

Argyll and Bute Council

Scrutiny Manual

March 2024



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Introduction

1. In March 2021 the Audit and Scrutiny Committee (the Committee) approved Argyll and Bute Council's (the Council) updated Scrutiny Framework (the Framework). This was first approved in March 2018 and it establishes the framework for scrutiny within the Council. It is for the use of anyone involved in the scrutiny process including:
 - members of the Audit and Scrutiny Committee
 - all elected members of the Council
 - staff involved in the scrutiny process and those who may be required to provide evidence as part of a scrutiny review
 - members of the public, partners and external organisations who may be invited to provide evidence as part of a scrutiny review.
2. The Framework sets out the process adopted to identify scrutiny topics and confirms that the Chief Internal Auditor (CIA) will develop and maintain guidance on the performance of scrutiny reviews. This manual, first approved by the Committee in 2018 and last updated in March 2022, provides that guidance and is designed to be a reference tool for officers carrying out scrutiny reviews, it is not intended to be prescriptive, but to help ensure the scrutiny review process is a more structured and informed one.

Scrutiny Reviews

3. Scrutiny reviews can be broken down into five stages as illustrated in exhibit 1. The process is cyclical as it can be necessary to revisit earlier steps as the review progresses.

Exhibit 1 – Five Stages of a Scrutiny Review



Stage 1-2 – Scoping and Identifying Required Evidence

4. Initially the identified scrutiny topic may be quite loosely defined. If it is required to be assessed against the prioritisation process defined in the Framework there may already have been a need for it to be clarified. However, if chosen for scrutiny, further clarification may be required to help determine a precise focus. This should be carried out by the appointed scrutiny officer in consultation with the topic proposer and the appropriate council service.
5. Once the topic is clearly defined the scope of the review should be determined. In particular we need to establish the:
 - purpose and objectives
 - specific areas to be covered and any exclusions
 - approach to be adopted
 - evidence required
 - people to be interviewed or invited to give evidence
 - anticipated outputs
 - timescales.
6. Defining the scope of the review will normally happen during an initial panel briefing meeting which is attended by the three Scrutiny Panel members (a subset of the Audit and Scrutiny Committee), the CIA and the appointed scrutiny officer.
7. That initial panel should also agree indicative timescales for panels to allow a provisional plan for the key stages of the review to be created.
8. Once the Scrutiny Panel have agreed the scope and objectives they should be shared with all members of the Audit and Scrutiny Committee. This will be done by e-mail as waiting for the next meeting of the Committee might result in too much time elapsing.

Stage 3 – Evidence Gathering

9. When considering how the evidence is to be gathered it is important to remember there is no definitive process. Every scrutiny review will be different and there are a range of different approaches that should be considered. These include:
 - public meetings
 - surveys
 - workshops / focus groups
 - site visits (internal and external)
 - sourcing data and reports
 - literature research
 - SWOT/PESTLE analysis
 - investigating good practice
 - reviewing performance and financial data including trends and comparisons
 - process mapping
 - investigating potential collaborators and/or alternative suppliers
 - interviewing experts
 - working with officers and elected members to research issues.
10. The evidence can be categorised as either ‘written and secondary evidence’ or ‘oral evidence’.

Written and Secondary Evidence

11. This includes:

- written evidence from internal and external individuals and organisations
- notes taken by the scrutiny officer during interviews or site visits
- existing council plans, policies, strategies, and reports relevant to the subject area
- relevant national guidance, legislation and documentation
- relevant guidance, good practice guides from national and regional bodies
- good practice and innovative reports and plans from other councils.

12. All written evidence considered as part of the review should be kept on file and retained in a manner consistent with the requirements of the Council's records management plan. These files be stored on a SharePoint site managed by Scrutiny Officers.

Oral Evidence

13. The gathering of written evidence may identify a benefit in inviting internal and external individuals to provide oral evidence either to the scrutiny officer as part of the review, or directly to the Committee at an informal and private meeting. The scrutiny process should be inclusive and ensure that all those who wish to contribute whether as councillors, officers, external experts or members of the public feel valued and are able to speak freely and openly.

