

**GENERAL SYNOD**

**SYNOD QUESTIONS**

**A REPORT BY THE BUSINESS COMMITTEE**

1. Members of the Synod will be aware that the Business Committee has had the arrangements for Synod Questions under review and that has resulted in Questions being taken on the second day of Synod, in both July and November 2001. This is a matter which has been under regular review by the Committee and its predecessors. Correspondence to the Business Committee has consistently urged a number of other possible changes to the arrangements for Questions.
2. Members will be aware that the procedure for Questions is governed by Standing Orders (SO 10(b) and SO 105-109) but there is some freedom for adjusting arrangements without changing Standing Orders and that has enabled the Committee to shift Question Time to the second day of Synod, a change which has met with generally favourable response.
3. In this paper the Business Committee suggests a number of further adjustments to the arrangements for Question Time and invites endorsement of its suggestions. If the suggestions are endorsed, the Standing Orders Committee will be asked to draft appropriate changes to the Standing Orders, and those matters which do not require such a

change will be implemented from November 2002 onwards.

4. As well as setting out its recommendations, this paper reviews the history and rationale for current arrangements under the headings: “Why Questions?”; History; Practical considerations; Proposed changes in practice”.

### **Why Questions?**

5. The large number of questions which are tabled at each Group of Sessions and the close attention paid to the delivery of answers indicates that members need no persuading of the importance of Question Time. It is however relevant to put on record three reasons for including this provision in the agenda of every Group of Sessions. The three reasons are :
  - a. means by which members of Synod can hold officers, committees, Boards and Councils, etc accountable on action taken and views expressed between and apart from the Sessions of the General Synod;
  - b. means of eliciting information which would not otherwise be in the public domain or easily accessible so that it may be referred to in Synod debate;
  - c. means by which information, which may be already known to the questioner, can be made more generally and publicly available in circumstances when it is judged that there is good reason for the information to be widely accessible.

Oral delivery of answers, with the possibility of supplementary questions, is appropriate for questions asked for the first reason. In many instances the second two purposes can be achieved by requesting written answers.

### **Historical background**

6. Before engaging with current difficulties and proposed changes, some history of the emergence of the current arrangements will provide background to the ‘climate’ in which Question Time is viewed, both by Synod members and those responsible for the provision of answers.
7. Something very like the present form of Question Time was inherited from the Church Assembly, but in the early years there were few Questions at any Group of Sessions. The number steadily increased but until the early 1990s an average of 70 or so at each Group of Sessions were manageable. There was an inherited convention (not supported explicitly in Standing Orders) that Questions should always be taken on the evening of the first day of a Group of Sessions (even if that had been a half-day meeting in London or a Friday evening meeting in York). This has now been varied.
8. Other features of the present arrangements include:
  - a. Since the overall number of questions has increased markedly in recent years there is a real risk at any Group of Sessions that many questions will not be reached.
  - b. There has been comment that answers are over-lengthy and ponderous, slowing down the pace of Question Time.

For that reason Standing Orders now limit the length of time taken to deliver answers to one minute.

- c. For some time there has been tension at each Group of Sessions over restricting questions to Chairmen of bodies on which the Synod is represented; for example, there are always those who want to question “the Archbishop of Canterbury” about issues which lie quite outside his role as Chairman of a body answerable to Synod. From time to time it has been judged possible to answer such questions by the convention of addressing the Secretary General, in his capacity as the Synod’s liaison with ‘worlds’ outside the Synod ambit.
- d. There has developed a convention of allowing questions to be answered by persons other than the Chairman, where the Chairman is not a member of Synod or the designated member of the body is better placed to field the question than the Chairman him/herself.
- e. The underlying assumption has always been that if a questioner does not specify ‘written answer’, an oral answer is looked for. The Standing Order seems equally capable of the opposite interpretation. There is a convention of providing an oral answer which directs the questioner to more detailed information posted on a notice board.
- f. The Standing Orders give no direction as to the order in which questions shall be taken but the ‘rolling rota’ by which the body which answered last at a particular Group of Sessions answers first at the next, has been established for two decades at least.

