By law, the Electoral Commission must comment on the intelligibility of UK, national and regional referendum questions, and some local government referendum questions. 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.

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?