



**Research Paper**  
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# **ASSEMBLY QUESTIONS: SURVEY RESULTS**

## **FINAL REPORT**

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This paper details the findings of three surveys carried out on the attitudes and opinions of: Members of the Northern Ireland (NI) Assembly; members of the general public; and a group of AS level politics students on oral and written questions in the NI Assembly.

This research aims to facilitate the Committee on Procedures with its inquiry into Assembly Questions and how they can be improved.

Library Research Papers are compiled for the benefit of Members of The Assembly and their personal staff. Authors are available to discuss the contents of these papers with Members and their staff but cannot advise members of the general public.

## **SUMMARY OF KEY POINTS**

This paper details the findings of three surveys carried out by Research and Library Service. Survey One sought to gain the attitudes and opinions of Members of the Assembly on procedures surrounding oral and written questions. Survey Two investigated the attitudes and opinions of members of the general public on Question Time in the Assembly and Survey Three sought to gain the attitudes and opinions of a group of AS level politics students on Question Time in the Assembly.

### **SURVEY ONE**

In total, a series of 25 interviews were conducted with Members of the Assembly. The following provides a summary of the key issues discussed.

#### **LODGING QUESTIONS FOR ORAL ANSWER**

- The majority of interviewees agreed shortening the time frame between lodging a question for oral answer and the Question Time may increase the topicality of questions.

#### **SELECTION OF QUESTIONS**

- The majority of Members interviewed supported the random selection of questions for oral answer and agreed this was a fair and proportional selection method.

#### **NUMBER OF QUESTIONS ON ORDER PAPER**

- Almost all interviewees voiced concerns regarding the number of questions reached during Question Time. Over half of the interviewees suggested the number of questions on the Order Paper should be reduced.

#### **ROTA FOR MINISTERS APPEARING AT QUESTION TIME**

- The majority of interviewees were of the opinion that the rota for the First Minister and deputy First Minister and all other Ministers was working adequately. However it was mentioned the appearance of the First Minister and deputy First Minister at Question Time every week could potentially increase public interest.

#### **TIME ALLOCATION FOR EACH MINISTER**

- The majority of interviewees felt the thirty minute time allocation at Question Time for each Minister was adequate.

#### **LENGTH OF MINISTERIAL RESPONSE**

- A high proportion of interviewees were of the opinion Ministerial responses during Question Time were often too lengthy. There was no consensus among interviewees in relation to imposing time limits on Ministerial responses, although nearly all interviewees commented Ministerial responses could be regulated in some form.

- A concern which was raised by a large number of interviewees was in relation to the content of some Ministerial responses. A number of interviewees commented that they felt at times, Ministerial responses did not adequately address the issues raised in oral questions.

#### SUPPLEMENTARY QUESTIONS

- A number of interviewees believed lead questioners should be allowed to pose more than one supplementary question. The rationale behind this suggestion was Members would have the opportunity to pose further supplementary questions if they were not satisfied with the follow up response from a Minister.
- A small number of interviewees raised concerns over the length of some supplementary questions.
- Several interviewees discussed the issue of spontaneity surrounding supplementary questions and in Question Time in general.
- Several interviewees expressed confusion over how supplementary questions are allocated.

#### WRITTEN QUESTIONS

- A large proportion of interviewees commented on the notable difference between Departments in the time taken to respond to a written question. A number of interviewees voiced concerns over written questions being over used and hence, the suggestion of placing a limit on the number of written questions political parties are allowed to lodge was made.
- Another aspect of written questions raised by a large number of interviewees was that of Priority Written Questions. Many respondents felt that Priority Written Questions are used incorrectly and at times, perceived this as an abuse of the system. A number of respondents voiced their confusion over what exactly constituted a Priority Written Question.

#### SURVEY TWO

In total, nine completed questionnaires were returned by members of the public visiting Question Time. The following provides a summary of the key points.

#### VISITING QUESTION TIME

- The majority of respondents were visiting Question Time for the first time.

#### STRUCTURE OF QUESTION TIME

- The majority of respondents felt thirty minutes was an adequate length of time for each Minister to be questioned. The majority of respondents agreed Question Time allowed MLAs to gain information, allowed them to investigate Minister's work and allowed MLAs to give their views on Department policies.

- Only two respondents felt that the quality of questions was high compared to six who felt the quality of answers was high.

### **SURVEY THREE**

In total, 33 questionnaires were returned from the group of politics students.

