

West Midlands Regional Assembly

Regional Scrutiny

What Is It?



Introduction to the West Midlands Regional Assembly

The West Midlands Regional Assembly is responsible for developing and co-ordinating a strategic vision for improving the quality of life in the Region. It is responsible for setting priorities and developing regional strategies, including the Regional Spatial Strategy.

The majority of our funding comes from Central Government to support and develop the following:-

- The Assembly's role as the Regional Planning Body and Regional Housing Board
- The scrutiny of the Regional Development Agency – Advantage West Midlands
- The Assembly's role as the strategic focal point of the Region

The Assembly's membership consists of 100 nominated representatives, with 68 Members representing all 38 local authorities within the West Midlands, 16 Members representing the business community and 16 Members representing the community and voluntary organisations.

Further information on the West Midlands Regional Assembly and its activities can be found on the Assembly's website at www.wmra.gov.uk

Why Do We Have A Regional Scrutiny Role?

The Regional Development Act 1998 requires Regional Development Agencies (RDA's) such as Advantage West Midlands (AWM) "to consult and have regard to the views of the designated Regional Assembly". This has recently been strengthened in statutory guidance for Regional Economic Strategies.

Each region has developed an approach to scrutiny which meets its needs. In the West Midlands, this is governed by a protocol agreed by West Midlands Regional Assembly, Advantage West Midlands and Government Office for the West Midlands.

Someone has to ask the following questions:

- Why is this being done?
- Is this the best way?
- Can it be improved?

...and asking these types of questions is the Regional Assembly's job.

The Regional Assembly holds Advantage West Midlands to account on its strategies, decisions and actions through **Scrutiny Reviews**.

In addition, the Regional Assembly also conducts **Strategic Reviews** which are in-depth reviews of wider regional issues (for example, Equalities and Diversity) not specifically related to Advantage West Midlands' activity.

Overall, scrutiny aims to achieve greater public accountability, and to ensure that Advantage West Midlands and other agencies effectively deliver their services.

Who Carries Out Regional Scrutiny?

The **Strategic Review Group** is the co-ordinating body for the Regional Assembly's scrutiny function. The Group comprises a mixture of local authority, business and voluntary sector representatives, together with representation from Advantage West Midlands and Government Office for the West Midlands.

Scrutiny and Strategic Reviews are carried out by individual **Panels**, made up predominately of Assembly Members, with full delegated powers. Panel Members are not necessarily experts on the issues being investigated, but quickly identify key issues and areas of concern.

What Scrutiny and Strategic Review Panels Do

Review Panels use a similar approach to Parliamentary Select Committees, but are less formal to encourage participation. Panel Members collect evidence from a wide variety of sources, including:

- Questioning “witnesses” or experts at hearings or discussion events
- Literature research or reviews
- Surveys
- Taking written submissions from professionals, businesses & community groups

In addition to making suggestions for improvements, scrutiny also acknowledges good practice and strong performance.

What Scrutiny and Strategic Review Panels Do Not Do

Review Panels do not deal with individual queries, concerns or complaints which are more appropriately dealt with by separate complaints procedures. Neither do they make or overturn decisions. They do, however, submit their findings to the Regional Assembly and Advantage West Midlands in order to influence relevant decision-makers.

What Issues Are Open To Regional Scrutiny?

There are many issues that the Regional Assembly can examine. It is therefore important that the issues selected are strategic and significant, add value to Advantage West Midlands and/or other partners' overall performance, promote discussion of challenges for the Region, and are capable of leading to effective outcomes.

Recent Review activity includes:

Scrutiny Review of Advantage West Midlands

- Regeneration Zones
- High Technology Corridors
- Rural Renaissance

Strategic Reviews

- Regional Approach to Sustainable Development
- Equalities and Diversity in the Region
- Region's Relationship with Europe post 2007

Further details of each Review are available on the Regional Assembly's website at www.wmra.gov.uk

How Are Reviews Undertaken?

Although every Review is different, the approach they take is similar.

