

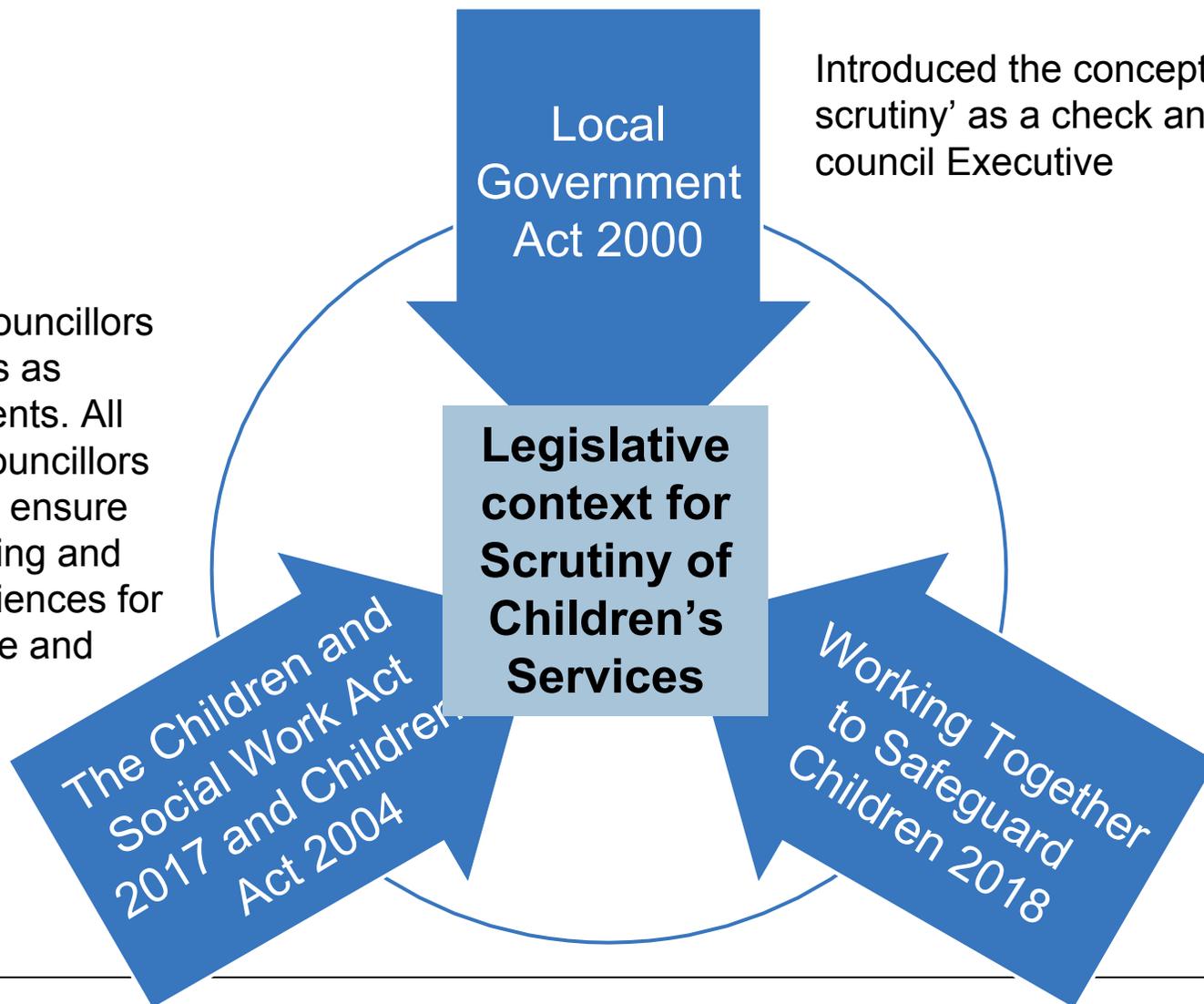
Introduction to Effective Scrutiny of Children's Services

The purpose and role of scrutiny

- To play a role in the wider governance system that holds the authority's decision-makers to account.
- To influence policies and decision made by the council and other organisations involved in delivering public services, and drive improvement.
- To gather evidence on issues affecting local people and make recommendations based on its findings.
- To add value and make a positive contribution to the lives of local people.