14. It is important that, all internal and external individuals invited to give evidence, are:

- treated with courtesy and respect
- given ample notice of the time, date and place of meeting
- informed of the review scope
- provided with questions, or the line of questioning, in advance with an explanation that this will not be a restrictive list
- provided with copies of any relevant reports, papers and background information
- given the opportunity to submit written evidence in advance of the meeting which is circulated to Committee members
- given the opportunity to decline or to submit written evidence instead of appearing in person
- introduced to the Committee chair prior to the meeting commencing.

15. Minutes from any scrutiny panels should be circulated to scrutiny panel members, and any council officer or external individuals that participated in the panel to enable them to comment on the factual accuracy of the minute before they are finalised. When these are issued a timescale for response should be provided with a statement that they will be accepted as correct if no response is received by the stated timescale.

Council Officers/Elected Members Providing Evidence

16. Council officers invited to give evidence would normally be third tier managers or above (although this could extend to other elected members). The officers to be invited must be agreed with the relevant member of the Council's Senior Management Team and/or relevant Head of Service to ensure they have the necessary knowledge of the topic.

17. The evidence giving process must be seen as being supportive of scrutiny and not an opportunity to be critical of any officer giving evidence. Questions asked of officers must be focused on reviewing the policies and performance of the Council in relation to the topic being scrutinised. Scrutiny should

never be used to question the capability or competence of officers, or about matters of a disciplinary nature, and questions should never be asked in a way that may be considered confrontational.

18. 'Guidelines for Officers Attending Scrutiny Committees' are included at Appendix 1. A copy of these guidelines should always be provided to officers prior to them attending meetings.

External Experts Proving Evidence

19. External experts can be an essential part of undertaking a scrutiny review and their evidence can be a valuable source of information. Providing information to a scrutiny review or attending a scrutiny committee may be a new experience to some and it should be remembered that external experts are attending on a voluntary basis. It is incumbent on the scrutiny team and Committee members to ensure their experience is positive and stress-free.
20. External experts can be drawn from a wide range of individuals and organisations, for example:
 - elected Members and officers from other councils
 - other external public sector bodies
 - voluntary sector organisations (local, regional and national)
 - professional associations
 - trade unions
 - private sector
 - user groups (local, regional and national)
 - community groups
 - experts in the subject area (academics, public or private sector managers).
21. 'Guidelines for External Experts Attending Scrutiny Committees' are included at Appendix 2. A copy of these guidelines should always be provided to witnesses prior to them attending meetings.

Stage 4-5 - Conclusions and Reporting

22. At the end of a review a draft report should be produced which provides a full picture of the issues under consideration and contains key findings and learning points. The report must be evidence based and relate directly to the review scope.
23. Learning points should focus on delivering improvements in service delivery, policy or strategic direction. The scoping phase of the review will have identified the purpose and objectives of the review and the final report should be closely aligned to those objectives. A template for the report has evolved as the scrutiny process has developed between 2018 and 2021 however we should remain flexible about how we report on scrutiny work as there could be occasions where a different approach might be beneficial. However, as a minimum, the output should include:
 - executive summary
 - introduction (including the background, scope and approach)
 - findings
 - learning points
 - appendices (where required)
24. The draft report should be agreed with the Scrutiny Panel members before being discussed and cleared with the relevant council officers at a meeting attended by the Chair of the Scrutiny Panel, the CIA and possibly the appointed Scrutiny Officer.

25. Once the Scrutiny Panel are satisfied the report can be finalised and submitted to the next scheduled Committee meeting for endorsement, the Committee will also determine at this meeting which, if any, of the other council committees the report should be submitted to for consideration.
26. All scrutiny reports are submitted in their entirety to the Committee which, through the transparent provision of committee papers, makes them public documents. In the event that the report contains sensitive information they may be restricted however this decision will only be taken in consultation with senior management and legal counsel as appropriate.

Appendix 1 – Guidelines for Officers Attending Scrutiny Committees

Giving Evidence to the Audit & Scrutiny Committee – A Guide for Council Officers

Introduction

This document provides guidance to Council staff who have been asked to provide written or oral evidence to the Audit and Scrutiny Committee (the Committee). Scrutiny is a key component of good governance which helps the Council improve our decision making, policy development & implementation and service delivery.

What is the Committee?

