

# Putting it into Practice: The Questioning Technique



## **The Centre for Public Scrutiny**

The Centre for Public Scrutiny promotes the value of scrutiny in modern and effective government, not only to hold executives to account but also to create a constructive dialogue between the public and its elected representatives to improve the quality of public services. The CfPS want to enhance public understanding of what scrutiny means, why it matters and how it can be successful. The CfPS supports effective scrutiny by bringing people together, developing networks and disseminating research to share imaginative practice across the country.

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Mark Ewbank, Research Assistant at the Centre for Public Scrutiny, has compiled this paper.

# Introduction

The scrutiny role requires the skill of providing a critical friend perspective of those under scrutiny and necessitates “constructive, robust and purposeful challenge to prompt reflection on policy development and decision-making.” (Good Scrutiny Guide, 2006) However, the line between being a critical friend and explicit criticism that generates unproductive conflict is thin. How can one therefore ensure that scrutiny remains calm, measured and balanced whilst demonstrating strong, objective and successful challenge, which provides legitimate checks in the name of public accountability?

This research paper seeks to clarify the role of questioning in the scrutiny process and attempts to highlight how one can provide a ‘critical friend’ challenge without either carrying out the role less rigorously or far too aggressively.

The first section of the report details a range of questioning techniques and examples that are widely regarded as positive practice. The second section contrasts the first by providing examples and the theory behind unhelpful questioning techniques. The final section of the report deals with some practical examples from local overview and scrutiny committees and central government select committees, which illustrate the typologies that have been summarised in the first and second sections.

## Positive Practice: Questioning Individuals

### Types of questions

In order to fully utilise the presence of a witness giving evidence or officer being held to account, one must first assess what type of information one is attempting to elicit. By agreeing a context from which to work, one can then assess what types of questions should be asked in order to maximise the information given.

It is clear that different types of questions extract different types of response; for instance, using three questions rolled into one, with each section pre-determining the rest of the questions, may seem antagonistic and aggressive behaviour. For example, regard the single question posed below;

*Do you think that your department is having problems? Will the problems get better? Why has it taken so long for you to react to the problem?*

Although scrutiny is meant to probe deeply and rigorously, it is not fruitful to confront the scrutinised in an aggressive and intensely inquisitorial style.

The following sections detail examples of positive questioning techniques that seek to maximise the information received from those under scrutiny yet allow the scrutineer to retain a critical and objective perspective.

## 1.1 Free narratives and open questions

One of the key motivations for the scrutiny function is calling into question an activity, action or situation and quite crucially not necessarily the person with whom one questioning, which is why it is more beneficial for the scrutineer to not have pre-conceptions about those who are being held to account.

Effective scrutiny occurs when it is evident that all parties are concerned with seeking the truth of a situation rather than trying to win a debate. The clearest way to begin to elicit information and 'seek the truth' is through asking open questions and allowing the scrutinised to inform the scrutineer about a situation in their own words.

*What are your thoughts regarding the provision of youth facilities?*

By asking an open question and allowing the respondent to give a free narrative of the situation from their perspective, it allows the scrutinised to give an account of how they are exercising their responsibilities in the public interest. Remaining silent, without interrupting or highlighting certain points, allows the respondent free rein to explain their standpoint. The scrutineer may find this process useful, as there is an opportunity to listen and process the response and take note of gaps, hesitations and contradictions that could be crucial to the investigation.

## 1.2 Probing

One of the most important questioning techniques for those undertaking scrutiny is the probing method. Incorporating review and clarification questions, probing questions are used to elicit further information from a respondent and "to deepen the response to a question, to increase the richness of the data being obtained, and to give cues to the interviewee about the level of response that is desired."<sup>1</sup> The importance of accurate and effective probing is highlighted in the example below.

**“Any others?”/“Anything else?” versus “What others?”/ “What else?”**

The distinction between using the phrase “what others? / what else?” and “any others? / anything else?” when probing respondents is subtle but profound. In the commercial research sector, training is often provided to qualitative interviewers to highlight the distinction between the phrases and how significant the differing research results are.