#### **VISITING QUESTION TIME**

- Twenty eight of the respondents found the session informative however, when asked if they found it easy to understand what was happening 16 said yes.

#### **STRUCTURE OF QUESTION TIME**

- Twenty three students felt that thirty minutes was an adequate length of time for each Minister to be questioned. The majority of students believed that Question Time allowed Members to gain information on a subject, allowed MLAs to investigate the work of Ministers and gave them the opportunity to give their views on policies.
- Twenty four respondents felt the quality of questions was high and 21 respondents felt that the quality of answers was high.

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## **PART ONE: INTRODUCTION**

This paper has been prepared for the Committee on Procedures by Research and Library Services. It details the findings of three surveys carried out on the attitudes and opinions of: Members of the Assembly; members of the general public; and a group of AS politics students on various aspects of Assembly Questions in the Northern Ireland (NI) Assembly.

### **THE INQUIRY**

This research aims to facilitate the Committee on Procedures with its inquiry into Assembly Questions and how they could be improved.

The inquiry was initiated in May 2008 and the Terms of Reference were to review the following:

#### **Oral Questions**

- The methodology for selection of questions, the number of questions on the Order Paper and the number of questions answered during question time,
- The rota for Ministers including the frequency of questions to the First Minister and deputy First Minister,
- The time bands allocated for question time,
- The length of Ministerial responses,
- The length of supplementary questions and responses,
- The method for allocation of supplementary questions.

#### **Written Questions**

- The process for the tabling of written and priority written questions including assessing whether the limits should be increased or decreased, and
- The extent to which Government Departments achieve the targets for answering questions.

#### **Priority Written Questions**

- The criteria for admissibility of priority written questions.

#### **Priority Notice Questions**

- The criteria for admissibility.

#### **Standing Orders**

- The grammar, language and style of SO 19 and consider improvements.

As part of the review the Committee on Procedures commissioned Research and Library Service to conduct three surveys on the views of Members of the Assembly, members of the general public and a group of AS Politics students on various aspects of Assembly Questions in the Assembly.

## **PART TWO: SURVEY METHOD**

### **2.1 SURVEY ONE**

Survey One was conducted via short, approximately 10-15 minute, one to one interviews with Members of the NI Assembly. Whips from each of the four political parties nominated Members to take part in the one to one interviews based on proportional representation. The target group for Survey One therefore contained 25 Members of the Assembly, including four party Whips and one deputy party Whip. The target group was made up of:

- 9 DUP Members,
- 6 Sinn Fein Members,
- 4 UUP Members,
- 4 SDLP Members, and
- 2 Alliance Members.

An interview schedule was devised by Research and Library Service and subsequently approved by the Committee. This survey covered the following issues:

- Lodging questions for oral answer;
- Methodology for selecting questions for oral answer;
- Number of questions published on the Order Paper;
- Rota for Ministers appearing at Question Time;
- Time allocation for each Minister;
- Length of Ministerial response;
- Supplementary questions;
- Procedures surrounding Written Questions.

The opportunity to voice any additional comments on any aspect of oral and written questions was also given to the interviewee.

Names of those Members nominated to take part in the one to one interviews were sent to Research and Library Service between 16 September and 9 October. Following this, Research and Library Service endeavoured to arrange appointments with all Members nominated. Interviews were conducted between the 29 September and the 7 November. During this period all 25 Members nominated to take part in the survey were interviewed.

### **2.2 SURVEY TWO**

Survey Two was in the form of a questionnaire which aimed to gain the attitudes and opinions of the public on Question Time in the NI Assembly. The target group for Survey Two therefore was members of the public viewing Question Time from the public gallery.

A survey was devised by Research and Library Service and subsequently approved by the Committee. This survey questioned participants on several areas of interest including:

- How many times had they attended a session of Question Time;
- Was seeing Question Time the main reason for their visit;
- Had they attended Question Time as part of a group;

- The main reason for watching Question Time;
- Their views on the 30 minute time allocation for each Department;
- How long they listened to Question Time;
- To what extent they agreed Question Time allowed MLAs to gain information about a particular subject;
- To what extent they agreed Question Time allowed the Assembly to investigate what Ministers are doing;
- To what extent they agreed Question Time allowed MLAs to give their views on the policies of certain Departments;
- Did they find it easy to understand what was happening;
- How informative they found Question Time;
- Their opinion on the quality of questions and answers.

A cover letter was included with the questionnaires explaining the nature of the survey and what the information obtained from the survey would be used for. It was emphasised any participation would be completely voluntary. Participants were provided with a pen and instructions were provided on where to leave completed questionnaires.