The Committee is a cross-party committee made up of seven elected members, (four from the opposition and three from the council administration) and an independent chair. This provides an appropriate political spread within its membership however it is not a political committee and should always conduct itself impartially.

What does the Committee do?

The overall remit of the scrutiny element of the Committee is to *'perform a scrutiny role through the provision and delivery of scrutiny work focused on improving the performance of the Council.'*

In summary it considers the performance of the Council, looking at the effectiveness of policies and service delivery and identifies areas for improvement with, wherever possible, a key focus on outcomes for the community rather than inputs. As such scrutiny adopts a 'critical friend' approach to help promote continuous improvement. The committee does not make policy and does not take decisions about the operation of council services, but it may make recommendations to Council on policy matters.

Scrutiny Support

The Committee is supported by the Chief Internal Auditor and staff from the internal audit section who will be responsible for carrying out scrutiny reviews and drafting the scrutiny reports for the Committee.

The Chief Internal Auditor is responsible for ensuring that officers giving evidence are given good advance notice of any invitation to meet committee members, are properly briefed about the arrangements for the meeting and receive adequate notice of the questions to be discussed at the meeting. If you have any queries about scrutiny or your participation in it then please contact the Chief Internal Auditor (audit.internal@argyll-bute.gov.uk)

Why have you been invited?

You have been asked to meet the Committee because you have knowledge or expertise that is relevant to the topic being reviewed. The meeting also provides you with the opportunity to express your views on any strengths, weaknesses and possible areas for improvement.

What are the arrangements for meeting members of the Committee?

You will be contacted by phone or e-mail by an officer supporting the committee. The officer will explain:

- why you have been invited
- background information about the committee
- background about the topic being investigated

- arrangements for your attendance.

Approximately two weeks before the meeting, you will be sent key themes which will form the basis of the discussion with the committee. This will allow you to come prepared and seek out any information that you may need in advance.

You should inform your line manager that you have been invited to the meeting. If you have any problems or questions, please contact the Chief Internal Auditor.

Meeting location

Historically these meetings take place in one of the Council's administrative buildings however the impact of the COVID pandemic makes it more likely they will be virtual meetings.

What happens at the meeting?

The meetings are informal and are conducted in an open and friendly manner and usually last no longer than two hours. Officers who support the Committee and any independent external expert will also be present. The Chair or nominated lead will open the meeting by welcoming and introducing those present and outlining the process. The key themes will be discussed and you should be open and honest in your responses and feel free to raise additional issues related to the topic.

Please be aware that your participation in the process is very much seen as being supportive of scrutiny and is appreciated by all the Committee members. The scrutiny process is designed to be inclusive and ensure that all those who wish to contribute whether as councillors, officers, external experts or members of the public feel valued and are able to speak freely and openly. It is not an opportunity for Committee members to be critical of any officer giving evidence or to question the competence of any officer. Questions will be focused on reviewing the policies and performance of the Council in relation to the topic being scrutinised.

Notes will be taken of the discussion at the meeting. The meetings are held in private and notes of the evidence will not become record until you have agreed to them.

What happens after the meeting?

After the meeting, you will be sent a summary note of the discussion. You are entitled to make any additions, deletions or amendments to this note and these should be highlighted and the document returned. The note is confidential until it has been agreed by all witnesses. Once the Committee has heard all the evidence, and drawn its conclusions and recommendations, a briefing or report will be written and submitted to a formal meeting of the Committee. At this meeting the Committee will also determine which of the other council committees the report should be submitted to for consideration. This could be to full Council, to the Policy & Resources Committee or to one of the service committees. Scrutiny reports are submitted in their entirety to the Committee which, through the transparent provision of committee papers, makes them public documents. In the event that the report contains sensitive information they may be restricted.

Appendix 2 – Guidelines for External Experts Attending Scrutiny Committees

Giving Evidence to the Audit & Scrutiny Committee – A Guide for External Experts

Introduction

This document provides guidance to external witnesses who have been asked to provide written or oral evidence to the Audit and Scrutiny Committee (the Committee). Scrutiny is a key component of good governance which helps the Council improve its decision making, policy development & implementation and service delivery.

What is the Committee?

