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Understanding Independent Scrutiny in Safeguarding Partnerships

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Contents

List of figures	5
Glossary	6
Foreword	8
Executive Summary	9
Introduction	12
The Role and Purpose of Independent Scrutiny	12
Research Methods	14
Limitations	14
Independent Scrutiny Arrangements - Survey Findings	17
Overview of Current Independent Scrutiny Arrangements	17
Areas of Focus and Priorities for Independent Scrutineers	24
Scrutiny Priorities	24
Strategic Alignment	27
Balance of Proactive and Reactive Focus	27
Planning Cycles, Capacity and Tracking	28
Co-ownership of Priorities	29
Scope Boundaries: Assurance rather than Operational Delivery	30
Conditions that Enable and Constrain Effective Scrutiny	32
System Infrastructure and Capacity	32
Leadership, Governance, Culture and System Maturity	32
Relationships, Trust and Autonomy	34
Scrutineer Capability and Credibility	34
Evidence, External Insight and Engagement	35
Prioritisation and System Pressures	35
Meetings as a Scrutiny Tool	37
Limits of Meetings	37
Strategic Meetings are Prioritised	37
Balancing Presence, Independence and Challenge	38
Sources of Evidence	40

Triangulation and Core Evidence Sources	40
Qualitative Insights and Direct Observations	41
Flexible and Proportionate Approaches to Evidence Gathering	42
Using Evidence to Demonstrate Impact	42
Impact of Independent Scrutineer - what difference does scrutiny make	45
Strengthening Learning Culture and Reflective Practice	45
Strengthening Accountability and System Clarity	46
Driving Improvement in Practice and Outcomes	46
Added Value: What Independent Scrutiny Contributes Beyond Formal Assurance	51
Developmental Challenge and System-wide Perspective	51
Relational Influence and how Scrutiny 'Lands'	52
Extending System Capability and Insight	53
Supporting System Functioning and Capability: Support to Partnership Business Units	54
How Partnerships Monitor the Effectiveness and Impact of Independent Scrutiny arrangements	56
Looking Ahead: How Interviewees thought Impact Should be Assessed	59
Support Needs Identified by Interviewees	62
Clarity on Skills, Experience, and Recruitment	62
Strengthening Role Clarity, Capability, and Professional Development	62
Collective Infrastructure: Networks, Tools and Shared Learning	64
Development of Participation and Co-Production Practice	66
Support for Evidencing Impact	66
Realistic Resourcing and Recognition of System Costs	66
Legacy of Independent Chairing and Blurred Role Boundaries	66
Embedding the Voice of Children and Young People in Scrutiny	69
Capturing the Voice of Children	69
Dedicated Infrastructure Makes the Difference	70
Moving Beyond Established or "Safe" Voices	71
Participation Embedded Across the System, Not Bolted On	72
Young Scrutineers and Peer-Led Models	73

Moving from Consultation to Co-production	74
Tangible Changes Driven by Lived Experience	74
Ethical and Practical Challenges	77
Resourcing and Consistency Remain Uneven	77
Conclusion	80

List of figures

Figure 1: Independent Scrutiny Arrangements	18
Figure 2: Background of Independent Scrutineer	18
Figure 3: Length of Time in Role	19
Figure 4: Approaches to Commissioning Independent Scrutiny	20
Figure 5: Contracted input of Independent Scrutineer(s)	21
Figure 6: Annual Budget Allocated for Independent Scrutiny	22
Figure 7: Scrutineer's Areas of Focus	26
Figure 8: Meetings Attended and Chaired by Scrutineers	38
Figure 9: Sources of Evidence Used for Scrutiny	41
Figure 10: How the effectiveness and impact of independent scrutiny is monitored by the partnership	56
Figure 11: The Scrutineer's level of contribution to the annual report	57
Figure 12: Additional support needs identified by respondents	64
Figure 13: How the Scrutineer accesses the voice of children and young people	69

Glossary

Audit (Multi-agency Audit) A review of multi-agency practice used to assess the quality and effectiveness of safeguarding arrangements and identify areas for improvement.

Business Unit The team that supports the safeguarding partnership, including governance, quality assurance, learning, data and administrative functions.

Child Exploitation (CE) The abuse of children through criminal, sexual or other forms of exploitation.

Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) Sexual abuse of a child, including abuse occurring within or outside the family environment.

Child Safeguarding Practice Review (CSPR) A local or national review undertaken when serious child safeguarding incidents raise important issues about multi-agency practice.

Composite Action Plan A combined action-tracking document that brings together recommendations from scrutiny, reviews, audits and other assurance activities.

Delegated Safeguarding Partner (DSP) The senior leaders delegated by safeguarding partners to lead and coordinate local multi-agency safeguarding arrangements.

Freedom to Roam A term used by interviewees to describe a scrutineer's ability to access people, information, meetings and practice activity to pursue lines of enquiry independently.

Independent Scrutiny Independent evaluation, challenge and assurance of the effectiveness of local multi-agency safeguarding arrangements.

Learning Culture The extent to which a partnership promotes reflection, curiosity, openness to challenge and the embedding of learning into practice.

Local Safeguarding Children Partnership (LSCP) The statutory multi-agency safeguarding partnership responsible for safeguarding children in a local area.

MASA Multi-Agency Safeguarding Arrangements. The local arrangements established by safeguarding partners under Working Together to Safeguard Children.

Multi-agency Chronology A shared chronology drawing together information from multiple agencies to improve understanding of a child's circumstances and experiences.

Quality Assurance (QA) Processes used to evaluate, monitor and improve safeguarding practice and partnership effectiveness.

Rapid Review A review undertaken following a serious child safeguarding incident to identify immediate learning and determine whether a CSPR is required.

Section 11 The statutory duty on organisations to ensure their functions are discharged having regard to the need to safeguard and promote the welfare of children.

TASP The Association of Safeguarding Partners, a national membership organisation that supports safeguarding partnerships and independent scrutineers.

Triangulation The use of multiple sources of evidence (for example audits, performance data, practitioner views and lived experience) to assess effectiveness and improve confidence in findings.

Voice of the Child Methods used to understand and consider children's experiences, views and outcomes in safeguarding activity.

Yearly Report The yearly report published by safeguarding partners setting out the effectiveness of local safeguarding arrangements and learning from scrutiny activity.

Foreword

Independent Scrutiny has an important role to play in the multi-agency safeguarding arrangements that help keep children safe. Effective Independent Scrutiny provides challenge, support and assurance, helping safeguarding partners reflect on the effectiveness and impact of local arrangements. It can also act as a bridge between safeguarding partners, local practitioners and the families, children and young people they work with.

This report provides valuable insight into the scrutiny function within multi agency safeguarding arrangements, examining its role, resourcing, methodologies, and impact. It highlights the range of scrutiny approaches currently in use, explores how different areas are securing benefits from their scrutiny functions and considers common challenges faced. The findings demonstrate that there is no one 'correct' approach. The report also identifies some of the factors that make scrutiny more likely to have a positive impact.

Local areas that have experienced the greatest benefits from scrutiny are generally those that have welcomed and encouraged constructive challenge, set clear priorities for scrutiny whilst providing flexibility within work programmes; and actively sought the independent perspective of scrutiny. As well as providing valuable insight into the role and impact of scrutiny within multi agency safeguarding arrangements, this report offers reflective questions to help partnerships review their own arrangements in light of the good practice and challenges identified.

I would like to thank the many scrutineers and partnership members who generously gave their time to complete surveys and engage with the research team. I also thank the research team for their hard work in producing this insightful report, and the members of the Independent Scrutiny Advisory Group for their oversight and guidance throughout the project.

This project sought to improve understanding of current models and approaches to independent scrutiny, identify what works well and explore how scrutiny contributes to accountability, assurance and system improvement within multi agency safeguarding arrangements, moving the conversation from assumption to evidence. It has achieved these objectives. This report should be read and considered by anyone with an interest in multi-agency safeguarding arrangements and their continued improvement and development.

Adrian Loades

National Safeguarding Partner Multi-Agency Facilitator and Chair of the Independent Scrutiny Advisory Group

Executive Summary

This report presents findings from research examining the implementation and perceived impact of independent scrutiny within local safeguarding partnerships in England. The study was commissioned to build the evidence base on how independent scrutiny is operating in practice and to explore how it contributes to assurance, learning, accountability and system improvement. The research combined a national survey of safeguarding partnerships (78 responses, representing approximately 55% of partnerships nationally) with qualitative interviews involving independent scrutineers, safeguarding partners and other key stakeholders from 15 safeguarding partnerships.

The findings indicate that independent scrutiny is now an established feature of safeguarding partnership arrangements. Most responding partnerships operate a single independent scrutineer model, although considerable variation remains in how scrutiny is commissioned, resourced and undertaken. Scrutiny priorities are typically aligned to partnership priorities and informed by a combination of data, audits, reviews and emerging safeguarding concerns. Partnerships generally adopt focused programmes of work, recognising that limited capacity requires careful prioritisation. Effective scrutiny is described as balancing planned activity with sufficient flexibility to respond to emerging risks and issues. Scrutiny activity commonly focuses on partnership effectiveness, learning from reviews, multi-agency practice and the experiences of children and families. Evidence used by scrutineers usually combines performance data, audits, reviews, practitioner perspectives and feedback from children and young people. Interviewees emphasised the importance of triangulating multiple sources of information when assessing safeguarding effectiveness. Meetings play an important role in providing visibility, challenge and system insight, but interviewees consistently emphasised that attendance at meetings alone is insufficient and must be complemented by wider scrutiny activity.

Interviewees frequently described independent scrutiny in their partnership as providing challenge, reflection and accountability within the safeguarding system. Participants said that scrutiny can help partnerships identify emerging issues, strengthen oversight of improvement activity, test whether learning has been embedded, and provide an independent perspective on partnership performance. However, interviewees were clear that the role of the scrutineer is not to lead or deliver change directly, but to strengthen the partnership's ability to identify where change is needed and hold itself to account for improvement. The study also found that the nature and extent of the scrutineer's contribution varies considerably between areas and is influenced by local arrangements, resources, relationships and organisational culture.

Interviewees generally described scrutiny as having its greatest impact when it strengthens learning, supports constructive challenge, clarifies accountability and helps improve practice. Interviewees also highlighted the added value of scrutiny beyond formal assurance, particularly its role in promoting reflection, learning, relationship-building, constructive challenge and system-wide insight. Interviewees highlighted the importance of strong relationships between the scrutineer and partners. Much of the value of scrutiny was described as coming from the scrutineer's ability to bring an independent perspective, identify patterns across agencies and encourage partnerships to reflect on and improve their effectiveness rather than through formal authority. A recurring finding is that the effectiveness of scrutiny appears closely linked to the environment in which it operates. Participants identified strong leadership, openness to challenge, business unit capacity, access to high-quality data and analytical support, and clear governance arrangements as important enablers. Interviewees also identified value in the informal support that scrutineers provide to partnership business units, helping to test thinking, maintain oversight and sustain improvement activity. Common barriers included limited commissioned time, capacity pressures, difficulties accessing meaningful multi-agency data, leadership turnover, uncertainty about role boundaries, and challenges balancing independence with influence.

The research also highlights continuing variation in how partnerships understand and position the scrutiny role. While some scrutineers are closely involved in quality assurance and improvement activity, others appear to adopt a more detached assurance role. Interviewees frequently described tensions between maintaining sufficient independence to provide objective challenge whilst remaining sufficiently connected to understand and influence the safeguarding system.

Embedding the experiences and views of children and young people within scrutiny emerged as a consistent priority for participants although practice remains uneven. While examples of innovative participation practice and young scrutineer models were identified, many partnerships continue to rely primarily on participation activity undertaken by partner agencies. Interviewees reported uneven approaches across partnerships and highlighted the importance of dedicated participation capacity, effective feedback mechanisms and broader engagement beyond established participation groups. Interviewees also highlighted the importance of moving beyond consultation towards meaningful participation and co-production, supported by dedicated infrastructure and sustained investment.

Interviewees reported that approaches to monitoring the effectiveness and assessing the impact of independent scrutiny are relatively underdeveloped and are identified as a particular challenge. Partnerships commonly monitor scrutiny through annual reporting, governance processes, action tracking and follow-up activity. Impact is generally assessed through evidence of learning, action and improvement over time

rather than through formal performance measures. However, interviewees noted that it can be difficult to isolate the specific contribution of scrutiny because it operates alongside other improvement mechanisms, including audits, reviews, inspections and leadership activity. As a result, impact is often assessed in terms of contribution to learning, decision-making and sustained improvement rather than direct attribution.

Looking ahead, interviewees identified a need for greater clarity, consistency and support. There is strong support for clearer expectations, stronger networks, professional development opportunities and practical tools to support scrutiny activity. However, interviewees were clear that independent scrutiny does not require tighter control or more prescriptive regulation. Instead, they favoured greater professionalisation with flexibility, strengthening capability, confidence and consistency while preserving local ownership and adaptability.

Overall, the findings suggest that independent scrutiny is now a well-established component of safeguarding partnership arrangements and is perceived by participants as making a contribution to learning, accountability and improvement. However, the study also highlights continuing variation in practice, ongoing challenges in evidencing impact, and differing interpretations of how scrutiny should be commissioned, positioned and supported within local safeguarding systems.

Introduction

Independent scrutiny is now a central component of local safeguarding partnership arrangements, it aims to provide assurance, challenge and learning across complex multi-agency systems. As the role has evolved - particularly following the move away from independent chairing¹ - there is increasing interest in understanding how independent scrutiny operates in practice, the difference it makes, and the conditions that enable or constrain its effectiveness.

This report presents findings from interviews with independent scrutineers, safeguarding partners and other key stakeholders, alongside analysis of a national survey of safeguarding partnerships. It examines how partnerships prioritise areas for scrutiny, the evidence used to inform judgements, and the impact scrutiny can achieve. It also explores how partnerships assess the effectiveness of scrutiny over time, the value it adds beyond formal assurance, and the factors that shape its influence within different system contexts.

This research builds on a 2022 national study of independent scrutiny², which provided the first descriptive account of how Local Safeguarding Children Partnerships were implementing scrutiny arrangements following Working Together 2018. That study identified significant local variation in scrutiny models, including the use of independent scrutineers, retained Independent Chair arrangements, scrutiny panels, peer review and young scrutineer approaches (Pearce et al., 2022).

The Role and Purpose of Independent Scrutiny

Independent scrutiny is a relatively recent feature of local safeguarding arrangements, emerging from reforms introduced by the Children and Social Work Act 2017³. The Act states that partnerships 'must include arrangements for scrutiny by an independent person of the effectiveness of the arrangements'. These reforms replaced Local Safeguarding Children Boards (LSCBs) and their independent chair role with multi-agency safeguarding partnerships. While independent chairs previously provided external challenge and oversight of safeguarding systems, the shift to independent scrutiny reflects a move towards more flexible, locally

¹ The role of the independent chair in Local Safeguarding Children Boards (LSCBs) originated from the statutory requirement under section 13 of the Children Act 2004, which mandated the establishment of LSCBs by local authorities in England. The independent chair was introduced to ensure accountability and facilitate the effective working of the LSCB.

² [Pearce, J., Stratton, I., Parker, L. and Thorpe, A. \(2022\) Independent Scrutiny and Local Safeguarding Children Partnerships. Vulnerability Knowledge and Practice Programme and the Safer Young Lives Research Centre, University of Bedfordshire.](#)

³ Children and Social Work Act 2017, available at [Children and Social Work Act 2017](#)

determined models of challenge and assurance, while retaining the core function of independent oversight.

Statutory guidance (*Working Together to Safeguard Children*⁴) requires safeguarding partners to establish arrangements for independent scrutiny to assess the effectiveness of their multi-agency safeguarding arrangements. Independent scrutiny should be objective and separate from day-to-day partnership activity acting as a constructive “critical friend”, that offers both support and challenge to promote reflection and continuous improvement. It should consider outcomes for children and families, practitioner experiences, the quality of leadership and the effectiveness of multi-agency collaboration.

Independent scrutiny forms part of a wider system of accountability, alongside inspectorates and other assurance processes. Its purpose is to support learning, strengthen accountability and drive continuous system improvement over time, rather than provide one-off inspection judgements. *Working Together to Safeguard Children (2026)* notes that safeguarding partners should set out in their published arrangements how independent scrutiny operates, including reporting processes, how recommendations are acted on, and how scrutiny informs annual reporting and ongoing evaluation of partnership effectiveness. There is also a requirement for the inclusion of a review of the impact and learning from independent scrutiny.