The questionnaires were placed at the front desk of Parliament Buildings to coincide with Question Time in the Chamber. The questionnaires were placed in this location every Monday from 2.30pm until 4.00pm between the 29 September and the 20 October. This location was chosen to distribute the questionnaires as a member of the public must obtain a visitors pass from this point to gain entry into the public gallery.

During the period between the 29 September and the 20 October nine completed questionnaires were returned by members of the public visiting Question Time.

### **2.3 SURVEY THREE**

Survey Three was in the form of a questionnaire which aimed to gain the attitudes and opinions of young people on Question Time. The target audience for this particular survey therefore was a group of AS politics students who were visiting the Assembly as part of an educational visit.

This survey took the same format as Survey Two however it was adapted slightly to suit the target audience of AS politics students. This survey was subsequently approved by the Committee.

Survey Three was administered on the 15 September when the group of students visited the Assembly as part of an educational visit. Prior to the students entering the public gallery, the Clerk to the Committee on Procedures and a researcher explained the background and the reasons for carrying out the research. The questions within the survey were explained to the students and any questions were answered prior to the students entering the public gallery. Thirty three of the students completed the questionnaire.



## **PART THREE: SURVEY RESULTS**

### **3.1 SURVEY ONE**

Survey One was conducted via short, 10-15 minute, one to one interviews with 25 Members of the NI Assembly. Included in this group were four party Whips and one deputy party Whip. Each interviewee was asked to give his/her opinion on a number of core issues relating to oral and written questions in the Assembly.

Before the core issues surrounding oral questions were discussed and to gain a more general view of Members' opinions of Question Time, Members were asked to consider what they thought was the main reason for Question Time. A number of common themes emerged from the responses which are outlined below.

- To hold the Executive and Ministers to account in a public manner.
- To gather information.
- To highlight issues of public importance.
- To give backbenchers the opportunity to ask supplementary questions.
- To underscore certain party political views.

Interviewees were asked to what extent they believed Question Time in the Assembly fulfilled this role. Responses to this question varied in nature and a large proportion of interviewees were of the opinion Question Time only partially fulfilled its role. The majority of Members interviewed made reference to at least one aspect of Question Time which they believed was not working as well as it should and could possibly be improved on.

Aspects of Question Time which nearly all interviewees commented on were the length of Ministerial responses and the content of such Ministerial responses. Interviewees explained that very often it was perceived Ministerial responses did not adequately address the issues raised from the lead question. Even after posing a supplementary question, Members interviewed described how frequently they felt the issues being raised were still not sufficiently addressed. It was suggested, the lead questioner being permitted to ask more than one supplementary question would allow Members to probe Ministers further if they perceived the Ministerial responses as being inadequate. General comments on Question Time included:

*“Question Time is very much a hit and miss scenario. On occasion the Minister does not answer the question.”*

*“Limited role in this regard although it is a useful exercise, it would be strongly missed if it wasn't there.”*

*“Question Time in the Assembly is not working effectively. Firstly, time management and secondly questions placed on Order Paper aren't answered adequately. That isn't the purpose of them being there. It's not working as an accountable democracy.”*

*“Question Time is working to an extent.”*

*Question time partly fulfils this role. There are certain aspects of Oral Question Time in the Assembly which do not allow Members to fully probe Departments thoroughly enough.”*

*“Question Time is a good idea to have....I think we could all make better use of it.”*

*“Question Time doesn’t really fulfil its role at the moment, its very stage managed and scripted.”*

*“The Minister knows exactly what is going to be asked therefore there will be a pre planned answer for everything.”*

Another common aspect discussed by interviewees was how Question Time lacked spontaneity and at times was too stage managed and scripted. A number of Members discussed the possibility of having a section of Question Time specifically allocated for topical questions, where the questioner’s name would be selected and not the question. The rationale behind this suggestion being that this would help to create more spontaneity and possibly increase public interest.

During the period in which this research was conducted, steps have been taken to try and achieve more spontaneity and interest during Question Time. A new procedure during Question Time was provisionally agreed upon by the Speaker and party Whips, which would involve Members rising in their seats to indicate they wished to be called for a supplementary question. The start date for this new procedure has yet to be agreed and the Committee on Procedures may wish to monitor the progress of this new procedure.

The remaining sections of the interview sought Members’ opinions and attitudes on the core issues outlined in the Committee’s Terms of Reference. Each of the core issues are discussed in greater detail below.

