

Rushcliffe Borough Council - Scrutiny Witness Guide

Introduction

Rushcliffe Borough Council recognises the valuable contribution that can be made by witnesses to the scrutiny process, be this in the form of expert opinion from professionals in a particular discipline, the views of town and parish councils and community groups, or residents who are directly affected by a particular service. We also value hearing from our own councillors where they have felt compelled to submit a topic for scrutiny so that we can best understand their concerns.

This Witness Guide seeks to ensure that there is a positive and clearly defined relationship between the scrutiny process and witnesses to support the effective delivery of scrutiny. Further information about scrutiny at Rushcliffe Borough Council can be found at the end of this Guide and in our Constitution online.

Who can be asked to speak at scrutiny as a witness

Topics for consideration by the Corporate Overview Group can be submitted by both councillors and officers. Once approved, these are allocated to one of our three themed scrutiny groups – Governance Scrutiny Group, Communities Scrutiny Group or Growth and Development Scrutiny Group. The Corporate Overview Group is responsible for deciding who it would be beneficial to hear from as part of the debate at scrutiny; however, the chairman of the relevant scrutiny group can request additional witnesses be invited, in conjunction with the relevant lead officer, as a result of investigative work undertaken in advance of the scrutiny meeting. Each scrutiny group has a lead officer; it is their responsibility to contact, secure the attendance of, and brief any witnesses before the scrutiny meeting.

The following people may be invited to speak at scrutiny as a witness:

- The councillor who submitted the scrutiny matrix (our mechanism for raising topics of concern for consideration by the Corporate Overview Group)
- An expert in a relevant field of research or occupation – for example, a university professor specialising in environmentally friendly energy sources to contribute to an investigation into the Council's generation and use of energy
- Officers from the Council – this is often a useful way of understanding the Council's current policy or activity in relation to a particular topic
- Professionals from other organisations such as another public sector organisation or the County Council can be asked to speak on a topic that affects the residents of the Borough but is not necessarily the responsibility of the Borough Council
- Representatives from town and parish councils, community groups or special interest groups can also provide very valuable insight into the impact of Council policy or activity on the residents of the Borough.

Members of the Council's Cabinet can be asked by the relevant chairman to attend scrutiny to answer questions about a recent decision (holding the Cabinet to account) or where the insight of the Cabinet member would be beneficial to the topic under discussion.

It is not necessary to invite representatives from all of the above categories to each scrutiny meeting – neither would it be desirable. The purpose of inviting witnesses to scrutiny is to inform the debate and increase understanding; therefore, a balance between information gathering and discussion must be maintained.

What to expect at Scrutiny

The agenda for scrutiny meetings is published five clear working days in advance of the meeting on the Council's website. This will include any reports that have been written in advance about the topics under discussion at that meeting.

The Council holds all scrutiny meetings in the Council Chamber at Rushcliffe Arena (Rugby Road, West Bridgford, NG2 7YG). The building is fully accessible, and the chamber has a built-in hearing loop. Meetings usually start at 7pm, though the Chairman can start earlier if there are many items to discuss (this will be made clear in your invitation and on the agenda for the meeting). All scrutiny meetings are live streamed to the Council's YouTube channel. To ensure you can be heard both within the room and on the live stream, we use table-top microphones – a full demonstration will be provided before the meeting starts.

If you would like to use an MS Powerpoint presentation during your witness statement, this needs to be provided to Democratic Services the working day before the meeting – you will need to share your presentation with the lead officer in advance of this so please arrange this with them directly. Your presentation will be set up and tested before the meeting starts and a handheld device provided to enable you to move your own slides forward.

Other people present in the chamber include the scrutiny committee members, the lead officer who you will have been in touch with, and at least one democratic services officer who is responsible for minuting the meeting. Other witnesses may also be present to talk on the same item or other areas of the agenda. The lead officer will ensure you are introduced to the Chairman and Vice Chairman before the meeting starts. It would be advisable to arrive at the meeting 10-15 minutes before the official start time so that we can help you get settled.

When it is time for you to speak, you will be invited to do so by the Chairman. Once all witnesses have spoken, the committee will debate the issue – they may have questions for you so please stay in the meeting until the discussion on your topic has finished. You may stay for the rest of the meeting if you wish to.

The main aim of inviting witnesses to scrutiny meetings is to gain access to relevant expertise, new perspectives and practical experiences which will help the scrutiny process to deliver well informed recommendations. You have an important role to play in providing the committee with an insight into the issue or service which is under investigation that we might not otherwise achieve.

Guidance for the Council

In managing an effective scrutiny process, the lead officer will seek to:

- Provide all witnesses with details of the time, date and place of the scrutiny session at which they have been invited to speak

- Ensure that witnesses are advised about why they have been invited to attend a scrutiny session and the matters which they will be asked to comment upon including the key lines of enquiry documented in the scrutiny matrix
- Ensure all witnesses are provided with this guide to ensure they are prepared for the meeting and feel supported in their attendance
- Ensure that all witnesses are treated with courtesy and respect.

Quick reference table

Who can be a witness?	How long can they speak for?	Where can they speak?	Nature of involvement in debate
Topic Originator (Councillor)	5 minutes	Corporate Overview Group and / or relevant scrutiny group	None
Expert Witness	15 minutes	Relevant scrutiny group	To answer relevant questions
RBC Officer	15 minutes	Relevant scrutiny group	To answer relevant questions
Professional from another organisation	15 minutes	Relevant scrutiny group	To answer relevant questions
Town and Parish Councils, community groups or special interest groups	15 minutes	Relevant scrutiny group	To answer relevant questions
Cabinet Members	As required	Relevant scrutiny group	To answer relevant questions

Timings for presentations can be extended at the discretion of the Chairman in advance of the meeting should the complexity of the topic require it.

If you have any comments about your experiences as a witness or scrutiny in general, please contact:

Charlotte Caven-Atack
 Service Manager – Corporate Services
 Lead Officer for Corporate Overview Group
Ccaven-attack@rushcliffe.gov.uk
 0115 9148278

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Appendix: What Is Scrutiny?

The dictionary defines scrutiny as critical observation or examination.

In terms of local government, a scrutiny committee can influence the policies and decisions made by the council and other organisations involved in delivering local public services. The scrutiny committee gathers evidence on issues affecting local people and makes recommendations based on its findings. It is one of the ways in which the council can find out how it is performing and if it is meeting customer expectations. Scrutiny can consider issues in relation to Council services, services provided by other public sector organisations and any issue of concern identified by the public, where the Council can have an influence.

Within Rushcliffe, scrutiny is carried out by four committees. The overarching Corporate Overview Group is responsible for issues which affect the whole Council or Borough (such as performance, health and safety, and customer feedback) and also considers topics put forward for consideration at one of the three themed scrutiny groups: Governance Scrutiny Group, Communities Scrutiny Group or Growth and Development Scrutiny Group.

Within their terms of reference, scrutiny committees will:

- review and/or scrutinise decisions made, or actions taken in connection with the discharge of any of the Council's functions
- make reports and/or recommendations to the full Council and/or the Cabinet in connection with the discharge of any functions
- consider any matter affecting the area or its inhabitants where it can influence the outcomes for local residents
- exercise the right to call-in decisions made but not yet implemented by the Cabinet.

Effective scrutiny should:

- provide constructive 'critical friend' challenge
- amplify the voices and concerns of the public
- be led by independent people who take responsibility for their role
- drive improvement in public services.

Further information about scrutiny at Rushcliffe can be found in the Council's Constitution [\[link to document online\]](#).