The guidance does not prescribe a single model, instead allowing local partnerships flexibility to design arrangements suited to their local context, provided scrutiny is robust, evidence-informed and credible. However, this flexibility also results in variation in resourcing, capacity and intensity across areas. As explored later in this report, these differences influence the depth, reach and impact of scrutiny activity in practice.

Evidence from earlier work in 2022⁵ showed significant variation in how independent scrutiny is designed, positioned and applied. Differences in the scope and influence of the scrutineer role, its links to decision-making and its levels of independence, capacity and support meant there is no consistent national picture of what “good” scrutiny looks like (Pearce et al., 2022).

This project was commissioned to further explore current models and approaches with a desire to identify what is working well and to deepen understanding of how

⁴ [Working together to safeguard children - GOV.UK](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/67222/Working_together_to_safeguard_children.pdf)

⁵ [Pearce, J., Stratton, I., Parker, L. and Thorpe, A. \(2022\) Independent Scrutiny and Local Safeguarding Children Partnerships. Vulnerability Knowledge and Practice Programme and the Safer Young Lives Research Centre, University of Bedfordshire.](#)

scrutiny contributes to accountability and system improvement. A key aim was to move from assumptions about how independent scrutiny works to evidence.

The evidence base that comes from this research is intended to inform future statutory guidance and policy updates, strengthen how scrutiny operates locally and nationally and support more consistent and impactful safeguarding systems. Ultimately, the purpose is not just structural - it is to better ensure scrutiny adds real value to partnership governance and leads to better safeguarding outcomes for children and young people.

Research Methods

This research used a mixed-methods approach combining a national survey of safeguarding partnerships with in-depth qualitative interviews.

A total of 78 safeguarding partnerships responded to the survey, representing approximately 55% of partnerships nationally. The survey gathered information on independent scrutiny arrangements, priorities, resourcing, approaches to evidence gathering, impact and future support needs.

The survey findings were complemented by semi-structured joint interviews involving independent scrutineers, safeguarding partners and other key stakeholders. Interviews were undertaken jointly in most cases, enabling participants to reflect collectively on local arrangements and explore the contribution of scrutiny from different partnership perspectives. These interviews explored experiences of scrutiny in greater depth, including its contribution to accountability, learning and system improvement, as well as the facilitators and barriers to effective scrutiny.

Interview data were analysed using NVivo software, with thematic analysis used to identify recurring patterns, themes and areas of variation across participants' accounts. Survey and interview findings were analysed together to identify common themes and areas of variation. Throughout the report, survey findings are used to provide a broader national picture, whilst interview findings offer richer insight into how independent scrutiny operates in practice.

Limitations

The findings should be considered in light of several limitations. While the survey achieved a strong response rate (55%), findings should be interpreted as indicative of the views and experiences of responding partnerships rather than as a definitive representation of all safeguarding partnerships nationally. The responding local authorities appear broadly representative of the wider local authority population in

terms of region, authority type, rurality and deprivation. However, the survey overrepresented medium-sized authorities and underrepresented smaller authorities. Findings should therefore be interpreted with some caution where population size may influence responses.

The qualitative interviews were designed to provide depth of understanding rather than statistical representativeness. Interview participants were drawn from 15 safeguarding partnerships and findings should therefore be understood as illustrative of experiences and perspectives rather than representative of all local safeguarding arrangements.

Most interviews were conducted as joint interviews involving independent scrutineers, safeguarding partners, business managers and, in some cases, other partnership representatives. While this approach enabled different perspectives to be explored together and facilitated discussion about partnership arrangements, it may also have influenced the extent to which participants felt able to express critical or dissenting views about individuals, relationships or local arrangements. The presence of colleagues and senior leaders may have reduced willingness to discuss areas of tension, challenge or disagreement openly.

The research focused primarily on the perspectives of those directly involved in safeguarding partnerships and independent scrutiny arrangements. The views of children, young people and families were not collected directly as part of this study, although participants frequently reflected on how lived experience informs local scrutiny activity.

Finally, many interviewees emphasised the challenges associated with evidencing the impact of independent scrutiny. As a result, examples of impact reported throughout the study often reflect participants' assessments of scrutiny's contribution to improvement rather than direct causal attribution. Independent scrutiny operates alongside a range of other improvement mechanisms, including audits, reviews, inspections, leadership activity and workforce development, making it difficult to isolate its specific influence on outcomes.

Reflective Questions for Partnerships: The role and purpose of Scrutiny

Throughout this report, reflective questions are included to support discussion within safeguarding partnerships. They are not intended as an assessment framework or checklist, but as prompts to help partnerships consider how the findings relate to their own local context and arrangements.

1. How clearly do we (collectively) understand the purpose of independent scrutiny—and where does confusion still exist (e.g. inspection vs learning)?
2. To what extent is scrutiny experienced as a “critical friend” rather than compliance or oversight?
3. Where might scrutiny in our partnership drift into operational involvement—or remain too distant to influence practice?
4. How well does our model of scrutiny reflect local context while retaining credibility and independence?
5. What would stronger independent scrutiny look like from the perspective of children, families, and frontline practitioners?

Independent Scrutiny Arrangements - Survey Findings

Seventy-eight responses were received in total, representing a 55% response rate. The survey was open during September and closed on 10 October 2025, with links circulated to business partners. Not all respondents completed every question, so the number of responses (n) varies between questions. This section draws on survey findings to describe how independent scrutiny is currently organised across safeguarding partnerships. It examines scrutiny models, commissioning arrangements, scrutineer backgrounds, capacity and resourcing.

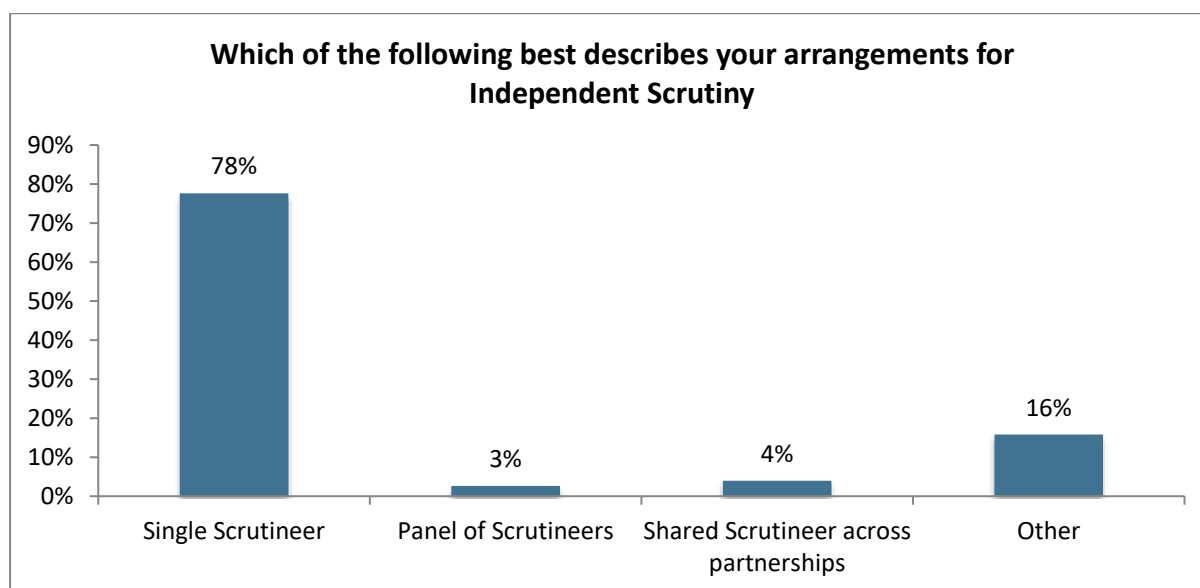
Overview of Current Independent Scrutiny Arrangements

Most partnerships now operate with a single independent scrutineer. Seventy-eight per cent of survey respondents indicated that they operate with a single independent scrutineer, 7% use panel approaches or shared arrangements across partnerships, while 16% selected "other". Examples of "other" arrangements include the use of independent consultants for discrete pieces of work and scrutineers working across multiple partnerships.

This pattern is broadly consistent with a previous national study undertaken in 2022, while also showing how scrutiny arrangements have become more established over time. In 2022, of those areas employing independent scrutineers, just over three quarters (76%) employed a single scrutineer, 13% employed two, 6% employed three and 5% employed four or more (Pearce et al., 2022)⁶.

⁶ [Pearce, J., Stratton, I., Parker, L. and Thorpe, A. \(2022\) Independent Scrutiny and Local Safeguarding Children Partnerships. Vulnerability Knowledge and Practice Programme and the Safer Young Lives Research Centre, University of Bedfordshire.](#)

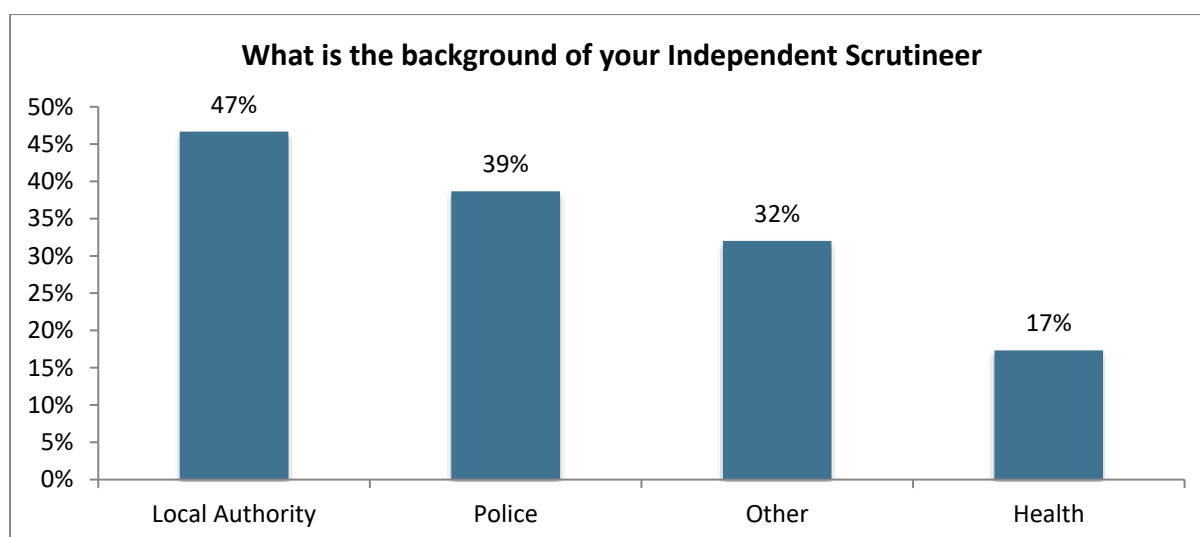
Figure 1: Independent Scrutiny Arrangements



Source: National Survey of Safeguarding Partnerships

There is also variation in the backgrounds of scrutineers. Respondents could provide multiple responses as some have more than one scrutineer. A local authority background is the most common (47%), 39% have scrutineers with a police background, 17% a health background and just under a third (32%) have scrutineers with other backgrounds, including academia, the voluntary sector, education, probation and prison services, CAFCASS and business management. These findings suggest that partnerships draw on a diverse range of expertise when appointing scrutineers, reflecting both the multi-agency nature of safeguarding arrangements and differing local approaches to independent scrutiny.

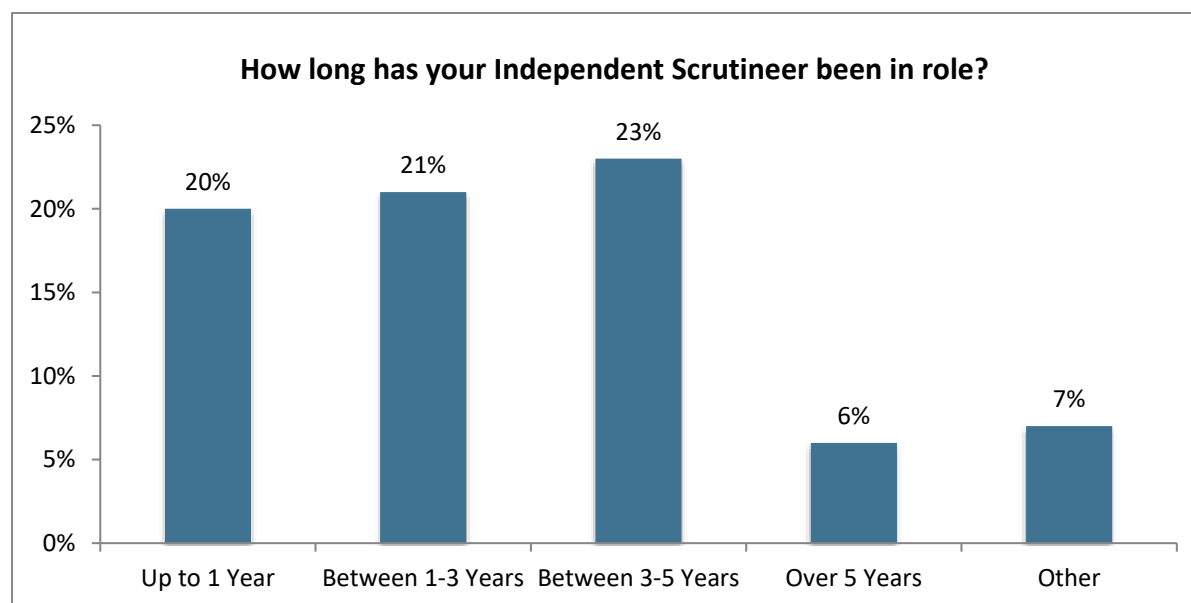
Figure 2: Background of Independent Scrutineer



Source: National Survey of Safeguarding Partnerships

The role itself remains relatively new and continues to evolve, with most scrutineers in post for fewer than five years, and many appointments within the past three years. This reflects the relative newness of current scrutiny arrangements rather than necessarily the experience of those undertaking the role.⁷.

Figure 3: Length of Time in Role

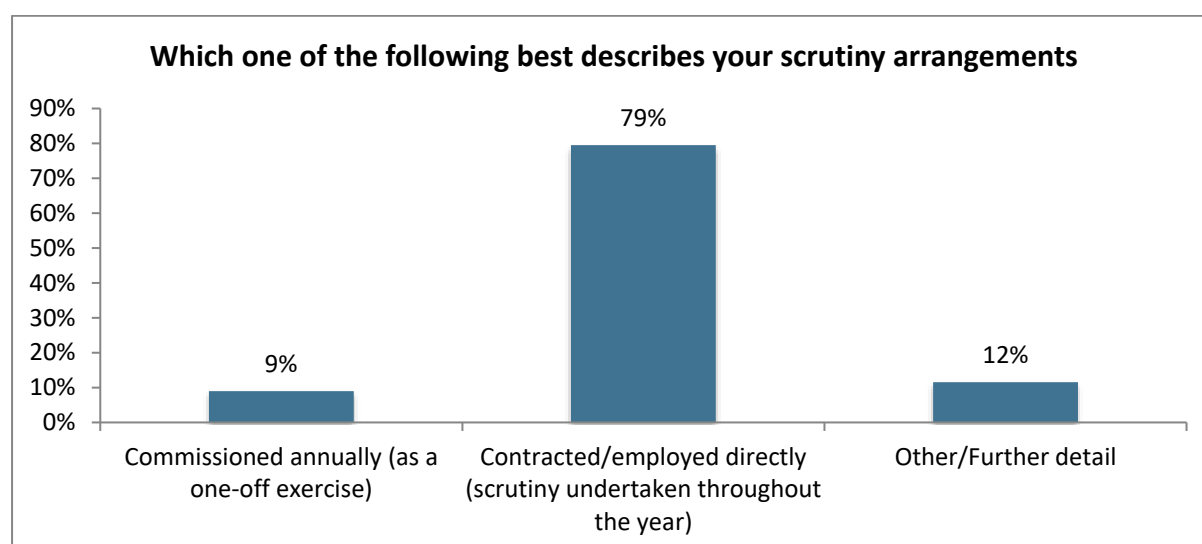


Source: National Survey of Safeguarding Partnerships

⁷ The independent scrutineer role was introduced through the safeguarding reforms set out in *Working Together 2018* and continues to evolve. While many current appointments have been made within the past five years, this reflects the relative newness of current scrutiny arrangements rather than necessarily the experience of those undertaking the role, many of whom may previously have held Independent Chair or other safeguarding leadership positions.

In terms of commissioning, most partnerships employ or contract scrutineers on an ongoing basis rather than commissioning one-off reviews. However, some retain flexibility to commission additional thematic or specialist work where needed.

