

Six Steps to Effective Scrutiny of Children's Services

Self-Assessment Template

This self-assessment is a tool to diagnose areas of strength and areas for development in children's services scrutiny practice. It links directly to training modules offered by the LGA aimed at improving the effectiveness of children's services scrutiny.

It is recommended that the self-assessment is completed by the Chair and/or members of the Scrutiny Committee (either individually, in small groups, or as a collective). A sponsor should be nominated at the start of the process to support and co-ordinate completion with, or on behalf of, the Chair. This could be a democratic services representative, the Director of Children's Services or someone from within the Scrutiny Committee.

The template is organised around 'Six Steps' which together articulate good practice in scrutiny of children's services. For each Step, the prompt questions should be used to explore this component of effective scrutiny and form a view on which of the following statements best describes current scrutiny practice in this area:

- Beginning its journey
- Developing its practice
- Strong and embedded

The self-assessment template provides space for answers to specific questions to be recorded, and a space that should be used to evidence why a particular response (beginning/developing/embedded) has been chosen.

An introductory presentation on scrutiny of children's services and support available through the LGA is attached and should be viewed alongside the self-assessment.

Step 1 – Knowledge of Children’s Services

Children’s Services is complex, and the council and its councillors are accountable for safeguarding children and a myriad of statutory duties, including acting as corporate parents to children in the care of the local authority. To effectively challenge and scrutinise delivery of children’s services, councillors need to understand the services provided to children and families, the challenges faced by professionals in delivering these, and the impact that these services have on the lives of children.

<p>Use the questions below to explore scrutiny practice, and form a view on whether the committee is: Beginning its journey, Developing its practice or whether it is strong and Embedded</p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> Beginning its journey</p> <p>There is a limited understanding from members of the committee on the services provided by the council for children and how they are performing. There is little challenge in meetings, which leads to less oversight of policy, practice and decisions of the executive.</p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> Developing its practice</p> <p>Members of the committee have some understanding of children’s services and the standards of services that are delivered. Challenge is less robust, leading to less impactful reviews, and reduced oversight of policy, practice and decisions of the executive.</p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> Embedded</p> <p>Members of the committee have a clear understanding of the services provided, and their performance. They use this knowledge to effectively challenge, scrutinise and influence policy, practice, and decisions of the executive.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do you as a councillor ensure that you have the knowledge you need to make the right decisions or recommendations? • What training and development opportunities are there to develop your knowledge of Children’s Services? • Is there an annual briefing to ensure that all councillors understand the services provided to children and young people? • How are you and other councillors supported to understand your statutory 	<p>Response to questions</p>	<p>Where we are now and evidence to support</p>	

<p>duties regarding children, young people and safeguarding?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• What do you think councillors need, to facilitate a better understanding?• Are there any barriers preventing you from developing your skills and confidence?• Do you and your scrutiny colleagues input into the development of Agendas and the Forward Plan?• Are you provided with a good overview of performance information?		
<p>Areas for Development</p>		

Step 2: The role of children’s scrutiny

“Scrutiny works best when it has a clear role and function. This provides focus and direction.

The scrutiny function can often lack support and recognition within an authority because there is a lack of awareness among both members and officers about the specific role it plays, which individuals are involved and its relevance to the authority’s wider work. Authorities should, therefore, take steps to ensure all members and officers are made aware of the role the scrutiny committee plays in the organisation, its value and the outcomes it can deliver, the powers it has, its membership and, if appropriate, the identity of those providing officer support.”

Statutory guidance on overview and scrutiny in local and combined authorities, May 2019

How committees are created, its membership and its meeting structure are key to creating effective scrutiny. Scrutiny is no place for politics and should be cross-party in its membership.

