QUESTIONING SKILLS FOR SCRUTINY

The evidence of witnesses to a review may often be the most valuable source of information. However, if the questions are not the right ones they may not be effective in soliciting the best information. Asking questions is not about profiling yourself, making a personal speech or arguing with witnesses as this can put them off giving evidence.

Considering what questions to ask and the types of question to use to gain focused information often means preparation beforehand. Below are examples that can be considered.

Question types

Closed questions – Used when you require a brief factual answer as they close down a discussion. E.g. What is your name?

Open questions – Used to gain more than a yes or no answer as they stimulate further discussion on an issue. E.g. Tell us about…or Please give us an example of….

Probing – Seek verifiable data and usually start with the words Who, What, Why, When, Where or How. They are used to gather information.

Opinion Finding – Ask for subjective information that gets at opinions, values or beliefs. They help to understand views. E.g. Do you think…?

How to Prepare

Stage 1 – Identify what the committee wants to find out from the witness.
Stage 2 – Identify questions that could be asked of the witness.
Stage 3 – Decide which questions are relevant and which are the most important.
Stage 4 – Decide which order the questions should be asked in. It may be helpful to start with more general questions which set the context and then home in on the more specific issues.
Stage 5 – Decide who will ask the questions. Regardless of who suggests a question there should be an opportunity for everyone to play a part in asking questions.

Preparing the Witness

It is helpful to brief the witness in advance of the meeting. The Scrutiny Officer usually briefs witnesses and helps them to prepare for the meeting. It is very helpful if the Scrutiny Officer has some guidance from councillors beforehand, in the form of a question plan or outline.

It is good practice to tell witnesses what you want to discuss with them. This enables them to prepare so that they come to the discussion equipped with the information you want to talk about. It also provides an opportunity, prior to the meeting, for them to say if they are not the correct person to answer questions and to suggest an alternative or additional witness who might help. The Scrutiny Officer will also give the witness some information about what to expect, i.e. how the meeting will be conducted, formalities, number of people there, etc.
**The Role of the Chairman**
The Chairman can play a very important role in this process. Some of the ways in which they might help include:

- Leading the planning process
- Keeping the meeting on track and ensuring that councillors stick to the plan.
- Ensuring that questioning is not hostile or aggressive.
- Trying to ensure that everyone in the group has the opportunity to contribute to the planning process and to be involved in the questioning process. Everyone should understand the plan and be clear on what has been agreed.
- Keeping the meeting within time constraints and ensuring that key points are given priority if time is limited.

**Summing up** – The Chairman should sum up the discussion and check to ensure that the key points of the plan have been covered. They should also ensure that the next steps have been considered, are further witnesses required etc.

**Questioning the Witness**
The whole of your questioning technique should be based on the principle that the interviewees should talk in order to obtain the maximum amount of information about them, their points of view, needs and ideas. It is very important that challenging questions are not asked before a full and clear picture is gained.

**Seek Elaboration**
- Start by assuming little knowledge about the subject. Aim to build a rapport with your respondent, putting them at ease and encouraging them to open up.
- Be clear about the purpose of questions before asking them.
- Show interest as you listen to the answers.
- Allow the respondent thinking time.
- Use plain language and a friendly tone suggesting neutrality.
- Repeating one or two of the respondent’s key words often encourages a further response.

**There are five classic open questions:**
- What impact does the policy have on you?
- What difficulties are you up against?
- How are you coping?
- Tell me about your job at….
- Tell me more about….

**Probe and Seek Clarification**
Ensure that you fully understand the information that the respondent has given you and aim to convey that understanding back to the respondent.

- What does the respondent seem to be trying to communicate?
Observe the respondent’s non-verbal signals and the ‘colour’ of their language
Offer supportive statements such as “I see…” or “That’s interesting…”
If appropriate ask the respondent to be more precise or provide an example
Repetition of a short or ambiguous reply often elicits clarification
Consider asking for a respondent’s specific opinion such as “How do you feel about…?” Or “Just how far do you think…?"
Responding to a respondent’s answer with a pause yet showing interest with eye contact can encourage a further response

Questions aimed at seeking clarification:
- Who did you speak to?
- When did you…?
- How long is it since…?
- Where did problems first become apparent in…?
- Did you…?
- Would you…?
- Can you…?
- Was it difficult to…?
- Have you tried…?
- What would you do…Or How would you feel if…?
- How did the two situations differ?
- Which did you prefer?

Present the Challenge
It is very important that you do not ask challenging questions prematurely. Deferring a challenge builds a rapport and trust, and conveys an air of understanding allowing a Scrutiny panel to gain more access to the full picture and the maximum amount of information. As a result, any investigation is likely to be more reliable and thorough and any proposed response is likely to be more effective.
- Try to use as many open-ended questions as possible as closed questions can present as threatening.
- Although the question ‘why’ is open ended, it is nonetheless very challenging in nature. If asked in the wrong manner and at the wrong time, it will almost certainly trigger defence mechanisms in the respondent which will, in effect, defeat the objective of your scrutiny exercise.
- Maintain an open, friendly tone and posture when challenging.
- Maintain eye contact when challenging.
- Avoid asking a challenging question that is far too direct or leading in nature.
- Have you always had a problem getting on with people?
- You don’t really think… do you?
- Surely you don’t think there’s a need to…?
- You mean to say, you think…?
Questions aimed at challenging a respondent should primarily be open-ended:

- How convinced are you that…?
- What makes you think…?
- When you say…, what evidence do you have in mind?
- What are the reasons for you saying…?
- If we were to…, what would you…?
- What would be your response to the suggestion…?
- Why do you think it is that…?
- Why did you change…?
- Which of the options do you think…?

**Questioning Pitfalls**

- **Multiple Questions**
  - Two or more questions presented at the same time.
  - Multiple questions usually confuse respondents and may allow a respondent an opportunity to evade a specific answer or even hold the floor indefinitely to distract or bore the panel.

- **Marathon Questions**
  - Questions asked in such a rambling or incomprehensible way that everybody let alone the respondent are left confused.

- **Rhetorical Questions**
  - Questions which you go on to answer yourself or a statement dressed up as a question.

- **Punitive Questions**
  - Questions seemingly simple but thereby framed in such a way that the answer implies recognition of guilt. ‘Where were you last week?’ These questions convey the message ‘I have already made up my mind!’

  - **Leading Questions**
  - Questions that put words into people’s mouths.
  - **Jargonised Questions**
  - Questions that dangerously assume ‘insider’ knowledge.
  - **Analysing Responses and Rationalising the Evidence**
  - The relationship between questioning and analysis is obviously a close one. The questions you ask determine the direction of the interview, selecting the right questions can make analysing much easier.

  - **Some committee members find that keeping a record or log of the activities, evidence gathered, questions asked and answers received can be beneficial. An example of a form which could be used for this purpose follows.**
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SCRU\NY FORM FOR QUESTIONING WITNESSES</th>
<th>What are we scrutinising and why?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What are the criteria by which to judge whether or not this service/policy/organisation is effective?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is this an issue for other Authorities and how are they dealing with it?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What specific evidence do we need?</td>
<td>Questions to be asked?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why?</td>
<td>From whom?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What site visits might help?</td>
<td>Questions to be asked?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who?</td>
<td>When?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Where?</td>
<td>Why?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do we need advice from an expert/witness?</td>
<td>Questions to be asked?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over what?</td>
<td>When?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why?</td>
<td>Where?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What would be the impact of any proposed changes?</td>
<td>Questions to be asked?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On stakeholders?</td>
<td>On the organisation?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On service providers?</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>