#### **LODGING QUESTIONS FOR ORAL ANSWER<sup>1</sup>**

The first core issue interviewees were asked to comment on was, to what extent they believed the time frame for lodging questions for oral answer allowed Members to address current issues.

The majority of Members interviewed were of the opinion that although the time period for lodging an oral question did not have a dramatic adverse affect on the topic of questions they wished to lodge, it was agreed the level of topicality in general during Question Time may increase if the time frame was shortened. Comments included:

*“If this [time frame] could be shortened it may bring an element of topicality which isn’t there at the moment. A lot of the questions anyway aren’t in the way of topical.”*

*“It [time frame] does effect the topicality of questions but topicality sometimes is not the main point of a question.”*

*“It might be beneficial if the time frame was moved. However it needs to allow for more topical questions but give Departments enough time to research the answers.”*

A number of Members felt this time frame restricted the level of topicality somewhat, however several Members pointed out the opportunity to raise a topical issue through a Private Notice Question (PNQ) was still available. Comments included:

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<sup>1</sup> The period for lodging a question for oral answer is 5 working days. This period ends on the second Tuesday (9 working days) before the Question Time in which the answer is to be given.

*“It [time frame] restricts the level of topicality but there is the opportunity to use PNQs. At times these can be on the restrictive side in terms of the amount of times they are allowed to be used.”*

*“There is the possibility of closing the gap between tabling a question for oral answer and the Question Time as the questions lodged may be irrelevant by the time Question Time comes around. There is the option of the Private Notice Question which would cater for an issue that has come up suddenly which needs a quick response.”*

Contrasting to these opinions, a small number of Members indicated they favoured complete spontaneity during Question Time and therefore felt questions should not be tabled at all.

*“I favour complete spontaneity. Members should be able to ask a reasonable question and get a reasonable answer which isn’t completely scripted.”*

### **SELECTION OF QUESTIONS**

The second core issue interviewees were asked to express their thoughts on was the selection process of questions for oral answer.

The majority of Members interviewed supported the random selection of questions and agreed this was a fair and proportional selection method. However, there were a number of issues of concern raised by several Members in relation to certain aspects of the selection process. One such concern was in relation to Members of a Minister’s own party tabling a large number of questions for their Minister’s Question Time. A number of interviewees voiced concerns that in doing so, misrepresentation potentially could occur in relation to how many questions from each party would be published on the Order Paper. Interviewees discussed how this could affect the scrutiny of a Minister and their Department. Comments included:

*“Members from Ministers own party asking questions could be restricted so they don’t get into the first number of slots for Question Time.”*

*“At times it seems the Ministers own party get a large number of the questions. If the whole idea is about scrutiny of Ministers and Departments it seems strange that the Ministers own Members gets to do it.”*

*“I understand the selection process in random but what happens when a party overload the system with a large number of questions? That party is more than likely going to get a higher number of questions selected than another party with less questions lodged.”*

### **NUMBER OF QUESTIONS PUBLISHED ON ORDER PAPER<sup>2</sup>**

The third core issue interviewees were invited to express their views on, was the number of questions published on the Order Paper.

Almost all interviewees voiced concern regarding the number of questions reached during any one Question Time. For this reason over half of the interviewees suggested the number of questions per Department should be reduced. Those Members advocating such a change suggested either 12 or 15 as a more realistic number of questions to be chosen for each Department. A small number of

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<sup>2</sup> Using computer software, 20 questions for each Department are selected therefore, 60 questions in total are published on the Order Paper for Question Time.

interviewees suggested reducing the number of questions to 10 per Department. A number of reasons were given for such a viewpoint, with comments including:

*“The number of questions could be reduced to twelve or fifteen because realistically we wouldn’t reach any more. Twenty questions gives Members false hope their question will be reached.”*

*“If the number of questions selected was reduced, this would reduce the cost i.e. there would be less resources spent on those questions which more than likely will not be not answered in the chamber anyway.”*

Contrastingly, several interviewees believed the number of questions chosen for each Department should not be reduced and there were several arguments for such a viewpoint. A number of interviewees acknowledged that although all of the questions may not be reached on the Order Paper, at least those questions would receive a written response. A counter argument which several interviewees expressed was if Members had wanted a written response to a question they would have lodged a question for written answer and not a question for oral answer. Comments included:

