

Referendum question assessment guidelines

By law, the Electoral Commission must comment on the intelligibility of UK, national and regional referendum questions, and some local government referendum questions.¹ In this context, we mean referendums where voters are asked to vote on a proposal put forward by government. At this type of referendum, voters are given a ballot paper that contains the question and at least two possible responses to choose from.²

We have developed these guidelines to:

- help us assess how intelligible a proposed question is
- help people draft intelligible referendum questions

In this context, 'question' includes the question, the responses, and any statement that comes immediately before the question.

Guidelines for assessing referendum questions

A referendum question should present the options clearly, simply and neutrally. So it should:

- be easy to understand
- be to the point

- be unambiguous
- avoid encouraging voters to consider one response more favourably than another
- avoid misleading voters

Checklist

We will use the following checklist to help us assess how intelligible a question is.

- Is the question written in plain language? That is, language that:
 - uses short sentences (around 15–20 words)
 - is simple, direct, and concise
 - uses familiar words, and avoids jargon or technical terms that would not be easily understood by most people
- Is the question written in neutral language, avoiding words that suggest a judgement or opinion, either explicitly or implicitly?
- Is the information contained in the question factual, describing the question and the options clearly and accurately?
- Does the question avoid assuming anything about voters' views?

1 Under the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000.

2 How many responses voters can vote for depends on the voting system used at that referendum.

Feedback

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