The difference is that we are psychologically conditioned to respond negatively to one set of the phrases and therefore limit the amount of information provided by a respondent. By asking a question followed with a probe of “*any others?* or *anything else?*” one is unintentionally ending a line of questioning because the respondent is typically programmed to respond with a simple “no.” Examples:

**A)**

Scrutineer: What do you think was the problem with the initiative?

Respondent: It was the lack of resources and the lack of interest shown by external organisations.

Scrutineer: Anything else?

Respondent: No

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<sup>1</sup> Berry, R,S (1999) “**Collecting data by in-depth interviewing**” Paper presented at the British Educational Research Association Annual Conference, University of Sussex at Brighton, September 2 - 5 1999

**B)**

Scrutineer: What do you think was the problem with the initiative?  
Respondent: It was the lack of resources and the lack of interest shown by external organisations.  
Scrutineer: What else?  
Respondent: It was also the timescales involved.  
Scrutineer: What else?  
Respondent: I suppose one could even say that Mr A was to blame for problem.  
Scrutineer: What else? etc.

**C)**

Taken from the oral evidence from the House of Commons Defence Select Committee inquiry into "UK Defence: commitments and resources" Tuesday 6 March 2007

Q139 Mr Hancock: That is not influenced by any other source?  
ACM Sir Jock Stirrup: No.

These small lexical choices make a significant difference to the responses from those under scrutiny; therefore scrutineers should ensure that they understand which questions elicit the most informative response.

## Types of probing

Berry (1999) identifies nine useful probing techniques for using when questioning a respondent.

### → **Challenging**

In order to gently push the respondent to think more about the issues that they have raised, it may be a useful tool for the scrutineer to encourage the respondent to prove the concepts behind their argument or point of view. This probing technique is used to demand further information to prove the validity of the informant's previous claims. Challenging questions push the respondent to 'tell you more' about the subject and question their own reasoning and thought processes. This method allows the scrutineer to 'dig deeper' into an issue and discover how arguments are formed. Example:

**A)**

Respondent: The initiative is the best in the county. Three officers currently run the programme and it is clear that the project is a success.  
Scrutineer: You said that the initiative was the "best in the county." How is that measured and who made that judgement?

**B)**

Respondent: There are many reasons why project X is better managed than project Z. In fact, project X has been better managed throughout the life span of both projects.  
Scrutineer: Can you give me an example of why you think project X was successful compared to project Z?  
Respondent: Well the success of the project must be due to the staff involved.  
Scrutineer: What exactly does this mean?

### → **Encouraging**

Giving compliments in order to encourage a respondent to continue on the same track can also be included within 'probing' as it can control the response of the witness/scrutinised. Example:

Scrutineer: Can I ask what you achieved compared to the target?  
Respondent: We are currently on 80% and the target in 2006 was 60%  
Scrutineer: That is a significant improvement! [Pause for response]

Respondent: Well the target has gone up this year to 85%, which means that we are currently behind target.

### → **Acknowledging**

By repeating information given by a respondent, it can demonstrate that the scrutineer has been paying close attention to the information being presented. Repeating information can also trigger the respondent to clarify the subject, further his or her answer or backtrack to correct details. Example:

Respondent: I don't think that the department had any problems at the time.

Scrutineer: You don't think that the department had any problems at the time?

### → **Procuring details**

Procuring questions are useful follow-ups to open questions, in order to summarise the information that has just been provided and test understanding of what has been raised up to that point. Review questions are most effectively used at the *complete* end of a response to an open question, in order to highlight important, relevant or key points of the scrutinised' response and guide the questioning accordingly. These questions guide the respondent on to an appropriate track. Example:

A)

Scrutineer: What did you do on that occasion?

Respondent: I read the document and subsequently commented on the information.

Scrutineer: Did you do anything else?

B)

Respondent: The project has been running for two years and it will be complete in two months time. It has covered two wards in particular and has reduced anti-social behaviour by fifteen percent.

Scrutineer: Is there anything else you can tell me about this project?

