

Remember to allow time for thoughtful responses and to listen to what people are saying.

Do not

- ask multiple questions i.e. two or more questions at the same time. These may confuse participants or perhaps allow them to evade a specific or awkward question
- ask rambling or incomprehensible questions that confuse everybody.
- ask rhetorical questions that you either go on to answer yourself or are in fact a statement dressed up as a question
- ask punitive questions that imply fault (or even guilt)
- be aggressive in your questioning
- ask questions laden with jargon
- ask questions that don't give people time to answer.
- ask questions about issues not in the participant's knowledge
- ask "trick" questions designed to confuse participants
- make a personal speech or statement
- let participants cross-examine each other
- talk when people are giving evidence

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Warwickshire County Council – A Members' Guide to Questioning Techniques for Scrutiny.

Successful scrutiny relies on effective questioning being used to obtain relevant evidence. If questions asked are not the right ones or are not presented in an appropriate fashion it is unlikely you will get the best information.

This guide is intended to provide Members with practical examples of effective questioning and highlights practices to avoid.

Preparation

The key to asking the right questions in the right manner is to have prepared beforehand. There are six stages to preparation.

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| Stage 1 | Ensure that you are familiar with the terms of reference of your committee or of the review, whatever evidence has been gathered already. |
| Stage 2 | Consider what you wish to find out from participants. |
| Stage 3 | Identify questions you could ask of the participant |
| Stage 4 | Decide which questions are relevant and which are the most important |
| Stage 5 | 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 6 | If appropriate 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. |



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Types of Question

Open questions are used to gain more than a “yes” or “no” answer as they stimulate further discussion on an issue. e.g.

“Please give an example of how your service has improved?”
“Tell us about how your service is organised?”

These questions tend to be of most use when you are just starting to develop your knowledge of a particular issue. Their open nature means that you can develop a general picture of the issue before focusing down on the detail.

Closed questions are used when you require a brief factual answer as they close down discussion e.g.

“What is your name?”
“Do you work in another organisation?”
“How many accidents involved children?”

These questions leave much less room for manoeuvre. As you can see from the two examples above they do not necessarily require a “yes” or “no” answer. However, there will be no “grey areas” with answers from closed questions.

In addition to the two basic types of questions there are others which reflect more the style of questioning.

Probing questions seek verifiable data and usually start with the words who, what, why, where, when and how. You will find that these are amongst the most useful forms of questions. They are used to gather information about a situation. E.g.

“How much have we spent on this service this year?”
“Who was consulted before the changes were implemented?”

Opinion finding asks for subjective information that gets at opinions, values or beliefs. They will help you understand views e.g.

“Do you think people understand the services available?”
“How do you feel the consultation went?”

Getting the detail is often important as it can help to fill in any gaps in your understanding. Examples might be,

“You mentioned costs a few minutes ago – can you be more specific?”
“Explain that in more detail for us please”

Best and least questions are similar to opinion finding questions as they help to test the limits of participants’ needs and wants E.g.

“What is the best thing about the service we offer?”
“What is the worst thing about the way we publicise our services?”

Third party questions can help people express sensitive information and uncover thoughts in an indirect manner, but beware that they do not become leading questions. E.g.

“Some people say it takes too long to get a response from our services. How does this sound to you?”

Crystal Ball or hypothetical questions can be used to explore ideas. E.g.

“If time and money were no object, what sort of computer system would you design for the department?”

Questioning do’s and don’ts.

To make the best use of the time available for a participant, it is important to think about not only the type of question but also the way in which it is asked. The following are some issues to think about:

Do ask,

- clear concise questions covering a single issue
- challenging questions that will stimulate thought
- reasonable questions based on what participants will know about
- honest and relevant questions