

# Effective Questioning for Scrutiny: A Checklist

October 20, 2011 by [Dave Mckenna](#) [3 Comments](#)



Effective questioning is at the heart of effective scrutiny. For this reason it has been identified as one of the things that we want to develop and [improve over the next 12 months](#).

As a starting point we have tried to capture all of the things that the overview and scrutiny boards and committees in Swansea already do well, as well as best practice advice from elsewhere such as from the [Centre for Public Scrutiny](#). We have tried to pull everything together into a simple checklist that can be used to support effective questioning in a consistent way in future.

We would love to hear what you think about this list and any ideas you have for improving it.

## – The Effective Questioning for Scrutiny Checklist –

### 1. Treat questioning as a form of research

Like any form of research it needs rigour, consistency and a clear purpose. Having a clear process that has been tried and tested matters – this is the way to ensure the best results.

### 2. Start with the ‘Big Question’ and work from there

Every questioning session should have a clear purpose that can be expressed as a single question such as ‘how can this service be improved?’, ‘what should be our policy in this area?’ or ‘how well are services performing for this group of people?’ Witnesses are called to help to answer these big questions so specific questions should be designed depending on who the witnesses are and what they might know.

### **3. Ensure the focus is on gathering evidence**

The purpose of calling witnesses to scrutiny is to learn from people not to put them on trial. Always think explicitly about who is the best person to provide the evidence that the Committee wants and make sure enough time has been allocated to get that evidence. At meetings the aim should be for the witnesses to be talking during 80-90% of questioning sessions – the scrutiny committee can discuss their own views later. After all, calling witnesses to hear the views of committee members is not a good use of anyone's time!

### **4. Know your questions**

The power of the investigation is in the quality of the questions and the best results will always come when questions are carefully designed to fit the particular situation. Questioners should have a good working knowledge of the different types of question they might use and when best to use them. Open, closed, probing, extending, summarising, reflective, hypothetical, historical and comparative questions should all be in the armoury of every scrutineer.

### **5. Always, always invest in proper preparation**

There is a maxim in training that the time taken to prepare any course should be at least double the time of the course itself. Something similar should apply for questioning witnesses in scrutiny. Good preparation includes three distinct stages:

- First, the overall purpose and one or two general questions need to be set. This could be done at the end of the previous meeting, by email or at a separate meeting.
- Second, the whole committee should be involved in developing a full set of questions; again this could be done at a separate meeting or by email.
- Finally, a pre meeting should be held to decide who is going to ask what and in what order. This will be the broad plan that the chair will use to manage the questioning session.
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### **6. Prepare the witness as well as the committee**

To be able to provide the evidence that the committee needs witnesses need to know why they are there and what the committee wants to know. Everyone attending scrutiny should have access to a clear and up to date witness guide that sets out exactly what they should be able to expect. At the same time witnesses should be provided with the broad questions that the committee will be asking in advance. In this way they can make sure that specific details are checked before they come – this reduces the need for people having to

provide information later that they did not have to hand at the meeting. Also, knowing what the Committee wants will help to ensure the witness avoids taking up valuable time covering other matters unnecessarily.

### **7. Be ready to listen and learn**

The purpose of questioning for scrutiny is to learn from the witness and to gather information. It should go without saying that all witnesses have a right to expect a minimum level of respect and courtesy from the Committee. Hostility is both unprofessional and counterproductive. When witnesses feel confident that their evidence is being treated seriously and professionally they are more likely to offer more. Careful, interested questioning can work to build trust with the witness. Starting with a general open question, for example, gives people an opportunity to get warmed up and helps reduce any anxiety. Listening is an important part of this process and the Committee should work to ensure that that they have the required listening skills.

### **8. Work as team**

Questioning is a team sport. To get the most out of questioning and the limited time available with witnesses it is important to have an approach to questioning that involves everyone. Of course there needs to be room for individual concerns to be raised and for members to develop specific lines of questioning but this must be done in the context of an agreed plan that everyone has had the chance to contribute to. If members do not get involved in the development of a questioning strategy and then just turn up at a meeting and ask questions 'at a tangent', this might undermine what the committee wants to achieve – far better to register questions with colleagues before the meeting starts.

### **9. Be clear about the chair's responsibility for the whole process**

The chair (and vice chair) has a critical role and needs to be confident they can lead questioning effectively at every stage. They must ensure that; a clear purpose for questioning has been established; all of the committee are able to contribute to developing questions; a clear plan is place before the questioning session; and the meeting itself is managed in line with this plan. This role is a skilled one – existing and prospective chairs should be confident that they have received the training and development that they need.

### **10. Question your questioning**

Finally, as questioning will always be an art as much as a science it is important to evaluate and review the effectiveness of questioning. This can be done in post meetings, as part of annual reviews or through one off exercises.

Read more at <http://www.swanseascrutiny.co.uk/2011/10/20/effective-questioning-for-scrutiny-a-checklist/#0aAFoEo51kilZw45.99>