### → **Puzzling**

The 'faking puzzling' probe is not as malevolent as it sounds. This technique involves the scrutineer pretending to be confused about something in order to indicate to the respondent that some elaboration is needed. Example:

Respondent: ...so the member of staff transferred XX amount of the hospice funds to his own personal account.

Scrutineer: Is there anything wrong with that?

### → **Linking**

Linking up the respondent's comments with information that the scrutineer requires is an effective way to politely guide and control the exchange. Example:

Respondent: The project is currently running to plan and under budget. The responsibility of Officer A is to control the development of project Z. More importantly, it is another team who are responsible for the implementation of project Z and they have recently completed a feasibility study into increasing capacity to deliver the results three years early.

Scrutineer: Regarding the responsibility of Officer A, what is the remit of her role?

### → **Direct questions**

Using direct questions to allow the respondent a free narrative is also an effective probing technique that allows the scrutineer to get a wider picture of the

evidence. Simple questions beginning with 'what' or 'how' are typical direct open questions. Example:

Respondent: The inspections by our officer are the same as those carried out by our neighbouring authority. They actually use the same paperwork. One section of the inspection involves X and another involves Y.

Scrutineer: How do authorities outside our area test for the same problems?

### → **Showing understanding / time for elaboration**

Showing understanding and positive acknowledgement to a respondent's answer allows the response to continue until a scrutineer ceases acknowledging the responses. Simple techniques such as using 'I see' imply that the response is incomplete and needs further elaborations. Example:

Respondent: I went to the stakeholder meeting and I received a very positive response about the work. It was difficult to explain about us because we are quite unique.

Scrutineer: I see

Respondent: So I found it useful to take our publications along to distribute.

Scrutineer: I see

Respondent: My colleagues at the meeting found the information useful but were wary about the proposals put forward.

### → **Contradicting**

Another useful probing technique is using a contradiction; this entails intentionally giving a direct opposite to the respondent's response in order to provoke further information / explanations. Example:

Respondent: After I had seen the weak performance information I had realised that one of the indicators had significantly deteriorated. It was only a matter of time before a related department had contacted me to say that there was a significant problem regarding resources.

Scrutineer: Isn't it good performance information?

## **Positive Practice: Questioning Groups**

It is often the case that elected members ask a question to a number of people at the same time in order to source information. By questioning a group of people, one seeks to incorporate a large amount of views and information but not necessarily in-depth from each individual. It is essential to remember that asking questions of groups is inherently difficult as retaining the attention and concentration of those present can be a challenge. The two key skills in conducting a successful group scrutiny session are steering and maintaining the group; these are explored below.

### **2.1 Steering the group**

#### → **Reducing punishment**

Asking questions in a group situation is a fine balancing act and how the conversational dialogue plays will influence other people's participation. For example, if you are a demanding chair with strong and tough responses to answers, you may isolate other individuals from coming forward and providing information. Example:

Scrutineer: (directed at the group) Why was the project not completed on time?

Respondent: I'll take this question if I may. I think that it was chiefly A, B and C that caused the main problems. We tried to solve the problem many months prior to event but it was a fruitless task.

Scrutineer: I think that is a poor answer. Why did this fail? Why did you not provide a solution earlier? Why are you still in charge? This is unbelievable!

In the above situation, other potential respondents would not be forthcoming in answering the chair's subsequent questions and if information were still sought from the group, it would be detrimental to the scrutiny investigation.

However, it is of utmost importance that the chair still feels as though he/she can still challenge the respondent; otherwise scrutiny would not live up to its role. As a result, correct timing is essential to combine effective challenge with the maximisation of participation; for example, *asking non-threatening informational questions* at the beginning of a session to maximise involvement and responses, whilst following up these questions with more powerful and challenging responses.

### → **Increasing rewards**

Similarly, positive reinforcement is required to engage group members and motivate other members of the group to respond. This may be as simple as showing interest in a subject and offering thanks, to praising and commending responses. This method is also useful to signal to the group about the direction of topic and what type of information is welcomed. Example:

Respondent (1): I think that we have scored well on that variable because we have excess capacity in our team to deal with all the enquiries that we receive. However, this excess capacity should not necessarily be used in this way. I propose that we need to reconfigure the staffing arrangements to reflect the upcoming spending review.