Figure 4: Approaches to Commissioning Independent Scrutiny

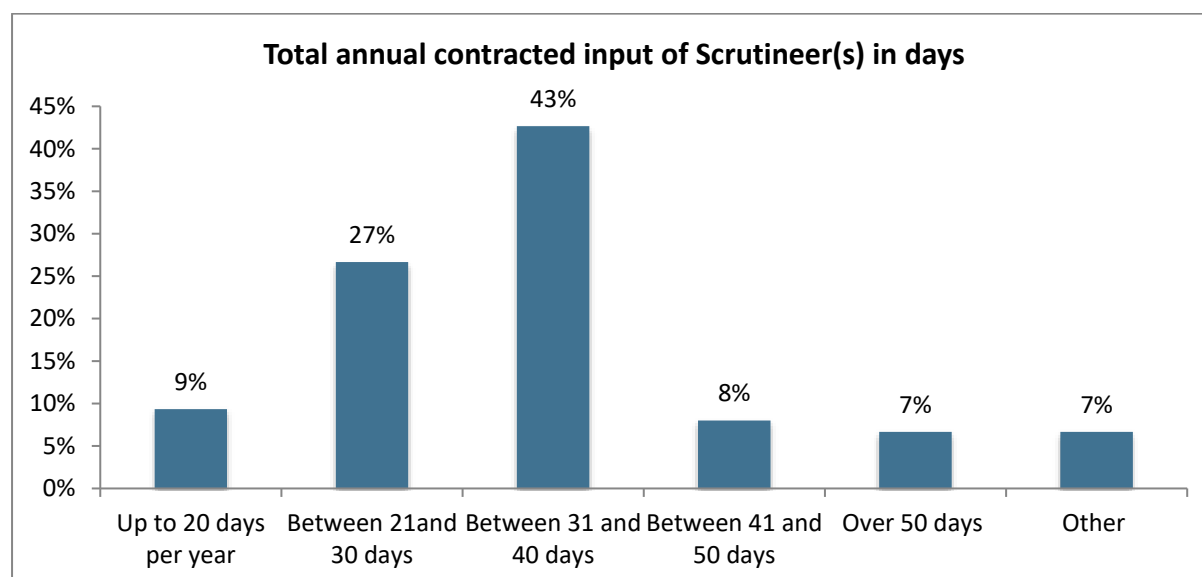


Source: National Survey of Safeguarding Partnerships

Survey findings also highlight variation in resourcing and capacity. The most common level of independent scrutineer input was 31-40 days per year (43%). However, reported input varies considerably, ranging from up to 20 days per year (9%) to more than 50 days per year (7%) in some areas. Some of the responses

categorised as "other" indicated that scrutineer input was flexible rather than specified as a fixed number of days.

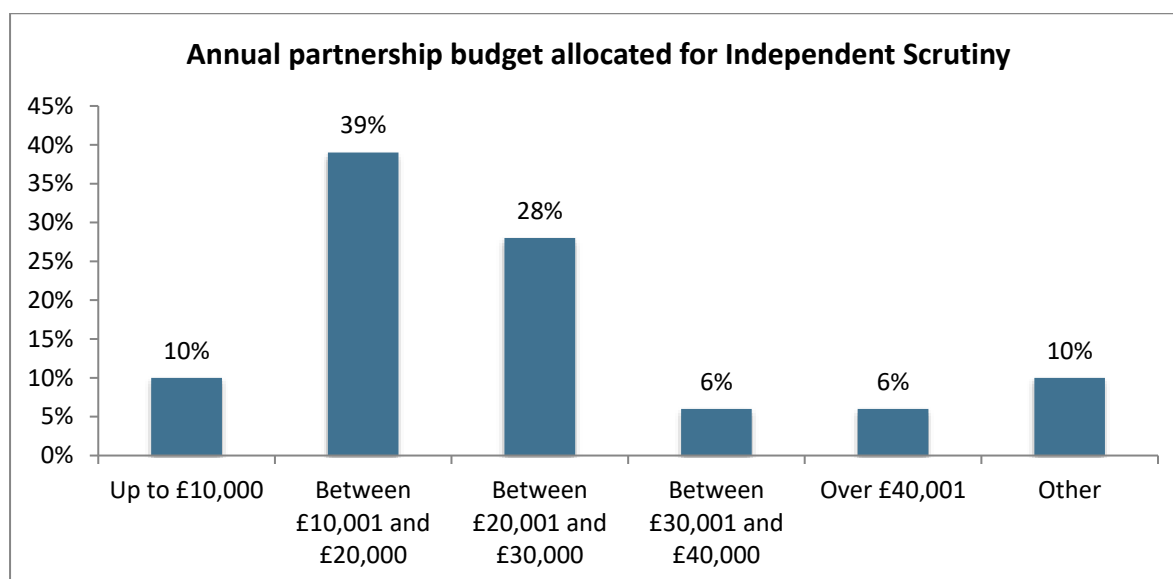
Figure 5: Contracted input of Independent Scrutineer(s)



Source: National Survey of Safeguarding Partnerships

Annual budgets for independent scrutiny also vary across partnerships. The most commonly reported annual budget was between £10,001 and £20,000 (39%). However, annual budgets range from up to £10,000 (10%) to more than £40,000 (6%). Several responses categorised as "other" reference day rates rather than annual budget allocations, making direct comparison more difficult. One respondent noted that no fixed budget is allocated; instead, additional scrutiny activity is commissioned as required and funded from the wider partnership budget, subject to partner agreement.

Figure 6: Annual Budget Allocated for Independent Scrutiny



Source: National Survey of Safeguarding Partnerships

Summary

Taken together, the survey demonstrates that while independent scrutiny is now embedded across safeguarding partnerships, it operates through highly diverse local models, shaped by context, resource and local priorities. As explored throughout this report, this variation has implications for the depth, consistency, and impact of scrutiny activity.

Reflective Questions for Partnerships: Scrutiny Arrangements

Partnerships may wish to use the following questions to reflect on how the findings in this section resonate with their own scrutiny arrangements.

1. Are our current arrangements sufficiently resourced to deliver meaningful scrutiny, or do they constrain depth and impact?
2. How does our model (single scrutineer, panel, shared) shape the breadth, challenge and resilience of scrutiny?
3. What are the trade-offs between flexibility and consistency in our approach?
4. How confident are we that our investment in scrutiny (time, budget, infrastructure) is proportionate to the complexity of safeguarding need?
5. What is the opportunity cost of our current model—what are we not scrutinising?

Areas of Focus and Priorities for Independent Scrutineers

This section explores how scrutiny priorities are identified, agreed and delivered within safeguarding partnerships. It examines the factors that shape areas of focus, including strategic priorities, emerging risks, local intelligence and available capacity.

Scrutiny Priorities

Most interviewees describe their scrutiny priorities as focused and evidence-driven. While emphasis varies across partnerships, common areas of focus include neglect, child sexual abuse and exploitation, vulnerable cohorts, the voice of the child, and the effectiveness of partnership arrangements. Scrutiny is typically positioned as a mechanism for deepening understanding over time, testing impact, and supporting learning and improvement rather than simply identifying deficits. As one interviewee noted when describing their scrutiny priorities:

“We hone them down and agree them with the DSP group... the ideas come very much from the freedom to roam that’s given to the scrutineer... if something is worrying... we need to explore this a little bit more.”

Several themes are described as “always priorities”, revisited iteratively rather than being treated as one-off topics. This includes neglect, children under five, child sexual abuse, exploitation and domestic abuse. Scrutiny is also used to assess whether governance and assurance arrangements linked to these priorities remain effective over time. This pattern is consistent with findings from a study on safeguarding partnerships in 2022⁸, which also highlighted a focus on persistent safeguarding themes and iterative approaches rather than one-off scrutiny (Pearce et al., 2022).

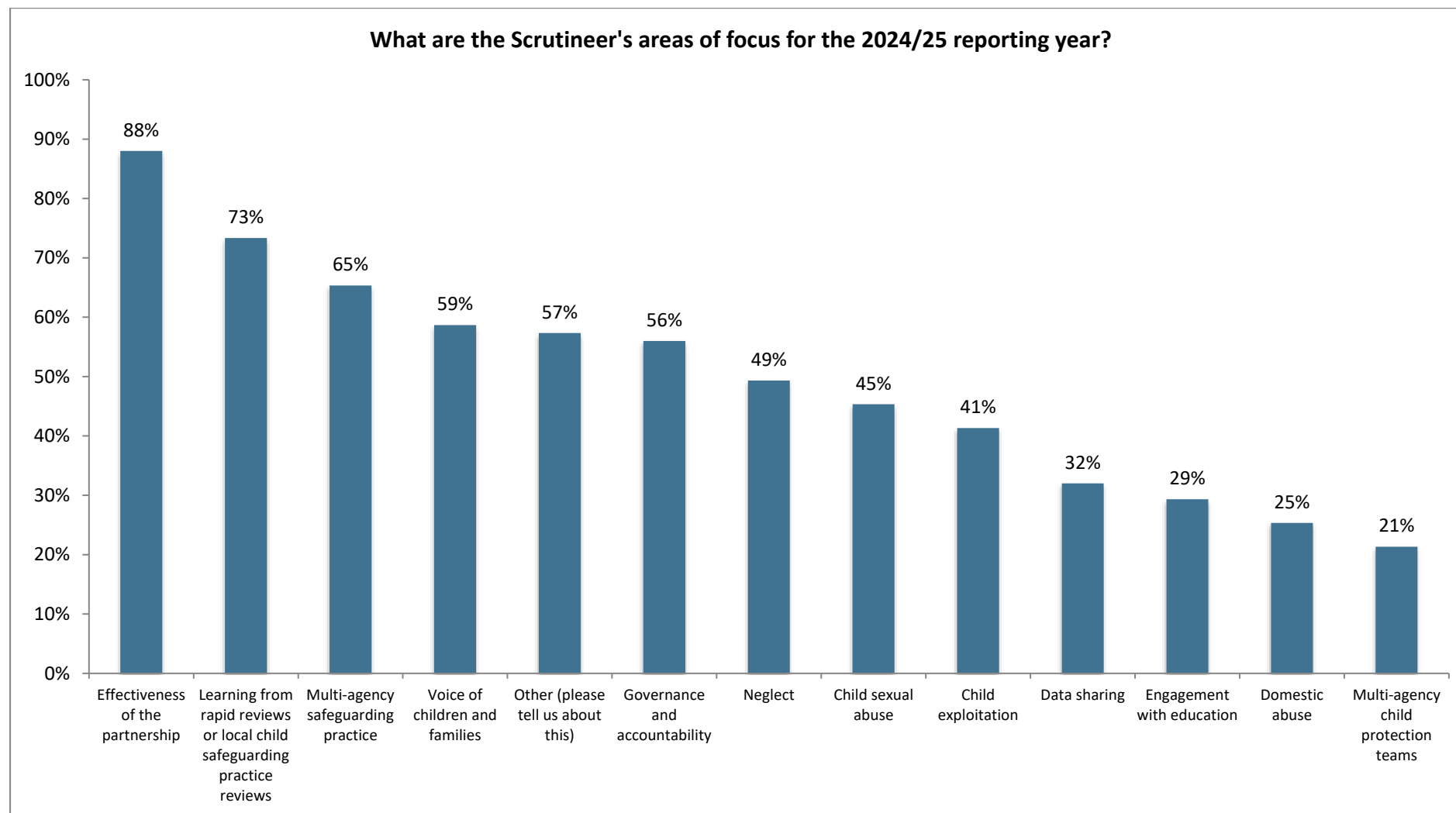
Survey findings reinforce this pattern, with respondents most frequently citing partnership effectiveness, learning from reviews, multi-agency safeguarding practice and the voice of children and families as key areas of focus. Additional themes (in the ‘other’ category) included transitional safeguarding, Section 11, children and

⁸ [Pearce, J., Stratton, I., Parker, L. and Thorpe, A. \(2022\) Independent Scrutiny and Local Safeguarding Children Partnerships. Vulnerability Knowledge and Practice Programme and the Safer Young Lives Research Centre, University of Bedfordshire.](#)

young people's mental health and wellbeing, workforce wellbeing and understanding vulnerability.

Looking ahead, most partnerships had agreed or partially agreed priorities for the coming year. These largely mirror existing areas of focus, with some increased emphasis on child sexual abuse, the development of young scrutineer approaches, and strengthening work on multi-agency practice, governance, learning from reviews and trauma-informed approaches. Overall, this suggests continuity rather than significant change, with partnerships seeking to build depth and impact over time.

Figure 7: Scrutineer's Areas of Focus



Source: National Survey of Safeguarding Partnerships

Strategic Alignment

A consistent theme amongst the interviewees is that scrutiny priorities are closely aligned with the wider strategic priorities of the partnership rather than being chosen in isolation. In some areas, priorities explicitly “dovetail” with learning hubs, practice learning groups, or a small number of core strategic priorities. Some scrutineers caution against being overly ambitious and emphasise the importance of realistic prioritisation, doing fewer things well and in depth, for example limiting scrutiny to one major deep dive per quarter.

Case study example: Limiting scrutiny to one deep dive per quarter

One partnership deliberately limited independent scrutiny to one substantive deep dive each quarter, alongside routine oversight of assurance activity. This approach was adopted after concerns that pursuing too many priorities simultaneously was resulting in broad oversight but limited depth.

A small number of annual priorities were agreed, and each was examined through a structured programme of data analysis, audit activity, practitioner engagement and review of existing learning. Other issues continued to be monitored through governance and performance processes but did not receive intensive scrutiny unless new concerns emerged.

Interviewees reported that this approach improved the quality of scrutiny findings and increased ownership of resulting actions. While fewer topics could be explored during the year, partners felt the additional depth led to stronger learning, clearer recommendations and greater confidence that improvement activity was addressing underlying issues rather than symptoms.

Balance of Proactive and Reactive Focus

Interviewees consistently describe scrutiny as balancing planned and reactive activity.

- Proactive approaches include annual or multi-year scrutiny programmes aligned to strategic priorities and known or persistent risks.
- Reactive approaches include responding to review findings, national developments (e.g. Casey Audit of Group-Based Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse and other national safeguarding reviews and thematic studies) or responses to local data and emerging local issues.

This balance allows scrutiny to remain structured while flexible enough to be responsive to what is “important in the moment.” As explored later in the report, this relies on

scrutineers having sufficient autonomy and access to pursue emerging issues, balanced by clear expectations and dialogue with partnership leaders.

Planning Cycles, Capacity and Tracking

Many interviewees said that scrutiny is structured through forward-planning and defined cycles, such as quarterly or annual programmes that outlines what will be examined and why. Those interviewed said this approach is particularly important given limited capacity. Survey findings indicate that independent scrutiny is commonly commissioned at around 30–40 days per year, reinforcing the need for prioritisation. As one interviewee said:

"We've thought quite a lot together about the methodology... we really looked at what the priorities were, what we had coming up, what were the challenges and developed that work plan."

And another said when talking about choosing priorities carefully:

"We did a lot of work around [neglect]... we're able to prioritise other areas of really important business because of what our data is telling us."

And another recognised scrutiny requires investment to achieve impact.

"We've increased slightly all of our investment as partners... because of the value that we see with that."

While some partnerships limit their focus to one or two priorities each year, others take a staged or rolling approach. Some interviewees said that meaningful impact may not become evident for 12 to 18 months and that things need to be re-scrutinised on a rolling basis. Several partnerships report that when scrutiny findings are translated into action plans, assigned to named owners, logged and regularly reviewed, they contribute to a continuous cycle of learning and improvement rather than a one-off response.

In one partnership an "80:20" approach is adopted, with core scrutiny delivered by the scrutineer and additional specialist input commissioned where needed each year. One partnership commissioned an external lead reviewer to undertake a thematic review of repeated non-accidental injury cases, providing specialist analysis of underlying system issues and informing subsequent partnership improvement activity. Similar approaches were described in a small number of other partnerships, although not always formally structured in this way, with partnerships drawing on internal expertise to support the scrutiny activity. Examples include specialist quality assurance activity, workforce development and training, child participation and engagement work and thematic reviews linked to national developments such as child sexual abuse and exploitation. These arrangements are described by some as enabling partnerships to access specialist knowledge while maintaining the independent scrutineer's oversight of the overall scrutiny programme.

Case study example: Two year rolling scrutiny programme

One partnership operated a two-year rolling scrutiny programme designed to test not only whether issues had been identified, but whether improvements occurred and were sustained. Priorities were agreed through annual planning and regularly reviewed, but scrutiny activity was sequenced across a longer horizon to reflect the time required for system change.

