



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Protocol for Handling Assembly Questions Tabled to the Assembly Commission.

INTRODUCTION

1. Standing Order 19(1)(b) specifies that:

19 (1) A member may ask questions of (b) a member representing the Assembly Commission, on matters relating to the Commission's official responsibilities.
2. This protocol sets out the arrangements by which the Commission and Chief Executive's Office (CCEO) will coordinate the replies to oral and written questions to the Commission in accordance with the requirements of both Standing Orders and the Commission Handbook.
3. It is the responsibility of CCEO to:
 - (i) Allocate questions to relevant Directorates of the Assembly Secretariat to prepare draft replies;
 - (ii) Allocate draft replies to Commission Members for consideration and signature;
 - (iii) Issue signed answers to relevant Members and the Business Office.

ALLOCATION OF QUESTIONS

4. When CCEO is notified of a question to the Commission having been tabled, it will be allocated to the most appropriate Directorate to lead in drafting the response.
5. Answers to questions will normally be allocated to the Commission Member holding the portfolio for the lead Directorate.
6. In the case of Oral Questions to the Commission, CCEO will take account of portfolios when allocating which questions will be answered by which

Members but will also try to ensure a balance in the number of questions being answered by each Member.

7. All Commission Members will be notified of questions which have been received and of answers which have been issued.
8. The Speaker, as Chair of the Commission, will be consulted on politically novel and contentious answers before they are issued to the relevant Member.

NATURE OF RESPONSES

9. Standing Orders are clear that in answering questions tabled to the Commission, Commission Members are “representing the Assembly Commission, on matters relating to the Commission’s official responsibilities.” Answers will therefore be drafted on a factual basis and reflect any relevant Commission decisions or positions.
10. Members may wish to amend answers to reflect their individual style or particular queries on detail but must still reflect the Commission’s position. Answers to written or oral questions should not be party political in nature.
11. If a Member wishes to amend an answer in a way which does not reflect Commission policies or decisions, or to make it party political, CCEO will bring it to the attention of the Speaker who will adjudicate on an acceptable official Commission reply.

LANGUAGE

12. A Commission Member will decide whether they prefer to answer questions allocated to them in English or in both English and Irish.
13. CCEO will provide bilingual translation to a Commission Member who requests it using the existing provision available within the resources of the Official Report.
14. For oral questions, in accordance with Standing Orders and rulings governing the use of language in plenary, CCEO will continue to provide bilingual translation to a Commission Member requesting it.
15. For written questions, CCEO will contact each Member of the Assembly who may table questions to ask whether they prefer to decline to receive responses bilingually.
16. CCEO will maintain a record of the preferences of each Member and will ensure it is kept up to date at the start of, and during, each mandate.

17. If an individual Member has made clear that they do not wish to receive an answer bilingually, CCEO will notify the Commission Member when a question has been allocated to them from that Member. A bilingual answer will not be issued to a Member who has made clear that they do not wish to receive a bilingual response.

DEADLINES

18. Standing Order 20C(4) specifies the deadlines for responses to written questions. Given the statutory role of the Assembly Commission to support the work of the Assembly, the Commission should set an example to departments and meet these deadlines in all but exceptional circumstances.
19. The Assembly Secretariat will treat Assembly questions to the Commission as a priority and will aim to give Commission Members sufficient time to consider answers for signature.
20. Commission members will be notified of the deadline when an answer is allocated to them and will be expected to respond as quickly as possible to ensure that an answer is provided on time.
21. When a member of the Commission who would be due to receive an answer in line with their portfolio is unavailable, or CCEO has been unable to receive a timely response from them, CCEO may allocate the answer to another member in order to ensure a deadline is met.