



**Ministry
of Justice**

**Parliamentary Questions –
Guidance**

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Part 1 – Introduction

This guidance document is a reference document for Action Officers (AO's) in the MoJ and contains everything an AO needs to carry out their role including:

- Details about an AO's duties and responsibilities
- The role of Parliamentary Branch
- The MoJ's operating processes for responding to Parliamentary Questions
- Guidance, tips and FAQs.

Contacting us

We can be contacted via email at the following address: pqs@justice.gsi.gov.uk

Alternatively, our contact details are as follows:

- | | | |
|------------------------|---------------------------|---------------|
| • Aaron Manku | Head of PQs and PMQs Team | 0203 334 3480 |
| • Yaroslava Koseva | Parliamentary Officer | 0203 545 8599 |
| • James Wood | Parliamentary Officer | 0203 334 6155 |
| • Marcus Tucker-Cooper | Parliamentary Officer | 020 3334 4470 |
| • Zara Clifford | Parliamentary Assistant | 020 3334 4466 |

Our postal address is:

Parliamentary Branch
Post point 9.25A
102 Petty France
London
SW1H 9AJ

What is on the web – handy links

MoJ Intranet

Parliamentary Questions guidance: <http://intranet.justice.gsi.gov.uk/ministers-parliament/working-with-parliament/parliamentary-questions/index.htm>

Parliament Website

Parliamentary Questions factsheet:

<http://www.parliament.uk/about/how/guides/factsheets/procedure/p01/>

Hansard; Commons PQs by MP: <http://intranet.justice.gsi.gov.uk/ministers-parliament/working-with-parliament/parliamentary-questions/pqs-commons.htm>

Hansard; Commons PQs by date & subject area:

<http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/hansard/commons/by-date/#session=62738&year=2013&month=0&day=28>

Hansard; Lords' PQs by Peer: <http://intranet.justice.gsi.gov.uk/ministers-parliament/working-with-parliament/parliamentary-questions/pqs-lords.htm>

Hansard; Lords' PQs by date & subject area:
<http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/hansard/lords/by-date/#session=62738&year=2013&month=0&day=28>

They work for you

<http://www.theyworkforyou.com/mp/>

Part 2 – Roles and responsibilities

Action Officers

- Requests processed in line with Parliamentary Branch's processes and procedures
- Responses returned to Parliamentary Branch by set deadlines
- Sensitive cases are dealt with in line with the High Profile criteria
- Advising of changes to your business area and ensuring adequate cover.

Parliamentary Branch

- Distribute PQs to Action Officers for answer
- Handle any transfers to other government departments
- Receive draft responses, pass to SpAds and prepare for Ministerial signature
- Deliver PQs to both Houses
- Provide training courses to new Action Officers and ongoing training across the department
- Supporting capability – providing advice on PQ handling

Provide performance information:

We provide The Procedure Committee with timeliness information relating to Commons written and named day PQs on a sessional basis.

Statistics relating to performance for the 2012-13 Parliamentary session are available on the Parliament website as follows:

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201314/cmselect/cmproced/writev/wpqs/p30.pdf>

We also report monthly statistics on Lords written answers.

Part 3 – Types of PQs and deadlines

How do PQs reach the department?

MPs/Peers table PQs in their respective House. The department receives these the next day, via email, from the Parliamentary Table Office.

What does Parliamentary Branch do when PQs are received?

Parliamentary Branch commissions all new PQs by 10.30am each day via the PQ Tracker System.

- Finance colleagues go through the list of PQs in the morning and highlight those PQs that will require input from them.
- PQs are commissioned through the new PQ Tracker System to the relevant individual Action Officer.
- 'Accept' and 'Reject' links are included in the commissioning email sent to the Action Officer allowing them to accept or reject a PQ and (if rejecting) explain their reasons why.
- The PQ template and all relevant guidance can be found on the MoJ intranet. A link is provided direct to the Parliamentary Branch pages in the commissioning email.
- Once the initial commissioning process is complete, a PQ watchlist is sent out that lists all of the days MoJ PQs. This is sent to a large list of individuals who have requested sight of the day's PQs. Please contact Parliamentary Branch if you wish to be on this list.

Q. What is the Parliament's Identifying Number (PIN)?

In the Commons the UIN is a five or six figure number in brackets located immediately below the question on the right hand side. In the Lords it is indicated by the letters HL followed by a number in brackets.

Types of PQs and timescales

There are three types of written PQs:

1. **Commons Ordinary Written:** The deadline in which to respond to the MP is five 'sitting days'.

Parliamentary Branch allocate **two** days for Action Officers to return a draft

2. **Commons Named Day:** The PQ must be answered on a date specified by the MP tabling the question.