- g. For the last decade there has been the internal rule of thumb applied that not more than one hour's dedicated work to the provision of an answer cannot be defended, and the need for longer preparation time will justify polite declining to answer a question.
- h. The recent advances in technology and the admission of e-mailed and faxed questions has meant that the deadline for receipt is increasingly pressurised. Many questions are received within minutes of the deadline, even though no overall assessment of the subjects being raised and other practical organisational issues can be settled until after the deadline. Conversely, the advent of information technology has made the provision and gathering together of answers much easier than it used to be.
- i. From the end of the 1980s the custom has been to distribute Questions reasonably in advance of Question Time. Answers are released to the press and questioner in the course of oral delivery of answers. Answers are publicly available from the end of Question Time. The text of the supplementary questions and their answers is not publicised until the transcript is received.

### **Practical considerations**

- 9. Practical considerations in dealing with Questions might best be appreciated by describing current practice:
  - a. When questions are received, receipt is acknowledged by letter or e-mail.
  - b. Each question is passed to the Legal Adviser who examines the text in the light of the requirements of

Standing Orders. Any decision to disallow a question, or to require a varied wording to bring it into order, is communicated to the questioner in writing (or e-mail), with time allowed for response. Protracted exchanges between the questioner, administrators and Legal Adviser sometimes ensue.

- c. When the question has been cleared by the Legal Adviser, it is relayed to the body required to prepare an answer (with a note of the last date on which that answer is required).
- d. In practice, stages (a) to (c) above can, and very often are, concentrated into a very short space of time, particularly when the question has been received immediately before the deadline, in company with a good many others.
- e. Immediately after the deadline, all questions received are marshalled into an appropriate order (precise orders within each body to be questioned are settled by the body concerned). There is a meeting of relevant staff to assess the range of questions and that meeting often suggests that a question addressed to one body could appropriately be transferred to another body. It is also at that meeting that it is apparent that some subjects are being raised with different bodies and it becomes clear that there is a need to alert the bodies concerned of the cross-reference. The proposed transfer of questions from one body to another is notified in writing to the questioner and opportunity is given for response.
- f. At November Groups of Sessions, which do not begin until Tuesday, Standing Orders include the closing time for questions of 5.30 pm on a Friday afternoon, which

inevitably delays the process of marshalling the questions and soliciting answers until after the ensuing weekend; November Groups of Sessions which begin on Mondays (with a Thursday deadline) make the practical task much easier.

- g. As soon as possible after the deadline, the Questions Notice Paper is marshalled, indexed and printed.
- h. As answers are prepared by the bodies concerned, they must be cleared with their Chairmen or other spokespersons. Delays sometimes occur if a Chairman is not immediately accessible.
- i. Prepared answers are assembled. In practice this is not usually complete until the day before Question Time or the morning of that day. Copies of Questions and Answers are then printed, ready for distribution an hour or so before Question Time.
- j. Envelopes addressed to each questioner are filled with the appropriate answer(s). material for posting on notice boards is marshalled.
- k. Copies of the Questions and Answers paper are distributed to the Chairman of the session, his/her platform advisers, the shorthand writer, the editor of the Report of Proceedings, relevant staff and all those who are to give answers. Copies are made available to the Press Office to be distributed when Question Time begins. Questioners' copies are posted in the relevant pigeonholes as Question Time proceeds.

- l. This whole process ((a) to (k) above) is a prominent element in the workload of one staff member (at Executive Officer level) for some days before the deadline until Question time itself. This officer is advised at all stages by the Legal Adviser, the Clerk to the Synod, the Secretary General and senior staff (Board and Council Secretaries). If an advising officer is not immediately available, delays in the process can occur. The designated officer “holds the ring” of the process throughout.
- m. ‘Tightness’ in the present timetable must be emphasised. Additional pressures occur when over-long answers are received and need editing or a questioner’s negotiation over the wording is protracted.
- n. The staff meeting held the day after the deadline (and internal discussions within Boards and Councils) determine whether anyone other than the Chairman concerned is to answer or where a common answer will be given to two or more questions.
- o. Written communications with questioners are always in the form of “if I have not heard from you by ...”; if no response is received, agreement is assumed.
- p. On occasion a prepared answer is altered at a very late stage. Sometimes the earlier prepared answer has already been copied and all concerned are warned to “check against delivery”. Unless the change is made during oral delivery, the changed version would be made available to the questioner, even if not more generally.

