

What to Expect When Attending a Review Committee Meeting

The protocol is split into guidance for observers and guidance for expert witness evidence:

GUIDANCE FOR OBSERVERS:

1. Where and when are the meetings held?
 - 1.1 Meetings usually take place at 5.30pm in Committee Room 1 at Sunderland City Council's Civic Centre.
 - 1.2 Occasionally, alternative times and venues may be used, for an up-to-date schedule of meetings please visit our website or contact us.
2. Who will be there?
 - 2.1 Membership of the Review Committees is made up of elected councillors from all political parties on the Council. Council officers with an interest in one or more of the topics on the agenda may also be present as well as Council Officers providing support to the committee to ensure the functioning of the meeting.
 - 2.2 As review committee meetings are open to the public (unless otherwise stated – i.e. confidential matters are being discussed), members of the public are welcome to attend and have access to the agenda, reports and background papers. The press and media may also be present.
 - 2.3 Meetings may involve contributions from a wide range of sources, including members, officers, NHS employees, education representatives, local businesses, voluntary groups, specialists and other members of the public.
3. What happens when I arrive to attend a meeting?
 - 3.1 If you are attending the meeting as an observer you will be greeted by one of the Council Officers who will show you to the public seating area and provide you with a copy of the agenda (if available).

GUIDANCE FOR EXPERT WITNESSES:

4. Introduction

- 4.1 If a Review Committee decides that they would like to invite you to come along to one of their meetings as a witness, a member of the Scrutiny team will contact you informally about the process. There is no obligation for people from outside the Council to attend (except for certain health authority staff under legislation concerning local authorities' scrutiny of the National Health Service), but by attending you will be making a valuable contribution in helping the members of the committee to gain an accurate view of the issue/s being discussed. You can nominate another person to come on your behalf if they are fully briefed on the issue. Occasionally, organisations, rather than an individual, are invited to give evidence. In this case, it is up to you to decide who would be most appropriate to attend.

5. Where and when are the meetings held?

- 5.1 A Review Coordinator will contact you beforehand and provide details of the date, time and location of the meeting. If you agree to come along you will be sent a formal invitation confirming these details.
- 5.2 Meetings usually take place at 5.30pm in Committee Room 1 at Sunderland City Council's Civic Centre. Occasionally, alternative times and venues may be used, but you will be informed accordingly of any changes.

6. How can I prepare for the meeting?

- 6.1 You will be provided with an outline of the reason for your attendance and the likely issues to be discussed.
- 6.2 Any witness, including a person whom the Committee expects to invite to give oral evidence, will be invited to submit written evidence. This not only makes the Committee at which oral evidence is given more productive, as Members have the witness statements in advance, but also means that if the witness is not ultimately called or declines an invitation to give oral evidence, the Committee still has the benefit of their views.
- 6.3 Meetings of the Review Committee are open to the public, and the public have access to the agenda, reports and background papers, unless they contain exempt or confidential information. If a witness requests that the whole, or part, of their evidence is considered confidential/exempt and/or should only be heard by the Council they should state this at the outset with their reasons, and discuss the matter with the Review Coordinator. If

the evidence does not fall within the definition of confidential information or within one or more of the categories or exempt information, it will be for the witness to decide if they wish to continue to be involved.

- 6.4 In order to assist a witness to prepare for the session, the Review Coordinator may be able to give, in advance, some informal indication of possible lines of inquiry, but a witness should not expect Members to restrict themselves to these.
- 6.5 Written evidence should contain, if appropriate, a brief introduction to the person or organisation submitting it (perhaps stating their area of expertise, etc.) and any factual information upon the particular subject area which they have to offer from which the Committee might be able to draw conclusions (or which could be put to other witnesses for their reactions). Inclusion of any recommendations which the witnesses would like the Committee to consider for inclusion in its final recommendations could also be helpful.
- 6.6 There are no rules about the form written evidence should take; what follows is simply guidance. If written evidence is very brief, it can be sent as a letter, but otherwise it is helpful for the evidence to be in the form of a self-contained report, with numbered paragraphs. If a report is lengthy, it should include a one-page summary of the main points, and a table of contents.
- 6.7 Where interested parties wish to contribute their views as part of the review, but have not been specifically invited to do so by the Committee, they should submit written evidence in accordance with these guidelines.
7. Who will be there?
 - 7.1 Membership of the Review Committees is made up of elected councillors from all political parties on the Council and a number of community representatives. A Review Coordinator will also be present to provide advice as well as a Democratic Services Officer to take minutes at the meeting. Other officers with an interest in one or more of the topics on the agenda may also be present.
 - 7.2 As overview and scrutiny meetings are open to the public (unless otherwise stated – i.e. confidential matters are being discussed), members of the public are welcome to attend and the press and media may also be present.
 - 7.3 Meetings may involve contributions from a wide range of sources, including members, officers, NHS employees, education representatives,

local businesses, voluntary groups, specialists and other members of the public.

8. What happens when I arrive to attend a meeting?
 - 8.1 The Chairman will introduce himself/herself to you before the start of the meeting. One of the Officers will show you to your seat and provide you with a copy of the agenda.
9. What happens at the meetings?
 - 9.2 At the beginning of the meeting there will be a number of procedural items of business that the Chairman will address, such as approving the minutes of the last meeting and taking apologies from absent members etc. The meeting will generally follow the order of business as set out in the agenda for the meeting.
10. What happens when I give evidence?
 - 10.1 We will 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.
 - 10.2 When it comes to your agenda item, the Chairman will introduce you to those present and ask you to introduce yourself, including a brief introduction to your work and how you are connected with the issue under discussion. If appropriate a short presentation may be given. Once all introductions have been completed, the meeting will open out into a question and answer session.
 - 10.3 Whilst Review Committees are formal meetings, questioning of witnesses will be conducted with a degree of informality. If a witness does not have immediately available the information to answer a question, the Review Committee may ask for further information to be submitted in writing afterwards. If a witness refuses to answer a particular question, or they would like time to consider the answer or to seek advice, the question will not be put again, and the Chairman will proceed to the next question.
 - 10.4 If you are attending on behalf of an organisation, you should make it clear whether any views expressed are personal views or those of the organisation.

11. What happens next?
 - 11.1 Following the meeting you will be thanked for attending. Witnesses will be sent the minutes of the meeting for their record and to identify any supplementary information asked for by Members of the Committee.
 - 11.2 If, after the meeting, you become aware that you have given incorrect or misleading information, for example by incorrectly quoting a figure, then let a Review Coordinator know as soon as possible so that the information can be corrected.
 - 11.3 Following the proceedings, you will be written to (where appropriate) and informed of the outcome.
 - 11.4 When the Review Committee has concluded its review a report will be written to present a full picture of the inquiry and recommendations will be made. If the recommendations are accepted, Review Committee Members will monitor progress and the agreed report will be circulated to all those involved with the review, including those who gave evidence.