



Witness Guide to Scrutiny

This leaflet is designed to give guidance to anyone participating in a Scrutiny Board inquiry at Leeds City Council.

What is a Scrutiny Board?

Scrutiny Boards are largely made up of Elected Members of the City Council and their role is to examine, review and challenge the work and performance of the Council – in essence, a watchdog role.

What can Scrutiny Boards do?

- Challenge and review decisions made by the Council
- Review the performance of the Council and its partners
- Consider representation from groups outside the Council
- Consider individual requests for inquiry
- Help develop new policy areas

Which Board is relevant to my issue?

Depending on the issues with which you are involved, you will be asked to give information to or attend one of the Council's Scrutiny Boards.

What are the powers of Scrutiny Boards?

- To make recommendations to the full Council, to the Executive Board, Area Committees, departments, LAA partners and NHS Trusts.
- To co-opt non-Councillors to the Board to offer additional expert advice
- To invite others outside the Council to attend as 'witnesses'
- Scrutiny Boards cannot make decisions

How are Inquiries generated?

A request for scrutiny of an issue may come from a number of sources including members of the public or a group outside the Council, as well as Board members themselves. However, each Board decides

which topics and issues they will cover as an Inquiry. This means that not all requests for Scrutiny will be accepted.

What will I be asked to provide to the Board?

Usually written information is required by the Board to provide a basis for discussion. Often, Scrutiny Inquiries have agreed terms of reference. These identify the subject areas Members wish to pursue and tell those providing information what is required. However, officers in Scrutiny Support will advise on the particular information required.

Written Evidence

Written evidence should state, if appropriate, who or which organisation is submitting it. The evidence should be self-contained and paragraphs should be numbered for ease of reference. Please try to be as concise as possible. Where a longer submission is unavoidable, please include a brief summary of the main points and use clear headings to subdivide your main report.

Supplementary material may also be sent, but any key points should be summarised in your main submission.

Written evidence for a Board meeting is usually required at least two weeks before meeting. The Scrutiny Board's support officer will agree the timetable with you. Written evidence provided to a full Scrutiny Board will be made publicly available.

What written style should I use?

Keep written information concise and clear, avoiding jargon and unnecessary 'technical' references. Information should be relevant.



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Verbal Evidence

If you are giving verbal evidence you will be told the specific area of inquiry you will be questioned about, and where possible you will receive guidance on the questions you may be asked. In addition you may be asked to provide written background information that will be circulated to Board members before the meeting.

Attending a Scrutiny Board meeting

Witnesses may be asked to attend the whole meeting so that they can be invited to comment on the evidence of other witnesses. Where the Board calls for a council witness, it may be left to the department to decide which of its members of staff should represent it at the hearing, or the Board may request a named officer. The Board's support officer will advise if necessary.

Witnesses may bring advisers with them to consult during questioning.

Boards nearly always take evidence in public and representatives of the press may also be present. If there are particular reasons why a witness wants to give some or all of their evidence in private, the support officer should be consulted well in advance of the meeting. However, witnesses will have the right not to answer particular questions in public sessions where they believe that their answer would contain confidential information.

Evidence is likely to be tape recorded, although tapes will not normally be transcribed unless there is some dispute about what was said, or unless Board members or the support officer wish to review the evidence that was given.

Witnesses are therefore encouraged to make their answers reasonably brief and to the point. The tapes are kept for six months.

On arriving...

Scrutiny Advisers endeavour to give approximate times for when your item is likely to be discussed. However, as items may over run, there may be a short waiting time. It is usual for witnesses to sit at the back of the committee room until the relevant item. As the meeting is open to the public, you may decide to stay for other items. Otherwise, feel free to leave when the Board has finished discussing your item.

How will the meeting room be set out?

Members of the Scrutiny Board usually sit around a table in a horseshoe shape.

There is a further table where witnesses will be invited to sit while they are giving evidence. Microphones are provided to enable everyone to hear each other.

In addition to this there will be seating at the back of the room for the public and press, and for any other officers who are attending the meeting.

At most meetings tape recording equipment is used so that the Board can ensure that it has noted all the points made at the meeting.

If you identify yourself to the Scrutiny Board's support officer on arrival at the meeting they will show you where to sit and try to answer any other questions you may have about the meeting. Please also let them know if you wish to be kept informed of progress on a particular issue being considered by the Scrutiny Board.

What will I be asked?

Scrutiny Advisers can provide advice on the context of the information required and you may be given subject areas that are likely to be covered. All Members are able to ask questions. Sometimes Scrutiny Advisers are able to give



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guidance as to what Members may ask. However, on the day Members may pursue any area of interest.

What about confidentiality?

All the meetings are held in public and it is generally assumed that all reports are open to public scrutiny, so be careful not to give confidential information either in your written document or verbally. Some items may be deemed to be of such a confidential nature (e.g. commercial or personal information), that all members of the press and public will be asked to leave.

What if I can't answer a question?

This is not a problem. If you are able to supply the information at another time, Members will be pleased to receive it later (the Board's Scrutiny Adviser will make arrangements with you either immediately after the meeting or over the telephone). If Members ask about information which you are unable to supply (because it is not directly related to your interest in the issue or is simply not possible to provide, for example) simply explain this to the Board. If you are able to point Members to another source of information, this will be welcomed.

Will I get feedback after the process?

Yes, officers from the Scrutiny Support Unit will keep you informed of outcomes and developments.

Working Groups

Scrutiny Boards also often consider evidence and hold discussions in smaller private meetings known as Working Groups. The guidelines for providing information to a Working Group are the same as those for a full Board, as although the meetings are held in private any information provided may be fed back to the full Board by the members involved, and therefore needs to be suitable for

publication. Working Groups are also generally more informal than full Board meetings. They are held in small meeting rooms, and usually involve a discussion around a particular topic, rather than a series of formal questions and answers. If you have been invited to attend a working group and have any other questions, please contact the relevant Principal Scrutiny Adviser on the number below.

Visits

As part of an inquiry, Board members may also carry out visits to relevant sites and organisations. These are generally fairly informal and their purpose is to give members an idea of how a particular service operates – they are not an inspection! If you are participating in a visit there is no need to provide any written information to Board members. You must simply be available to answer questions. As with Working Groups, the members who have taken part in the visit will feed back their findings to the full Board. If notes have been taken during the visit these may be published as part of the meeting agenda. However, you will usually be given the opportunity to check any notes before they are made public. If you have been asked to take part in a visit and have any other questions, please contact the relevant Principal Scrutiny Adviser on the number below.

Where can I find further information?

Please feel free to contact the Scrutiny Support Unit:

Peter Marrington
Tel. (0113) 3951151
peter.marrington@leeds.gov.uk

The scrutiny unit publishes a monthly bulletin called Scrutiny News. You can



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read this on our website, or join our mailing list by contacting the unit staff.