

Blue Book

K – Parliamentary, Ministerial and Top Management Group

K1: Oral Parliamentary Questions: Houses of Commons, Lords and Prime Minister's Question Time

Background

In the House of Commons, **Oral questions on International Development** occur once every four/five weeks (on a Wednesday at 11.30am) when Parliament is in session. DFID receives notice of its oral questions on the Thursday before, and briefing is due within 24 hours on the Friday at 12 noon. Deadlines are tight to ensure Ministers have the maximum amount of time for preparation and must be respected. We receive 15 questions.

In the **House of Lords oral questions** can be tabled at any time. These are known as "starred questions". The House of Lords also take requests from peers for "Topical Oral Questions"

Prime Minister's (PM) Questions are held every Wednesday (at 12 noon) when Parliament is in session. Deadlines are short, notice of requirements are often given on the Tuesday night or Wednesday morning. MST will advise on what is required.

Compliance Tasks

- For all of the tasks below, Deputy Directors through Heads of Department/Heads of Overseas Offices/Group Leaders **must** clear all briefing and submit through Ministers. Deadlines **must** be respected to meet box deadlines. Those clearing briefing are ultimately responsible for ensuring formatting - as well as content - requirements are met.

Task assigned to: All Staff, Director, Head of Department, Head of Overseas Office

- For **Oral Questions in the Commons** full briefing is required on the first twelve questions. As a minimum, briefing must comprise the following sections: the answer, one page of key facts, FCO political script (where appropriate) and index of supplementary information. Where relevant, background information must also be included. The remaining three questions will be treated for written reply to be answered on the day of Orals. These three questions only need a draft answer and one page of key facts on the topic. Orals will be commissioned using CHAPTER.

Templates for each Minister will be provided through CHAPTER. All briefing should be submitted on CHAPTER.

Task assigned to: All Staff, Director, Head of Department, Head of Overseas Office

- Answers for Orals in the Commons must be **no more** than 70 words, clear, concise and contain no jargon. For the briefing acronyms must be spelled out the first time they are used. The format must be double spaced and the font Arial pt 14

Task assigned to: All Staff

- Supplementary topics and information must be drafted to cover all issues. You should consider lines to take and beartraps likely to be raised around the original question. Supplementary information must include topical lines, Teams should consult with Press Office and MST for a steer.

Task assigned to: All Staff

- The background section must put the question into context and contain any relevant information (including Foreign and Commonwealth Office briefing for country-specific questions)

Task assigned to: All Staff

- Answers and briefings **must** be cleared at Deputy Director level, through Heads of Department/Heads of Overseas Offices/Group Leaders

Task assigned to: All Staff

- All briefing **must** be submitted through CHAPTER, once approved at senior level by 12:00hrs on the FRIDAY before Oral Questions

Task assigned to: All Staff, Head of Department, Head of Overseas Office

- Junior Ministers will have briefing meetings on the Monday/Tuesday before Orals. SoS does not have a briefing meeting, but asks for a nominated contact should he have any questions. Heads of Department should ensure staff are available for briefing meetings

Task assigned to: All Staff, Head of Department, Head of Overseas Office

- Additional background requested at the briefing meeting must be submitted using CHAPTER links by 14:00 on Tuesday.

Task assigned to: All Staff

- **"Starred" (House of Lords) Oral Questions** are tabled on a regular basis (Topical Questions are drawn each week, and we may only get 1 day notice). MST will set briefing deadlines and provide guidance/templates to use.

Task assigned to: All Staff

- Answers for Lords Oral Questions must be the maximum length allowed (**70 words**), concise and clear. All acronyms must be spelt out in full

Task assigned to: All Staff

- MST will provide a template for briefing. This will include the answer, key points and supplementary information. Supplementary answers must be provided (with index). Lords Oral Questions are tabled to the Government, rather than to a single Department. Briefing will need co-ordination with other Government Departments, particularly with FCO, MOD, DECC, Home Office for lines on the topic. The political and country context must be covered. Briefing must be cleared at Deputy Director level

Task assigned to: All Staff, Director, Head of Department, Head of Overseas Office

- Officials will need to brief the DFID Lords Spokesperson orally in advance of the question.

Task assigned to: All Staff, Head of Department, Head of Overseas Office

- **Prime Ministers Questions** are held every Wednesday at 12.00pm. Officials may be asked to provide input at very short notice (sometimes less than an hour on a Wednesday morning). Briefing will be commissioned and submitted to Number 10 by MST. If a department receives a request directly from Number 10 they should let MST know immediately.