They:

- **Decide exactly what the Review will look at** - this is called “The Scope” or “Terms of Reference”,
- **Gather information** - via research, surveys, written submissions, interviews, invitations to “expert witnesses” for evidence and any other appropriate means,
- **Analyse the Information** - deciding what the findings of the Review are,
- **Make Recommendations** - as to what should be changed.

The Regional Assembly makes every effort to ensure that Reviews are fair and balanced. If they are unfairly critical then the recommendations will not be agreed and implemented by AWM or other bodies. On the other hand, if the recommendations are unchallenging, the Regional Assembly will have failed in its function to bring about improvements.

What Happens To Scrutiny Reports And Recommendations?

For scrutiny to have credibility, the public needs to know that it leads to improvements.

Review Panels recommend improvements and changes for Advantage West Midlands and/or other relevant organisations to consider, and these are referred to the full Regional Assembly for discussion and endorsement.

Following a Scrutiny Review, Advantage West Midlands responds to the Regional Assembly stating which of the recommendations it is going to put into action, together with an explanation of any recommendations that have not been accepted. This statement is then used as the basis for monitoring progress in the implementation of recommendations.

Additionally, there will be other national and local bodies that the Regional Assembly will wish to influence through its Scrutiny and Strategic Reviews. All organisations and individuals, such as Government Departments and Parliamentary Select Committees, relevant to the issue being examined therefore also receive copies of Review reports.

The Strategic Review Group monitors the outcome of the recommendations made by Reviews and this provides an opportunity to return to issues if the Group feels that there needs to be a more in-depth update. In addition, the Strategic Review Group publishes an Annual Report which summarises progress over the previous year.

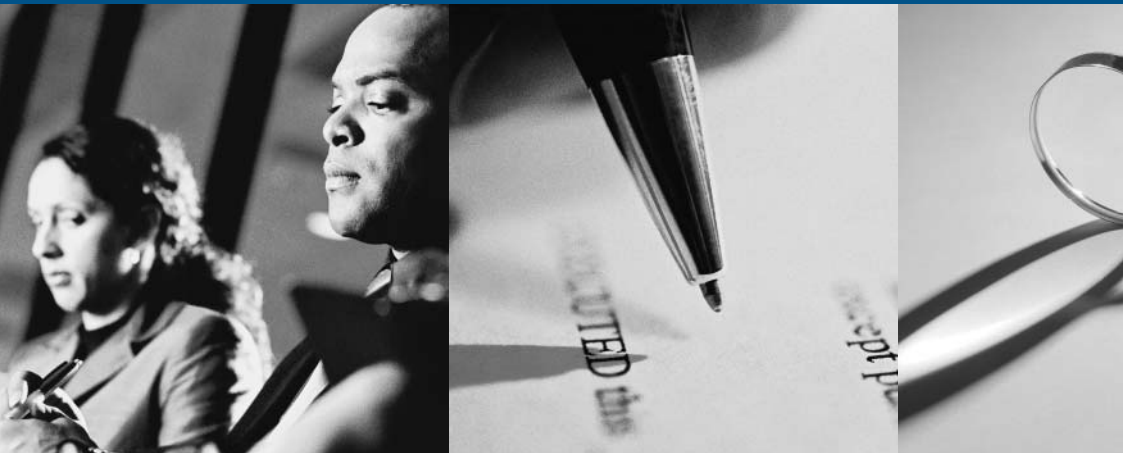
What If I Am Invited To Give Evidence To A Review Panel?

External witnesses can be an essential part of undertaking a Review and their evidence will be an invaluable source of information. Attending a Review meeting will be a new experience for most people, but need not be stressful.

Providing evidence, or attending as a witness, is completely voluntary. The right of a witness to decline to attend, or to submit written evidence rather than appearing in person will be respected.

In advance of the meeting, invited witnesses will be informed of the purpose of the Review and the areas on which the Panel will want to question them, although the Panel may not restrict itself to these.

Review Panels invite witnesses to provide them with information that will help them make evidence-based recommendations on the development or delivery of services being examined. Sometimes small groups of witnesses are invited to give evidence at the same session. Witnesses do not have to answer any questions which they feel unhappy answering, and it is fine for witnesses to tell the Panel when they do not know the answer to a question. It is also fine if for any reason witnesses want to give some or all of their evidence in private.