Scrutineer: Thanks, that is a great point and I think that we should, as a council, be looking at reconfiguring staffing in order to maximise efficiency.

Respondent (2): I think that our team over in the finance department should also look at service sharing agreements, which could increase efficiency.

Scrutineer: Thanks, has anyone else got any insight or views regarding efficiency and staffing?

## 2.1 Maintaining the group

### → **Engaging, involving and sustaining**

One of the difficulties of questioning people in a group environment is engaging the continuous attention of all respondents. Often respondents may lapse into disinterest or become left out of the questioning. There are ways that the scrutineer can resolve the disengagement such as when only one person seems to be answering all of the questions posited; one can seek other's opinions. Example:

Scrutineer: What are the key prerequisites for the successful implementation of project Z?

Respondent (1): I believe that there are three key significant points that can be used to explain how this can be successful. One is A, another B and finally C.

Scrutineer: Who else has an opinion on this?

Positing tentative conclusions can also encourage respondents to make comments about the debate and stimulate active agreement or disagreement. Example:



Scrutineer: I think that from what you have said, the problem is the responsibility of Mr A at the department of Z. It is clear from the responses that the project has not been successful because checks did not occur and monitoring was not actioned.

New respondent: Picking up on that point, checks did actually occur and monitoring was included in the process. The previous response was from Mrs P who wasn't present at the last stakeholder meeting.

Of course, a scrutineer can also be more pro-active and address respondents individually or selecting people from a sub-group of people. Scanning the room and making eye contact with respondents in order to encourage responses, can indicate those who look confused, agitated and those who look as though they have been disengaged. By pinpointing specific respondents from within the group, it keeps the respondents prepared that they will be next in line for questioning; this usually also ensures that responses are thought through and organised. Example:

Scrutineer: Who has responsibility in that department?

*(A few respondents motion with their hand)*

Scrutineer: Mr K, why is the department failing to meet its targets on this issue?

Respondent: I think that it is because we have failed to see the bigger picture and fallen behind targets for more than four issues. It is also a cyclical issue.

Scrutineer: Mr J, do you agree with Mr K?

Respondent: Quite frankly, no.

Another technique for maintaining engagement is repeating comments made by respondents and 'bouncing' the question back out to the group. This technique effectively allows the group to have a dialogue and debate that could be useful to the scrutineer, however, it may be more appropriate for informative purposes rather than for holding to account and often the chair may need to step in to ensure that the group are staying focused on the relevant issues. Example:

Scrutineer: *(to group)* What things do you think are the *main* problems facing the youth centre in the next five years?

Respondent (1): I believe there are significant issues involving A and B. I think that C and D are not very important. We need to ask what are the key plans for the future?

Scrutineer: *(to group)* What are the key plans for the future?

Respondent (2): The key plans for the future involve resolving funding issues, staffing issues and increasing ICT services. If these things are resolved then we can ask the question; where next?

Scrutineer: *(to group)* So, where next?

## 3.0 Avoiding unhelpful practice

For every positive and constructive questioning technique there is also a negative and obstructive practice. Often used to trick, trap and lead a respondent through a metaphorical maze, unhelpful questions are one way of hindering the scrutiny process. Although scrutiny is meant to be rigorous, challenging and seek the truth, it would be unfair to deliberately trap and deceive those being held to account. Firstly, one is likely to put off respondents from attending subsequent overview and scrutiny hearings and secondly, one would only hinder the process of collecting valid and accurate information.

Some examples of unhelpful practice are shown below.

### → **Double bind questions**

Double bind questions are particularly unhelpful because they are impossible for respondents to answer without incriminating themselves of some action. By framing the question as a closed question, the other person is only able to agree or disagree. Example;

Scrutineer: Have you stopped lying about the figures?

Answering in the affirmative to this question ('yes') assumes that the respondent has previously lied about the figures, whereas answering in the negative ('no') assumes that respondent is still lying about the figures. The only way to answer this would be to treat the question as an open question or respond with another question:

Respondent: What makes you think I might lie?

or

Respondent: I have never lied about the figures and never will.

