

Witness Charter

Attending a scrutiny meeting as a witness is often a new experience for people. Cheltenham Borough Council recognises the need to support witnesses. We will keep witnesses informed throughout the scrutiny process to try and ensure that the experience is as stress-free as possible.

The Council will:

1. Inform the witness of the time, date and place of the scrutiny meeting at which their evidence is to be taken.
2. Inform the witness of the matters about which the scrutiny committee wish to ask them. Inform the witness of any documents that the scrutiny committee wishes to have produced for them.
3. Provide reasonable notice of all of the requirements of the scrutiny committee to enable the witness to respond in full at the earliest opportunity.
4. Provide copies of all relevant reports, papers and background information.
5. Arrange for the chair of the scrutiny committee to introduce himself/herself to the witness prior to the proceedings.
6. Ensure that all witnesses are treated with courtesy and respect and that all questions to witnesses are made in an orderly manner as directed by the chair of the meeting.
7. Ensure where appropriate that the witness is provided with information about claiming witness expenses.
8. The Council's protocol on Officer/Member Relations will apply to all internal witnesses.
9. The joint protocol of Gloucestershire County Council and district councils will apply to all officers and Members of a Public Authority required to attend as witnesses at scrutiny meetings of other Public Authorities.

Guidance Notes for Witnesses

1. Who will be at the scrutiny meeting?

Meetings of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee (OSC) are normally held in public and the press and media may be present. In practice, unless it is a high profile issue it is rare for there to be more than one journalist taking notes. Members of the public are always welcome, but are not usually present in large numbers. The OSC will consist of 10 elected councillors, a lead officer will be present and a Democracy Officer will minute the meeting, usually the person you will have had contact with regarding attending the meeting. Other officers with an interest in the scrutiny topic(s) on the agenda may be present.

Occasionally, if sensitive or confidential information is being considered part of the OSC meeting may be held in private, however you will be advised if this is the case.

Under the new scrutiny arrangements you are more likely to be asked to give your evidence at a meeting of a scrutiny task group. The task group consists of a small group of members who are set up to review a particular issue. They meet more informally and their meetings may be held in public or private. You will be advised which is the case. An officer will be in attendance and notes will be taken. These will not normally be published but the evidence you give may form part of the final report of the task group which will be made public.

2. What happens when I arrive to attend a scrutiny meeting?

An officer 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. If you have any particular anxieties or questions then you should not hesitate to raise these with the officer. Upon arrival at the council offices, unless an alternative arrangement has been made with the contact officer you should make your way to the Committee Rooms entrance and the notice board will tell you where to go. The Chair of the OSC or task group will also introduce her/himself to you before the start of the meeting.

3. What happens when I give evidence?

Witnesses are welcome to attend the entire meeting or can wait outside until the committee or task group reaches the relevant agenda item. When you are called you will be shown to a seat at the table with the members. They will ask you questions in an orderly and respectful manner as directed by the chair of the meeting.

The main aim of inviting witnesses to meetings is to gain information and consider different experiences about a particular issue or concern. On the basis of all the evidence received, the OSC or task group may decide to make recommendations to Council or Cabinet as they are not decision making bodies themselves. If you wish to be informed of the outcome please let the contact officer know.

Meetings of the OSC tend to be quite formal. Whereas the scrutiny task groups are smaller to encourage a relaxed 'round table' discussion.

Remember:

- (i) take your time and speak slowly and clearly;
- (ii) ask for questions to be repeated if you do not understand or cannot hear;
- (iii) if you are not sure of the answer then say so. If appropriate you could indicate that you would be able to provide further information at a later date, outside of the meeting.

After you have finished giving your evidence you are free to leave if you wish to do so.

4. Witness special requirements

If you have any particular requirements or access needs to enable you to give evidence please let the contact officer know before the meeting so arrangements can be made in good time. Likewise, if you need information in other formats, for instance large print or on audio tape then please let the contact officer know.

The Committee Rooms are installed with a hearing loop and are accessible for wheelchair users or people with mobility impairments. Disabled access to the Municipal Offices is from the Royal Well entrance at the rear of the building.

5. Can I claim expenses?

If as a result of being asked to attend a Cheltenham Borough Council scrutiny meeting you have incurred expenditure then you are entitled to claim reasonable 'out of pocket' expenses (for instance bus fares or mileage and parking). You should, where possible, obtain receipts of any expenditure. If you would like to claim for your expenses, please ask the contact officer and they will provide a form for you to make your claim. The Council does not reimburse the expenses of witnesses employed by Cheltenham Borough Council.

6. Feedback

Democratic Services values your time and the contribution you make. If you have any comments, whether positive or negative, about your experiences as a witness or the scrutiny process in general, please contact one of the team:

Beverly Thomas, Democratic Services Team Leader
Tel 01242 264246 Email: beverly.thomas@cheltenham.gov.uk

Saira Malin, Democracy Officer
Tel: 01242 264129 Email: saira.malin@cheltenham.gov.uk

Sophie McGough, Democracy Officer
Tel: 01242 264130 Email: sophie.mcgough@cheltenham.gov.uk

Harry Mayo, Democracy Officer
Tel: 01242 264211 Email: harry.mayo@cheltenham.gov.uk

Or write to Democratic Services:

Cheltenham Borough Council, Municipal Offices, Promenade, Cheltenham, GL50 1PP