- q. From time to time a judgement has to be made about how much of the 'notice board' information can, practically, be included in the subsequent Report of Proceedings.

### **Proposed ways forward**

- 10. In the circumstances outlined in the preceding sections of this paper, the Business Committee propose the following changes to the current arrangements by change to Standing Orders (where required) or by changing current arrangements:
  - i. The number of Questions which may be tabled by each Synod member should be reduced to two. (Change to Standing Orders needed to achieve this)
  - ii. Subject to a discretion remaining with the Chairman of the Session, only two supplementaries would normally be allowed to each question, the original questioner having priority.
  - iii. The notice period for the submission of questions should be in relation to the first day of the period approved by Synod for meetings of the General Synod rather than the actual first day of that particular Group of Sessions. Thus London Sessions to fall within a Monday to Friday period would always have the closing date calculated from the Monday, even if the Group of Sessions does not actually begin until the Tuesday, and York Groups of Sessions will have the submission date calculated in respect of the Friday, even if the Group of Sessions does not begin until Saturday. In this way the closing date for receipt of questions can be calculated and widely known well in

advance. (Change to Standing Orders needed to achieve this)

- iv. It should be clearly accepted that questions might be answered by a member of the body concerned other than the Chairman if the Chairman so directs. The answerer (if not the Chairman) must be a member of the General Synod. (Change to Standing Orders needed to achieve this)
- v. The Questions Notice Paper should specify who will answer questions and the reason which has prompted someone other than the Chairman being designated.
- vi. The text of written answers to questions to be circulated on a Notice Paper immediately prior to the first period for Questions on the Agenda. Although some have suggested that all questions and answers should be given prior circulation (so that Question Time would be devoted solely to supplementaries), the Business Committee takes the view that the style and ethos of Question Time require that supplementaries be framed and posed only after the oral delivery of the initial answer.
- vii. Standing Orders could be adjusted to make it clear that when two or more questions are combined to receive a common answer, an answer taking longer than one minute to deliver would be in order without the Chairman of the session having to rely on his discretionary powers. (Change to Standing Orders needed to achieve this)
- viii. The provision of more than one separate allocation of time in an agenda for the answer of Questions should be allowed. Such separate periods should be allocated (a) to

questions to the Houses of Synod (particularly the House of Bishops) and Archbishops' Council, (b) to officers of the Synod (Secretary General, Clerk to the Synod), and (c) Boards, Councils and other bodies on a rotating basis as at present. Such an arrangement however should not preclude separate periods for Questions moving on sequentially if that is appropriate at a given Group of Sessions. (Standing Orders need to be amended to achieve this.)

- ix. As a matter of administrative practice, the rotation of those giving answers should be accelerated by taking three bodies from the end of the rota at one Group of Sessions and placing them first at the next Group of Sessions, rather than one such body on each occasion.
- x. As well as copies of questions and answers being generally available (to the press, at the information desk and in the concourse) after Question Time, they would be posted and be accessible on a website.
- xi. There should be prescribed dates for the submission of question for written answer between Groups of Sessions of General Synod, so that, for example, between July and the following February, there could be the possibility of written answers on a named date in late October, and between February and July Groups of Sessions on a named date in May. Such Questions and Answers would be 'on the record' and part of the published record of Synod's proceedings. (Standing Orders would need to be amended to achieve this.)
- xii. Where a member of Synod wishes to withdraw a question (perhaps because the information requested has already

been disclosed before Question Time is reached), he or she might do so by written notice to the Chairman of the session, who would then announce that the Question had been withdrawn when it was reached.

11. Subject to General Synod endorsement of these proposals, the appropriate process for change (either reference to the Standing Orders Committee for action or change in administrative procedures) will be put in hand at the earliest opportunity.

On behalf of the Committee

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Chairman

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