Task assigned to: All Staff

- Briefing required is usually in the form of a "Backbench Script", 4-5 bullets on the topic which can be read in 30 seconds. More detailed background briefing may be needed but instructions will be given on a case-by-case basis.

Briefing **must** be cleared by at least head of Department level. It will also be cleared by the relevant PS for the Secretary of State. MST will submit briefing to No 10.

Task assigned to: All Staff, Director, Head of Department, Head of Overseas Office

Risks of non-compliance

- Potential to mislead Parliament
- Damage to Ministers' and DFID's relationship with Parliament and the public
- Disproportionate costs
- Duplication of effort

- Delays in not meeting deadlines meaning Ministers are unprepared for their Parliamentary sessions.

K2: Written Parliamentary Questions: Houses of Commons and Lords

Background

Parliamentary Questions (PQs) are asked for a variety of reasons and form a part of the scrutiny function of Parliament. In the House of Commons a Member of Parliament (MP) may have constituents' concerns to raise, want more information on a topic or may have been asked by a lobby or pressure group to ask questions.

In the House of Commons, an MP will ask a question of the relevant Secretary of State. 'Named Day Questions' are when the MP has asked for a response on a specific day. A Named Day Question must be answered on the day stipulated (on occasion, a holding reply may be necessary but this must be justified to Ministers). For all other questions we have five working days to respond to the MP, therefore deadlines are tight and limited to 2 working days for teams to submit replies.

There are no limits to the number of PQs an MP can table; however MPs cannot table more than 4 Named Day questions a day.

Questions can be transferred between Government Departments, but this has no impact on the timeframe - we still have a 5 day response deadline.

In the House of Lords questions are usually asked because the Peer has an interest and normally a certain level of knowledge in the topic. The questions are asked to Her Majesty's Government, the House of Lords decides which Department should answer the question. We have 10 days to respond to peers' questions, but all answers must first be cleared by a DFID Minister, deadlines are kept deliberately short to enable this.

All PQs will be commissioned through CHAPTER, you should respond using the system.

On occasion, a PQ is asked that is very similar to a question that has been asked previously by another MP. We are able to respond to the question by referring back to the previous answer given, if it was first tabled within 3 months. This is known as a 'referral answer'. You should be able to check your Team's record on CHAPTER to look for the previous answer and response.

If the same MP asks two or more questions all of which can be answered in a single reply, it may be possible to group the PQs. In case of doubt, MST should be consulted.

Sometimes it is impossible to provide an answer to a written Parliamentary Question without detailed research and analysis. If a question is liable to cost more than £800 in official time, then a disproportionate cost answer can be given.

Where the same question is asked simultaneously of several Government Departments, Cabinet Office will provide guidance on the response, which all departments must use. This type of response is known as a 'Round Robin'. The same deadline of a 5 day response time applies. If you have any queries please check with MST.

The PQ system CHAPTER will note if a question is "sensitive" or is a "Round Robin".

If you do not understand the question please contact MST who can refer to the MP or Cabinet Office for further guidance.

Background notes should be used to inform Ministers of relevant information, explanation of why a question has been answered in a particular way or to highlight sensitive issues. Background notes should be used for both Commons and Lords PQs. Please note background notes are not submitted as part of the question reply. However, they can be subject to Freedom of Information (FOI) requests.

Compliance Tasks

1. All PQs, Commons and Lords will be commissioned using CHAPTER to Heads of Department and Deputy Directors, copying in the relevant policy lead. DFID must provide responses to Commons and Lords PQs within the specified deadlines of 5 days for Commons and 10 days for Lords. Named Day Questions may have a tighter deadline. The deadlines will be listed on the CHAPTER system, but Teams are expected to submit replies on the CHAPTER system within 2 working days.

Task assigned to: All Staff, Head of Department

2. Let MST know as soon as possible if you believe a Question you have been allocated is for another Government Department

Task assigned to: All Staff

3. If the question is for another department within DFID please use the CHAPTER system and follow instructions to assign the PQ to another colleague. The PQ will remain on your system until the person has "accepted" the PQ and assumed ownership

Task assigned to: All Staff

4. A QUEST Template will be issued by CHAPTER for each PQ and this MUST be used for the draft answer. All drafts for Commons and Lords PQs should be written in Arial, Point 12 and in one and a half spacing.