The Committee is a cross-party committee made up of seven elected members, (four from the opposition and three from the council administration) and an independent chair. This provides an appropriate political spread within its membership however it is not a political committee and should always conduct itself impartially.

What does the Committee do?

The overall remit of the scrutiny element of the Committee is to *'perform a scrutiny role through the provision and delivery of scrutiny work focused on improving the performance of the Council.'*

In summary it considers the performance of the Council, looking at the effectiveness of policies and service delivery and identifies areas for improvement with, wherever possible, a key focus on outcomes for the community rather than inputs. As such scrutiny adopts a 'critical friend' approach to help promote continuous improvement.

The Committee does not make policy and does not take decisions about the operation of council services, but it may make recommendations to Council on policy matters.

How does the Committee work?

The Committee collects evidence from a wide variety of sources including:

- written evidence from a range of internal and external individuals and organisations
- notes taken by the scrutiny team during interviews or site visits
- existing council plans, policies, strategies, and reports relevant to the subject area
- relevant national guidance, legislation and documentation
- relevant guidance, good practice guides from national and regional bodies
- good practice and innovative reports and plans from other councils.
- questioning witnesses, experts and relevant community groups
- surveys and questionnaires.

Scrutiny Support

The Committee is supported by the Chief Internal Auditor and staff from the internal audit section who will be responsible for supporting scrutiny reviews and drafting the scrutiny reports for the Committee.

The Chief Internal Auditor is responsible for ensuring that external experts giving evidence are given good advance notice of any invitation to meet committee members, are properly briefed about the arrangements for the meeting and receive adequate notice of the themes to be discussed at the meeting. If you have any queries about scrutiny or your participation in it then please contact the Chief Internal Auditor (audit.internal@argyll-bute.gov.uk)

Why have you been invited?

You have been asked to meet the Committee because you have knowledge or expertise that is relevant to the topic being reviewed. The meeting also provides you with the opportunity to express your views on any strengths, weaknesses and possible areas for improvement.

What are the arrangements for meeting members of the Committee?

You will be contacted by phone or e-mail by an officer supporting the committee. The officer will explain:

- why you have been invited
- background information about the committee
- background about the topic being investigated
- arrangements for your attendance.

Approximately two weeks before the meeting, you will be sent key themes which will form the basis of the discussion with the committee however the Committee may not restrict itself to these themes. This will allow you to come prepared and seek out any information that you may need in advance. You are welcome to send an initial written response to these themes before the meeting takes place however this is entirely optional.

Meeting location

Historically these meetings take place in one of the Council's administrative buildings however the impact of the COVID pandemic makes it more likely they will be virtual meetings.

What happens at the meeting?

The meetings are informal and are conducted in an open and friendly manner and usually last no longer than two hours. Officers who support the Committee and any internal or external experts may also be present. The Chair or nominated lead will open the meeting by welcoming and introducing those present and outlining the process. The key questions will be discussed, with supplementary questions being asked where appropriate. The scrutiny process is designed to be inclusive and ensure that all those who wish to contribute whether as councillors, officers, external experts or members of the public feel valued and are able to speak freely and openly.

Notes will be taken of the discussion at the meeting. The meetings are held in private and notes of the evidence will not become record until you have agreed to them.

What happens after the meeting?

After the meeting, you will be sent a summary note of the discussion. You are entitled to make any additions, deletions or amendments to this note and these should be highlighted and the document returned. The note is confidential until it has been agreed by all witnesses. Once the Committee has heard all the evidence, and drawn its conclusions and recommendations, a briefing or report will be written and submitted to a formal meeting of the Committee. At this meeting the Committee will also determine which of the other council committees the report should be submitted to for consideration. This could be to full Council, to the Policy & Resources Committee or to one of the service committees.

Scrutiny reports are submitted in their entirety to the Committee which, through the transparent provision of committee papers, makes them public documents. In the event that the report contains sensitive information they may be restricted.

Am I obliged to attend?

Whilst your participation in the process will be very much appreciated by all the Committee members you are, of course, under no obligation to attend. If you do not wish to be involved in the process or would prefer to just submit written evidence rather than attending to give oral evidence then you are perfectly entitled to make that choice.

Expenses

As you have been invited to attend a meeting the Council would reimburse you for any reasonable travelling expenses.