

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION ON PARLIAMENTARY QUESTIONS

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BACKGROUND

This supplementary briefing note is prepared for Members of the Committee on Procedures of the Northern Ireland (NI) Assembly, in response to the following queries:

1. Is the new procedure of Topical Questions in the House of Commons working adequately?
2. What is the Advisory Cost Limit of Parliamentary Questions in the House of Commons?
3. Do Departments of the Irish Government direct Dáil Éireann Members to their website for information requested by Written Questions?

This briefing note is based on information received from the specific legislature in question and relevant supplementary information identified by Research Services.

1. TOPICAL QUESTIONS

On 25 October 2007 the House of Commons agreed to a new procedure recommended by the Select Committee on Modernisation. This new procedure provides time for Members to ask "topical" oral questions in the last 10 to 15 minutes of some Oral Question Times from the beginning of the 2007-08 Session. The Modernisation Committee's intention was to create the opportunity for topical and spontaneous questions on issues of the day selected by Members. Members wishing to ask a question during Topical Questions may enter their name into a ballot instead of lodging a specific question. Those Members chosen to ask a topical question will be notified of this and will subsequently be called by the Speaker to ask their question in the Chamber during Topical Questions.¹ In relation to how well the new procedure of 'Topical Questions' is working, the Table Office of the House of Commons provided this response,

As this procedure is still relatively new in the House of Commons, it is still being considered an 'experiment'. Therefore, no formal evaluation has taken place to date however anecdotal evidence suggests that it has gone down well with backbenchers and has not caused Ministers any insurmountable problems.²

The Standing Order which governs Topical Questions will expire at the end of the current Parliamentary Session. If the House of Commons wish to extend this Standing Order a debate will be required which will most likely take place in October

¹ 'A Guide to Topical Questions in the House of Commons', provided by the Table Office of the House of Commons

² Information gained through correspondence with the Table Office of the House of Commons.

2008. Therefore, the Committee on Procedures may wish to take into account the outcome of this debate when considering its current inquiry into Assembly Questions.³

2. ADVISORY COST LIMIT

Within Government Departments there is an Advisory Cost Limit known as the Disproportionate Cost Threshold (DCT), which is the cost level above which Departments can refuse to answer a Parliamentary Question. At present there is no advisory cost limit for oral answers, however there is for written answers. The DCT per written answer is currently £700 which is based on eight times the average marginal cost of answering Written Parliamentary Questions.⁴ Marginal cost is taken as the direct cost of civil servants' time and the average cost is based on a sample of all Written Questions answered by those Departments with the highest volume of Questions. Such samples are taken on a quinquennial basis, the next being due in 2009.⁵

3. DIRECTING DÁIL ÉIREANN MEMBERS TO DEPARTMENT WEBSITES

There have been, on occasion incidents where Government Departments have directed Members of the Dáil Éireann to Departmental websites for information requested through written questions. However, this type of reply does not occur frequently and it would not be normal practice for Government Departments to reply in this manner.⁶

³ Information gained through correspondence with the Clerk of the Procedures Committee of the House of Commons.

⁴ House of Commons Factsheet P1 Parliamentary Questions, March 2007 pg 14

⁵ Questions for Written Answer, House of Lords January 2008

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld200708/ldhansrd/text/80117w0003.htm>

⁶ Information gained through correspondence with the Parliamentary Questions Office of the Dáil Éireann.