*“If you reduce the number of questions on the Order Paper does that mean more people will get their questions asked? Or would that mean you are more likely to get your question chosen? Most people realise that reaching question 7 is good and any questions which are not reached will be provided with a written answer.”*

*“There is the issue of getting a written answer to a question that was not reached on the Order Paper. If you had wanted a written answer you would have tabled a written question.”*

An important point which a large number of interviewees commented on was that simply reducing the number of questions selected for each Department would not have a dramatic affect on the flow of Question Time. For interviewees advocating such a viewpoint, reducing the number of questions selected would only become effective when other issues surrounding Question Time were addressed. For example, issues surrounding the length of Ministerial responses and supplementary questions. Comments surrounding this particular viewpoint included:

*“I don’t really think this [reducing the number of question for each Department] would make a difference. Those which are in the top twenty and are not reached will be given a written answer. It’s not going to affect the number of questions which the Minister gets through which I think is the problem.”*

*“Even reducing the number of Questions per Department from twenty to fifteen, fifteen will most likely not be reached anyway, unless something can be done regarding the Ministers responses.”*

*“Some Members make statements during supplementary questions rather than just asking the question.”*

### **ROTA FOR MINISTERS APPEARING AT QUESTION TIME**

The fourth core issue interviewees were asked to give their view on was the rota for Ministers appearing at Question Time.

The majority of interviewees were of the opinion the rota at present for the First Minister and deputy First Minister appearing every two weeks was adequate. The majority of interviewees also felt that the present rota for all other Ministers was working adequately also. However, there were a number of important points highlighted by several interviewees which the Committee on Procedures may wish to consider. Comments included:

*“Having the First Minister and deputy First Minister up every week may increase public interest. Even at their Question Time at the moment it’s hard to get a full chamber.”*

*“It’s difficult because in any Democratic society you should have the First Minister up every week but at the minute nothing is happening. Maybe the rota should stay as it is until the Assembly has bedded in properly.”*

### **TIME ALLOCATION FOR EACH MINISTER**

The fifth core issue interviewees were asked to consider was whether the thirty minute time allocation for each Minister during Question Time was adequate.

The majority of interviewees felt the thirty minute time allocation at present was adequate. However, a number of interviewees who held this opinion felt the questions during this time could be shorter and/or the Ministerial responses could be shorter and more concise. Comments included:

*“Thirty minutes is long enough, particularly when there are three sessions one after the other but it could be tightened up a lot more, put less questions on the Order Paper if realistically they are never going to get to question fifteen. Also, address the length of responses by some Ministers.....I think maybe around fifteen questions and realistically try and achieve at least 12 of those questions.”*

*“Question Time could be tightened up, shorten the questions and answers first.”*

The possibility of increasing this time allocation to forty minutes per Department was suggested by a number of interviewees whereas a small number of Members indicated they felt three sessions during Question Time was too many. Also, the possibility of splitting Question Time either during the one sitting day or over two sitting days was suggested by a small number of interviewees.

*“There is the possibility of having 45 minutes for each Minister or two sessions spread over two days.”*

*“Maybe there could be two sessions of Question Time, one in the morning and one in the evening. That would allow longer than thirty minutes per Minister and would take away the angst people may feel about not getting their question asked. A longer time over say, two days may be possible.”*

*“Three sessions is a bit long, I would prefer two. Have a session on Monday and Tuesday, one Ministry each for about an hour or 45 minutes.”*

### **LENGTH OF MINISTERIAL RESPONSE**

The sixth core issue interviewees were asked to consider was the length of Ministerial responses and whether there should be a time limit imposed.

From the responses received from the interviewees, two common themes can be identified. Firstly a high proportion of Members interviewed were of the opinion many Ministerial responses are too lengthy. When asked whether there should be a time limit imposed on Ministerial responses, approximately one third of interviewees favoured this, however not all interviewees suggested a suitable time limit. The most popular suggestion by those interviewees who did comment on a time limit was three minutes. Comments from those interviewees favouring a strict time limit included:

*“Ministerial responses should be under a time limit so Ministers can not give very long answers that take up a lot of time which could be spent on getting through the questions on the Order Paper.”*

*“Some times it’s the answers to questions which are the problem. A time limit on Ministerial responses would be a good idea. Every Minister does it from time to time but it is very frustrating for Members not getting to ask their question.”*

*“There should be a time limit in which Ministers should not be allowed to go over, for example 3 minutes.”*

