

Scrutiny Guidance for Witnesses

The role of Scrutiny

Hertfordshire County Council has a Cabinet style of government, which means it follows the Leader and Cabinet and scrutiny committee/s option. The Cabinet is made up of 9 senior politicians from the ruling party to form the Executive and take the major policy and operational decisions.

This means that when all 78 County Councillors meet at a full council meeting it is their role to set the strategic direction for council services, receive petitions from the public and reports from various committees.

The Role of Scrutiny

Scrutiny holds the Executive to account acting as a critical friend. The Council has two scrutiny committees the Overview & Scrutiny Committee (OSC) and the Health Scrutiny Committee (HSC).

The role of the OSC is to hold the Executive to account by scrutinising:

- Decisions made by, or on behalf of the Council or Cabinet
- Any operational or policy aspect of the Council's business

They are also able to scrutinise any issue which affects the County and its residents which may be outside the Council's control.

The Overview & Scrutiny Committee has co-opted members who are representatives of specialist organisations or groups (e.g. parent governors). Executive Members are not allowed to sit on OSC to ensure that it can do its work without undue political pressure.

The role of the HSC is to scrutinise the work of health services providing services to residents of Hertfordshire. The Committee includes ten county councillors and representatives from each of the ten Hertfordshire district/borough councils.

Like the full Council, the meetings of scrutiny committees and the topic groups are open to members of the public to attend. They may observe proceedings but cannot participate unless invited to do so by the Chairman. Executive Members and their deputies are not allowed to sit on a topic group to ensure that Scrutiny can do its work without undue political pressure

Deciding the work programme

The Committees each set a work programme. This prioritises the investigations that will be carried out over the coming year and is usually undertaken using one of the following formats: one-off item, whole committee scrutiny or topic group. Alternatively, members may decide that a seminar or bulletin can provide the additional information required.

The committees and topic groups use several sources to gather evidence for investigations including the council's own officers, other local authorities, service users and expert witnesses. They will then make a number of recommendations to the appropriate body or person – the Council, Cabinet, chief officer, health organisation/s or an external organisation.

It is important to note that none of these bodies is obliged to act on any of the recommendations; however, the topic group or committee will receive a response that indicates what action will occur and the rationale if a recommendation is not being enacted. All this information is made public. Therefore, your contribution is a vital aspect of ensuring the continued development of council services.

What can I expect?

If you have been asked to attend a meeting of either a scrutiny committee or a topic group it is because the councillors would like to hear your views on the issues being scrutinised. Councillors will not be trying to interrogate you. If you are concerned please discuss your concerns with the scrutiny officer and you are not obliged to attend. You may prefer to provide a written submission (see **Written Evidence**).

Whilst scrutiny committee meetings can appear large and daunting, the formality is a necessity due to size. Please remember that councillors are not scrutinising you personally but want to consider different experiences about a specific issue. Topic group meetings are much less formal in approach and often evidence will be heard using a round table discussion.

Attending a meeting

The committees and topic groups have a scrutiny officer. Details will be sent to you in advance of the meeting specifying, time, location and contact details. If you have any queries the scrutiny officer will be happy to help. They will explain:

- how your evidence fits in with the investigation;
- the kind of information the topic group or committee is seeking;
- the remit of the investigation to ensure your evidence is relevant and does not fall outside the committee or topic group's terms of reference.

Scrutiny committees and topic group meetings are held at County Hall, Hertford.

If you have any special requirements or access needs, then please contact the scrutiny officer prior to the meeting who will make the necessary arrangements to ensure the venue is fully accessible. Meeting rooms in County Hall are fitted with a hearing loop system.

Gathering evidence

It is important to remember that the evidence you are giving is done so in public and may be published in final reports. Your evidence is also subject to the requirements of the Freedom of Information Act.

You will find a nameplate to indicate where you should sit and after a few items of formal business the chairman will introduce him or herself and will ask you to do the same. The councillors will then ask you and other witnesses questions on the issues identified. These will be done so in an orderly and polite manner. It is important to remember that if you do not know the answer then say so and ask for a question to be repeated if you do not understand it. It is also important to remember that you are only being asked to give evidence on the issue identified.

Whilst you are welcome to stay for the entire meeting you may prefer to leave when you have finished giving your evidence. It would be helpful if you could stay until the end of the discussion concerning your input in case there are further issues identified by any of the other witnesses.

Written evidence

You may be invited to submit written evidence prior to the meeting or be asked to prepare a presentation. This will have been agreed in advance and the scrutiny officer will have contacted you to discuss arrangements.

There are no rules as to the format of any written evidence. It should address the issue being scrutinised and be clear, concise, be factually correct and avoid jargon or abbreviations. Answering the questions councillors are addressing from the scoping document can be a useful starting point. It must be submitted to the scrutiny officer by the agreed deadline.

If you have been asked to prepare a presentation it would be helpful if this could be sent electronically at least 3 days beforehand.

What happens next?

After the committee or topic group has finished collecting its evidence it will prepare a written report that summarises its work including the source of its evidence. Once the final report has been approved you will be sent a copy for information.

Your feedback

Your feedback about your experience as a witness, negative or positive, is highly valued. After the scrutiny you will be sent a feedback form. We appreciate the time you take to complete it.

Natalie Rotherham, Head of Scrutiny
(natalie.rotherham@hertfordshire.gov.uk)
Hertfordshire County Council
County Hall
Hertford
SG13 8DE