

This is an extract from Greenwich Council's scrutiny manual  
**'Making a Difference - a Guide to Scrutiny in Greenwich'**

## **Giving evidence to Scrutiny Panels**

**'Information is powerful and fundamental. Getting reliable information that tells an authority how well or not it's performing puts it in a position where it can start to make decisions about what needs improving.'**

*Audit Commission and I&DeA – PMMI Interim Findings*

**'Scrutiny must make a difference. Real change can be made when scrutiny is used as a mechanism for listening to public concerns.'**

*Dr Jane Martin, Centre for Public Scrutiny*

**'If you impose change on people they resist it. If you work with people, engage with people, listen to people, they will embrace it.'**

*Rhion Jones (Consultation Institute)*

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This annex sets out guidance to individuals and organisations who are called to give evidence to a scrutiny panel of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee. It is set out in the form of questions and answers which are aimed at enabling those called to provide evidence to understand the process and what is expected of them.

As such, it is intended as a guidance note which should be sent out to those involved in providing evidence as well as being guidance for the panels and the Committee itself on the process. Therefore, whilst there is some degree of repetition in the different sections, this is intentional.

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## **Giving oral evidence to scrutiny panels**

### **Introduction**

This guide is for individuals and organisations who have been asked, or who wish, to give evidence in person to a Greenwich scrutiny panel. You can find more general information about how scrutiny works from our website at:

<http://www.greenwich.gov.uk/Greenwich/YourCouncil/CouncilMeetings/Scrutiny>

If you want to talk to us about scrutiny, please telephone **020 8921 5670**.

Greenwich Council established an Overview and Scrutiny Committee formally in 1999.

As required by legislation, there is a clear distinction in Greenwich Council between the roles of the executive (Cabinet) and scrutiny. Scrutiny is charged on behalf of the full Council to investigate significant issues and make recommendations for change. Scrutiny in Greenwich helps elected councillors ensure that the Council's Cabinet takes the best decisions. But scrutiny is also about improving the Council's policies and performance. Scrutiny provides an opportunity for all councillors to play a part in the development of policy and the examination of how well the Council is performing in meeting its objectives. The scrutiny function supports the achievement of Council objectives by providing a 'critical friend' approach, feeding back to the Cabinet and the Council its views on policies, procedures, service delivery and performance.

This guide is set out in the form of a series of questions and answers, the questions covered being as follows:

Q1: What is a Scrutiny Panel?

Q2: Who are the contacts for Greenwich's Scrutiny Panels?

Q3: How do I go about submitting my views to a Scrutiny Panel?

Q4: If I am invited to give evidence to the Panel, must I attend?

Q5: What if I cannot attend on the date of the Panel?

Q6: Where are scrutiny Panel meetings held and are they accessible?

Q7: Who will be present at a Scrutiny Panel meeting?

Q8: Will I have to give a presentation?

Q9: What will I be asked?

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**Q1: What is a Scrutiny Panel?**

Scrutiny Panels get to the heart of issues and problems in order to make a difference to services and to improve the quality of life of local residents. In Greenwich, councillors sit on our Panels and these scrutiny bodies can also include other people who are co-opted members to represent a specific section of the community and/or provide specific expertise.

Scrutiny Panels call Council officers, councillors on Cabinet and other witnesses to answer questions and give evidence about whatever subject is being scrutinised. Panels collect evidence in order to analyse problems or potential difficulties. They then recommend improvements to the Chief Executive to consider.

**Q2: Who are the contacts for Greenwich's Scrutiny Panels?**

Each Panel has a scrutiny support officer based in the Corporate Performance and Scrutiny Unit in the Chief Executive's Department. The support officer can advise you on most of the issues or concerns you may have. Each Panel will operate differently depending on the issue, so do raise any concerns you have early on.

You may contact the relevant scrutiny support officer for the scrutiny body in which you are interested by telephoning **020 8921 5670**. Alternatively, you may e-mail the team at [scrutiny@greenwich.gov.uk](mailto:scrutiny@greenwich.gov.uk).

A committee officer is also allocated to each panel to organise the programme of meetings and ensure that papers are sent out to all parties within the agreed timescales. The committee officer attends the regular scrutiny meetings to take minutes.