### → **Biased questions**

Occasionally questions may have an inbuilt bias towards a particular perspective and if asked in a closed-question format, it leaves the respondent with either the task of tacitly accepting the bias (in which case incriminating oneself with the biases of the scrutineer) or failing to answer the question (which could look like evasion.) Example:

Scrutineer: What do you think about the problems that disabled people are causing?

In this situation, the respondent would have to make it clear that he/she disagrees with the question format and bias before attempting to construct a response.

### → **Leading questions**

There are three distinct types of leading questions that unfairly lead a respondent to a particular answer. These types of question are deliberately designed to make the respondents think in a certain way and be under the control of the scrutineer. In regards to scrutiny, leading questions are particularly unhelpful as information provided as a result of leading questions is likely to follow the scrutineers own biases and perceptions and responses are likely to be highly manipulated by the process. The following examples stand out as unhelpful practice:

## Absolute questions

By asking closed-questions which given an extreme option, respondents are almost certain to respond using the least extreme answer as few people would like to be committed to an extreme position. Example:

Scrutineer: Would you say that the finances for department are the healthiest that they have ever been since the council was founded?

Respondent: No.

## Assumptive questions

Leading questions often make strong assumptions in questions, similar to double-bind questions, which direct the respondent in the desired area. By assuming a fact within a question, the scrutineer unfairly indicates that this may be the case and may subsequently trick the respondent into accepting the question as a genuine fact. Example

Scrutineer: How much will council tax go up next year?

Even reverting to a weaker leading question, such as the example below, still forces the respondent to think exclusively about rising prices.

Scrutineer: Do you think that council tax will go up next year?

## Associative questions

A scrutineer may also unhelpfully use associative leading questions that may directly affect the responses given by those under scrutiny. By stating one's own opinion and emotions, the scrutineer makes it clear what their perspective is and therefore the respondent is unduly influenced. Example:

Scrutineer: I think that the present administration is one of the worst administrations that we have ever seen. Their financial mismanagement has been the talking point at every watercooler from A to B. What do you think about the administration?

The interesting example below shows a weaker leading question;

Scrutineer: Would you prefer to live in the XX ward or in the YY ward, where there have not been any murders in the last week?

The question leads the respondent to think that there has been a murder in the XX ward in the last week, based on the evidence that there has not been a murder in the YY ward in the last week. However, just because there has been no murder in the YY ward in the last week does not necessarily imply that there has been a murder in the XX ward.

## → **Terminating statements**

A particularly unhelpful practice in questioning is using terminating statements to stop another person from answering. This questioning technique blocks any reply as the respondent's focus is directed more by the final statement than the question itself. This questioning technique creates a situation where the respondent, because they had not interrupted to answer, has tacitly agreed with the scrutineer's statement. Example:

Scrutineer: Is there a right of access for Mr L? I think that it is an impossible initiative to arrange, given the interminable objections from Officer R.

→ **Tag questions**

Tag questions are small additions added to the end of a statement in order to prompt a response. The verb used in the tag question is usually negated and the second element is a pronoun. The tag question is typically used to gain agreement or compliance and turns a claim into a question that is difficult to disagree with. Examples:

Scrutineer: It was inevitable, wasn't it?

or

Scrutineer: They will finish the project, won't they?

or

Scrutineer: That is your responsibility, isn't it?

This type of questioning is relatively unhelpful to scrutineers, because it controls the respondent's agreement on the basis of an assertion.

# Case Study:

## Worthing Borough Council

The Overview and Scrutiny Panel for Improvement and Scrutiny Reviews undertook a detailed inquiry into street cleaning in order to identify a number of recommendations for improvements to the street cleaning service. As part of its investigation, the panel had received a number of adverse comments about cleanliness from residents that suggested to the members that the town was not as clean as the public would like. Therefore the panel agreed it was important to scrutinise the related issues as part of a review.