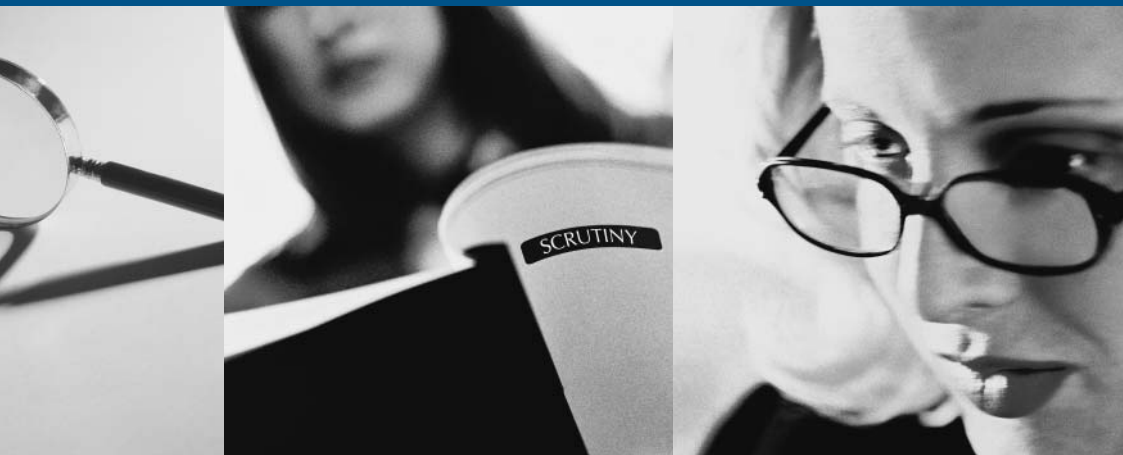


How Should I Prepare To Be A Review Panel “Witness”?

If you are invited to provide evidence to a Review Panel, following these few easy steps will ensure that you use your time to maximum effect:

- Read all the papers you have been sent for the Panel meeting. This will ensure that you have knowledge of the key issues being examined by the Panel.
- Prepare a list of information you would like to provide to the Panel, but do not prepare a presentation unless the Panel has specifically requested one.
- As time for oral evidence may be limited, all witnesses are invited to submit supporting evidence to help make oral evidence more productive.
- Recognise that members of the Panel may not be experts on the issue. Try to avoid jargon or professional speak when giving answers.
- Talk to the Regional Assembly officer supporting the Panel. The officer will be able to tell you the Panel’s expectations of you.
- Attending a Review Panel offers a good opportunity to present your organisation’s knowledge and experiences directly to the Regional Assembly.

Finally, it should be noted that Review Panel meetings are open to the public and press, and all reports are public documents unless they contain exempt or confidential information. Witnesses should, however, be assured that they will not be prejudiced as a consequence of making critical comments against any organisation or individual as part of a Review.



How Can You Get Involved In Regional Scrutiny?

There are several ways in which organisations or individual members of the public can get involved in the Regional Assembly's scrutiny function.

To ensure open and transparent decision and policy making at the regional level, all Regional Assembly, Strategic Review Group, and Review Panel meetings are open to the public. The scrutiny pages of the Regional Assembly website provide up to date links to dates of meetings, agendas and reports.

The Regional Assembly also welcomes and encourages submissions from everyone with an interest in any topic being scrutinised. If you would like to submit information, whether in writing or in person, for a current or future Review, please contact the Scrutiny team at the address below.

Contact:

Dagmar Waller
Regional Scrutiny Manager
West Midlands Regional Assembly
Albert House, Quay Place, 92-93 Edward Street
Birmingham B1 2RA

Tel: 0121 678 1054

Fax: 0121 245 0201

Email: d.waller@wmra.gov.uk

Website: www.wmra.gov.uk

Please direct any requests for translation, interpretation, large text or audio tape versions of this to **access@wmra.gov.uk** or tel: **0121 245 0200**. All requests will be dealt with on an individual basis.