Priority themes were initially examined through deep-dive scrutiny activity, drawing on audits, review findings, performance data and practitioner perspectives with follow-up activity scheduled over the subsequent 12 to 24 months to assess progress any ongoing barriers. The programme retained flexibility to respond to emerging risks while maintaining a longer-term focus. Interviewees reported that revisiting themes over time helped manage expectations about the pace of change and provided greater confidence in whether improvements had become embedded in practice.

Case study example: Quality Assurance Forward Plan

One partnership developed a Quality Assurance Forward Plan that mapped future audit and scrutiny activity against strategic priorities, known areas of risk, national developments and learning from reviews.

The plan identified not only what would be scrutinised, but why specific areas had been selected and how findings would be revisited over time. Audit findings, assurance requests, review learning and Section 11 activity were incorporated into a single framework, enabling recurring themes to be tracked across multiple sources of evidence.

Interviewees described this approach as strengthening oversight of partnership learning and helping ensure that scrutiny focused on issues of greatest relevance and risk. It also provided a clearer basis for assessing whether recommendations had led to sustained improvement over time.

Co-ownership of Priorities

Some interviewees highlighted that scrutiny priorities are typically developed collaboratively rather than set by a single individual or agency. Independent scrutineers play an active role in identifying themes, proposing areas of focus, drawing on intelligence from subgroups, data, audits and reviews. Priorities are often developed through partnership planning sessions or engagement events, with final decisions agreed at executive or partnership board level. As one interviewee reflected:

“We got everyone to go... these are our successes; these are our gaps... and getting partnership members to own it rather than me [the independent scrutineer] dictating this is what we’re going to do.”

One interviewee described scrutiny priorities as a combination of agreed priorities and emerging issues identified through ongoing scrutiny activity, explaining:

"We hone them down and agree them with the DSP group for a sort of plan for the year and the ideas come very much from the freedom to roam that's given to the scrutineer.... If there is something that is worrying that comes up that I think we need to talk about this or we need to explore this a little bit more... I'll put that down on a sort of list for future scrutiny"

These collaborative approaches are seen as supporting shared ownership while maintaining the independence of the scrutiny function.

Scope Boundaries: Assurance rather than Operational Delivery

Some interviewees also reflected on the boundaries of scrutiny. For example, some emphasised that scrutiny should operate primarily at an assurance level and avoid being too operational. However, the extent of (operational) involvement varies by local context.

Where interviewees self-described strong leadership and management and more mature systems, they said that scrutiny remains strategic, focusing on assurance and oversight. They felt that in less mature systems, scrutiny can move closer to practice to compensate for the gaps in internal assurance. This reinforces that the scope of scrutiny is context-dependent rather than standardised.

Summary

Independent scrutineers generally operate within planned and strategically aligned programmes of work, with priorities shaped collaboratively through partnership intelligence, data, audits, reviews and emerging safeguarding concerns. While the specific focus of scrutiny varies between areas, common priorities include partnership effectiveness, multi-agency practice, learning from reviews, the voice of children and families, neglect, exploitation and child sexual abuse. Partnerships emphasise the importance of balancing proactive scrutiny of long-term priorities with the flexibility to respond to emerging risks and national developments. Given limited scrutiny capacity, most adopt focused and realistic work programmes, often concentrating on a small number of priorities over time and revisiting issues to assess progress and impact. The findings also highlight the importance of shared ownership, robust tracking of actions and clear boundaries between assurance and operational delivery, while recognising that the scope and intensity of scrutiny are influenced by local context and system maturity.

Reflective Questions for Partnerships: Areas of focus and prioritisation

Partnerships may wish to use the following questions to reflect on how the findings in this section resonate with their own focus and priorities.

1. How do we ensure our scrutiny priorities are genuinely evidence-led rather than habit- or theme-driven?
2. Are we prioritising too many areas, and diluting depth and impact?
3. How effectively do our scrutiny priorities align with: strategic partnership priorities; lived experience and emerging risks?
4. How well do we balance proactive planning with responsiveness to new information?
5. To what extent do partners feel ownership of scrutiny priorities, rather than viewing them as externally imposed?

Conditions that Enable and Constrain Effective Scrutiny

This section examines the factors that influence the effectiveness of independent scrutiny. It considers the organisational, cultural and relational conditions that can support or hinder scrutiny within safeguarding partnerships.

System Infrastructure and Capacity

Interviewees consistently linked effective scrutiny to the capacity and capability of the partnership business unit alongside access to data and appropriate resourcing. Interviewees highlighted the importance of skilled business managers who understand the purpose of scrutiny and can translate findings into action. The business manager role encompasses both strategic and operational functions including developing action plans, coordinating data and engagement activity, and ensuring access to relevant information. Interviewees felt that strong, trusting relationships between scrutineers and the business manager are critical, enabling shared understanding, prioritisation and continuity. It was noted that without this infrastructure, scrutiny risks becoming fragmented, delayed, or disconnected from system improvement. As one interviewee said:

“Business managers... there’s so much that happens in that role... if they weren’t there, it would all fall apart.”

Interviewees also said that access to data, supported by analytical capacity was another key enabler. They felt that partnerships with dedicated or shared analytical support enjoyed greater confidence in identifying emerging issues, undertaking in-depth analysis, and moving beyond descriptive reporting towards meaningful insight. Interviewees noted that limited analytical support is associated with a disproportionate focus on data collection rather than interpretation.

Conversely, limited commissioned time, resource constraints and insufficient analytical capacity were commonly identified as barriers to effective scrutiny. Interviewees described difficulties accessing meaningful multi-agency data, challenges associated with fragmented or incompatible datasets, and pressures on partnership business units that limited the depth and reach of scrutiny activity. Several participants noted that scrutiny can become fragmented rather than sustained when capacity is insufficient. As one interview commented:

“In other areas... it’s like 14 days a year... they don’t really know what’s going on... and then they get wheeled back in the cupboard again.”

Leadership, Governance, Culture and System Maturity

Interviewees consistently highlighted leadership, culture and system maturity as key enablers of effective scrutiny. They felt that leadership behaviour sets the tone for how

scrutiny is received and used within partnerships, with visible and sustained commitment from senior leaders identified as particularly important. As one interviewee commented:

"You have to want [scrutiny]... if you don't want it, you can't really do meaningful scrutiny."

Some interviewees said that effective scrutiny is most commonly associated with environments where:

- Leaders genuinely value scrutiny and expect challenge
- Scrutiny is embedded within governance and assurance cycles
- Senior leaders model openness, curiosity and respectful disagreement
- Escalation processes are used appropriately

Interviewees said that in these environments, challenge is treated as a routine and constructive part of partnership working rather than something to be avoided or personalised. As another interviewee explained:

"You have to have leaders that welcome scrutiny... you have to want somebody to do that for you."

More broadly, interviewees described learning culture and system maturity as important foundations for effective scrutiny. Factors such as leadership commitment, business unit capacity, data access and trust were seen as most effective in partnerships that are open to challenge and committed to learning and improvement.

Interviewees suggested that in more mature systems, scrutiny is embedded and expected as part of everyday practice, supporting continuous reflection and improvement. By contrast, in less mature environments, even well-evidenced scrutiny may struggle to gain traction and can be resisted, personalised or viewed defensively.

Interviewees also highlighted several factors that can limit scrutiny's influence within partnerships. Defensive responses to challenge, competing priorities, and organisational instability were all described as potential barriers. Frequent changes in senior leadership, particularly within partner agencies, were reported to disrupt continuity, weaken accountability and reduce organisational memory, making it harder for scrutiny findings to gain traction and be sustained over time. Interviewees also identified role ambiguity as a potential barrier. A lack of shared understanding about the purpose and boundaries of independent scrutiny could lead to confusion with inspection, compliance or operational leadership. Participants further described ongoing tensions between independence and involvement, noting that scrutineers require sufficient access and influence to understand the system, while maintaining enough distance to provide objective challenge and credible assurance.

Overall, interviewees felt that effective scrutiny depends not only on the capability of the independent scrutineer, but also on a partnership culture that values challenge, learning and continuous improvement. Where these conditions are present, scrutiny is more likely to be heard, acted upon and sustained over time.

Relationships, Trust and Autonomy

Interviewees consistently identified relationships and trust as underpinning effective scrutiny. Scrutineers were expected to be visible and accessible while maintaining sufficient independence to remain objective and credible. Appropriate autonomy - often described as “freedom to roam” - was also an important facilitator, enabling access to meetings, people and data, and allowing scrutiny to respond flexibly to emerging issues.

However, interviewees emphasised the importance of balancing autonomy with clear expectations and alignment to partnership priorities. This balance enables scrutiny to remain both independent and influential within complex systems. A lack of shared understanding about the purpose and boundaries of the role was identified as a significant challenge in some partnerships. Participants reported that scrutiny was sometimes narrowly interpreted as attendance at meetings or confused with inspection or compliance activity. Others highlighted tensions where scrutineers became either too embedded within local systems or too detached to exercise meaningful influence. These findings suggest that clarity of role is central to maintaining both credibility and impact.

The 2022 study⁹ provides useful context for understanding this balance. Early examples of embedded scrutiny showed that close access to partnership activity could give scrutineers a stronger understanding of how the system was functioning in practice. However, those examples also suggest that autonomy needs to be accompanied by clear purpose and shared ownership: the scrutineer may help surface evidence and challenge assumptions, but partners must retain responsibility for decisions, delivery and improvement (Pearce et al., 2022).

Scrutineer Capability and Credibility

The capability and credibility of the independent scrutineer were also sometimes identified as critical factors. Effective scrutineers were described as individuals who:

- Operate confidently at senior strategic levels
- Understand the perspectives and functions of different agencies
- Can hold their own with very senior leaders
- Balance challenge with sensitivity to context
- Bring breadth and depth of experience into complex systems

⁹ [Pearce, J., Stratton, I., Parker, L. and Thorpe, A. \(2022\) Independent Scrutiny and Local Safeguarding Children Partnerships. Vulnerability Knowledge and Practice Programme and the Safer Young Lives Research Centre, University of Bedfordshire.](#)

Credibility was seen to derive from a combination of experience, judgement and interpersonal skill, rather than any single professional background. Several interviewees also suggested that clearer articulation of competencies would strengthen recruitment, commissioning and role clarity, as the role continues to evolve.

Some interviewees also described the role as professionally isolating, particularly where opportunities for peer support, mentoring or reflective discussion were limited. While regional and national networks were valued, participants varied in their views about the extent to which these forums provided meaningful challenge and development. Consequently, access to professional support was viewed as an important factor in sustaining capability and effectiveness.

Evidence, External Insight and Engagement

Interviewees also remarked that access to diverse evidence and external insight further strengthened scrutiny. They said that engagement with regional and national networks such as TASP, provided comparative perspectives and shared learning, helping partnerships avoid insular, or “blinkered” thinking and approaches and adapt effective practice. Scrutineers working across multiple partnerships were seen to bring additional value through broader experience and benchmarking insight.

Prioritisation and System Pressures

Interviewees emphasised that effective scrutiny depends on making deliberate choices about what can be examined in depth. Attempting to scrutinise too many issues simultaneously was widely viewed as reducing impact and limiting opportunities to embed learning. Wider financial pressures, workforce constraints and competing demands across safeguarding systems were also described as factors that can restrict scrutiny activity. Participants generally suggested that stronger scrutiny was associated with realistic prioritisation and a focus on depth rather than breadth.

Summary

Effective independent scrutiny is shaped by a combination of system capacity, leadership, culture, relationships, role clarity and access to evidence. Interviewees highlighted the importance of strong business unit support, analytical capability, clear governance arrangements and leaders who welcome challenge and promote a learning culture. Trust, constructive relationships and appropriate autonomy enable scrutineers to remain both independent and influential, while credibility, experience and professional judgement are seen as essential to exercising the role effectively. Conversely, limited capacity, organisational instability, role ambiguity, defensive cultures and competing system pressures can reduce the impact of scrutiny. Overall, the findings suggest that effective scrutiny depends not only on the capability of the individual scrutineer but on the wider conditions within which scrutiny operates, with the strongest arrangements characterised by openness to challenge, realistic prioritisation and a shared commitment to learning and improvement.

Reflective Questions for Partnerships: Facilitators and Barriers

1. Which enabling factors are strongest in our system: leadership; culture; infrastructure; relationships?
2. Where are gaps that are limiting scrutiny's effectiveness?
3. How well do leaders: welcome challenge; model openness; create psychological safety?
4. Do our business unit and analytical capacity enable deep, insight-driven scrutiny?
5. How effectively do we balance autonomy ("freedom to roam") with alignment and accountability?
6. Which barriers most affect us: capacity; data; culture; role clarity?
7. How do these barriers interact (e.g. limited time + poor data = weak insight)?
8. Where is scrutiny being constrained by: misunderstanding of its role; defensiveness; over-ambition?
9. How resilient is our scrutiny model during system change or leadership churn?
10. Which barriers are within our control—and what are we doing about them?

Meetings as a Scrutiny Tool

This section considers the role of meetings within independent scrutiny arrangements. It explores how meetings are used to support oversight, challenge and system understanding, and how they fit within wider scrutiny activity.

Limits of Meetings

Across interviews, meetings are consistently described as a valued but limited component of the independent scrutiny role. They form part of a broader approach that also includes deep-dives, quality assurance activity and direct engagement with practice. This mirrors findings from an earlier study in 2022¹⁰ which similarly highlighted that meeting attendance alone provides limited insight and must be complemented by deeper analytical activity (Pearce et al., 2022).

There is clear resistance to reducing scrutiny to “just going to meetings”, with respondents emphasising the need for scrutiny activity to generate insight rather than visibility alone. Some interviewees also made the point that meetings can present a curated or overly positive picture of system performance, limiting their reliability as a sole source of scrutiny evidence and, on their own, are rarely sufficient to answer key scrutiny questions.

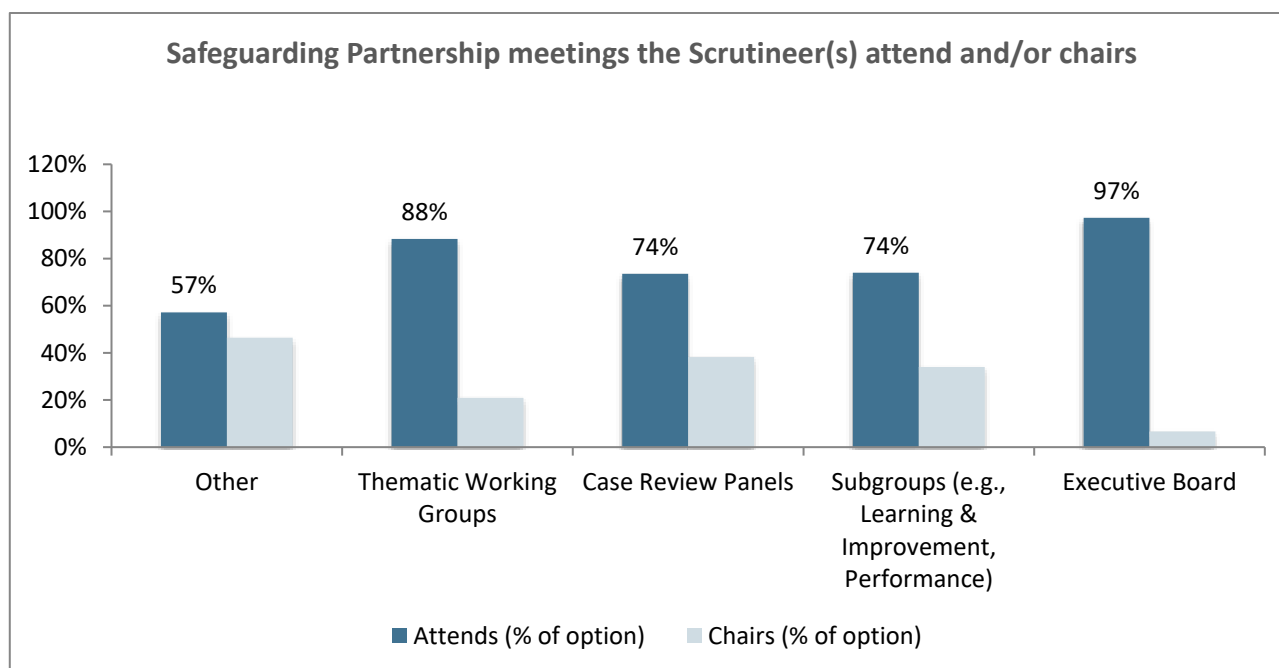
Strategic Meetings are Prioritised

Interviewees commonly reported prioritising attendance at strategic, executive-level meetings, such as safeguarding partner boards, where they can observe decision-making, leadership culture and provide senior-level challenge. Survey findings reinforce this, indicating that executive meetings are the ones that scrutineers are most likely to attend, though they are less frequently chaired.