Having established the background to the review and gathered evidence to supplement its findings, the Scrutiny Panel decided to question the cabinet members responsible for the environment, resources and the leader of the council prior to producing its full report, in order to discover what the authority was already doing to address the associated issues and gauge the cabinet member's views on the standards and levels of street cleaning in Worthing. Below is an assessment of some of the questions utilised by the panel to uncover information on the topic. Note that questions are sequential and A1, A2, A3 etc are part of the same original question. The scrutineers are anonymised for privacy but our thanks are extended to the members involved in this session.

### **Question A:**

#### **Open question followed with *acknowledgement probe* and *direct probe***

A1) What do you think about the current standard and level of street cleaning in Worthing?

Although this may seem simplistic to say so, this is a two-part and non-leading open question that allows the respondent complete freedom to respond how he/she would wish. This is an ideal and effective way to begin a questioning session as it allows the respondent to give as much information as he/she has about a topic. This question was then followed up with a review question after the respondent had finished;

A2) You say that you go down there, but what about standards in other areas?

This question (A2) uses the 'acknowledgement probe' (see pg 5) and seeks to let the respondent know that the scrutineer has been paying attention. The repetition of the respondent's statement may also hint that the scrutineer would like to know some further details about the visit to the area. The question posited above also uses the 'direct-question probe' (see pg 5) in the second part of the enquiry that is open-ended and allows for an open explanation about cleaning standards in other areas of the borough.

### **Question B:**

#### **Open question followed with *challenge probes* and *puzzling probe***

B1) How do you decide what are sufficient funds for street cleaning?

The question (B1) above seeks an open, free narrative answer regarding the thought processes that go in to deciding the level of 'sufficient funding' for street cleaning. The enquiry is not antagonistic or aggressive and merely seeks to ascertain a step-

by-step guide to the respondent's thoughts. Note that the question does not ask, "what are sufficient funds for street cleaning?" nor "what do you think is a sufficient fund for street cleaning?" By avoiding a direct question about funding, the approach is much less confrontational. Importantly, it is unlikely that the person under scrutiny would be able to specify a notional "sufficient fund" for street cleaning, which shows that the original question is a thoughtful, considered approach.

#### B2) How are you going to market this?

The follow-up probe to the first question is a 'challenging probe' that seeks to persuade the respondent to prove the concepts behind their argument or point of view. By asking 'how' a respondent will complete an action, it pushes the response to contain an action phrase; for example, "I will do... / we will publicise..." etc.

#### B3) Why are you spending all of the money on the town centre?

The follow-up query to the initial probe could be considered a 'puzzling' probe, which blatantly includes a false assertion. By declaring that the council is spending *all* of the money on the town centre it prompts the respondent to clarify this statement before reasoning *why* this is the case.

#### B4) How will you market that?

In a style similar to the inimitable Jeremy Paxman, the scrutineer repeats the earlier probe regarding marketing and yet moves the question from the present to the future tense. The tense shift moves the action from 'now' to 'later' and therefore would be more likely to encourage a direct response to the question. This second 'challenge probe' seeks to obtain an answer that had not been provided by the respondent.

#### B5) How will you market that?

Unfortunately the respondent had managed to evade a direct response to the challenge and the question is repeated once more. However, the repetition of the same phrase in the same tense finally initiated a response on the topic and proved to be an example of successful challenge.

### **Question C:**

#### **Open question followed with a *direct probe***

#### C1) What are we doing to make sure that these organisations are working together?

This question at the end of session is another open question that seeks to elicit relatively specific information from the respondents. The question is worded using the first person, which shows that the scrutineer is attempting to effectively bridge the gap between scrutineer and respondent. Using the first person is a helpful technique that can remind those under scrutiny that despite the executive / scrutiny split, everyone is part of the same authority and goals are alike.

#### C2) What is going to happen?

The session concludes with a direct challenge that seeks to prompt a 'plan of action.' This direct challenge is a popular way to prompt the respondent to give real details and plans of action for the future using the immediacy of the present tense.

