

Under the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000, The Electoral Commission has a statutory obligation to comment on the intelligibility of UK, national and regional referendum questions.

In assessing intelligibility, the Commission will have regard to the question's effectiveness in presenting the options clearly, simply and neutrally.

The Commission has developed these guidelines to facilitate the assessment of referendum questions and to try and achieve an acceptable level of intelligibility. We intend to keep them under review in order to ensure they remain relevant and applicable

## Question assessment guidelines

### Guideline one

The question should prompt an immediate response

It should be clear what decision the voter is being asked to make.

Voters should not have to work out, or try to interpret the question; the voter's preferred answer should be immediately identifiable.

Voters should not have to re-read the question several times to understand its content.

The question should be written in a way that encourages each reader to interpret it in the same way. To achieve this, clear and unambiguous language should be used.

The response options should be phrased in terms that are consistent with those used in the question. For example, if the question contains the words 'agree' and 'disagree' the possible answers should also be 'agree' and 'disagree'.

### Guideline two

Words and phrases used in the question should not have positive or negative connotations

Certain words or phrases may encourage support for one particular outcome. For example, words such as 'new' and 'approve' may in some instances imply that something is a positive concept.

Equally, negative words and phrases should be avoided. For example, 'abolish', 'old' and 'reject' may in some instances imply that something is a negative concept.

Attempts should be made to find unbiased descriptive words to replace such terms.

Consideration should be given to perceptions that voters may have about the subject matter and potential negative or positive connotations associated with particular words.

### Guideline three

Words and phrases used in the question should not be intentionally leading

The question should not be phrased so as to guide the voter towards one particular outcome.

### Guideline four

Words and phrases used in the question should not be loaded

The question should be balanced and should not contain words or phrases which do prompt one particular answer.

Words and phrases that are, or could be perceived as, false or misleading should be avoided.

## Guideline five

The question should not contain 'jargon'

Words, phrases and acronyms that are only commonly used and understood by specialist groups should be avoided.

## Guideline six

The language used in the question should be consistent

If certain words or concepts are referred to once in a question or preamble, their use should be consistent throughout the entire text.

## Guideline seven

Words and phrases used in the question should reflect the language used and understood by the voter

Consideration should be given to the language used during any informal campaigning that may have taken place prior to the referendum period commencing, providing this could not be perceived as potentially influencing the outcome.

## Guideline eight

The question should not provide more information than is necessary to answer the question meaningfully

The question should not contain unnecessary detail about the options or subject matter.

The question should focus on the main issue(s), rather than less important consequences or implications.

Policy alternatives that are not directly related to the referendum question should not be mentioned, as they will only make it less clear what the voter is being asked to do.

## Guideline nine

The question should not be longer than necessary

The question should be sensitive to the level of public awareness surrounding the referendum issue. If there is limited public awareness of the subject, it may be appropriate to include more detail about the choices.

Where the referendum issue is a complex one or unfamiliar one, it may be appropriate to use a preamble to explain the context and/or provide additional information to the voter, rather than have a long question.

## Guideline ten

The question should be well structured

The text of any question should be carefully structured and easy for the voter to read. Questions should present the issues and key words in a logical and rational sequence.

This may involve the use of several short sentences and/or a preamble.

Reverse wording or 'double negatives' should be avoided as they can make it difficult for the voter to understand the question.