The deadline is generally two 'sitting days'. Parliamentary Branch allocate **one** day for Action Officers to return a draft – this is allow time for clearance by interested parties (i.e. the individuals who you copy when the PQ is returned) before the response is printed off and delivered to the appropriate Minister for sign-off.

Note: MPs may table a named day much further in advance. Where this occurs, it is likely you will have an extended deadline in which to provide a draft

to Parliamentary Branch. This will be communicated in the commissioning email.

3. **Lords' written questions:** The deadline in which to respond is ten working days.

Parliamentary Branch allocate **3–4** days for Action Officers to return a draft. Further time is required to ensure the draft can be cleared by both the Minister of State and additional Policy Minister.

Part 4 – Processing a PQ

Accepting or rejecting a new case

Upon receipt of the commissioning email, you should assess the PQ and click the 'Accept' or 'Reject' link in the email.

Rejecting a PQ – if you do not think we should have allocated this PQ to you, please click the 'Reject' link. In the relevant box that appears please state why your policy area is not best placed to deal, and if you can, please suggest where the PQ sits.

Please note: If a request spans multiple business units, we will allocate to the business unit with the greatest interest who will be asked to take a lead drafting the response, seeking contributions from other business units. If such a PQ has been incorrectly allocated to you please reject in line with the above guidance.

If a PQ is asking for statistical information, we will commission it to an Action Officer in the relevant policy team. It is then up to the Action Officer in the policy team to seek an input from the relevant statistics team. This will allow the policy team to ensure that the statistics are provided in the answer with the right context

Transfers

On occasion, a MP/Peer will table a PQ to the wrong department – this then needs to be transferred to the correct department by Parliamentary Branch.

Rejecting a PQ not for the Ministry of Justice

If you believe a PQ does not fall under the remit of the department, please reject immediately in line with the instructions above (and in the commissioning email). Please advise which department you think the question falls to and (where possible) the name of a lead official in the relevant area of that department (if known).

Parliamentary Branch will seek agreement to transfer with the department concerned. If the department accepts responsibility for answering the question, it will be transferred to them. If the department refuses to accept a transfer, the PQs team may ask for your assistance. This may include liaison between you and colleagues in the other department to agree who is best placed to respond to the PQ.

Handling PQs transferred to the department

Where a PQ is transferred to us, we will make direct contact with you to confirm if it is for the department.

Once we have confirmed an action officer, we will confirm with the transferring department that the PQ is for us. You will need to process the PQ in line with the processes below.

PQ Handling – Press Office Intervention and high profile criteria

The information below identifies under what circumstances PQs are likely to require Press Office involvement. Please refer to the high profile criteria for more information

- Relate to the Ministerial team's five priority areas: transforming rehabilitation; the youth estate; reform of the courts and criminal justice system; reducing prison costs; and ensuring the legal aid system commands public confidence
- Relate to any other high profile or sensitive policy issue
- Uncover facts we were not aware of (that may attract Parliamentary or media attention)
- Show a deterioration in effectiveness or delivery
- Show an increase in spending
- Provide statistical information not already in the public domain
- Raise possible coalition sensitivities or handling issues.

What do I do next – Processing the PQ

You should begin to process the request, gathering the information for inclusion in the response.

Drafting a Response

Answers to written PQs should be factual and concise. There is no minimum or maximum length for a written answer.

All responses should be drafted in font; Times New Roman, size 12 throughout. Please refer to the draft template for further guidance on drafting the content of the response.

Stick to the scope of the question!

If you are unsure what is being asked for, define the scope of your answer in the response, and explain the reasoning for taking this approach in the background to the PQ.

If you are experiencing difficulties deciphering the scope of the question, please speak to the PQs team, it may be that a correction has been received or that a member of the team can contact the MP's/Peer's office for further clarification.

Corrections

On occasion, MPs/Peers will make amendments to a PQ they tabled to the department. In this instance, the Table Office will advise the department.

When received, Parliamentary Branch will liaise with you and advise of any corrections to the PQ you are drafting.

Releasing information already in the public domain

Where information is already in the public domain, you should steer the MP/Peer towards it, providing links where necessary.

Releasing information provided in a previous PQ response

If you have previously provided the information and it is still accurate, you can refer to this.

The answer should read as follows:

“I refer the hon. Member to the reply given to the hon. Member for [constituency]/ Peer on [date], Official Report, [insert columns].”

You should explain in the background note that the PQ has previously been answered provide a copy of the relevant Hansard extract.

This approach should **not** be used:

- where the answer was given in a previous administration
- where the answer was given in a previous session or
- where the answer was given many months before in the same session.

However, to contradict this, if the information is identical and still accurate, you can use the same information – however, do not make reference to the previous answer returned to the MP/Peer.

Disproportionate costs

If it is estimated it would cost the department £850 (approximately 4½ working days at £25 an hour) or more to process a PQ response, then we can refuse to do so.