Statutory context for Scrutiny of children's services

Council and councillors responsibilities as corporate parents. All officers and councillors have a duty to ensure secure, nurturing and positive experiences for children in care and care leavers



Introduced the concept of 'overview and scrutiny' as a check and balance on the council Executive

Safeguarding partners (local authorities, police, and CCGs) must work together with relevant agencies to safeguard and protect the welfare of children in the area.

Reach of children's services scrutiny



Corporate parenting

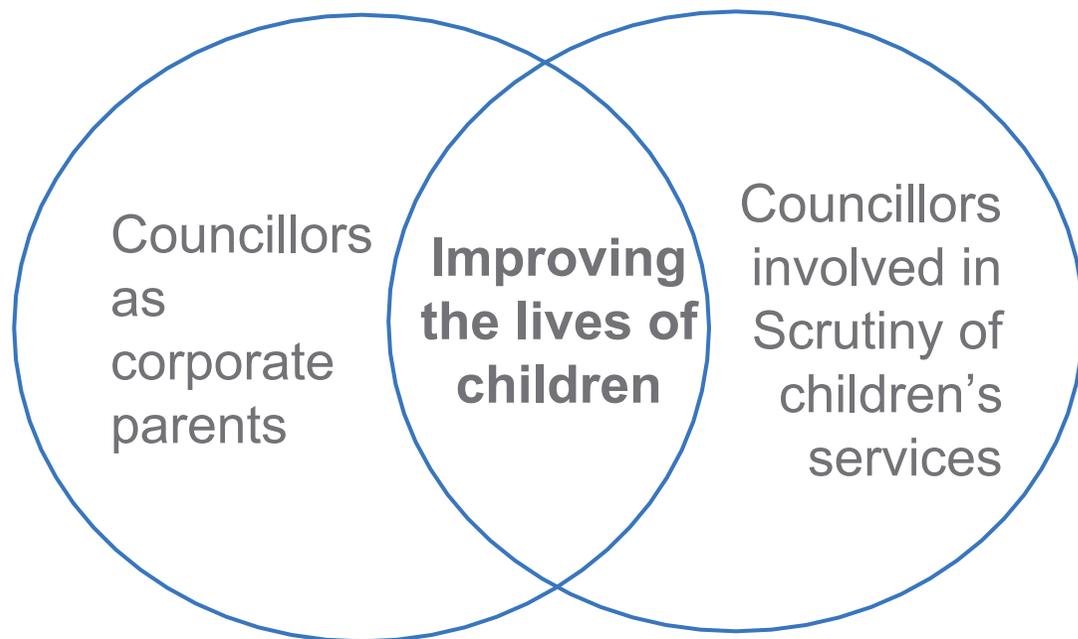
- All councillors and council employees have a unique responsibility to be ‘corporate parents’ to children they look after and their care leavers.
- Councillors with the opportunity to be part of the scrutiny of children’s services are uniquely positioned to champion the interests of children, be active corporate parents, and to provide challenge that supports the systems that keep children safe.

‘Would this be good enough for my child?’

“All children need love and stability in order to thrive. A strong corporate parenting ethos means that everyone from the Chief Executive down to front line staff, as well as elected council members, are concerned about those children and care leavers as if they were their own.”