Just under half of the interviewees commented there should not be a strict time limit imposed on Ministerial responses as Ministers may be addressing certain issues which require a more lengthy answer. However nearly all Members interviewed suggested that Ministerial responses could be regulated in some way. A common suggestion made was the Speaker may wish to encourage Ministers to give more concise answers. Comments received advocating this viewpoint included:

*“I don’t think there should be a time limit because a Minister may need longer to explain a position however the Speaker could encourage Ministers to stay on topic.”*

*“If there is a strict time limit Question Time could become quite artificial but in saying that the Chair or the Speaker could push the Minister towards a concise answer.”*

*“I don’t really think this [time limit] would work. Some questions may require a reasonably lengthy answer and some of the supplementary questions in particular.....A major step forward would be for the Speaker/Chair to keep the Ministers on track with the question.”*

Another common theme identified from the responses to this question concerned the content of Ministerial responses during Question Time. One such interviewee stated:

*“It doesn’t matter if the responses are shorter if the answers mean nothing.”*

Furthermore, when asked whether or not they believed a time limit should be imposed on Ministerial responses those interviewees concerned with the content of Ministerial responses stated:

*“Yes, there should be however very often there are pre prepared answers from Ministers which do not answer the question.”*

*“Not necessarily but Ministers must be more concise instead of filling out responses.”*



### **SUPPLEMENTARY QUESTIONS**

The seventh core issue interviewees were asked to give their views on was in relation to supplementary questions during Question Time.

There were a variety of opinions received regarding the issue of supplementary questions during Question Time. For example, a number of interviewees were of the opinion that a Member asking the first question should be allowed, on occasion to ask more than one supplementary question. Members who voiced this viewpoint suggested this may allow a Member to probe further into a certain issue if they believe they have not received a satisfactory answer. Comments surrounding this issue included:

*“Members should have the opportunity to place one supplementary question and another if necessary.”*

*“Members should be allowed more than one supplementary question but there has to be a limit. This may be down to the discretion of the Speaker.”*

A small number of interviewees raised the issue of the length of some supplementary questions, commenting that on occasion supplementary questions have been rather lengthy. A small number of interviewees therefore suggested the possibility of a time limit being imposed on supplementary questions. Another aspect of supplementary questions which several interviewees highlighted was the lack of spontaneity during this time. One such interviewee suggested the following:

*“Ministers should have no hint of the supplementary questions at all, this would increase spontaneity.”*

Several other interviewees felt quite strongly in relation to the spontaneity of supplementary questions and of Question Time as a whole. Comments regarding the issue of spontaneity during supplementary questions included:

*“Supplementary questions should involve Members popping up and down, indicating that they wish to ask a question. Leading supplementary questions should be frowned upon, they should be responsive to the response given to the initial question. The whole process should be much more responsive rather than stage managed.”*

*“The problem with supplementary questions is that you don’t actually get a chance to do the thrust and counter thrust necessary to develop a debate.”*

Several interviewees also expressed concern over how supplementary questions were allocated.

### **WRITTEN QUESTIONS**

The final core issue interviewees were asked to consider were the procedures surrounding written questions.

Just under half of the interviewees found the procedures surrounding written questions satisfactory. However, a relatively large proportion commented on the notable difference between Departments in the time taken to respond to a question. Comments from individuals of this opinion included:

*“On the whole the procedures work fine although some Departments take longer than others to get back with a response.”*

*“The time it takes Departments to respond is sometimes very long. Other Departments are better than others.”*

*I don't really have any problems with written questions or the procedures behind them apart some Departments are quicker than others at responding.”*

*“Procedures in general are working fine, occasionally Departments take an extremely long time to respond.”*

*“Responses from Departments are often delayed, in some instances there is a large gap between submitting a written answer and getting a response.”*

This interviewee explained how it was sometimes easier to gain information from other sources due to the slow response times of several Departments,

*“Departments tend to be slow for a response. As such it is sometimes easier to find out information from other areas.”*

A number of interviewees discussed how they perceived written questions as not being used in the right manner and were, they felt at times, over used. Many individuals also commented on the cost of providing a written response by Departments. The idea of placing a limit on the number of written questions political parties are allowed to lodge was discussed by a number of interviewees.