In the first instance, you should complete the ‘Disproportionate Costs’ estimate table attached in the commissioning email. If this indicates that the cost of providing the information at the level of detail required would exceed the disproportionate costs threshold you should refuse the information.

The completed estimate table should be attached when you return the PQ and the background note should clearly explain the reasons and justification for the answer.

Where information is being refused on the grounds of disproportionate cost, the answer should explain why it would incur a disproportionate cost – readily available information does not need to be provided.

Difficulties accessing information within deadlines

You should notify Parliamentary branch immediately if the full information is not available within the deadline set. The answer should state that a letter with the comprehensive answer will be sent shortly. In the meantime, you should provide as much information as is currently available in the answer to the PQ.

It is your responsibility to follow up the original PQ response, providing the PQ team with a copy of the information when it is available to deliver to the House.

Attaching tables

Please also ensure that the table is appropriately formatted. All tables should be created in Word or Excel and contain text that is large enough to read. There should be a clear heading above the table showing what it represents and notes below, where necessary, to explain the information. To refer to a table in the text of the answer, use the words: “The information is in the table(s) below.” Do not refer to the table “attached” as the table will be below the answer when published in Hansard.

Grouping PQs

If you have received a number of questions from the same MP all relating to the same subject, they can be grouped together and one single answer provided. The format of the question should set out the first listed question in full, marked (1), followed by the other questions, each numbered (2), (3), (4), etc. The subsequent questions need not repeat the opening phrase “To ask the Secretary of State for Justice”. For example:

“**[Member]** (constituency): To ask the Secretary of State for Justice,

(1) how many ...

(Parliament’s Identifying Number)

(2) how many ...

(Parliament’s Identifying Number)

(3) how many ...”

(Parliament’s Identifying Number)

If the questions are from the same MP but cover different subject areas they should not be grouped but answered in separate responses. If you do group responses not similar, they will be returned to you for re-formatting.

Round Robins

A Round Robin is an identical PQ tabled by the same MP/Peer to 3 or more departments.

In most instances, Cabinet Office will provide early notification of a Round Robin request and will advise guidance to follow. A government department or the Cabinet Office will be nominated to draft and issue guidance across Whitehall (normally by that afternoon).

We will advise you the PQ is a Round Robin and once received in Parliamentary Branch, we will immediately provide you with a copy of the guidance and you should draft the response in line with the guidance provided.

Q. I haven’t received any guidance?

A. If you haven’t received any guidance you should, in the first instance contact Parliamentary Branch who will chase with Cabinet Office/ the nominated government department.

If the deadline is fast approaching you should answer the question factually, flagging in the background note that central guidance has not yet been received and that the answer has been drafted in the absence of guidance.

If you have to submit a round robin answer without guidance, please notify the PQs team in your covering email.

Troubleshooting

Q. How do I refer to another Member/Peer in an answer?

A. MPs should be referred to in the third party, and by the constituency they represent (not by name). The correct forms of address are as follows:

<i>MP in the same political party</i>	My hon. Friend, the Member for [constituency] (MP's name)
<i>MP in a different political party</i>	The hon. Member for [constituency] (MP's name)
<i>If the MP is a Privy Counsellor</i>	My Rt hon. Friend / The Rt hon. Member for [constituency] (MP's name)
<i>If the MP is a QC</i>	My hon. and learned Friend / The hon. and learned Member for [constituency] (MP's name)
<i>If the MP is a QC and Privy Counsellor</i>	My Rt hon. and learned Friend / The Rt hon. and learned Member for [constituency] (MP's name)
<i>Government Spokespersons in the Lords <u>or</u> member of the same party in the Lords</i>	My noble Friend
<i>Other Peers</i>	The noble Lord / Lady

Background Note

The background note provides context to the Minister signing off the PQ.

It contains two sections: (1) PQ Action List and (2) Supplementary Information

(1) PQ Action List

This section poses a series of questions, you should answer each of these in bullet point format, and use the answers to help frame the PQ response.

(2) Supplementary Information

This section poses a series of questions to provide Ministers with the appropriate background to the PQ. should provide:

Length

The note should be between 1–2 pages in length (although sometimes longer, for instance if there are a number of relevant Hansard extracts that need to be provided).

Q. How do I know what questions MPs have asked before?

A. Extracts can be found on the Parliament website:

by MP: <http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/hansard/commons/by-mp/>

by Peer: <http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/hansard/lords/by-lord/>

Commons by date & subject area:

<http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/hansard/commons/by-date/#session=62738&year=2013&month=0&day=28>

Lords by date & subject area:

<http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/hansard/lords/by-date/#session=62738&year=2013&month=0&day=28>

Clearance

Before you submit the final response to the PQ team and the wider copy list, you should ensure the appropriate clearance at your end – someone at SCS level or above.