Applying corporate parenting principles to looked-after children and care leavers

'Superpowered' scrutiny



Scrutiny roles offer unique opportunities for councillors:

- ask searching questions of a range of service providers to assure themselves that children in care are being well looked after
- hear directly from children and to ensure that their voices are heard when considering the impact and effectiveness of services
- champion the role of corporate parenting amongst wider councillor group

Importance of getting scrutiny right

Providing effective challenge

‘The challenge and scrutiny function...was lacking over several years at a time when it was more required.’ **Jay report**

A clearly defined role and place in wider governance system

‘An issue or responsibility that belongs to everybody effectively belongs to nobody.’ **Jay report**

Positive relationships to influence change – ‘critical friend’

‘The notion of challenge has been misunderstood and misinterpreted as bullish questioning.’ **Casey report**

The right knowledge and information to effectively challenge

‘Senior Members admitted that Cabinet has been unprepared to release information to scrutiny.’ **Casey report**

An organisational culture that values scrutiny

‘Inspectors concluded that overview and scrutiny had been deliberately weakened and under-valued.’ **Casey report**

Signs of effective scrutiny of children's services...

Children are at the centre and their voices are captured and heard

There are positive and constructive working relationships between scrutiny, other councillors and officers

Scrutiny is seen as a 'critical friend' and is focused on forward thinking and positive changes

Scrutiny is impartial and transcends party politics

Scrutiny members champion a dynamic and curious learning and improvement culture

Work is well planned and focused with clear criteria for the selection of topics

When scrutiny works well

“Probing oversight and challenge from the corporate parenting board, scrutiny committee and the East Sussex safeguarding children’s board are routine, all closely holding senior managers to account.”

East Sussex – Ofsted outstanding

“Effective scrutiny and engagement of elected members in understanding services for children has successfully maintained and increased investment in early help and safeguarding services that appropriately deliver responsive support to build on families’ strengths.”

Lincolnshire – Ofsted outstanding

“Strong political and corporate support and carefully targeted investment have enabled the local authority to manage demand and prioritise children’s needs across the council. This whole-council approach underpins the learning environment in which frontline practice is flourishing. Robust governance arrangements and effective scrutiny of service provision are helping to drive performance.”

Essex – Ofsted outstanding

6 Steps to effective scrutiny of children's services

6. A strong organisational culture

Scrutiny is valued and a key component of the improvement and governance of Children's Services.

5. Demonstrating value and influence

Scrutiny reviews are well planned and run. Scrutiny recommendations are used to influence services and policies to great effect, with a demonstrable impact.

4. Engagement and working with others

Scrutiny has excellent lines of communication with children and young people, partners, officers and the executive. It uses positive relationships to influence change.

3. Work programming and planning

Work planning is holistic and carried out in consultation with the wider council governance framework, and partners.

2. Clarity of role and purpose

A clear view on the role and purpose of scrutiny is shared across the whole council and its partners.

1. Knowledge of children's services

A clear understanding of children's services is used to effectively challenge and scrutinise policy, practice and executive decisions .

Supporting effective scrutiny: LGA offer

As part of the LGA's continuing work to support political and corporate leadership for children's services we offer:

- Support for scrutiny boards to identify strengths and areas for development using the '6 steps to effective scrutiny' self-assessment tool.
- A mixture of workshop sessions, individual coaching and resources to improve the confidence and ability of scrutiny chairs and members to use their roles to have a positive impact on the lives of children and families.
- Support to embed learning and ensure that the wider system of support around children's services enables scrutiny to operate effectively.

How to use the self-assessment tool

- The self-assessment tool provides children’s Scrutiny Chairs and members with a framework for diagnosing areas of strength and areas for development in their scrutiny practice, organised around ‘Six Steps’ which describe good scrutiny practice.
- Prompt questions invite participants to explore each of the ‘Steps’ and to form a judgement on which of the following statements best describes their committee position:
 - Beginning its journey
 - Developing its practice
 - Strong and embedded
- 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.

LGA Further information and support



Courses

Leadership Essentials courses for councillors providing learning and networking opportunities on specific themes, including Scrutiny and Children's Services <https://local.gov.uk/our-support/highlighting-political-leadership/leadership-essentials>



Resources

[Councillor workbook on scrutiny](#)
[LGA resources and 'must know' guides for children's services](#)



Peer mentoring

Peer mentoring for Scrutiny Chairs from an experienced children's services lead member or scrutiny chair.



Further information

For further information please contact:

- The LGA Children's Improvement Adviser for your region
- The LGA Children's Programme Team amy.brace@local.gov.uk