When discussing their concerns over the information requested by some written questions, one individual commented that Members could potentially look to research and to Committee reports first of all before placing questions to Departments. Comments from interviewees who voiced concerns regarding aspects of written questions included:

*“Written questions are over used and this puts undue burden on Departments and staff, to no gain. Some questions require vast amounts of statistical info and you wonder what this is for.”*

*“It seems sometimes Members may submit written questions just for the sake of submitting written questions. There should maybe be a limit on the number of questions each party is allowed to submit.”*

*“There is a situation where Members table a huge number of written questions to be seen as doing just that. It has nearly turned into a competition. Written questions also cost a lot of money. You don't want to get into a situation where you are gagging Members from asking questions but there has to be a sensible balance.”*

Another aspect of written questions which was an issue of concern for a large number of interviewees was Priority Written Questions. Many individuals discussed how they perceived Priority Written Questions as often being used incorrectly and at times, they perceived this as an abuse of the system. A number of individuals voiced their concerns and confusion over what constituted a priority question and reiterated priority questions should be used only in extreme circumstances. Some of the comments included:



*“Questions can go through the priority system which are not priority questions. Often questions are about on going issues and are not urgent matters. Members should have to justify a question for priority.”*

*“I can’t see the difference between Priority Written Questions and ordinary Written Questions. I would prefer a smaller number of questions which genuinely get priority and are used sparingly.”*

*“I have a concern with the system of Priority Written Questions. Some questions which Members put in as Priority should be ordinary written questions.”*

*“Priority Written Questions should be used only in extreme circumstances.”*

### **3.2 SURVEY TWO**

Survey Two was in the form of a questionnaire which aimed to gain the attitudes and opinions of the public on Question Time in the Assembly. The target group for Survey Two was members of the public viewing Question Time from the public gallery. During the survey period nine completed questionnaires were returned by members of the public visiting Question Time. The results of these questionnaires are discussed in greater detail below. (See also Appendix 1)

#### **VISITING QUESTION TIME**

Of the nine respondents visiting Question Time, 5 indicated that it was their first visit while 2 said that they had visited 8 times or more. Only one of the 9 respondents came as part of a group while the other eight were there in an individual capacity. Four people had attended specifically to see Question Time while another 4 were there for another reason but knew that Question Time was on. Among the reasons given for attending, 5 people indicated that it was to hear a specific issue or question raised while one said it was for general interest and another said they were there to support their local MLA. Two respondents stayed for less than 30 minutes, 2 stayed for between 30 minutes and an hour and 4 stayed for between an hour and an hour and 30 minutes. When asked about the quality of the session, 6 people felt that it was informative and 6 found it easy to understand what was happening.

#### **STRUCTURE OF QUESTION TIME**

When asked about the structuring of Question Time, 5 of the 9 respondents felt that 30 minutes was the right length of time for each Minister to be questioned and 3 respondents said that they would prefer longer. When asked to agree or disagree with a number of statements, 6 respondents agreed that Question Time allowed MLAs to gain information about a subject while 5 agreed that it allowed them to investigate Ministers work. Five respondents also agreed that it allowed MLA’s to give their views on Departmental policies.

Only two respondents felt that the quality of questions was high compared to 6 who felt that the quality of answers was high.

### **3.3 SURVEY THREE**

Survey Three was in the form of a questionnaire which aimed to gain the attitudes and opinions of young people on Question Time. The target audience for this

particular survey therefore was a group of AS politics students who were visiting the Assembly as part of an educational visit.

This survey took the same format as Survey Two however it was adapted slightly to suit the target audience of AS politics students. This survey was subsequently approved by the Committee. There were 33 completed questionnaires returned from this group of politics students. Results of these questionnaires are discussed in greater detail below. (See also Appendix 2)

#### VISITING QUESTION TIME

Of the 33 students, 20 said that they could clearly hear proceedings while 7 said that it was not loud enough, 2 felt that members did not speak clearly and 3 were prevented from hearing the proceedings due to an echo in the Chamber. Twenty two of the students felt that they had a clear view of MLAs and Ministers, while 6 said that they could only see one half of the Chamber. When asked if the session was informative 28 said that it was. However when asked if they found it easy to understand what was happening 16 said yes.

#### STRUCTURE OF QUESTION TIME

When asked if they thought 30 minutes was an appropriate length of time to question Ministers, 23 students felt that it was while 2 would have preferred a longer time period and 4 would have preferred a shorter period. All 33 students believed that Question Time allowed Members to gain information on a subject, while 30 felt that it allowed them to investigate the work of Ministers and 22 felt that it gave MLAs the opportunity to give their views on policies.

When asked if the quality of questions was high, 24 said that it was while 21 felt that the quality of answers was high.

**APPENDIX 1: SURVEY TWO RESULTS**

Question 1: How many times have you attended a session of Question Time?

