points.

- Where fairly similar supplementaries are submitted repeatedly, these should always be re-examined critically to ensure that they are up to date and concentrate on what is essential
- If similar questions have been asked in the past, you should note this in the briefing and check that your proposed reply is consistent
- Answers to PQs are printed the following day in the official report (Hansard). Always check the Hansard report. If there are any errors to the published answers, Parliamentary Section should be notified at once.
- Read aloud to yourself answers to questions (including supplementaries) to ensure the text is easy to read (e.g. brackets do not sound well in spoken answer)

5.3 Examples of an oral PQ answer and supplementaries are shown in the Parliamentary Questions handbook. NB. When providing briefing for Prime Minister's Questions, the style detailed in "Briefing for Prime Minister's Questions" should be used.

6. Written Questions

6.1 Written PQs are part of the process by which Members and Peers gather information from the Government, and by which the Government makes announcements and places information on the public record.

6.2 Ministers should be provided with a draft answer and essential background information (including any similar or related questions previously asked by the Member concerned or others), so that they can reply accurately, truthfully and concisely.

6.3 Procedure

- Parliamentary Section allocates PQs to the relevant Units and sets the deadline for draft replies
- When the replies are returned, Parliamentary Section passes them to the appropriate Private office for the Minister's approval
- Once the replies have been approved, Parliamentary Section makes the necessary arrangements for them to be dispatched

6.4 Tips on drafting for written PQs

6.4.1 As with answers to oral PQs, answers to written PQs should:

- adopt a positive and helpful tone
- be accurate, clear, concise and free of jargon
- answer the question!

7. Both oral and written PQs

- The answer given has to relate directly to the question
- Although it may not be possible to give a full answer to the whole of the question, it may be possible to give information which relates to part, and the answer should be drafted accordingly
- If it is not possible to provide information relevant to the question, it might be right to explain why rather than simply saying that it is not available. Ministers do not wish to be unhelpful in their responses to PQs
- The general rule is that PQs should be submitted by Directors. However, where the reply is urgent and arrangements cannot be made for the Director to clear a PQ, it should be submitted below that level. If the draft has been seen by a Director or other senior officer who was not present physically to minute the draft, the fact that it has been cleared by him or her should be minuted.