To see more of Worthing Borough Council's effective overview and scrutiny, please visit: <http://www.worthing.gov.uk/A-ZofServices/ServicesN-Z/Scrutiny/>

# Case Study:

## Bedford Borough Council

The Community and Culture Policy Review and Development Committee at Bedford Borough Council met to discuss a range of issues that were under consideration. The topics on the agenda included a forward plan of key decisions, the Bedfordshire and Luton joint health scrutiny committee, the anti-poverty and social inclusion strategy, art gallery and museum audience development, the draft greenspace strategy and the Bedford River Festival. Further to these topics, the committee were also involved in performance management topics towards the end of the session.

Below is an assessment of some of the questions utilised by the panel to uncover information on the topic. Note that questions are sequential and A1, A2, A3 etc. are part of the same original question. The scrutineers are anonymised for privacy but our thanks are extended to the members involved in this session.

### **Question A:**

#### **Closed question followed with a closed direct probe**

A1) I wanted to ask about one of the key issues regarding poverty and social inclusion; is Bedford Credit Union involved?

The question above is a courteously worded question that frames a closed-end query. Simple questions like these are helpful to the respondent as they can answer quite simply or expand further on the response. On this occasion the respondent answered the closed-question and then elaborated further on the topic and why it was the case. Interestingly, the scrutineer may have previously known that the Bedford Credit Union was not involved and was attempting to highlight their exclusion through a simple closed question.

A2) How often does the theme group meet?

Another example of a simple, but effective, closed question is demonstrated above in the direct probing query. The scrutineer may know the answer beforehand, but uses the question to raise the issue in front of fellow scrutineers. On this occasion, the respondent answers the closed question and again elaborates further on why it is the case.

### **Question B:**

#### **Positive acknowledgement and direct question followed with challenge probes**

B1) I support what you are doing but I do not think that we should ignore the rural areas of XX and I wondered whether you would be involving them?

The above question is an effective way to manage the respondent. Whilst the scrutineer is keen to give praise to the respondent's work, it is followed by an inquiring direct question. By raising the issue of rural areas, the respondent does not lead the respondent, but seeks to obtain some additional information on the topic. The question also uses the first person, in order to reassure the respondent of similar objectives.

## B2) How are you going to market these sessions?

The follow-up question mirrors similar probes from Worthing Borough Council and asks how the respondent will provide action using the present tense. The follow-up is a 'challenging probe' that seeks to persuade the respondent to prove the concepts behind their argument or point of view. It could be the case that the scrutineer may have had previous knowledge that the respondent was not going to market the sessions and therefore raised the issue in front of other scrutiny colleagues.

## B3) Did you use the newspaper to advertise the event?

The specific closed-ended question probe essentially allows the respondent two replies, either 'yes' or 'no.' The scrutineer may have been highlighting that the event was unsuccessful *because of* the respondents actions, however it is more probable that the scrutineer was using his/her own method to judge whether the respondent was taking the right action. Significantly, the respondent answered the query similar to an open question and refused to be drawn-in by the simplicity of the closed-ended method; this way, the respondent avoids the inevitable follow-up question: "If not, why not?"

To see more of Bedford Borough Council's effective overview and scrutiny, please visit: <http://www.bedford.gov.uk/scrutiny>

# Case Study: Salford City Council

The planning sub-group of the Environment, Housing and Planning Scrutiny Committee agreed to look at apartment developments within the city and carry out research to gain a better understanding of the housing market. This is being undertaken by speaking to a sample of property developers within the city, estate agents and representatives from other cities, to identify how they are dealing with the growth in this sector of the market.

Below is an assessment of a series of group questions (to a number of respondents) utilised by the panel to uncover information on the topic. Note that questions are sequential and A1, A2, A3 etc. are part of the same original question. The scrutineers are anonymised for privacy but our thanks are extended to the members involved in this session.

### **Question A:**

**Group open question followed by *procuring detail probes, challenging probes, acknowledgment probes and direct probes***

#### A1) Which apartments are the most popular developments in the city?

This question is an effective starting open-ended question that allows any respondent in the group to jump in and begin to respond. One of the respondents picked up on the question and began to answer the query.