Engagement with subgroups was described by some interviewees as more selective and typically aligned to their current priorities. Rather than attending all subgroup meetings routinely, some scrutineers reported attending groups that were most relevant to the specific issue, theme or line of enquiry being scrutinised at the time (for example, performance, quality assurance or review groups). These interviewees suggested that this targeted approach helps ensure that meeting attendance complements, rather than displaces analytical work and wider scrutiny activity.

¹⁰ [Pearce, J., Stratton, I., Parker, L. and Thorpe, A. \(2022\) Independent Scrutiny and Local Safeguarding Children Partnerships. Vulnerability Knowledge and Practice Programme and the Safer Young Lives Research Centre, University of Bedfordshire.](#)

Figure 8: Meetings Attended and Chaired by Scrutineers



Source: National Survey of Safeguarding Partnerships

Balancing Presence, Independence and Challenge

A consistent theme that the interviewees talked about is the need to balance visibility with independence. Attendance at meetings was seen as supporting system understanding, enabling timely challenge and helping the scrutineer to understand how partnership decisions are made. However, some interviewees cautioned that excessive involvement - particularly through chairing - can risk blurring boundaries between scrutiny and operational leadership. This tension was also evident in the 2022 study¹¹, which highlighted both the value of close involvement in understanding partnership dynamics and the risk of role confusion where scrutiny and chairing functions overlap. The current findings therefore suggest that this is not a new concern, but a persistent feature of independent scrutiny since early implementation; scrutiny needs sufficient presence to be informed and influential, while retaining enough distance to remain independent and credible (Pearce et al., 2022). While independent chairing arrangements are now uncommon and are not reflected in current statutory guidance, the broader issue of maintaining appropriate separation between scrutiny and partnership leadership remains relevant.

Meetings are also described as most effective as spaces for constructive challenge, where scrutineers act as a “critical friend” by asking probing questions rather than directing decisions. Interviewees said that meeting effectiveness is also shaped by wider

¹¹ [Pearce, J., Stratton, I., Parker, L. and Thorpe, A. \(2022\) Independent Scrutiny and Local Safeguarding Children Partnerships. Vulnerability Knowledge and Practice Programme and the Safer Young Lives Research Centre, University of Bedfordshire.](#)

governance clarity. Where structures, escalation routes and feedback loops are well defined, meetings provide opportunities to track issues, follow themes across the system and monitor progress over time.

Summary

Meetings are a valuable scrutiny tool, providing insight into partnership leadership, governance and decision-making. However, interviewees consistently emphasised that meetings alone are insufficient and must be complemented by wider scrutiny activity. Effective scrutiny requires a balance between maintaining visibility and providing challenge, while retaining sufficient independence and avoiding operational involvement. Overall, meetings are most effective when used as part of a broader, evidence-based scrutiny approach.

Reflective Questions for Partnerships: Meetings

1. How much of our scrutiny is visibility versus insight?
2. To what extent do meetings provide a curated narrative rather than a real picture of practice?
3. Are we using meeting attendance strategically, or as a proxy for scrutiny activity?
4. How well do our governance structures enable scrutiny to track issues through the system?
5. Where might increased presence risk compromising independence or challenge?

Sources of Evidence

This section examines the evidence used to inform independent scrutiny. It explores the sources, methods and approaches scrutineers use to develop judgements about the effectiveness of safeguarding arrangements.

Triangulation and Core Evidence Sources

Interviewees frequently viewed effective independent scrutiny as relying on triangulation of multiple sources of evidence, rather than depending on any single dataset or method. As one interviewee explained:

“We do take quite a systematic approach... what’s the learning we’re getting through the partnership, what’s the evidence... how can we triangulate that with practitioners’ experience... and families and children’s experience.”

Most of the interviewees emphasised that effective scrutiny should combine qualitative and quantitative evidence to build assurance, test hypotheses, and avoid over-reliance on one perspective. To enable more in-depth work, respondents commonly described routinely drawing on a wide range of sources, often six or more, to develop a rounded and credible picture.

Commonly cited sources of evidence include:

- Performance and outcome data (dashboards, KPIs, trend data)
- Multi-agency audits (case file, thematic, dip sampling)
- Safeguarding reviews (rapid reviews, CSPRs, local learning reviews, inspection reports, national evidence)
- Meeting papers, minutes and decision logs, policies and procedures
- Practitioner perspectives (focus groups, interviews, surveys)
- Direct engagement with children, young people and families

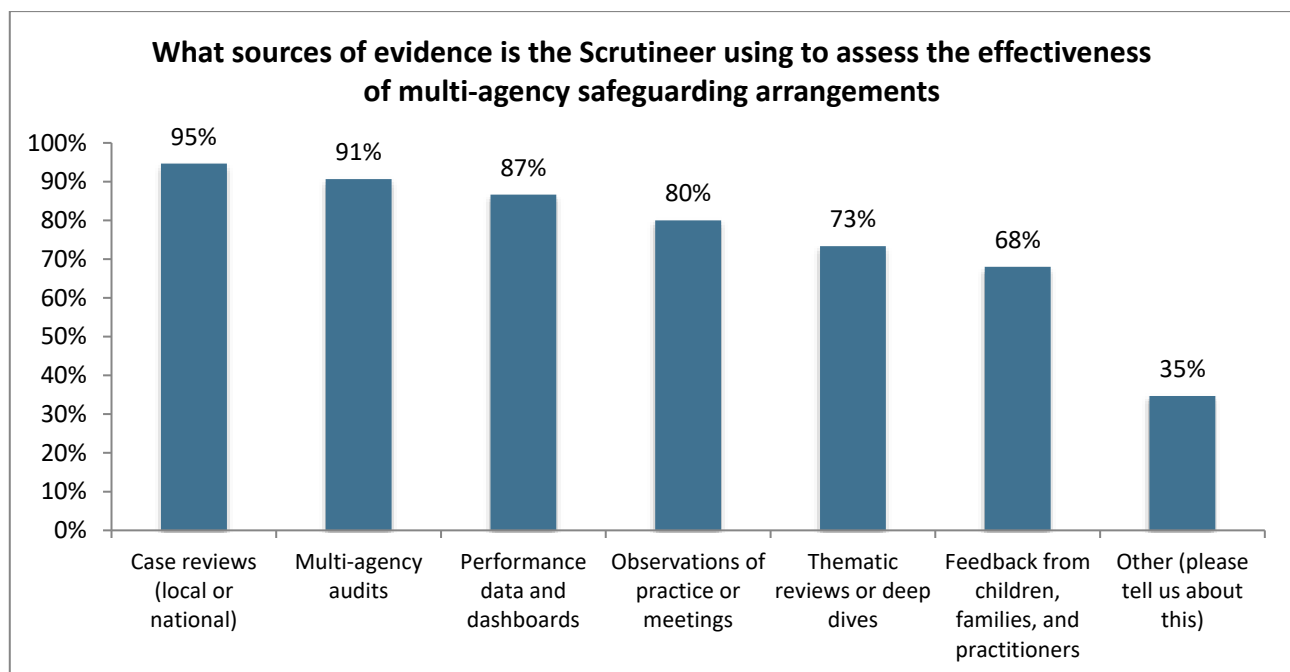
Survey findings reinforce this emphasis on triangulation with widespread use of case reviews, audits, performance data, and observations. Additional sources referenced by some respondents in the ‘Other’ category include Section 11 audits, single-agency assurance activity, practitioner engagement, inspectorate reports, national panel publications, complaints and escalations, site visits to frontline services, and cross-partnership comparisons. Training evaluation and embedded learning were also noted by some as key indicators of effectiveness.

Case study example: Triangulating evidence to identify a system wide issue

One partnership described how independent scrutiny combined learning from rapid reviews, performance data, multi-agency audits, practitioner feedback and governance activity and they were able to identify a recurring issue relating to information sharing and decision-making across agencies. Viewed in isolation, these cases appeared context specific; taken together, they suggested a broader recurring systemic pattern.

This triangulated analysis helped the partnership recognise the issue as system-wide rather than practice specific, prompting a focus on strengthening shared frameworks and assurance mechanisms. Interviewees felt that triangulating multiple sources of evidence increased confidence in scrutiny findings, supported clearer prioritisation and reduced the risk of focusing on isolated incidents rather than underlying system weaknesses.

Figure 9: Sources of Evidence Used for Scrutiny



Source: National Survey of Safeguarding Partnerships

Qualitative Insights and Direct Observations

Most interviewees said that whilst quantitative data is essential for identifying patterns and risk, it is rarely sufficient on its own. Interviewees also consistently emphasised the value of:

- Practitioner voice, to understand how systems operate in practice

- Lived experience, to test whether strategic intentions translate into outcomes for children and families

Interviewees noted that qualitative evidence is critical to understanding the “*why*” behind performance trends and audit findings. As one interviewee noted:

“The real magic happens... when they go out into the field... talking to frontline people... that’s where you really understand what it feels like in practice.”

Some interviewees described direct observation and participation in assurance activities, such as case conferences, case review meetings and multi-agency audit activity, as important sources of insight. They suggested that it enables scrutineers to assess aspects of system functioning that are not visible in documentation, such as the quality of professional challenge, decision-making and partnership behaviours.

Flexible and Proportionate Approaches to Evidence Gathering

Some interviewees noted that evidence-gathering approaches are typically described as tailored and flexible, rather than standardised. Methods are adapted according to:

- The scrutiny question (e.g. effectiveness, governance, practice quality)
- Scale and sensitivity of the issue
- Partnership maturity and capacity.

Interviewees consistently rejected “one-size-fits-all” approaches, describing scrutiny as adaptive and judgement-led rather than procedural. Some interviewees said that they draw on established frameworks (e.g. the TASP “Six Steps”) however, the implementation of the approach varies.

Interviewees also said that the effectiveness of evidence use is also influenced by local infrastructure. Those with strong analytical capacity, shared datasets or integrated dashboards had greater confidence in interpreting data.

Using Evidence to Demonstrate Impact

Interviewees consistently noted that evidence is not only used to identify findings, but also to demonstrate impact. As mentioned above, follow-through is viewed as a key component, including action planning, monitoring, re-audit activity, and revisiting key themes -often over 12 to 24 months.

Linking scrutiny findings to strategic priorities is seen by partnerships as critical to ensuring sustained improvement rather than one-off exercise. Scrutiny outputs such as reports, briefings and evaluation also form part of the evidence base. These are expected to

clearly articulate sources, explain how conclusions are reached, and acknowledge limitations, including where there is uncertainty. Shorter formats, such as one-page briefing notes, are often used alongside full reports to support workforce learning and dissemination.

Several interviewees recognised the risk of multiple, disconnected action plans emerging from different assurance processes. Some partnerships addressed this through integrated approaches, combining recommendations from independent scrutiny, audits, Section 11 activity, rapid reviews and safeguarding practice reviews within a single action-tracking framework. Interviewees emphasised the importance of ensuring scrutiny findings were aligned to existing partnership priorities, assigned to named owners, and embedded within mainstream improvement activity rather than operating as stand-alone scrutiny plans.

Summary

Independent scrutineers draw on a wide range of evidence sources and emphasise triangulation to build a robust understanding of safeguarding effectiveness. Effective scrutiny combines quantitative data with qualitative insights from audits, reviews, practitioners, children and families, recognising that no single source provides a complete picture. Evidence-gathering approaches are typically flexible and tailored to particular pieces of scrutiny. Direct engagement and observation are used to see how systems operate in practice. The findings also highlight the importance of using evidence not only to identify issues but to demonstrate impact over time through action planning, monitoring and ongoing review, embedding scrutiny within wider partnership improvement activity.

Reflective Questions for Partnerships: Sources of Evidence

1. How robust is our triangulation of evidence—and where are we over-reliant on one source (e.g. data or audits)?
2. Do we sufficiently integrate: practitioner voice; lived experience; direct observation?
3. How confident are we that our evidence explains the “why” behind performance, not just the “what”?
4. Where are there gaps in data quality, access or analytical capacity that limit scrutiny?
5. How transparent are we about limitations or uncertainty in our evidence base?

Impact of Independent Scrutineer - what difference does scrutiny make

This section explores how independent scrutiny contributes to safeguarding partnerships. It considers the ways in which scrutiny influences learning, accountability, decision-making and improvement.

Strengthening Learning Culture and Reflective Practice

Interviewees said that scrutiny is most effective when it helps partnerships reflect on how they operate and identify areas for improvement. Rather than reaching quick conclusions, some interviewees felt that effective scrutiny creates opportunities for partners to discuss strengths, challenges and differing perspectives, supporting deeper understanding and learning. Interviewees consistently emphasised that meaningful change takes time. Scrutiny was seen as more impactful when partnerships are able to act on feedback, embed improvements and revisit issues over time. One interviewee noted:

"We have really worked to get a learning culture... it is okay for people to have differences of opinion... we encourage those discussions."

And another said:

"Rather than to become so entrenched around the problem, we create the space to discuss the problem so that we can find solutions to it."

Interviewees associated effective scrutiny with approaches that are structured, proportionate and balanced. They suggested that clear frameworks help support consistency and ensure scrutiny is experienced as constructive rather than overly critical.

Case study example: From scrutiny finding to system change

One partnership described how a scrutiny contributed to sustained improvement through a cycle of review, action and re-testing. A multi-agency audit identified concerns about missed opportunities for early intervention. This prompted further scrutiny that highlighted weaknesses in information sharing and decision-making across agencies.

The independent scrutineer worked with the partnership to agree a small number of priority actions, with clear ownership assigned. These were incorporated into existing governance and action-tracking arrangements. Follow-up audit activity was later used to test whether improvements had become embedded in practice.

While some improvement was identified, continuing inconsistencies prompted additional targeted action. Interviewees emphasised that this iterative cycle — scrutiny, action, retesting and adjustment - as critical to achieving sustained change and assessing whether improvements had translated into practice.

Strengthening Accountability and System Clarity

A recurring theme is the role of the independent scrutineer in strengthening system-wide accountability. Interviewees described scrutiny as helping partnerships identify who is responsible for taking forward recommendations and improvement activity arising from scrutiny. This was described as helping ensure that findings were embedded within existing governance and action-tracking arrangements, assigned to named owners, and aligned with wider partnership priorities. Scrutiny was seen as particularly valuable by some interviewees in providing challenge and follow-up, helping partnerships maintain oversight of agreed actions and their implementation over time.

As one interviewee explained:

“You have to find homes [for recommendations]... what can we do effectively in what timeframe... what’s going to look different as a result.”

Interviewees emphasised the importance of restraint in making recommendations. A small number of clearly defined actions, with explicit ownership and realistic timescales, is seen as more helpful than extensive lists. This approach supports shared responsibility and positions scrutiny as working alongside partners rather than imposing change on them.

Driving Improvement in Practice and Outcomes

Interviewees identified clear links between independent scrutiny activity and improvements in frontline practice. Examples included:

- Identifying weaknesses in practice (e.g. delays or inconsistencies in strategy discussions) through audit and data analysis
- Escalating concerns to senior leadership to prompt action
- Commissioning targeted follow-up activity to address identified issues

As one interviewee noted:

“We create actions out of scrutiny... then we look back... and the data will show us whether we’re having the right impact.”

In some partnerships, interviewees reported being able to evidence improvement of their scrutiny activities through follow-up audits, inspection outcomes, and other assurance activity, demonstrating the contribution of scrutiny to measurable change.

Illustrative Examples of Practice Improvements Associated with Scrutiny Activity

The examples below are drawn from different partnerships to illustrate the range of ways in which scrutiny was reported to contribute to change:

Information sharing - scrutiny of Section 11 returns identified information sharing as an area requiring improvement. A dedicated review of information-sharing arrangements was commissioned. Findings informed a partnership workstream and led to further scrutiny and assurance activity focused on strengthening information-sharing practice across agencies.

Learning culture - scrutiny of the partnership's learning hub prompted further scrutiny of wider learning culture. This informed the development of a learning strategy and learning statement helping strengthen reflective practice and shared ownership of learning and a more structured approach to embedding and evaluating learning across the partnership.

Multi-agency chronologies - scrutiny of a pilot multi-agency chronology approach (an approach that combines agency information to build a shared understanding of a child's circumstances): the scrutineer gathered evidence through direct observation of child protection conferences, engagement with practitioners and feedback from families. Findings informed further development and promotion of the approach across the workforce and led to strengthened consistency in information sharing.