Task assigned to: All Staff

5. All acronyms, including DFID, must be spelt out the first time they are used

Task assigned to: All Staff

6. PQ drafts must be clear, concise and jargon free

Task assigned to: All Staff

7. Answers must be as helpful as possible to the MP/Peer

8. Very simple tables can be given with the answer, these should be formatted in Word but must not include shading.

If you wish to issue a complicated table (Excel) or additional booklet in reply please send this as a separate attachment with a title page and with the wording: 'I have arranged for the document XXX to be placed in the Libraries of the House'. You will need to provide MST with a PDF, excel or word version of the document. You should not refer to documents that have been deposited in the House of Commons without first checking with MST.

Task assigned to: All Staff

9. PQs must be cleared on CHAPTER through Deputy Directors, through Heads of Department/Heads of Overseas Offices/Group Leaders. Drafting officials will need to check the relevant box on CHAPTER once they have approval for draft answers. An email of confirmation will then be sent to the approver.

Task assigned to: All Staff, Head of Department, Head of Overseas Office

10. Submit all PQs electronically using CHAPTER. There are a number of mandatory fields which need to be completed, but CHAPTER will prompt you if the information is missing. The approver for the PQ will be listed on CHAPTER and an email will be sent to the approver once a draft has been sent to MST for quality assurance.

Task assigned to: All Staff, Head of Department, Head of Overseas Office

11. If the response to the new question is exactly the same as an answer given previously, your reply can refer to the previous answer given, in which case the correct text to use is 'I refer the (Hon) member for to the reply given to ... on You should use CHAPTER to search for the previous

answer and references.

Task assigned to: All Staff

12. If it could cost more than £800 worth of staff time to answer a PQ, prepare a background note to Ministers explaining why it has not been possible to provide a full response. Use the standard wording: "It would not be possible to obtain the information required without incurring a disproportionate cost".

Task assigned to: All Staff

13. For "Round Robin" questions once guidance has been received from the Cabinet Office, MST will upload the guidance on to CHAPTER attached to the relevant PQ. We do not have any time extension where there is a delay in Cabinet Office issuing Round Robin guidance. Departments should therefore consider whether they can start to prepare an answer, whilst waiting for the guidance.

Task assigned to: All Staff

Risks of non-compliance

- Damage to Ministers' and DFID's reputation with Parliament
- Disproportionate costs incurred
- Duplication of effort
- Potential to mislead Parliament
- Delays leading to not meeting deadlines as set by Parliament.

K3: Written Ministerial Statements: Houses of Commons and Lords

Background

DFID has a duty to report details of our financial Estimates, launch of Annual Departmental/Performance Report to Parliament. We do this through the issue of a Written Ministerial Statement. Written Statements should also be used proactively to inform Parliament of changes in policy, policy launches, funding announcements, contentious issues or to increase knowledge in an area of DFID work. Any associated press events **should not** take place before issue of the statement to Parliament. Statements cannot usually be issued on a Friday - but check with MST who will advise on timing issues.

Compliance Tasks

- Alert MST where recommendations to make Statement are made. Keep MST copied in to all correspondence on the Statement (between Teams and Private Offices). Consult MST over the date on which the statement is to be made. Once a date has been decided, MST must have confirmation from Private Office, as they will need to notify Parliament one working day before the Statement is due to issue (two working days before if the statement is to be made on a Monday).

Task assigned to: All Staff

- TMG's Parliamentary Guidance on Insight provides further information

Task assigned to: All Staff

- Statements should be clear, concise and free of jargon. There is no formal word limit, although they should ideally be no more than two pages long. All acronyms must be spelt out the first time they are used.

Task assigned to: All Staff

- The final text of the statement must be cleared through Ministers (in the name of the Secretary of State). Statements should be cleared by Ministers no later than the day before it is to be issued. Written statements are issued early in the morning (usually in order to reach Parliament by 9.30am). DFID's Statements are also issued in the House of Lords, in the name of the Lords Spokesperson.

Task assigned to: All Staff

- MST will ensure that the statement is repeated in the House of Lords

Risks of non-compliance

- Potential to mislead Parliament
- Damage to Ministers' and DFID's relationship with Parliament and the public
- Disproportionate costs
- Duplication of effort
- Delays in not meeting deadlines meaning Ministers are unprepared for their Parliamentary sessions.