	<b>Frequency</b>
Today is first visit	5
2-4 times	2
5-7 times	0
8 times or more	2

Question 2: Was seeing Question Time your main reason for visiting the Northern Ireland Assembly today?

	<b>Frequency</b>
Yes	4
No- although I knew it was happening today	4
No- I didn't know it was happening today	1

Question 3: Did you come today as part of a group?

	<b>Frequency</b>
Yes	1
No	8

Question 4: What was your main reason for watching Question Time today?

	<b>Frequency</b>
General Interest	1
To hear a specific question or issue	5
To support my local MLA	1
Had no choice	1
Other	1

Question 5: Each Minister is questioned for 30 minutes by Members of the Assembly. Do you think this is an appropriate length of time?

	<b>Frequency</b>
Prefer longer	3
Prefer Shorter	0
30 minutes is the right length	5
Don't know	1

Question 6: How long did you stay to listen to Question Time?

	<b>Frequency</b>
Up to 15 minutes	2
15 - 30 minutes	0
30 - 60 minutes	2
60 - 90 minutes	4
Missing value	1

Question 7: Question Time allowed MLAs to gain information about a particular subject.

	<b>Frequency</b>
Agree	6
Disagree	0
Don't know	2
Missing value	1

Question 8: Question Time allowed the Assembly to investigate what Ministers are doing.

	<b>Frequency</b>
Agree	5
Disagree	0
Don't know	3
Missing value	1

Question 9: Question time allowed MLAs to give their views on the policies of certain Departments.

	<b>Frequency</b>
Agree	5
Disagree	2
Don't know	1
Missing value	1

Question 10: I found it easy to understand what was happening.

	<b>Frequency</b>
Agree	6
Disagree	2
Don't know	0
Missing value	1

Question 11: I found the session informative.

	<b>Frequency</b>
Agree	6
Disagree	1
Don't know	0
Missing value	2

Question 12: The quality of questions was high.

	<b>Frequency</b>
Agree	2
Disagree	4
Don't know	1
Missing value	2

Question 13: The quality of answers was high

	<b>Frequency</b>
Agree	6
Disagree	0
Don't know	1
Missing value	2

**APPENDIX 2: SURVEY THREE RESULTS**

Question 1: Has your study group attended Question Time before?

	<b>Frequency</b>
Yes	0
No	33

Question 2: Have you previously attended Question Time not as part of your study group?

	<b>Frequency</b>
Yes	1
No	32

Question 3: Was seeing Question Time the main reason your study group visited the Northern Ireland Assembly today?

	<b>Frequency</b>
Yes	3
No, part of an educational visit	29

Question 4: Each Minister is questioned for 30 minutes by Members of the Assembly. Do you think this is an appropriate length of time?

	<b>Frequency</b>
Prefer longer	2
Prefer Shorter	4
30 minutes is the right length	23
Don't know	3
Missing value	1

Question 5: Could you clearly hear what was being said during Question Time?

	<b>Frequency</b>
Yes	20
No, volume wasn't loud enough	7
No, Members did not speak clearly	2
No, echo in Chamber	3
No, could hear other Members moving	1

Question 6: Could you clearly see from the public gallery the Members and Ministers taking part during Question Time?

	<b>Frequency</b>
Yes	22
No	1
Yes, due to screens	1
No, view blocked	2
No, could only see one half of the Chamber	6
Missing value	1

Question 7: Question Time allowed MLAs to gain information about a particular subject.

	<b>Frequency</b>
Agree	33
Disagree	0
Don't know	0
Missing value	0

Question 8: Question Time allowed the Assembly to investigate what Ministers are doing.

	<b>Frequency</b>
Agree	30
Disagree	0
Don't know	3
Missing value	0

Question 9: Question time allowed MLAs to give their views on the policies of certain Departments.

	<b>Frequency</b>
Agree	22
Disagree	6
Don't know	5
Missing value	0

Question 10: I found it easy to understand what was happening.

	<b>Frequency</b>
Agree	16
Disagree	14
Don't know	3
Missing value	0

Question 11: I found the session informative

	<b>Frequency</b>
Agree	28
Disagree	2
Don't know	2
Missing value	1

Question 12: The quality of questions was high.

	<b>Frequency</b>
Agree	24
Disagree	1
Don't know	7
Missing value	1

Question 13: The quality of answers was high.

	<b>Frequency</b>
Agree	21
Disagree	2
Don't know	9
Missing value	1