#### A2) Can I ask what Developer A's view is please?



Once the initial respondent had finished speaking, the scrutineer made it clear that he/she would like to ascertain the views of another member of the group. This is an effective practice when addressing a group and directs the scrutiny topic onto relevant points from relevant people. This practice is also useful to keep the attention of the other respondents in the room, as the scrutineer is willing to pick respondents at random to answer a question. In these two initial questions, the scrutineer has managed to successfully steer the group and maintain interest.

A3) With the XX development, does the location of the apartments and the proximity to ZZ affect the development?

The follow-up question above is seeking to procure details from the responses that he/she has received so far. This question is useful as a summary of the points just raised and it tests understanding of the topic so far.

A4) And the location is secondary?

The scrutineer, in the above acknowledgement probe, repeats some information provided by the previous respondent. By repeating the information as a question, the scrutineer has then opened up this particular point to the entire group. This is a useful technique to control the topic being discussed in the group and again keeps the attention of those participating in the session.

A5) Mmm.

Although not specifically a question, the general tone of the above quote was agreement. By the scrutineer answering a respondent with an acknowledging agreement it prompts the respondent to either continue on the same track or another respondent to add a different perspective to the dialogue. Although it is a simple technique and often not pre-planned by the scrutineer, a simple acknowledgement can prove to be a helpful aide to those conducting questioning.

A6) Which apartments are the most popular developments in the city?

The scrutineer then subtly reverts back to the original question (A1) in its entirety and puts this out to the group. This 'bouncing' of the question back out to the group successfully allows the group to have a continued dialogue and debate that could be useful to the scrutineer. It also allowed for a fresh perspective from another member of the group who may have completely disagreed with the original response (and subsequent line of questioning.)

This type of group questioning at Salford City Council was very effective at the meeting and allowed for a great deal of evidence collection. To see more of Salford City Council's effective overview and scrutiny, please visit:

<http://www.salford.gov.uk/council/scrutiny>

## Case Study:

# House of Commons Public Administration Select Committee

The House of Commons Public Administration Select Committee is chaired by Dr Tony Wright MP and consists of eleven members of Parliament distributed on house party balance. This year the select committee undertook an inquiry looking at how public services can learn from the experiences of those that receive and use them. The following questions were taken from the session when the committee questioned Bernard Herdan, the author of a recent review of the Charter Mark, Professor Patrick Dunleavy of LSE and Philip Cullum of the National Consumer Council on how government bodies can learn from complaints and improve their complaint handling.

### **Question A:** **Leading the respondent**

A1) Do you not think that something such as an ISO standard, which is internationally recognised and therefore easily understandable and transferable to different organisations, would be much more beneficial to the public sector?

This question posited by one of the members of the committee could be considered a leading question, which both asks a question and explains the answer within the same enquiry. For example, raising the ISO standard itself could be considered as leading the respondent (who may have thought about other international standards) but the scrutineer goes further by highlighting positive points about the system. Leading the respondent in this way effectively informs the respondent rather than questioning him/her.

### **Question B:** **Are they happy?**

B1) Is it motivating for the staff to belong to an organisation that has a Charter Mark?

This closed-ended question has very little scope for reply, other than responding in the affirmative or negative. The question is also leading the respondent by the mere suggestion that the staff would be motivated (without providing a comparable antonym) by the Charter Mark. Expectedly, the respondent does answer with a 'yes' but also elaborates on the answer with more detailed information.

B2) Those 400,000 people in the 1,500 organisations with Charter Marks, they are happy people?

The follow-up question to the original question is far more effective and helpful to the scrutineer. The question includes information that had been previously used by the respondent (400,000 people and 1,500 organisations) and asks if they are happy people. Although one could still argue that the use of 'happy' in the question does lead the respondent, the question has backtracked to one of the respondent's previous answers to use in a later question.

B3) Does that mean they are happy in their work?

The respondent fails to respond adequately the first probing question and thus the second probe repeats the first challenge more effectively by phrasing the query as a separate question. At this point the respondent answers the question more comprehensively.

To see more examples of scrutiny from the House of Commons select committees, please follow the link:

[http://www.parliament.uk/parliamentary\\_committees/parliamentary\\_committees16.cfm](http://www.parliament.uk/parliamentary_committees/parliamentary_committees16.cfm)