



An Chartlann Náisiúnta
National Archives

Disposal of Parliamentary Question (PQ) files on an ongoing basis as a category or class of records under section 7 of the National Archives Act, 1986

Guidance Note

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Document Control

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1. Introduction

What is a PQ?

A parliamentary question (PQ) is a question addressed to a minister in Dáil Éireann, usually by an opposition member or backbencher, on a matter related to that minister's portfolio. The minister is obliged to provide a factually accurate answer to the question. The Taoiseach answers questions on Tuesdays and Wednesdays, and the other ministers rotate their days, so that every minister must regularly answer PQs. PQs are divided into two types, oral (asked in the Dáil), and written. TDs may ask a minister two oral PQs, giving four days notice of each question, and an unlimited amount of written PQs, giving three days notice. There are also five priority oral PQs asked each day, for which three days notice is given. PQs and the answers given to them form part of the published record of the Dáil.

The process of creating a PQ file

Once notice of a PQ is received by a department, it is prioritised and delegated to a civil servant with competence in the matter to hand. A file is opened on the question, it is researched and an answer is provided for the relevant minister. For written PQs, an answer is usually only provided for the exact question that is asked. For oral PQs, the answer to the question is accompanied with a note for the minister allowing them to elaborate on the answer in the debate, and to answer other supplementary questions that their answer might provoke. This note will usually require some research by the civil servant charged with providing the answer to the PQ, and documents pertaining to this research are often found in the PQ file.

Records created in the process

A PQ file will contain the question that was asked of the minister and the answer that was given in the Dáil, both usually copied from the daily report of the Dáil. A note for the minister will usually contain additional information on the question, such as the specific case which a more general question might refer to, or further information to allow the minister to answer supplementary questions that might be asked. The information contained in the note for the minister will usually be taken from files that already exist in the relevant department. Sometimes there will be correspondence between civil servants and agencies that are holding the records, such as Health Boards or the Gardaí.

2. Review of PQ files within the National Archives

The National Archives undertook a review of the PQ files which it already held to ascertain if they merited long term preservation. From this review, it is clear that there that a distinction should be made between written PQ files, which generally hold very minimal information, usually only the question and answer (copied from the Dáil record), and oral PQ files, which contain information and documents copied from other departmental records, along with briefing notes prepared by civil servants to provide the minister with information on the nature of the question and the political reasons for it, or to allow the Minister to answer supplemental questions.

3. PQ files currently held by Departments of State

Consultation with the Office of the Clerk of the Dáil provided the National Archives with the following figures for the number of PQs submitted annually for a period of 13 years:

Year	Oral Replies	Written Replies	Withdrawn	Disallowed	Total
1996	1,714	17,424	3,033	1,954	24,125
1997	925	12,920	2,689	1,208	17,742
1998	1,597	20,174	3,132	1,564	26,467
1999	1,779	19,576	3,632	1,560	26,547
2000	1,874	21,846	4,099	1,404	29,223
2001	1,736	23,254	4,786	1,395	31,121
2002	1,172	19,595	3,852	1,515	26,134
2003	1,894	24,012	3,499	1,512	30,917
2004	1,875	25,960	3,781	1,445	32,791
2005	1,780	31,864	3,956	1,641	39,241
2006	1,688	34,463	4,724	1,663	42,538
2007	1,289	26,818	4,442	1,204	33,753
2008	1,496	33,638	8,726	922	44,782

From the above figures it is clear that the number of oral PQs has remained fairly constant, at an average of 1600 per year. The amount of written PQs has generally increased in the period, from an average of 19,800 from 1996-2002 to an average of 29,500 from 2003-2008. The high volume of PQs generated on an annual basis presents a compelling rationale for the examination of the archival value of PQ files.

4. Conclusions and recommendations

In reviewing PQ files the National Archives noted the following:

1. The creation of a PQ file is not a core function of a Department of State. It is a peripheral activity that does not create any significant new records of that department's functions, structures and activities.
2. The key record of a parliamentary question is the record published in the proceedings of the Dáil.
3. The information collated in PQ files is generally to be found in the records of the department itself, and this information is copied or abstracted and placed on the PQ file. The only unique information tends to relate to the collating of this information, such as letters between civil servants and government departments and agencies seeking information on the subject at hand, which is then copied from the records of that department or agency.

The National Archives therefore issues the following guidelines and direction in relation to the disposal of PQ files in Departments of State:

1. All written PQ files currently held by departments may be permitted to be destroyed forthwith, if they are no longer needed for business purposes.
2. Written PQ files that are created in the future by departments may be destroyed after they are no longer needed for business purposes.
3. Oral PQ files that are of a routine nature concerning issues which are of no major significance to the department or the governance of Ireland may be destroyed 10 years after their administrative use has concluded.
4. Oral PQ files that:
 - concern issues of a contentious nature and/or cause significant public debate
 - concern a matter of national significance
 - cause significant debate within a department

are to be retained in that department and transferred to the National Archives in accordance with the provisions of the National Archives Act, 1986.

5. Where departments do not retain PQ files as a specific series or where the contents of PQ files are placed on existing departmental files this authorisation will not apply.

5. PQ Disposal Certificate

In order to comply with the National Archives Act, 1986, a signed disposal certificate for FOI request case files must be obtained.

The following steps are required:

1. Complete the PQ Disposal Request Form (Appendix 1).
2. Email the completed form to query@nationalarchives.ie with your request for the attention of the Head of Current Records.
3. Your request will be processed and a draft certificate will be sent to you for signature by the relevant [certifying officer](#).
4. The signed certificate will be returned to the National Archives for counter-signature by the Director to complete the formal authorisation process.

Appendix 1

National Archives Appraisal Request: Application for Disposal of Parliamentary Question (PQ) Files

[Please download and complete a Word version of the form here.](#)

Please complete the questionnaire to provide the National Archives with as much information as possible to support your application for a records disposal certificate.

Please refer to the PQ Guidance Note before completing this form.

Part 1: General information	
Contact details:	
Name of department/office/body:	
Division/section/unit:	
Name and grade of applicant:	
Name and contact email of Certifying Officer :	

Part 2: Formats and date	
Formats:	
Which formats are the PQ files stored in?	☐ Paper ☐ Digital
Please give details of digital systems used:	
Date:	
Please indicate earliest date of records for which disposal authorisation is being sought. This disposal application is for ongoing disposal.	
From (yyyy):	

Part 3: Extent and storage of records	
Series volume (paper and electronic):	
What is the volume of the series?	
Paper files (approximate number of files currently held):	
Paper files (approximate accrual rate of FOIs per year):	
Digital files (approximate number of files currently held):	
Digital files (approximate accrual rate of FOIs per year):	
Storage location (electronic):	
Where are the electronic records stored?	☐ External servers ☐ Local servers ☐ Cloud storage ☐ Other
Please give details of storage providers and back-up services:	
Storage location (paper)	
Where are the electronic records stored?	☐ Office storage ☐ Local (building) storage ☐ Offsite storage ☐ Other
Please give details of storage providers:	

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