<p>Use the questions below to explore scrutiny practice, and form a view on whether the committee is: Beginning its journey, Developing its practice or whether it is strong and Embedded</p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> Beginning its journey</p> <p>There is limited understanding or commitment to the role that scrutiny has and can play in improving services.</p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> Developing its practice</p> <p>The role of scrutiny is understood by members of the committee. However, this is less understood across other councillors, staff and partners.</p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> Embedded</p> <p>There is a clear view on the role and purpose of overview and scrutiny, which is shared across the whole council and its partners.</p>
	Response to questions		Where we are now and evidence to support
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do councillors in your authority have a clear understanding of the remit of Scrutiny? • How has the role of scrutiny been defined? • What challenges do you face in describing or fostering understanding of your role? • Is there a clear terms of reference for the Scrutiny committee? • Do Scrutiny Minutes reflect meeting discussion and include evidence of challenge, areas of concern and good practice? 			

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Are meetings accessible and held frequently enough to maintain momentum?• Are relevant reports, adequate information and evidence supplied ahead of meetings with sufficient time for you to digest?• Is there sufficient capacity and officer support to facilitate evidence gathering by the committee? | | |
| <p>Areas for Development</p> | | |

Step 3: Work programming and planning

“Effective scrutiny should have a defined impact on the ground, with the committee making recommendations that will make a tangible difference to the work of the authority. To have this kind of impact, scrutiny committees need to plan their work programme, i.e. draw up a long-term agenda and consider making it flexible enough to accommodate any urgent, short-term issues that might arise during the year. Authorities with multiple scrutiny committees sometimes have a separate work programme for each committee. Where this happens, consideration should be given to how to co-ordinate the various committees’ work to make best use of the total resources available.”

Statutory guidance on overview and scrutiny in local and combined authorities, May 2019

Effective work planning for the year will allow scrutiny to see how its work can add value to the other aspects of children’s service governance - such as the Cabinet, Partnership Boards, Corporate Parenting Board, Improvement Boards and social care professional plans. Scrutiny also has additional strength in the type of review that it undertakes - being more pro-active and using the overview role more effectively.

<p>Use the questions below to explore scrutiny practice, and form a view on whether the committee is: Beginning its journey, Developing its practice or whether it is strong and Embedded</p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> Beginning its journey</p> <p>There is limited evidence of work programming and how topics are selected. Meetings tend to be reactive to current issues.</p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> Developing its practice</p> <p>The committee undertakes work programming for the year ahead, however this can be done in isolation of the wider governance framework and partners.</p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> Embedded</p> <p>Work programming is holistic and is done in consultation with the wider council governance framework, and that of partners. A variety of types of review are used to encourage engagement and maximise impact.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How does the scrutiny committee plan its work? • What criteria do you use to select areas of focus? How does this fit in with the wider governance framework? • Describe the types of scrutiny reviews that are undertaken – are these reactive or pro-active? • Does the committee hold evidence sessions? 	<p>Response to questions</p>	<p>Where we are now and evidence to support</p>	

- How do you work with other review panels, and partnership boards, such as the Corporate Parenting Board, Strategic Safeguarding Partnership, Improvement Board?

Areas for Development

Step 4: Engagement and working with others

“Evidence will need to be gathered to inform the work programming process. This will ensure that it looks at the right topics, in the right way and at the right time. Gathering evidence requires conversations with:

- The public... Listening to and participating in conversations in places where local people come together, including in online forums, can help authorities engage people on their own terms and yield more positive results.*
- The Council’s partners... Relationships with other partners should not be limited to evidence-gathering to support individual reviews or agenda items. A range of partners are likely to have insights that will prove useful.*
- The Executive... The executive should not direct scrutiny’s work, but conversations will help scrutiny members better understand how their work can be designed to align with the best opportunities to influence the authority’s wider work.”*

Statutory guidance on overview and scrutiny in local and combined authorities, May 2019

<p>Use the questions below to explore scrutiny practice, and form a view on whether the committee is: Beginning its journey, Developing its practice or whether it is strong and Embedded</p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> Beginning its journey</p> <p>There is limited evidence of working with others, including children, partners and the executive.</p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> Developing its practice</p> <p>There is some evidence of working with others, including children, partners and the executive, however this is not yet embedded.</p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> Embedded</p> <p>Scrutiny has excellent lines of communication with children and young people, partners and the executive and is able to influence for impact.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do you hear and take account of the voices and views of children and young people and ensure that they shape and influence policy? • How do children and young people contribute to Scrutiny reviews? • Are meetings of the scrutiny committee open to the public and how are they encouraged to attend? • How do you plan across partnership activity? 	<p>Response to questions</p>	<p>Where we are now and evidence to support</p>	

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• What is your working relationship with other parts of the governance framework? Is there a protocol that describes this? | | |
| <p>Areas for Development</p> | | |

Step 5: Demonstrating value and influence

“Effective scrutiny should have a defined impact on the ground, with the committee making recommendations that will make a tangible difference to the work of the authority.”

