

# A Guide to giving evidence to Scrutiny Review Panels

## Overview and Scrutiny Committee

### Leaflet No 2 in a series of 3

#### **Introduction**

This guide is for individuals and organisations who have been asked, or who wish, to give evidence to a Reigate and Banstead Review Panel or to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

The Council operates a Leader and Executive political management arrangement and the Overview and Scrutiny Committee is an integral part of that structure. The Committee can establish several short-term Review Panels to investigate key issues and make recommendations for change.

#### **What is Scrutiny**

Scrutiny seeks to help the Council's Executive to take the best decisions and improve the Council's policies and performance.

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee decides what subjects the Review Panels should consider. Depending on the subject, deadlines, and the amount of evidence a Panel decides to take it may last for a couple of sittings or several months.

Scrutiny is largely undertaken in the following ways:

- Developing policy. This includes the Plans and Strategies that make up the Policy Framework to be approved by both the Executive and the Council and other Executive policy proposals;
- Monitoring and reviewing the performance of the Council in relation to the implementation of Strategies, Plans, policy

objectives and performance targets adopted by the Executive/Council;

- Reviewing the performance of other public bodies.

#### **What Scrutiny doesn't do**

Scrutiny doesn't deal with individual problems, concerns or complaints about Council services. These are considered by the relevant service department. If you are not satisfied with a service you have received from the Council, then:

- You may wish to use the complaints procedure, or
- raise the matter with your Ward Councillor.

For more information contact the Council's Help Shop on ?

Scrutiny doesn't replace other consultation programmes on behalf of Council departments. Any requests for comment or evidence by a Panel would be outside other consultative arrangements.

#### **What is a Review Panel?**

Review Panels get to the heart of issues and problems and are less formal than a Committee. Panels comprise Councillors and Officers but can also include other people such as service users, voluntary sector representatives or other outside experts. Review Panels call Council officers, Executive Members and other witnesses to answer questions and give evidence about whatever is being scrutinised. Panels collect as much evidence as they can within the time available for each scrutiny. They then recommend

improvements and changes for the Executive or the full Council to consider.

## Who to contact regarding Review Panels

Each panel is supported by the Scrutiny Support Officer based in the Democratic Services Team in the Council's Chief Executive's Department. He can advise you on the operation of the Panel and his contact details are at the bottom of this leaflet.

## Submitting views to a Review Panel

When a Panel is established, it issues a press release asking anyone interested to write in. A Panel also invites specific people to submit written evidence. The Panel then decides who it needs to talk to face to face, and invites them to attend a Panel meeting. Each review will have a deadline for the receipt of views, which can be submitted to the Scrutiny Support Officer.

## Review Panel meetings

Panel meetings take place at the Town Hall, Reigate or at venues that are relevant to the review. Location details will be contained in your invitation letter or published in the press release. All Panel venues are wheelchair accessible. We can provide an interpreter if required and would ask you to give good notice of such requests.

Panels comprise Councillors, the Scrutiny Support Officer and other Council officers and they are mostly open to the press and public.

Panels have a limited amount of time for taking evidence and we encourage all witnesses to

submit written evidence even if you are invited to give oral evidence. It helps to make the meetings more productive in referring to technical or complex matters.

The Scrutiny Support Officer can advise on how best to present the points you want to make. There will be a published agenda (about a week before each panel meeting), which lists the evidence to be considered and includes any witnesses to be received. The Panel Chairman can decide whether to allow anyone else attending the meeting to speak.

## Written evidence to a Review Panel

There are no fixed rules about the format of written evidence. Evidence can be written in languages other than English and we will translate it. However it is likely to be helpful to have some guidance and we suggest that written evidence should ideally:

- Be concise, accurate and address matters within the scope of the Review Panel;
- 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, etc;
- Answer any questions the Panel has asked;
- Contain factual information to help the Panel to draw conclusions and to put to other witnesses for their reactions; and
- Include any suggestions for action if appropriate.

The Panel will determine what evidence it will include in its report.

## Making presentations

Some Panels ask witnesses to give a short presentation, whereas others do not and prefer to focus on discussion and questions from the outset. If you are asked to give a presentation, you can assume that Panel members will have read your written evidence beforehand. It is usually best to keep your presentation short, say, to around ten 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.

## Questions

You will be able to discuss with the Scrutiny Support Officer the issues that the Panel want to discuss with you. About a week before the meeting we send you a list of any specific questions on topics the Panel will want to discuss with you. The idea is that these points encourage discussion around the topic and the Panel may therefore also ask supplementary questions. A Panel may also ask you to send them further information in writing afterwards.

## Papers for Review Panels

Evidence received will be provided to members of the Panel, press and members of the public who request it. We will not withhold written evidence submitted from a Panel except if:

- Its content falls outside the Review Panel's terms of reference, or
- It contains any material we consider to be defamatory or offensive, in which case there would be an opportunity to submit revised evidence.

You will be asked to provide your name and address when you give us evidence for a panel, which unless you ask us otherwise will be included your evidence when it is circulated to the Panel and public.

### **Invitations to witnesses**

Review Panels can require Executive Members and senior Council officers to attend and give evidence. But, there is no such obligation for people from outside the Council except for certain health authority staff. 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.

### **If you cannot attend the Panel**

The work of Review Panels is often undertaken within tight timescales and it maybe difficult to arrange meetings that are convenient to everyone. It is most helpful to the review if you are able to attend on the day requested. If you cannot, you can nominate another person to represent you or the Panel can receive your written evidence but this may not allow all of the pertinent points to be highlighted.

### **Confidential evidence**

In some circumstances your evidence may need to be considered in private. If you are in any doubt about this please contact the Scrutiny Support Officer at an early stage.

### **After the Panel meeting**

About a week after the hearing, we will send you a summary of the main points raised. After the Review Panel has finished collecting all its evidence, it produces a report summarising its findings for the Overview and Scrutiny Committee. The report makes recommendations for future action and acknowledges the source of all the written and oral evidence provided to the Panel. The Overview and Scrutiny Committee puts forward the report to the Executive, which decides whether or not to implement each recommendation.

As part of our community partnership arrangements we will undertake to keep you informed on future progress. We will send you a copy of the final report and recommendations, and inform you of the Executive's decision.

### **Contacting the Council about scrutiny**

Please contact:  
Chris Phelan,  
Scrutiny Support Officer,  
Democratic Services,  
Reigate and Banstead Borough Council,  
Town Hall,  
Reigate RH2 0SH.

Tel: 01737 276114.

Email: [chris.phelan@reigate-banstead.gov.uk](mailto:chris.phelan@reigate-banstead.gov.uk)

Web site: [www.reigate-banstead.gov.uk](http://www.reigate-banstead.gov.uk)