



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Research and Information Service Briefing Paper

Paper 06/26

10 December 2025

NIAR 262-25

Cost of Assembly Written Questions

David Graham

In response to a request from the Committee on Procedures, this briefing paper outlines available information relating to the cost of answering written questions.

This information is provided to Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) in support of their duties, and is not intended to address the specific circumstances of any particular individual. It should not be relied upon as professional legal advice, or as a substitute for it.

Introduction

Submitting written questions is an important mechanism for holding the Executive to account. Each year, MLAs ask – and receive ministerial responses to – thousands of written questions.

The cost of answering a written question varies significantly. It can depend on the question's complexity and the workload, resources and capacity of departments. Departments may also refuse to answer questions if they would incur a disproportionate cost above an advisory threshold.¹

There is scarce information regarding the cost of answering written questions. The most recent and comparable evidence comes from the Welsh Government, where the First Minister estimated the average cost of answering written questions to have been £112 between 2022-2024.²

1 Departmental costs of answering written questions

The Northern Ireland Executive does not routinely publish information about the cost to departments of answering written questions.

So far, in the 2025-2026 session, Members have asked a total of 7,428 written questions to Ministers.³ In the same period, MLAs have asked 332 oral questions.⁴

The 2020 Guidance for Ministers in the Exercise of their Official Responsibilities (Section 3.3) requires performance statistics for each department to be published regarding answering written questions on time.⁵ However, they do not include any cost information.

¹ [Guide to Parliamentary Work](#), Cabinet Office, November 2024

² [Written Questions tabled on 21/03/2024 for answer on 28/03/2024 - Welsh Parliament](#), WQ92268 (e)

³ Available at [Northern Ireland Assembly Questions Search](#), Written questions, 2025-2026 [Accessed 10/12/2025]

⁴ Available at [Northern Ireland Assembly Questions Search](#), Oral questions, 2025-2026 [Accessed 10/12/2025]

⁵ [Guidance for Ministers in the Exercise of their Official Responsibilities](#), Northern Ireland Executive Committee, March 2020

2 Cost to departments of answering written questions

Comparable information on the costs of answering written questions is relatively sparse. However, there is some recent publicly available information from the Welsh Government, and more distant estimates from the Scottish and UK governments.

Departments may refuse to answer written questions if they would incur a disproportionate cost. The advisory threshold for disproportionate cost varies across the central and devolved governments. Publicly available information regarding threshold amounts is summarised below:

- UK Parliament: £850⁶ (pegged at 140% of the Freedom of Information Act cost limit, currently £600, to the nearest £50)
- Wales: £500⁷
- Scotland: £600⁸
- Northern Ireland: £750⁹

2.1 Wales

In response to a written question (WQ92268) answered on 8 April 2024, the Welsh First Minister estimated the average cost of answering written questions to have been £112 (£55-£170) between 2022-2024.¹⁰

2.2 Scotland

⁶ [Guide to Parliamentary Work](#), Cabinet Office, November 2024; [Written Questions: Costs](#), UIN HL3802; [Written Questions: Costs](#), UIN 23955

⁷ [Guidance on Assembly Questions](#), Presiding Office (Wales), April 2002

⁸ [Guidance for staff on Scottish Parliamentary Questions](#), September 2017

⁹ Paragraph 466, [Inquiry into Assembly Questions](#), Committee on Procedures, March 2009

¹⁰ [Written Questions tabled on 21/03/2024 for answer on 28/03/2024 - Welsh Parliament](#), WQ92268 (e)

In response to a Freedom of Information Request (FOI/202200332327) published on 30 October 2023, the Scottish Government said the average cost to respond to a written question was £98.51.¹¹

However, in response to a second Freedom of Information Request (FOI/202500452185) published on 4 March 2024, the Scottish Government noted that, while the £98.51 figure was the most recent estimate, it referred to a 2008 costing exercise that was now considerably out of date.¹²

2.3 UK Parliament

In response to a written question (UIN23955) answered on 22 January 2025, then-Leader of the House of Commons, Lucy Powell, said information on the average cost of answering a written question was not held, and:

The cost to the public purse of answering written PQs depends on numerous factors, including the size of parliamentary teams, volumes of parliamentary questions submitted, and the complexity of the question asked (and required policy work to answer it), amongst other factors.¹³

The Leader of the House of Lords, Baroness Smith of Basildon, made an identical response to written question (UINHL3802) on 21 January 2025.¹⁴

An earlier 2015 House of Commons Library Briefing Paper stated that the cost incurred by the Government when answering a written question was estimated to be £164, on average.¹⁵

2.4 Ireland (Oireachtas)

¹¹ [Costs to respond to written questions lodged by Members of the Scottish Parliament: FOI release](#), Financial Management Directorate, October 2023

¹² [Parliamentary questions cost: FOI Release](#), Communications and Ministerial Support Directorate, March 2025

¹³ [Written Questions: Costs](#), UIN 23955

¹⁴ [Written Questions: Costs](#), UIN HL3802

¹⁵ Section 2.5, [Parliamentary Questions: recent issues](#), House of Commons Library, May 2015

In response to a written question (520) on 21 November 2017, the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport said that costs “vary greatly from question to question”, and that providing an estimate “would need a detailed time and resource analysis over a significant time period”.¹⁶

3 Publication of written question costs by department or legislature

Other legislatures or departments do not seem to routinely publish written question costs. Any recent public information has been published in response to a written question (as in Wales) or a Freedom of Information Request (as in Scotland).

As noted above, Northern Ireland Departments must publish statistics regarding answering written questions on time.¹⁷ However, there is no requirement to provide any cost information.

¹⁶ [Parliamentary Questions Costs – Tuesday, 21 Nov 2017 – Parliamentary Questions \(32nd Dáil\) – Houses of the Oireachtas](#)

¹⁷ [Guidance for Ministers in the Exercise of their Official Responsibilities](#), Northern Ireland Executive Committee, March 2020