Statutory guidance on overview and scrutiny in local and combined authorities, May 2019

“Overview and scrutiny activity typically produces recommendations about subjects reviewed, but practitioners have not always focused on measuring their impact.” **Tipping-the-Scales: a model to measure the return on investment of scrutiny 2011**

The way that a scrutiny review is planned, scoped and run can help councils to measure the impact of their scrutiny work, ensuring that it adds value in a measurable way.

<p>Use the questions below to explore scrutiny practice, and form a view on whether the committee is: Beginning its journey, Developing its practice or whether it is strong and Embedded</p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> Beginning its journey</p> <p>The committee produces reports with recommendations, however limited thought has been put into whether these are SMART, or the views of councillors. There is no (or limited) monitoring of implementation or impact.</p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> Developing its practice</p> <p>The committee produces reports on their work with some SMART recommendations. Some monitoring of whether these have been implemented has been undertaken but limited and not embedded practice.</p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> Embedded</p> <p>Well planned and executed scrutiny reviews produce SMART recommendations, which are used to influence services and policies. The committee regularly returns to and reviews recommendation to understand their impact, and uses this to evidence their strength.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do you measure the impact of your scrutiny work? • How has scrutiny influenced policy and practice, within the authority or with partners? 	<p>Response to questions</p>	<p>Where we are now and evidence to support</p>	

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are recommendations evidence based and SMART, ie specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and timed? • Do you have a programme of follow-up work as part of your work programme? • How are you helping to improve children's services? • What evidence do you have that demonstrates how Scrutiny has positively impacted on the lives and outcomes of children and families? 		
<p>Areas for Development</p>		

Step 6: Creating a strong organisational culture

“The prevailing organisational culture, behaviours and attitudes of an authority will largely determine whether its scrutiny function succeeds or fails. While everyone in an authority can play a role in creating an environment conducive to effective scrutiny, it is important that this is led and owned by members, given their role in setting and maintaining the culture of an authority. Creating a strong organisational culture supports scrutiny work that can add real value.”

Statutory guidance on overview and scrutiny in local and combined authorities May 2019

The Council, its councillors and officers have a statutory duty to provide services for children and young people. Establishing a culture of scrutiny and the value it can bring will support the council in delivering its responsibilities, including as corporate parents.

<p>Use the questions below to explore scrutiny practice, and form a view on whether the committee is: Beginning its journey, Developing its practice or whether it is strong and Embedded</p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> Beginning its journey</p> <p>Politics can hinder effective scrutiny. There is limited support for the role and purpose of scrutiny and the value that it can bring to children’s services.</p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> Developing its practice</p> <p>The value that scrutiny can bring is beginning to be understood by the rest of the council. This is evidenced by better communication and acceptance of reviews and recommendations</p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> Embedded</p> <p>Overview and Scrutiny is valued, and a key component of the improvement and governance of Children’s Services. Reviews are non-political, and use a wide range of evidence to inform recommendations</p>
	<p>Response to questions</p>	<p>Where we are now and evidence to support</p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How would you describe the scrutiny landscape in your council? • What do you consider the strengths of Scrutiny in your council? • How would you describe scrutiny’s relationship with the Executive? 			

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• How would you describe scrutiny's relationship with officers?• How would you describe the relationships between Scrutiny Committee Members?• Is the role of scrutiny understood in your authority?• Is scrutiny valued within your authority? How do you know?• What do you believe to be the challenges and barriers that prevent scrutiny from working more effectively?• How can you evidence that the whole Council values and prioritises children's services?		
<p>Areas for Development</p>		