Reflective supervision - scrutiny of a multi-agency reflective supervision model identified that the model showed promise but needed greater embedding and consistency across agencies. Findings informed workforce development and evaluation activity, this then contributed to increased practitioner engagement and confidence in reflective practice and wider use of the model to resolve professional differences and strengthen multi-agency working.

Child sexual abuse - scrutiny and audit activity identified the need for stronger strategic leadership and coordination of child sexual abuse work. Findings prompted discussion at delegated safeguarding partner level and helped shape the development of dedicated strategic leadership arrangements for child sexual abuse. This strengthened oversight of partnership activity, provided greater clarity about accountability and priorities, and supported a more coordinated partnership response to child sexual abuse.

Independent scrutineers also play an important role in supporting the translation of learning into improvement. Interviewees described scrutiny as interacting closely with, rather than duplicating, other assurance processes such as safeguarding practice reviews,

rapid reviews and multi-agency audits. While these activities sit outside the formal scrutiny function, interviewees described how scrutineers frequently draw on learning from reviews, audits and other assurance activity to identify cross-cutting themes, inform scrutiny priorities, provide independent challenge and assess whether learning has been translated into improvement. In some partnerships, scrutineers also had more direct involvement in aspects of quality assurance activity, such as reviewing findings, contributing challenge and oversight, or helping to evaluate the impact of improvement activity arising from reviews and audits. In several partnerships, scrutiny was used to revisit issues previously identified through reviews and audits, helping to assess whether agreed actions had been embedded and resulted in meaningful change.

Several interviewees described scrutiny as extending beyond the activity of an individual scrutineer and becoming embedded within wider partnership culture and practice. In these examples, scrutiny was viewed as a shared responsibility, with partner agencies actively engaging in reflection, challenge and improvement activity. This finding builds on an important theme identified in the 2022 study¹². In that research, some partnerships were already describing scrutiny not as something undertaken solely by an external individual, but as a shared partnership discipline. One example was an embedded scrutiny working group involving partner agencies in oversight of the scrutiny process, shared understanding of referral behaviour and thresholds, transparent use of demand and performance information, mutual challenge, review of internal agency processes and regular review of agreed outcomes. This early example illustrated that scrutiny could operate as a mechanism for changing partnership culture and strengthening shared responsibility, rather than simply producing retrospective assurance (Pearce et al., 2022).

¹² [Pearce, J., Stratton, I., Parker, L. and Thorpe, A. \(2022\) Independent Scrutiny and Local Safeguarding Children Partnerships. Vulnerability Knowledge and Practice Programme and the Safer Young Lives Research Centre, University of Bedfordshire.](#)

Summary

Interviewees consistently describe independent scrutiny as having a positive and tangible influence on safeguarding systems. Its impact is most evident in strengthening learning cultures, clarifying accountability, and supporting improvements in frontline practice. Scrutiny is described as most effective when it is focused, proportionate and action-oriented, rather than primarily fault finding. Interviewees associated strong impact with clarity about the role and purpose of independent scrutiny, structured approaches, and sustained follow-through. Effective scrutiny integrates data and lived experience, translates findings into visible action, and reinforces shared responsibility across the partnership. Overall, impact is seen as greatest when scrutiny is embedded within existing governance and learning arrangements, contributing to collective accountability and sustained continuous improvement rather than operating as a separate or purely critical function.

Added Value: What Independent Scrutiny Contributes Beyond Formal Assurance

This section examines the contribution of independent scrutiny beyond its formal assurance function. It explores the wider ways in which scrutineers influence partnership working, learning, relationships and system development.

Developmental Challenge and System-wide Perspective

A central feature of the added value described by interviewees was the ability of independent scrutiny to promote reflection, learning and improvement. Rather than simply reporting findings, scrutineers were described as asking challenging questions, identifying patterns across the system and helping partnerships think critically about whether learning was being embedded and leading to change. Interviewees described scrutineers as creating opportunities for partners to reconsider assumptions about effectiveness, priorities and impact, and to explore issues from different perspectives. This form of challenge was valued not because it directed decisions, but because it deepened understanding, supported collective learning and informed more considered responses. This is illustrated in the case study example above, where triangulation of multiple evidence sources enabled the partnership to identify a system-wide issue that was not visible through any single dataset.

Interviewees described scrutineers as bringing a system-wide perspective that enables them to identify patterns and connections that may not be visible within individual agencies. This system-wide perspective is particularly important in complex environments, where no single agency has full sight of how different elements of the system interact. Independent scrutiny is therefore valued for its capacity to connect disparate strands of information and experience into a coherent, system-level understanding. Scrutineers also draw on external networks (e.g. TASP) to bring wider sector insight into partnerships.

Case study example: Independent scrutineer as critical friend and mediator

One partnership described how the independent scrutineer helped partners work through complex or sensitive issues where professional views differed. By providing an independent perspective, asking challenging questions and facilitating discussion across agencies, the scrutineer helped partners develop a shared understanding of issues and their implications for children.

Interviewees described occasions where differences in professional judgement had become entrenched, creating friction and delaying progress. Drawing on their independence and system-wide perspective, the scrutineer helped refocus discussions on shared safeguarding objectives and evidence rather than organisational positions.

Although largely informal and relational, this role was described as bringing tangible benefits, including restoring trust, unblocking stalled work and resolving issues before they escalated into formal disputes. Interviewees suggested that its effectiveness depended on the scrutineer's independence, credibility and relationships across the partnership.

Earlier evidence also suggests that the “critical friend” role has often been expressed through a mixture of challenge, facilitation and relationship-based influence. The 2022 study¹³ included examples of scrutineers acting as constructive critical friends by chairing challenge panels, supporting reflection and continuous improvement, facilitating resolution of agency conflicts and raising local issues at national level (Pearce et al., 2022). This reinforces the finding that the value of scrutiny is not limited to formal reporting. However, it also underlines the importance of clarity: mediation and facilitation can add significant value where they preserve independence and support shared accountability but may weaken scrutiny if they drift into decision-making or operational leadership.

Relational Influence and how Scrutiny ‘Lands’

Interviewees emphasised that much of the added value of independent scrutiny lies in how challenge is delivered. Professional judgement, sensitivity and attention to tone were described as critical to maintaining engagement and avoiding defensiveness. Scrutineers were valued for their ability to interpret evidence in context, and to frame challenge in ways that support learning. In some partnerships, this extends to an informal facilitation

¹³ [Pearce, J., Stratton, I., Parker, L. and Thorpe, A. \(2022\) Independent Scrutiny and Local Safeguarding Children Partnerships. Vulnerability Knowledge and Practice Programme and the Safer Young Lives Research Centre, University of Bedfordshire.](#)

role, enabling constructive dialogue on complex or sensitive issues without assuming decision-making authority. As one interviewee commented:

"We can go to them and be challenging, but in a way that's like, can we also put our arms around you and lead you out of the muddle you've got yourself into? ... we're not here to beat you with a stick."

And another said:

"I think culturally the partnership's invested in independent scrutiny... I'm always asked for my opinion in meetings... often DSPs will say, 'well, is there anything from a scrutiny perspective?' ... people do listen and are curious about why is that a reflection back?"

Scrutineers were also described as proactive and accessible. Rather than operating solely as a retrospective reviewer, effective scrutiny was described as when they contribute early in the process, offering challenge, identifying potential drift, and influencing work before issues escalate. As one interviewee said:

"I absolutely feel that I have freedom to roam...being able to kind of reflect early indicators back into the system that there might be a challenge or an issue without that having to be a formal process."

And another describes scrutiny being used to:

"suggest things to DSPs... and... you might want to have a look at this."

In some partnerships, scrutiny was used not only to look at existing practice but also to shape future priorities. Interviewees described examples where scrutiny findings directly informed the development of new workstreams, strategies and partnership priorities, helping partnerships identify emerging safeguarding issues and determine where future improvement efforts should be focused.

Extending System Capability and Insight

Several interviewees highlighted the value of independent scrutineers as brokers of external intelligence. Independent scrutineers can be members of regional and national networks and this can bring insight, tools and comparative learning that help partnerships situate their challenges and progress within a wider context. This was described as offering "food for thought" supporting reflection without prescribing solutions, enabling partners to draw their own conclusions.

As one interviewee commented:

"... I will nick good practice from anywhere and bring it to you because it means you're going to improve."

And another independent scrutineer that works across multiple areas said:

"the other part of what I would do as a scrutineer is to look across the other partnerships and say, what are those common factors?"

Supporting System Functioning and Capability: Support to Partnership Business Units

Interviewees said that a distinct and often overlooked source of added value lay in the support provided to partnership business units. Although largely informal and rarely captured through formal performance measures, this contribution was consistently described as critical to enabling scrutiny to translate into action.

Business unit roles were described as complex and often isolated, operating across multiple agencies and competing priorities. In this context, scrutineers were described as providing independent, system-level insight that is not otherwise available. Their overview of the system was described as enabling them to support business managers to test thinking, sense-check priorities, navigate conflicting messages, and retain perspective in demanding environments.

Scrutineers were also described as providing advocacy and “backing” within the system, strengthening business units to present complex or challenging messages to senior leaders. Interviewees said that the role enables difficult issues to be surfaced constructively, without undermining relationships or independence.

In addition, interviewees said that scrutineers contribute practical capacity through advisory support and constructive challenge and advisory support, helping to identify emerging risks and work through complex issues. While not easily measurable through KPIs or formal reporting, it is repeatedly described as integral to sustaining momentum and embedding learning over time.

Summary

Independent scrutiny adds value beyond formal assurance by promoting reflection, learning and improvement across safeguarding partnerships. Interviewees highlighted the importance of the scrutineer's ability to provide constructive challenge, bring a system-wide perspective, identify patterns across agencies, and support partnerships to think critically about effectiveness and emerging issues. Much of this value stems from the relational nature of the role. Relationships are key, with effective scrutineers using professional judgement, credibility and influence to facilitate learning and action rather than direct decisions. Scrutineers also contribute external insight, comparative learning and practical support to partnership business units, helping to strengthen system capability, surface emerging risks and maintain momentum for improvement. Overall, the findings suggest that the added value of independent scrutiny lies as much in how the role is exercised as in its formal assurance functions.

Reflective Questions for Partnerships: Added value of Scrutiny

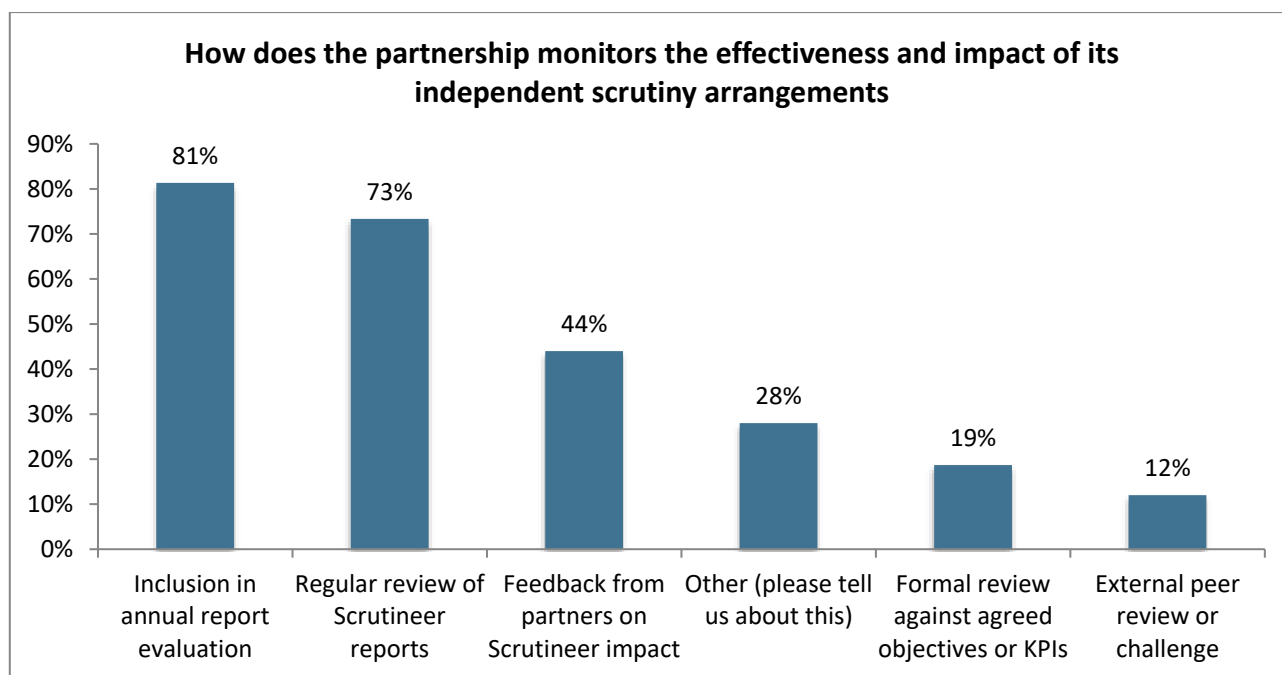
1. What does independent scrutiny bring that could not be achieved through internal assurance alone?
2. How effectively does our scrutineer: challenge assumptions; connect system insights; hold up a "mirror" to the partnership?
3. In what ways does scrutiny improve the quality of leadership dialogue and decision-making?
4. How well is the informal and relational value of scrutiny recognised and used?
5. Where could scrutiny be adding more value as a mediator, broker, or system connector?

How Partnerships Monitor the Effectiveness and Impact of Independent Scrutiny arrangements

This section explores how partnerships assess the effectiveness and impact of independent scrutiny. It examines the approaches used to monitor scrutiny activity, review progress and assess its contribution to learning and improvement.

Survey findings indicate that monitoring arrangements remain relatively underdeveloped. Most partnerships rely on inclusion in annual reports and the routine review of scrutineer outputs, with fewer using formal KPIs or external challenge. This aligns with interview data, which suggests that impact is often assessed in terms of overall direction of travel rather than through tightly defined metrics.

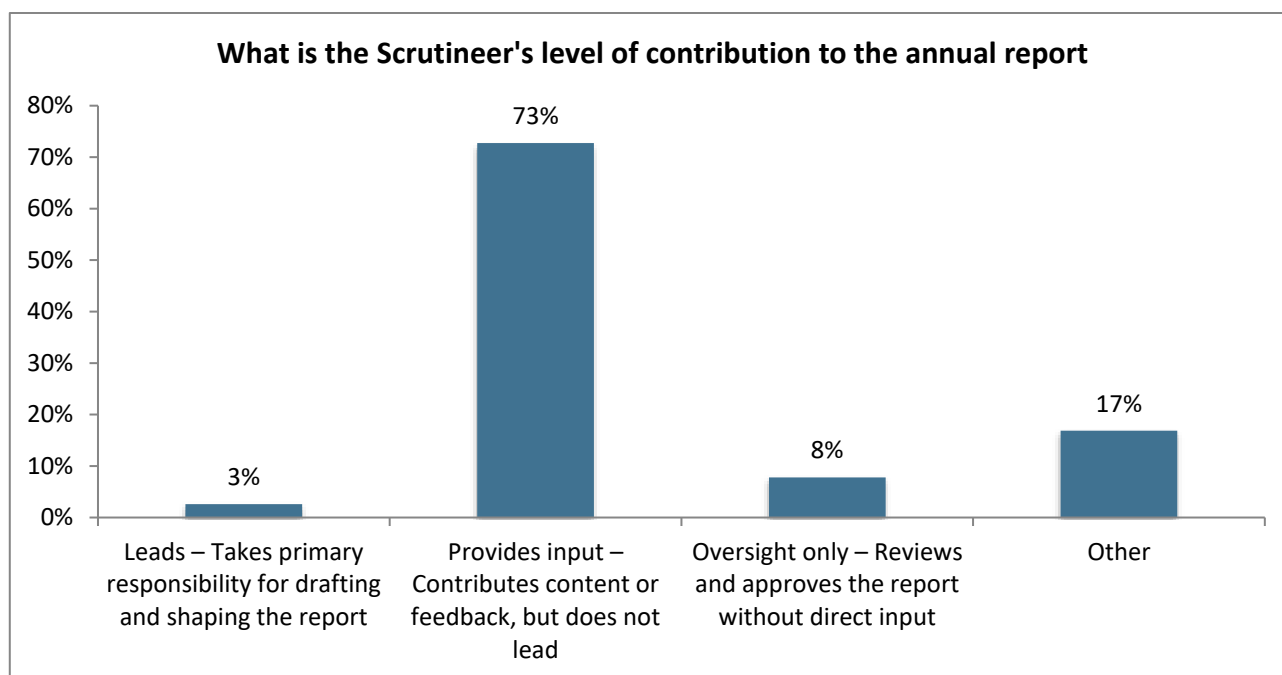
Figure 10: How the effectiveness and impact of independent scrutiny is monitored by the partnership



Source: National Survey of Safeguarding Partnerships

Survey respondents described the scrutineer's involvement in annual reporting. Most respondents indicate scrutineers contribute to, rather than lead, annual reports. This typically involves reviewing content, providing commentary, or producing a foreword or independent assurance statement. A small number report no involvement, while others describe arrangements as still evolving.