To contact the relevant committee officer, please telephone **020 8921 6160**.

The current scrutiny bodies are as follows:

- Overview and Scrutiny Committee
- Children and Young People
- Finance and Public Services
- Healthy Communities and Older People
- Safer and Stronger Communities
- Social Inclusion
- Sustainable Communities and Transport

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**Q3: How do I go about submitting my views to a Scrutiny Panel?**

When a review is underway, the Panel will invite specific people to submit evidence. The Panel will decide how it would like evidence submitted: either in writing or face-to-face. When the latter, it will invite them to attend a specific Panel meeting.

**Q4: If I am invited to give evidence to the Panel, must I attend?**

Scrutiny panels can require Cabinet Members and senior Council officers to attend and give evidence. There is also legal obligation for certain health authority staff concerning local authorities' scrutiny of the National Health Service. The Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 places a duty to co-operate on named agencies and organisations who work in partnership with local authorities. These agencies and organisations must take part in scrutiny in relation to any council's scrutiny inquiries relevant to LAA improvement targets.

You can nominate another person to come on your behalf if they are fully briefed on the issue. Panels sometimes invite an organisation, rather than an individual, to give evidence. In this case, it is up to you to decide who would be most appropriate to attend.

**Q5: What if I cannot attend on the date of the Panel?**

Scrutiny Panels will seek to group witnesses together in a logical way to help the flow of information. Panels also work to tight timescales and so it is often impossible to rearrange meetings in order that everyone can attend. Therefore it is important to come along on the day requested wherever possible.

If you cannot attend, you can nominate another person to come on your behalf. Or, it may be possible for the Panel to consider a written submission from you and come back to you later if there are still matters that have not been dealt with. This is something you can discuss with the scrutiny support officer.

**Q6: Where are Scrutiny Panel meetings held and are they accessible?**

Panel meetings normally take place in one of the committee rooms at the Town Hall, Wellington Street, Woolwich, London SE18 6PW.

Panels will sometimes take evidence away from the Town Hall. Location details will be contained in your invitation letter.

Any venues where we hold scrutiny Panel meetings will be wheelchair accessible. We can provide an interpreter (community language or BSL interpreter) if you tell us your requirements in advance of a Panel meeting. We do need as much notice as possible as interpreters are usually heavily booked.

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**Q7: Who will be present at a Scrutiny Panel meeting?**

As well as the Panel members, there will be a scrutiny support officer, committee officer and usually other Council staff present. The vast majority of Panel meetings are open to the public. Members of the press may also be at the meeting. If you feel that the presence of these people could make you feel uncomfortable in any way when giving your evidence, then do speak to the scrutiny support officer beforehand.

Panels will often hear from more than one set of witnesses at a single meeting. In such cases, it would be helpful if you could attend the whole of the meeting so that, if necessary, you can comment on the evidence already given.

**Q8: Will I have to give a presentation?**

Some Panels will ask witnesses to give a short presentation, whereas others will not and prefer to focus on discussion and questions from the outset. It is best to make sure that all the main points you want to make are contained in any written evidence you provide.

If you are asked to give a presentation, you can assume that Panel members will have read your written evidence, if provided, beforehand. It is usually best to keep your presentation short, say, to around five minutes. The Panel may then ask you some questions about what you have said.

The scrutiny support officer will advise you how long you will have for your 'slot' with the Panel.

**Q9: What will I be asked?**

You will be able to discuss with the scrutiny support officer the issues that the Panel members want to discuss with you. Whenever possible, about a week before the meeting, we will send you a list of any specific questions or topics the Panel will want to address. This will allow you to prepare for the meeting and ensure that you are able to respond to the lines of enquiry the Panel is intending to pursue. The idea is that these points encourage discussion around the topic and the Panel may therefore also ask supplementary questions.

Remember, the Panel is there to obtain information which will inform its review work, the conclusions and recommendations arising from it. The Panel is not there to catch people out.

Should you be unable to respond to any specific questions at the time, you will be able to advise the Panel of this and offer to provide a written response after the meeting. A Panel may also ask you to send them further information in writing afterwards.

