

Guide to Attending Herefordshire Council Scrutiny Committees/ Review Groups

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A GUIDE TO ATTENDING HEREFORDSHIRE COUNCIL SCRUTINY COMMITTEES/ REVIEW GROUPS

What is a Scrutiny Committee?

The Council as a whole is responsible for setting the budget and Council tax each year and agreeing the overall budget and policy framework within which decisions are made.

However, the majority of decisions are now made by the Cabinet Members (currently 9) either collectively or individually, each Cabinet Member being responsible for a specific area of Council policy. This is because, like the majority of principal Councils, Herefordshire Council has adopted what is known as a Leader and Cabinet system of governance.

Scrutiny Committees form part of these arrangements. The Committees are intended to ensure the accountability and transparency of the Council's decision making process. Their principal roles are to help in developing Council policy; probe, investigate, test the opinions and ask the difficult questions before and after decisions are taken; look in more detail at areas of concern which may have been raised by the Cabinet itself, by other Councillors or by members of the public; "call-in" decisions – this is a statutory power which gives Scrutiny Committees the right to formally stop a decision being implemented and to investigate it further; review performance of the Council and conduct Best Value reviews.

The Council has five Scrutiny Committees: (Adult Social Care and Strategic Housing, Children's Services, Community Services, Environment and Health). A Strategic Monitoring Committee scrutinises Policy and Finance matters and co-ordinates the work of these Committees.

Each Scrutiny Committee is responsible for examining Council policies and delivery of services, both by the Council and external organisations, falling within its particular remit.

Meetings of the Scrutiny Committees are held in public and open to anyone to attend, although there is no right to speak. Papers for the meetings are available one week in advance of the meeting at Council offices and in the Committee meetings section of the Council's Website at www.herefordshire.gov.uk.

Scrutiny Reviews

Sometimes a Committee will decide that it needs to look into a matter in more detail than is possible in one of its regular meetings. When this happens it will often appoint a small review group of Members to carry out a review, reporting back to the Committee as a whole, although on some occasions the Committee might decide to undertake the review itself.

The review will look at what the Council is doing well, what is not going so well, and how it can improve its service, taking into account the views of expert witnesses, members of the public and learning from examples of best practice in local government and elsewhere.

A critical part of a review is to gather information and reach reasoned conclusions based on and supported by evidence. This will often involve inviting officers, groups and individuals, concerned with or interested in the review to discuss the issues with the Members on the review group, or sometimes the Committee as a whole.

Providing Information for Reviews

People who are invited to provide information to help reviews by sharing their knowledge and experience are usually referred to as witnesses.

Although the term might make the process sound a bit like a court hearing, the aim is to seek to be as informal as possible. However, the review will need to be professional and businesslike and there will therefore need to be a degree of formality.

What is expected?

If it is decided to invite you to provide information what will usually happen is:

- An officer supporting the review will contact you informally to see if you agree that you're the right person to speak to the Councillors and are happy to do so. (Coming to speak is entirely optional (except in the case of some officers of the Council and representatives of particular public bodies). Some review group meetings are held in public and attended by the press. Reviews conducted by the Committee as a whole will normally be in public. The status of the meeting will be discussed with you before you agree to act as a witness.
- If you agree to come along you'll be sent a formal invitation letter outlining the date, time and place of the meeting and giving you as much notice of the meeting as possible. The letter will also give you more detail on the review.
- You will be asked if there's any background information you can provide by way of introduction or to aid discussion, for circulation to Members before the meeting. This will help Members prepare for the meeting and make the most of their discussion with you. (Please note that any information you submit may be published or otherwise made public unless you ask us to treat it as confidential.)
- A few days before the meeting, we'll contact you again to ensure that you have all the information you need and to outline likely areas of discussion. Again this is to help to give some structure to the meeting and to give you time to think about what you might be asked during the discussion. (Please note, however, that pre-notification of precise questions is not practical.)

When and where are meetings held?

Meetings are held both during the day and in the evening depending on the availability of witnesses and the subject being discussed. Where the meeting is held also depends on the subject being discussed and whether the meeting is being held in public or in private.

What happens at the meeting?

An officer supporting the review will be there to meet you and show you to your seat. It would be helpful if you would introduce yourself upon arrival. Everyone will have a nameplate so that you will be able to tell who has asked a question, or who you need to refer to in an answer.

At the beginning of the meeting, there may well be a number of formal items of business that the Chairman will go through such as agreeing formal minutes of previous meetings and noting any apologies for absence from Councillors.

When it comes to the matter that you will be asked to discuss, the Chairman will introduce you and ask you to comment briefly on your work, how you are connected with the review and any areas of particular importance to you or specialisation you might have.

Members will then ask you questions based on the terms of reference of the review, the areas for questioning notified to you beforehand and any supporting information you have asked to be distributed to Members.

Informal notes of the discussion will be taken which will help in the production of the final report of the review and can be used as a reference if any particular issues are raised after the meeting.

If you feel at any time, in a public meeting, that you might be discussing personal information, such as financial or personal details of yourself or a third party, or details of a business contract for example, you can ask for this part of the meeting to be conducted in private. The public and press will be asked to leave and the detail of the discussion will be available only on a very restricted basis.

What happens after the meeting?

It is possible that the review will take place over a number of months, culminating in the production of a final report that will draw on the evidence obtained during the review.

We may contact you to check aspects of the draft report to ensure that there are no errors, omissions or factual inaccuracies.

You may be sent an evaluation form about your experiences of the review, for example: Were you well prepared by Council staff? What did you think of the meeting? How could we improve in the future?

You will be sent a copy of the published report.

If the report is approved by the Scrutiny Committee it will then be sent to the relevant Cabinet Member or the Cabinet who decide what action, if any, they wish to take in response to the review's findings.

Expenses

Witnesses asked to attend a review may claim a travelling allowance. In exceptional circumstances a subsistence allowance may also be payable, if agreed in advance.

Expenses will normally be paid by cheque sent to your home address. However, if through exceptional circumstances, you need to receive immediate payment, please inform the Members Services Officer in advance so that payment can be arranged. Expenses will not be paid until after the conclusion of the meeting.

An Expenses Form, setting out the travelling allowance rates, will be sent to you prior to the meeting and when completed, should be handed to the Members Services Officer at the conclusion of the meeting.

Other information

If you require any further information about the Scrutiny Committees or any of the current reviews, please contact any of the following Members Services Officers:

Tim Brown: tbrown@herefordshire.gov.uk

(Corporate Matters and Health)

01432 260239

Paul James pjames@herefordshire.gov.uk

(Children's Services and Environment)

01432 260460

David Penrose dpenrose@herefordshire.gov.uk

(Adult Social Care & Strategic Housing and Community Services)

01432 260806

By Post: Members Services
 Brockington
 35, Hafod Road
 Hereford
 HR1 1SH

Please note that you can view agendas and minutes of all the Council's official meetings including the Scrutiny Committees at the Council's website at www.herefordshire.gov.uk , by going to the quick links section on the right hand side of the home page and clicking on the heading Committee meetings. This will take you to an alphabetical list of Committees, which in turn will lead you to the related agenda papers and minutes.