Figure 11: The Scrutineer's level of contribution to the annual report



Source: National Survey of Safeguarding Partnerships

Taken together, the findings suggest that partnerships monitor effectiveness through a combination of formal structured mechanisms and ongoing governance processes. Interviewees described a range of approaches to monitoring effectiveness, from relatively informal discussions through to more structured arrangements involving scrutiny plans, annual reviews, partner feedback, action tracking systems and performance monitoring. Several interviewees emphasised that effectiveness was judged less by the completion of scrutiny activity itself and more by whether findings were acted upon and led to demonstrable improvement. Mechanisms used to monitor effectiveness include:

- **Embedded governance and improvement processes** – effectiveness is monitored through ongoing governance, assurance and improvement arrangements, with scrutiny findings integrated into existing action-tracking and partnership planning processes. Examples included the use of composite action plans that brought together recommendations from scrutiny, audits, reviews and Section 11 activity, enabling partnerships to track actions, assign ownership, monitor progress and revisit issues over time and align improvement activity with wider partnership priorities. One partnership described using a composite action plan that brought together recommendations from scrutiny reports, Section 11 activity, audits, rapid reviews and safeguarding practice reviews. This enabled recommendations to be tracked in one place, assigned to appropriate leads and aligned with partnership priorities, helping ensure that learning translated into sustained improvement activity.
- **Executive oversight and reporting** – scrutiny is monitored through executive and delegated safeguarding partner oversight, supported by regular reporting, annual

reviews and inclusion within business planning and accountability arrangements. One interviewee commented that "the plan makes it really accountable."

- **Action tracking and re-testing** – effectiveness is assessed through clear actions, named ownership, regular review and revisiting recommendations over time to determine whether improvement has been sustained. Interviewees emphasised that scrutiny was most effective where findings were revisited and re-tested, rather than simply reported and closed.
- **Review of scrutiny approaches** – some partnerships periodically review scrutiny methodologies, frameworks and priorities to ensure they remain proportionate, relevant and aligned with partnership needs. One interview commented:

"We've just done a review of the multi-agency safeguarding arrangements... we did a questionnaire after... we always try and provide opportunities for people to say things anonymously... and then usually follow something up with one-to-ones with DSPs."

- **Evidence and impact measures** – partnerships use performance data, audits, trend analysis and other evidence sources to assess whether issues identified through scrutiny show improvement over time. Several interviewees emphasised the importance of revisiting recommendations and using performance information to assess whether scrutiny had led to meaningful change. As one interviewee commented:

"Once we start doing work, we'll create actions out of those pieces of scrutiny we do, and then we'll look back at the actions to see what work is going on and then the data will show us whether we're having the right impact."

Some interviewees noted that, while partnerships increasingly monitor scrutiny activity through reports, action plans and governance processes, they often find it harder to evidence the specific impact of scrutiny itself. Partnerships may be able to demonstrate what scrutiny activities took place, but are less able to show what changed as a direct result, highlighting an ongoing challenge in measuring the contribution of scrutiny to improvement and outcomes

- **Cultural and relational indicators** – effectiveness is judged not only by outputs, but by the extent to which scrutiny promotes openness to challenge, constructive dialogue, reflection and shared learning. Several interviewees suggested that the quality of partnership conversations and willingness to engage with challenge provided important indicators of whether scrutiny was having influence.
- **Accountability of the scrutineer** - small number of partnerships describe reviewing the effectiveness of the independent scrutineer and scrutiny arrangements through feedback from partners, reporting arrangements, review discussions and periodic reflection on whether scrutiny was aligned with partnership priorities and

delivering the intended impact. One partnership described using agreed annual objectives and KPIs for the independent scrutineer role, with progress reviewed by safeguarding partners as part of ongoing oversight arrangements. Generally, formal appraisal processes were less commonly described, with a recognition that scrutiny itself should be subject to review and challenge.

Interviewees consistently suggested that effectiveness is not assessed through a single metric, but through a continuous cycle of scrutiny, action, review and reflection. Scrutiny is sustainable where it is embedded in governance structures, supported by robust evidence and follow-through, and reinforced by relationships that value challenge, learning and accountability over time.

Case study example: Reviewing the Effectiveness of Independent Scrutiny

One partnership described undertaking a formal review of its independent scrutiny arrangements as part of a planned cycle of improvement. The review included discussions with subgroup members, management groups and executive partners to gather feedback on how well the independent scrutiny function was working and whether it was delivering the intended benefits. Findings were used to revise the scrutiny framework, clarify methodology and expectations, and inform future recruitment arrangements.

The partnership also used fixed terms for independent scrutineers, reflecting a view that independence can diminish if individuals remain embedded within local systems for too long. They argued that periodic review and planned re-recruitment helped ensure scrutiny arrangements remained effective, responsive and appropriately independent over time.

Looking Ahead: How Interviewees thought Impact Should be Assessed

Interviewees were also asked how the impact of independent scrutiny should be assessed in future. While scrutiny is widely perceived as having a positive influence, there was broad agreement that formal evaluation of both scrutiny activity and the independent scrutineer role remains relatively underdeveloped.

Interviewees suggested that impact assessment should draw on multiple sources of evidence rather than relying on any single measure. Proposed approaches included combining performance data, re-audit findings, practitioner and partner feedback, evidence of implementation, and examples of scrutiny influencing learning, decision-making and improvement activity. Several interviewees also supported more structured

approaches to reviewing the effectiveness of the independent scrutineer role, including annual reporting, regular review discussions and formal feedback mechanisms.

There is general agreement that the key question is not whether scrutiny activity has taken place, but whether it has influenced learning, decision-making and improvement. However, interviewees cautioned against attempting to attribute change solely to scrutiny, recognising that it operates alongside other improvement mechanisms such as workforce development, policy changes, audits, reviews, inspections and leadership activity. Instead, they emphasised the importance of assessing contribution, direction of travel and sustained improvement over time.

Interviewees also stressed that meaningful change often takes time to emerge. Several noted that improvements may not become evident for 12-18 months or longer and cautioned against assessing impact too early, as this risks drawing superficial or misleading conclusions. Some partnerships described using rolling multi-year scrutiny programmes that enabled recommendations, actions and outcomes to be re-examined after implementation, helping to assess not only whether actions had been completed but whether improvements had become embedded in practice.

Summary

Findings suggest that approaches to monitoring the effectiveness and impact of independent scrutiny are still developing and are often embedded within wider governance and improvement arrangements rather than assessed through formal performance measures. Partnerships typically judge effectiveness by whether scrutiny findings lead to action, learning and sustained improvement, using mechanisms such as action tracking, executive oversight, performance monitoring, re-testing of recommendations and partner feedback. Interviewees emphasised that the impact of scrutiny is best understood through its contribution to improvement rather than direct attribution, recognising that change is influenced by multiple factors. The findings also highlight the importance of cultural and relational indicators, such as the impact of scrutiny on openness to challenge and engagement with learning, alongside more formal evidence of progress. Overall, effective scrutiny is viewed as part of a continuous cycle of challenge, action, review and reflection, with meaningful impact often emerging over the longer term.

Reflective Questions for Partnerships: Monitoring Scrutiny Effectiveness and Assessing Impact

1. How do we currently judge whether scrutiny is effective—and how confident are we in that judgement?
2. Are we relying too heavily on process indicators (reports, meetings) rather than impact?
3. How well do we integrate scrutiny within governance, reporting and accountability structures?
4. Do we systematically track: actions; follow-through; re-testing over time?
5. What would a more rigorous and meaningful evaluation framework for scrutiny look like?
6. Are we realistic about timescales for change (12–18 months or longer)?
7. How well do we combine: quantitative data; qualitative insight; lived experience?
8. To what extent can we distinguish between contribution and attribution of scrutiny?
9. How could we strengthen feedback loops from practitioners and partners?
10. What would credible evidence of impact look like in our context?

Support Needs Identified by Interviewees

This section explores the support that interviewees believe would strengthen the effectiveness and sustainability of independent scrutiny. It considers perspectives on role clarity, capability, professional development, infrastructure and national support.

Clarity on Skills, Experience, and Recruitment

Concerns were raised about inconsistent recruitment standards, with interviewees emphasising the need for clearer articulation of the skills and experience required for effective scrutiny. Strong emphasis is placed on safeguarding expertise, statutory knowledge, and experience in analysis and quality assurance.

Building on earlier findings about scrutineer credibility and capability, some interviewees were clear that seniority alone does not guarantee scrutiny competence, nor does experience as an independent chair. Instead, credibility is described as arising from a combination of system-level experience, confidence engaging senior leaders, analytical skill, and relational judgement. Some interviewees suggested shared job profiles, competency frameworks, or light-touch standards to support recruitment, commissioning and appraisal, and to promote a shared understanding of what good scrutiny looks like, while cautioning against approaches that could become overly bureaucratic or evolve into formal accreditation.

Strengthening Role Clarity, Capability, and Professional Development

A widely shared support need is greater clarity about what independent scrutiny is and is not. Interviewees consistently noted the absence of a clear national definition or role description, resulting in wide local variation. Examples include variation in the amount of commissioned scrutineer time, levels of involvement in quality assurance and governance activity, expectations around chairing or facilitation, and differing views about the extent to which scrutineers should provide challenge, support or advisory input. While some variation is viewed positively as enabling responsiveness to local context, it is also described as contributing to confusion, boundary drift, and inconsistent expectations, particularly for new scrutineers and newly established arrangements.

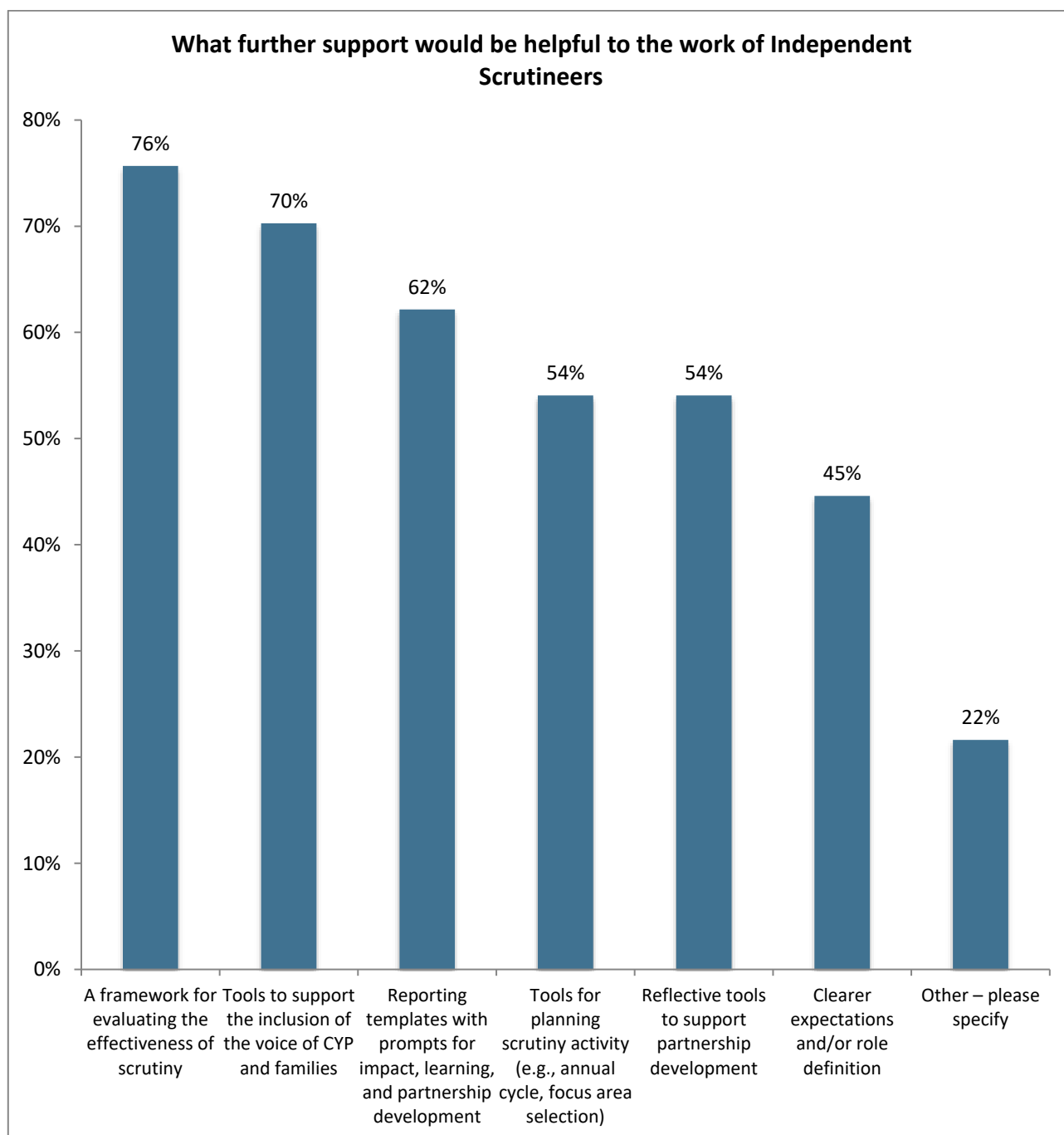
As outlined in earlier sections on role clarity and independence, a lack of shared understanding creates practical and relational challenges. Interviewees expressed strong support for a light-touch national framework setting out the purpose, boundaries, and expectations of independent scrutiny while allowing for local adaptation. The emphasis is on clarity rather than prescription, supported by practical toolkits or minimum offers to help partnerships understand what effective scrutiny looks like, particularly in under-resourced or developing systems. Clearer guidance is also seen as important in supporting the transition from independent chairing to independent scrutiny, helping partnerships move away from residual expectations of leadership or decision making and embed scrutiny as a function of challenge, learning, and improvement.

Alongside clearer role definition, there was demand amongst interviewees for non-mandatory, high-quality professional development to support the effectiveness and sustainability of the scrutiny function. Interviewees identified a range of development needs, including methodology training, coaching on influencing without authority, support for writing and communicating difficult messages, and structured development pathways for new scrutineers.

The transition into the role was described by some interviewees as professionally challenging and, at times, isolating, particularly for those moving from senior operational roles or independent chairing positions. Mentoring, buddying, and coaching arrangements were widely suggested as confidence building and developmental mechanisms that support judgement rather than replace it. Some participants suggested that routes into independent scrutiny roles remain unclear. Interviewees proposed mentoring arrangements, development opportunities and clearer pathways for prospective scrutineers, noting that many current scrutineers enter the role through personal networks or previous experience rather than through formal development pathways.

Survey findings were consistent with a number of themes emerging from the interviews. Both data sources highlighted interest in frameworks to evaluate scrutiny, tools to support the voice of children and families, clearer role expectations, and access to professional development. Taken together, the findings suggest a shared national appetite for greater consistency, capability, and confidence in independent scrutiny through professionalisation that supports practice without becoming overly prescriptive.

Figure 12: Additional support needs identified by respondents



Source: National Survey of Safeguarding Partnerships

Collective Infrastructure: Networks, Tools and Shared Learning

Some interviewees argued that independent scrutiny would benefit from greater professionalisation through stronger regional or national infrastructure. Suggestions included professional networks, competency expectations, accreditation arrangements, registers of experienced scrutineers and shared repositories of methodologies, reports and examples of good practice. Trusted spaces for testing ideas, discussing challenges, and reflecting on complex or sensitive issues are seen as particularly valuable within a role that

can often be professionally isolated. Interviewees felt this would help strengthen consistency, support professional development and improve access to specialist expertise when undertaking complex or highly specialised scrutiny activity

Case study example: Sub-regional and pan-partnership independent scrutiny

Interviewees described a number of examples where scrutiny operated across partnership boundaries. In one sub-regional arrangement, independent scrutineers from multiple safeguarding partnerships undertook a shared thematic deep-dive using a common methodology and agreed lines of enquiry. Findings were considered both locally and collectively, enabling partnerships to identify common strengths, shared challenges and opportunities for improvement. Interviewees reported that this approach reduced duplication, strengthened consistency and supported shared learning across areas.