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**Q10: What do I do if scrutiny panel members ask questions I consider to be wholly unacceptable?**

Scrutiny Panel members should not become aggressive with witnesses or to try to catch them out. Panels recognise that there is value in creating a comfortable environment if they are to obtain the information they need.

If you feel uncomfortable with a line of questioning, it is entirely reasonable for you to explain this to the Panel and to seek a more appropriate method for meeting the Panel's information requirements (e.g. to carry out further research and to provide further information outside of the meeting).

**After the Panel meeting**

Wherever practicable, about a week after the hearing, we will send you a copy of the notes summarising the main points people made. The notes may also quote some of the things that you said. You will have the opportunity to suggest amendments or corrections to the notes within a timescale set out in an accompanying letter.

From the notes, you will also be able to identify and send us any supplementary information asked for by members of the Panel.

After the Panel has finished collecting all its evidence, it produces a report summarising its findings. The report makes recommendations for future action and acknowledges the source of all the written and oral evidence provided to the Panel.

The Council's Chief Executive considers the Panel's report and, usually through reference of the recommendations to the Cabinet, the decision is taken on whether or not to implement each recommendation. The Cabinet is urged to provide a detailed explanation where it feels unable to implement a recommendation from Scrutiny.

As a valued contributor to the Panel's work, we will undertake to keep you informed on future progress. We will send you a copy of the Scrutiny Panel's final report with its recommendations, and a copy of the Cabinet's action plan.

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## **Giving written evidence to scrutiny panels**

### **Introduction**

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- Q3: How do I go about submitting my views to a Scrutiny Panel?
- Q4: Do I have to write in, or can I just turn up at a meeting and talk to the Panel?
- Q5: What should I include in my written evidence to a Scrutiny Panel?
- Q6: Where and when should I send written evidence?
- Q7: What will happen to my written evidence?
- Q8: Can I submit written evidence to a Scrutiny Panel anonymously?
- Q9: Can I submit written evidence to a Scrutiny Panel without it being made available to the public?



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**Q1: What is a Scrutiny Panel?**

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Scrutiny Panels call Council officers, councillors on Cabinet and other witnesses to answer questions and give evidence about whatever subject is being scrutinised. Panels collect evidence in order to analyse problems or potential difficulties. They then recommend improvements to the Chief Executive (and Cabinet) for consideration.

**Q2: Who are the contacts for Greenwich's Scrutiny Panels?**

Each Panel has a scrutiny support officer based in the Corporate Performance and Scrutiny Unit in the Chief Executive's Department. The support officer can advise you on most of the issues or concerns you may have. Each Panel will operate differently depending on the issue, so do raise any concerns you have early on.

You may contact the relevant scrutiny support officer for the scrutiny body in which you are interested (see the list below) by telephoning **020 8921 5670 (or extension 5670)**. Alternatively, you may e-mail the team at [scrutiny@greenwich.gov.uk](mailto:scrutiny@greenwich.gov.uk).

A committee officer is also allocated to each panel to organise the programme of meetings and ensure that papers are sent out to all parties within the agreed timescales. The committee officer attends the regular Panel meetings to take minutes.

To contact the relevant committee officer, please telephone **020 8921 6160 (or extension 6160)**.

The current scrutiny bodies are as follows:

- Overview and Scrutiny Committee
- Children and Young People
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**Q3: How do I go about submitting my views to a Scrutiny Panel?**

When a review is underway, the Panel will invite specific people to submit evidence. The Panel will decide how it would like evidence submitted: either in writing or face-to-face. When the latter, it will invite them to attend a specific Panel meeting [see separate guidance].

**Q4: Do I have to write in, or can I just turn up at a meeting and talk to the Panel?**

Panels have a limited amount of time for taking evidence. Therefore, they will often seek written evidence from a range of people, following this up with an invitation to some people to attend and answer questions at a specific meeting later. Although scrutiny meetings are held in public, there is no general right for people to attend and speak at those meetings. Any such input will be totally at the discretion of the Chair of the meeting. Therefore, you are advised that, if you have been invited to submit written evidence, you do not simply seek to attend a meeting to present your evidence orally instead.