If your immediate SCS cannot clear the answer, someone else at the same level or higher must clear it. If this is not possible within the deadline set by the PQ team, please contact them for advice.

Meeting Parliamentary Branch's deadline

Parliamentary deadlines are non-negotiable as they are set by Parliament - if it is not possible to meet the Parliamentary Branch deadline, please contact one of the PQ team immediately.

Submitting the final response late has wider ramifications e.g. allowing time for any comments/amendments, final Ministerial sign-off and returning to the House.

How to return the draft

Once cleared, the final answer and background note should be emailed to the PQs team. The draft should be attached with the following naming convention:

PIN Number – MP/Peer Name – Brief description of PQ

e.g. 123456 – Joe Bloggs – Knife Crime Stats

e.g. HL1234 – Joe Bloggs – Knife Crime Stats

We ask for the PQ to be returned in this way because each day, electronic versions of *all* PQs answered that day, are sent to colleagues across the department and the Press Team save each response for out-of-hours referral. Strict naming conventions allow them to file PQs appropriately (either by MP/ Peer name or subject area)

In addition:

In the email subject line:

- The date the response is due in the House
- **Type of PQ i.e. Named Day / Ordinary Written / Lord's**
- Indicate the name of the MP / peer and;
- Parliament's Unique Identifying Number (the 5 or 6 digit number that appears at the end of the question)

e.g. "RE: 123456 – Joe Bloggs – Named Day – Due for answer in the House xx xx xx – Subject of PQ"

In the email body:

- identify who cleared the response
- provide the full wording of the PQ question

- a brief summary of the response i.e. full disclosure, disproportionate costs, directed to information
- identify any sensitivities relating to the PQ, e.g. if there has been Press Office intervention.

We ask for you to provide these details to assist those responsible for clearing responses (e.g. Press and Private Office colleagues) prioritise responses requiring urgent clearance to meet Parliamentary deadlines or to identify high profile PQs that require immediate attention e.g. by MP name or subject area.

Copy list:

The answer **must** be copied to all of the following:

1. **Parliamentary Branch**
2. **Special Advisors**
3. **Head of News**
4. **Deputy Head of News**
5. **Press Officers**
6. **The SCS who cleared the response**
7. **Your designated Press Officer (if applicable i.e. where a designated Press Officer has been involved in the handling of the PQ)**
8. **Any applicable individuals in your team**

For ease of reference, email addresses for those at points 1 – 5 above can be located in the commissioning template.

Please be aware – PQs not sent to the full copy list as identified above, will be returned back to you to re-send to the full copy list.

More information on returning the draft can be found in the commissioning email

PQ Queries

Once you have submitted the draft, those on the copy list will look at and clear the response.

In the event of queries, the individual with questions will reply to advise, the PQ team will advise of a new deadline in which to return the PQ response (to ensure Parliamentary deadline is still met).

Once the revised deadline has been set – you should liaise only with the individual who queried the response (no need to cc Parliamentary Branch into every email)

Most of the time it will be easier to pick up the phone to work through difficulties!

Once the necessary amendments have been made you should resubmit the final response to the **original copy list** (detailed at step 4 of the commissioning email) to ensure that all parties are happy before the response is re-submitted for Ministerial sign-off.

Next Steps – Minister sign-off

Once the response had been submitted to the copy list indicated in the commissioning email the draft will be considered where there may be queries raised or further clarification sought. After an answer has been agreed via Private Office clearance, the PQ team will print the response, background note and any

attachments and deliver these to the appropriate Ministerial team for Ministerial sign off.

Where a Lord's PQ relates to a portfolio area of another Minister it will require double sign-off – from both the Policy Minister and the Minister of State.

Further PQ Queries

If the Minister has any queries, the response will be returned to Parliamentary Branch. A member of the team will be in touch to advise of a new deadline in which to return the PQ response (to ensure Parliamentary deadline is still met)

If there are any substantive amendments made to the content of the response you should resubmit the final response to the original copy list (detailed at step 4 of the commissioning email) to ensure that all parties are happy before the response is re-submitted for Ministerial sign-off.

Post-sign off – what happens?

Once the PQ has been signed off, it is returned to Parliamentary Branch. The PQ team appropriately format the response in preparation for return to the House.

Various copies of each response are prepared for hand-delivery to various destinations in both Houses.

Once received, the PQ is published on Hansard. The Parliamentary Assistant will contact you with the Hansard extract for your confirmation that the question and answer has been published accurately.

Mistakes in an answer

Where an error is discovered in an answer, it must be corrected. Very minor corrections that do not alter the meaning of the original text can be made editorially by Hansard if they are identified early enough. Other errors may require formal correction, either via the Ministerial Correction section of Hansard or a Written Ministerial Statement. Please contact the PQs team immediately. They will provide advice on the most appropriate way to correct errors.