

Brecon Beacons National Park Authority

Guidance Notes for External Witnesses



What are Witnesses?

Being asked to come to a Scrutiny Committee as a 'witness', simply means coming to talk to some Members of the Authority. This is because they feel that you have valuable opinions and/or expertise that will help them gain a better understanding of an issue they are looking at. The Members need to hear contributions from a wide range of people with a connection to the topic being scrutinised, if they are to come to a well considered decision. Being a 'witness' simply means coming along to answer some questions and to tell the Members what you think about a particular issue. Such sessions usually last for an hour, although they can sometimes be a bit shorter or a bit longer.

What are the aims of Scrutiny Committees?

- To assist the Authority in ensuring the continuous improvement of services in the National Park, with a particular focus on outcomes for the community.
- To ensure that the experience and knowledge of service users, community groups and other stakeholders/interested parties are used to develop the Authority's services.

In other words, the purpose of scrutiny is to examine how well the Authority is performing. Wherever possible it will concentrate on outcomes for the community, not on inputs. It is a mechanism for promoting the best interests and wellbeing of the National Park. Scrutiny Reviews should, therefore, adopt the role of 'critical friend', focus on strategic issues and take a community perspective.

How do Scrutiny Committees work?

Scrutiny Committees collect evidence from a wide variety of sources, including:

- Questioning 'witnesses'/ experts.
- Conducting literature reviews and undertaking surveys.
- Taking written submissions from professionals, stakeholders and community groups.

This guide refers to 'witnesses' and the 'giving of evidence', but this does not imply that Scrutiny Committees are courts or bodies convened with any legal power over those who attend them. It should be emphasised that the Scrutiny Committee has no powers to compel the giving of evidence or to require the production of any documentation. Nevertheless, the Scrutiny Committee does perform an essential function in looking at Authority policy and practice. It is hoped that those invited to give evidence will agree to do so in the interests of the community which is intended to benefit by the activity of the Scrutiny Committee. Although at times the Scrutiny Committee will have difficult questions

to ask they are always grateful for the help and co-operation they receive. 'Witnesses' can include:

- Voluntary sector representatives.
- Professional experts.
- Service users.
- Community Groups.
- Local employers.
- Members and officers.

The Committee will consider all the evidence they have collected before making recommendations to the National Park Authority on how services could be improved or developed to best meet the needs of National Park and its users.

Who will be at the Scrutiny Committee?

Scrutiny Committees are held informally. The Committee will consist of a number of members of the Authority, some officers and usually one or more representatives of other organisations – this is to give as much objectivity to the process as possible. The Scrutiny Support Officer will be present (usually the person you've had contact with about attending the meeting) and will minute the meeting. Other officers with an interest in the scrutiny topic(s) will also be present, for example the Director, Head of Service or Manager.

What happens when I arrive to attend a Scrutiny Committee?

Upon arrival at the venue for the Scrutiny Committee you will normally be met by the Scrutiny Support Officer. He or she will make contact with you prior to the meeting to confirm the arrangements, and where possible give you an indication of when your evidence is likely to be heard and explain the format for the meeting; this may be in writing or via email, alternatively you can contact the Scrutiny Support Officer by telephone on 01873 624437. If you have any particular anxieties or questions then you should not hesitate to raise these with the Scrutiny Support Officer. The Members of the Committee will also introduce themselves to you before the start of the meeting. After you have finished giving your evidence you may leave if you wish to do so, or you are welcome to stay if appropriate. Please note that the meeting may be recorded or in some cases, filmed. You will be asked if you agree to this.

If I am asked to attend what will Members ask me?

You will receive a written invitation to the meeting and this will include details of the areas on which you will be asked questions. Sometimes the Scrutiny Committee will prepare lists of questions in advance but witnesses should not expect the Scrutiny Committee to restrict itself to these. The Committee will have invited you along to provide them with information that will help them make evidence-based recommendations on the further development of services. You won't have to answer questions which you feel unhappy answering and it's fine to tell the Committee when you don't know the answer to a question. The meeting is ordinarily open to the public but, if for any reason you want to

give some or all of your evidence in private, please contact the Scrutiny Support Officer (see below) or speak to the Chairman of the Scrutiny Committee to discuss this beforehand.

How should I prepare to be a Scrutiny Committee ‘witness’?

Following these easy steps will mean you use your time at the meeting to maximum effect:

- Read all the papers for the Committee meeting you have been sent. This will ensure that you have knowledge of the key concerns or developments being explored by the Committee.
- Prepare a list of information you would like to provide to the Committee, but do not bring prepared presentations (unless the Committee has specially requested one).
- As time for oral evidence may be limited, all witnesses are invited to submit written evidence beforehand. This helps to make oral evidence more productive, as Members have the witnesses’ statements in front of them. Written evidence should be restricted to any factual information you have to offer from which the Scrutiny Committee might be able to draw conclusions (or which could be put to other witnesses for their reactions).
- Recognise that Committee Members may not be experts in your area. Try to avoid jargon/ professional speak when giving answers.
- Talk to officers supporting the Committee. These officers will be able to tell you the Committee’s expectations of you.
- Remember, attending a Scrutiny Committee offers a good opportunity to present your organisation’s knowledge and experiences directly to Members of the Authority.

Remember:

- Take your time and speak slowly and clearly.
- Ask for questions to be repeated if you do not understand or cannot hear.
- If you are not sure of the answer, then say so.

When we invite you to attend please let us know if there is anything we can do to make it easier for you to attend and participate. If you have any suggestions for improving the process or if you want any further information on Scrutiny Committees please contact the Scrutiny Support Officer listed below.

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