Panels find that it is particularly helpful to deal with technical or complex matters in writing.

The scrutiny support officer can advise on how best to present the points you want to make in your written submission.

**Q5: What should I include in my written evidence to a Scrutiny Panel?**

There are no fixed rules about the format of written evidence. Unless this is specified in your letter of invitation to submit evidence, you can assume that you have a free hand in how you would wish to present your written submission.

The following guidance is based on what Panels have found helpful so far.

Written evidence should ideally:

- Be concise, accurate and should only address matters relevant to the scope of the scrutiny Panel's specific review work in question
- Answer any specific questions the Panel has asked. You will be guided by your letter of invitation which will explain the points the scrutiny body wishes you to cover in your evidence submission
- Provide (or cross-refer to) evidence in support of any statements made in the submission
- Explain any jargon, abbreviations or technical terms used
- Include a brief introduction about the person(s) or organisations submitting it, perhaps stating their area of knowledge or expertise

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- Include any suggestions for recommendations for action, if appropriate. The Panel will then decide whether to put these in its report, having taken account of all the evidence it has compiled during its review work

You can send us, and refer to, additional material such as published reports, leaflets and press articles. But please summarise the main points you want to make through providing these attachments. Do not leave it to chance that the scrutiny body will identify the issues you wish to highlight. We will normally not print and distribute material that has been published by others.

**Q6: Where and when should I send written evidence?**

Written evidence can be:

- Posted or delivered to The Scrutiny Unit, Chief Executive's Department, Greenwich Council, 3<sup>rd</sup> Floor Woolwich Centre, Wellington Street, Woolwich, London SE18 6HQ
- E-mailed to the scrutiny support officer at [scrutiny@greenwich.gov.uk](mailto:scrutiny@greenwich.gov.uk)

All written evidence needs to be submitted by the deadline given in the original invitation to submit it. If it is late, we cannot guarantee that the scrutiny body will be able to consider it.

**Q7: What will happen to my written evidence?**

Firstly, scrutiny support officers will read your submission. We will then reproduce and circulate your evidence to members of the Panel.

Scrutiny support officers may edit out any material falling outside the terms of reference. If we do this, we will show you any changes we make before your evidence is circulated.

If your written evidence appears to contain defamatory or offensive material the committee officer will, after consulting with legal officers:

- Request you to submit a revised document without the offending wording
- In the event that you persist in wishing to submit the document without amendment, inform you that the document will not be put before the Panel
- Inform the Chair of the Panel of the action taken

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**Q8: Can I submit written evidence to a Scrutiny Panel anonymously?**

You must tell us your name and address when you give us evidence for a Panel. Unless you ask us otherwise, we will include your name and address with your evidence when it is circulated to the Panel. However, if you prefer, we can circulate your evidence without including your name and address. Please make your preference clear when you submit your evidence to us.

**Q9: Can I submit written evidence to a Scrutiny Panel without it being made available to the public?**

Ideally, all evidence considered by Scrutiny Panels should be made available to the public. However, if there are particular reasons why you want to give some or all of your evidence in private, contact the committee support officer at an early stage. Certain types of evidence can be made 'exempt'. This means that only Panel members and some Council officers would be able to see it. For example, if your evidence refers to individuals or provides details of someone's financial or business affairs, then it might be possible to treat this information as 'exempt'. Such matters are covered by legislation about what is and what is not exempt. Above all, please make it absolutely clear to us when submitting your evidence if you think it ought to be 'exempt'.

**At the end of the Review**

After the Scrutiny Panel has finished collecting evidence, it produces a report summarising its findings. The report makes recommendations for future action and acknowledges the source of all the written and oral evidence provided to the Panel. We will send you a draft of this report and respond to any comments you have about its factual accuracy.

The Council's Chief Executive considers the Panel's report and, usually through reference of the recommendations to the Cabinet, the decision is taken on whether or not to implement each recommendation. The Cabinet is urged to provide a detailed explanation where it feels unable to implement a recommendation from Scrutiny.

As a valued contributor to the Panel, we will undertake to keep you informed on future progress. We will send you a copy of the Scrutiny Panel's final report with its recommendations and a copy of the Cabinet's action plan.