Other examples involved scrutineers working across multiple partnerships and bringing a wider system perspective to reviews, audits and Section 11 activity. This enabled recurring themes, such as information sharing, professional curiosity and learning and development, to be identified across partnership boundaries and informed shared priorities and improvement activity. Interviewees also highlighted wider regional arrangements as valuable sources of challenge, benchmarking, professional support and the sharing of tools and methodologies.

Interviewees called for stronger regional and sub-regional scrutineer networks, alongside more consistently resourced forums that prioritise peer challenge, mentoring, and problem-solving rather than passive information exchange. Existing mechanisms—such as TASP or Regional Improvement Partnerships—are widely valued. TASP forums are referenced as providing opportunities for peer connection and sharing practice. However, some interviewees said engagement was informal and not always providing the depth of development or challenge required. As a result, while valued, these networks were not seen as sufficient on their own to support the professional development needs of independent scrutineers. There is particular interest in peer mentoring models and more formal professional “homes” for scrutineers that support confidence, quality, and sustainability in a role that is still evolving.

There was also strong support for the development of shared repositories of practical resources for scrutineers, including exemplar reports, methodologies, audit cycles and participation approaches. This was seen by some interviews as a pragmatic way to reduce duplication, improve consistency and enable scrutineers to draw on collective experience without undermining professional independence. Existing tools, such as the TASP “Six Steps for Independent Scrutiny”, were described as useful starting points for structuring activity.

Development of Participation and Co-Production Practice

A significant and recurring gap identified across the interviews relates to children's participation and genuine co-production within scrutiny. Many scrutineers reported low confidence in participation work and concern that scrutiny too often relies on feedback mechanisms rather than meaningful involvement of children, young people, and families.

Interviewees called for dedicated toolkits designed specifically for scrutineers, alongside models that move participation beyond tokenism. There is strong interest in shared regional frameworks that support ethical practice, skill development, and confidence-building. This area is explicitly recognised as resource-intensive, skills-dependent, and requiring cultural change as well as technical guidance, reinforcing that participation is both a professional capability and a system investment issue.

Support for Evidencing Impact

Building on issues identified in the section on *how impact should be assessed*, some interviewees highlighted the ongoing difficulty of testing and evidencing the impact of independent scrutiny. Suggested support includes practical examples of how impact has been assessed elsewhere, alongside templates or models for:

- Action tracking
- Follow-up
- Re-scrutiny

There is particular interest in guidance on integrating qualitative evidence—such as children's voices and practitioner insight—with quantitative data. The emphasis is consistently on learning how to demonstrate meaningful change, rather than simply producing reports or outputs.

Realistic Resourcing and Recognition of System Costs

Although not all partnerships reported insufficient funding, interviewees stressed that scrutiny effectiveness depends on resourcing far beyond the commissioned scrutineer days alone (as mentioned in earlier sections on facilitators and barriers). Business unit capacity, data analysis, participation activity, and follow-through all carry significant cost, which is often under-recognised.

Interviewees expressed interest in support that helps partnerships understand what “good enough” resourcing looks like to sustain credible scrutiny, without imposing a single national model. There is strong consensus that scrutiny quality is inseparable from wider partnership infrastructure and enabling capacity.

Legacy of Independent Chairing and Blurred Role Boundaries

Interviewees described continuing uncertainty in some partnerships about the boundaries between independent scrutiny and the former Independent Chair role. Whilst the use of Independent Chairs has reduced significantly as partnerships implemented Working

Together compliant arrangements, residual expectations associated with independent chairing models do continue to shape understanding of scrutiny in some partnerships. This echoes findings from the 2022 study¹⁴, which highlighted the tension between close involvement in partnership activity, which can strengthen scrutiny through greater insight, and the need to maintain independence and avoid perceptions of role confusion (Pearce et al., 2022). While some partnerships are deliberately distancing scrutiny from chairing or decision-making, residual expectations persist in some settings, creating pressure to take on quasi-governance functions. Interviewees emphasised the importance of clear role boundaries and intentional use of any chair-like responsibilities, stressing these should be time-limited, explicit, and exceptional. Without clarity, there is a risk that legacy chairing expectations are inadvertently reconstructed, undermining the independence and purpose of scrutiny as challenge, assurance, and system learning rather than leadership.

Summary

Interviewees identified a need for greater clarity, consistency and support to strengthen the effectiveness and sustainability of independent scrutiny. Key priorities included clearer role definitions, agreed expectations and competency frameworks to support recruitment, commissioning and professional development, alongside stronger networks, mentoring and opportunities for shared learning. Participants also highlighted the need for practical resources to support participation, evidencing impact and access to shared methodologies and good practice. Interviewees were clear that independent scrutiny does not require tighter control or more prescriptive regulation, but would benefit from greater consistency, clarity and supporting infrastructure. Overall, the findings suggest a desire for professionalisation with flexibility, strengthening capability and confidence while preserving local ownership and adaptability.

¹⁴ [Pearce, J., Stratton, I., Parker, L. and Thorpe, A. \(2022\) Independent Scrutiny and Local Safeguarding Children Partnerships. Vulnerability Knowledge and Practice Programme and the Safer Young Lives Research Centre, University of Bedfordshire.](#)

Reflective Questions for Partnerships: Support Needs

1. Where do we need clearer shared understanding of the scrutiny role?
2. What additional tools or frameworks would strengthen: planning; participation; impact tracking?
3. How connected is our scrutineer to peer networks and professional support?
4. Are we investing enough in: training; coaching; methodological development?
5. How confident are we that we have the right skills, experience and credibility in the scrutineer role?

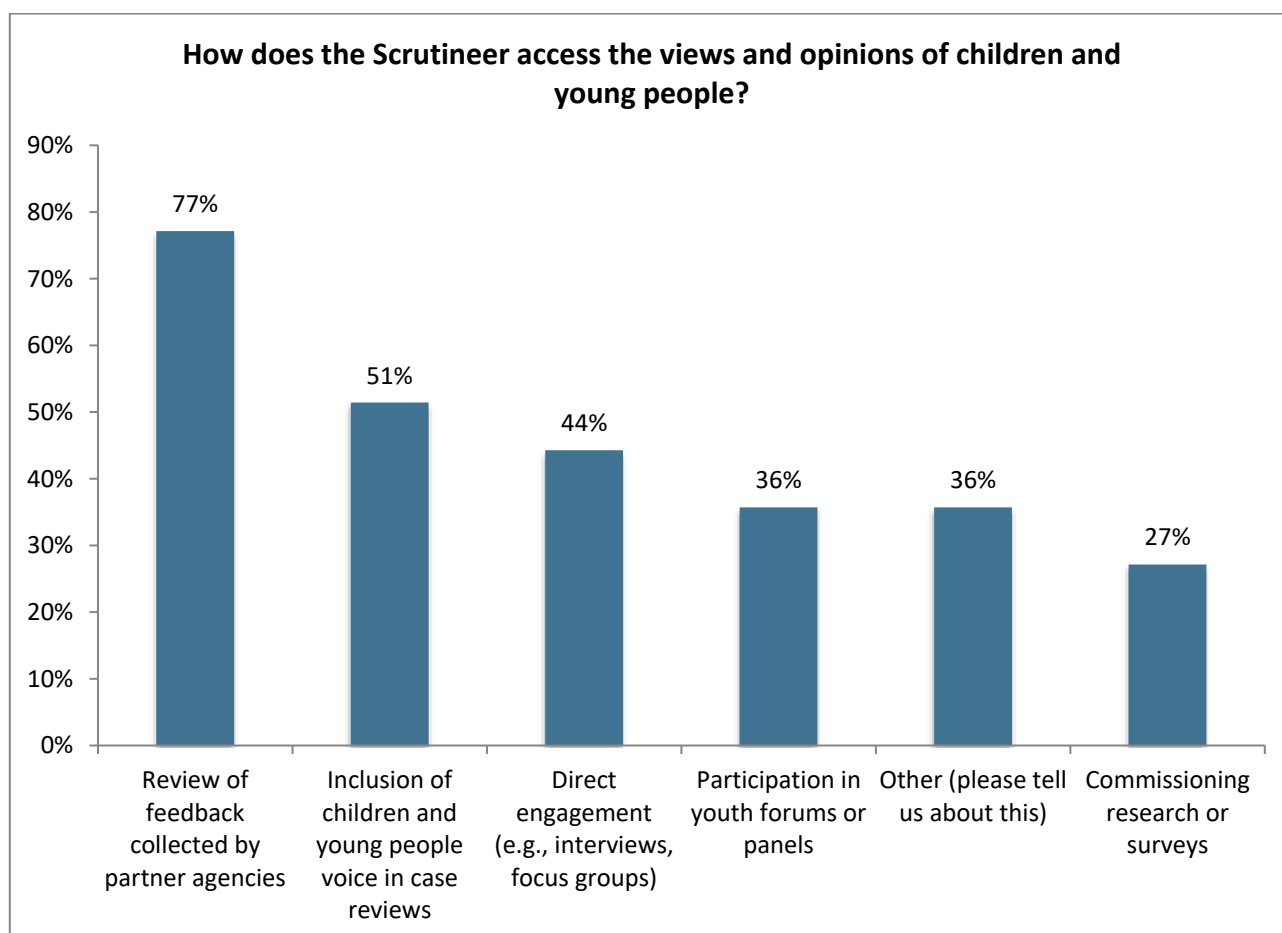
Embedding the Voice of Children and Young People in Scrutiny

This chapter examines how the voices and lived experiences of children, young people and families are incorporated into independent scrutiny. It explores different approaches to participation, engagement and co-production within safeguarding partnerships.

Capturing the Voice of Children

Interviewees consistently emphasised that ensuring the voices and lived experiences of children, young people and families inform scrutiny is a core component of effective safeguarding arrangements. However, both survey and interview findings suggest that practice remains varied. Survey findings indicate that most partnerships rely primarily on feedback and participation activity undertaken by partner agencies, participation teams or existing engagement mechanisms, rather than direct engagement by the independent scrutineer. Fewer partnerships reported direct engagement with children and young people through scrutiny activity or the use of young scrutineer models.

Figure 13: How the Scrutineer accesses the voice of children and young people



Source: National Survey of Safeguarding Partnerships

Across the interviews, participants consistently identified the voice of the child as a priority area for safeguarding partnerships and scrutiny. One interviewee reflected on engaging directly with children and young people, stating that:

"Some of the stuff they give you is absolute dynamite."

However, most felt that further development was needed. As one interviewee commented:

"one of the areas that we were less robust around was capturing the voices of children and families in our partnership's work."

Interviewees also described different approaches to the role of the independent scrutineer in relation to participation of children and young people. While some scrutineers engage directly with children, young people and families, others saw their primary responsibility as providing assurance that the partnership was effectively capturing, understanding and acting on children's views. In these arrangements, scrutiny focuses less on undertaking participation activity itself and more on testing whether lived experience is embedded within decision-making, quality assurance, learning and improvement processes. Several interviewees described a combination of both approaches, drawing on participation teams, established engagement mechanisms and existing lived experience evidence while also undertaking direct engagement where this was considered relevant and proportionate.

The findings suggest that there is no single model for incorporating children's voices into scrutiny. Instead, partnerships adopt different approaches depending on local capacity, participation infrastructure and the role envisaged for independent scrutiny.

Dedicated Infrastructure Makes the Difference

Interviewees described significant variation in partnerships' capacity to engage with children, young people and families. A small number highlighted the value of dedicated participation resource in strengthening the role of lived experience within scrutiny and partnership learning. One interviewee emphasised that participation needs active investment:

"We have a great participation team.... we can go to, who will do all they can to get that young person's voice".

Case study example: Sustained participation through dedicated capacity

One partnership described how appointing a full-time participation officer within the partnership team strengthened the role of children and families' lived experience within safeguarding activity. It enabled continuous outreach, work alongside existing youth forums and engagement with children and families who were not routinely engaged in formal participation structures.

Interviewees reported that the participation officer acted as a bridge between lived experience and partnership activity, helping to shape scrutiny, inform decision-making and maintain feedback loops. As a result, participation became more embedded within partnership processes and scrutiny was perceived as better informed by the experiences of children and families.

Moving Beyond Established or “Safe” Voices

Interviewees cautioned against relying solely on established participation forums. While these groups provide valuable insight, they may disproportionately represent children and young people who are confident, articulate and experienced in expressing their views. Several participants argued that effective scrutiny should make deliberate efforts to reach children and young people who are less likely to participate in formal engagement activity, including those affected by exploitation, violence, deprivation, social exclusion or other forms of vulnerability. This was seen as important in ensuring that scrutiny is informed by the experiences of children whose voices are often least heard within safeguarding systems. As one interviewee commented:

“What you have often are young people who are familiar with representing their views or very articulate in being able to do that... and... what [name of independent scrutineer] can do... is reach out to those children and young people who might not be so familiar with giving feedback to a partnership.”

One interviewee reflected on the value of engaging with children and young people beyond established participation forums. They gave an example where in one engagement exercise, young people highlighted contrasting perceptions of policing. Those with direct experience of police contact often described more positive views, while those without contact were more likely to see police as intimidating or threatening. Interviewees described this type of insight as demonstrating the importance of engaging directly with children and young people rather than relying solely on adult assumptions about their experiences.

Some interviewees associated effective participation with intentional outreach to children and young people who are not already engaged, including those affected by exploitation,

neglect, deprivation, or wider disadvantage. Interviewees described the following approaches as particularly effective:

- Detached youth work
- Community and family engagement
- Observational visits

Interviewees emphasised that reaching these voices requires time, skill, safeguarding awareness, and close coordination across agencies. Participation is for some framed as relational and developmental work, not a one-off engagement activity.

Participation Embedded Across the System, Not Bolted On

Some interviewees described the voice of the child as a “golden thread” running through safeguarding and scrutiny activity, rather than as a discrete or episodic exercise. In these contexts, lived experience is embedded across governance and assurance structures, examples include:

- Voice-of-the-Child subgroups at partnership level
- Annual conferences designed and led by young people
- Young people co-designing:
 - Web content
 - Pathways
 - Business plans
- Lived experience informing:
 - Audits
 - Rapid reviews
 - Learning reviews
 - Scrutiny priorities

In some partnerships, emphasis was placed on feedback loops—often framed as “you said, we did”—to demonstrate clearly how children’s contributions led to change. These mechanisms are described as essential to maintaining trust and credibility with young people and families. One interviewee emphasised that participation should not be bolted on, saying:

“Some of their priorities might not always be our priorities and their way of looking at the world might be very different to ours.”

Case study example: "You Said, We Did" feedback loop

One partnership used a "You Said, We Did" approach to demonstrate how the views of children and young people influenced safeguarding activity and partnership priorities. Through engagement events, young people identified a range of concerns, including bullying and cyberbullying, online harms, safer mobile phone use, recreational drug-use, feeling listened to in school, and personal safety when travelling independently.

In response, the partnership developed and promoted a range of actions, including safer phone guidance for schools, online safety resources, awareness-raising materials about the risks of recreational drug-use, travel safety information, and a wider child protection campaign delivered with partner agencies. Feedback was also shared with schools and published through partnership communication channels to demonstrate how young people's views had been acted upon

The partnership described this type of approach as helping to strengthen trust and credibility by showing children and young people that their views not only informed discussions but also led to tangible action. In doing so, participation became a mechanism for learning and improvement rather than a one-off consultation exercise.

Young Scrutineers and Peer-Led Models

Several interviewees reported developing or strengthening young scrutineer or peer-led models, often with increasing sophistication over time. One partnership described moving away from reliance on one or two individual young people towards recruiting a broader pool of young scrutineers, with attention to demographic diversity and a range of lived experiences.

Some partnerships described investing in young scrutineers through:

- preparation and induction;
- training and skills development;
- ongoing support and supervision;
- emotional and wellbeing support; and
- practical arrangements to enable participation.

These arrangements were described as important in recognising both safeguarding responsibilities and the potential impact of engaging with sensitive issues.

Interviewees also highlighted a number of challenges associated with sustaining young scrutineer models, including:

- ensuring diversity and representation;
- balancing meaningful participation with safeguarding considerations;
- differing views on payment and recognition of time and expertise;
- maintaining continuity as young people move on; and
- the ongoing recruitment and relationship-building required to sustain participation over time.

Overall, interviewees viewed young scrutineer approaches as offering significant potential to strengthen scrutiny by bringing perspectives that might otherwise be absent from partnership discussions, whilst recognising that meaningful participation requires sustained investment and support.

Moving from Consultation to Co-production

While many partnerships demonstrated a commitment to gathering feedback from children and young people, several interviewees argued that consultation alone is insufficient. Participants distinguished between collecting children's views and involving children in shaping decisions, priorities and service improvements. Feedback was viewed as an important source of insight, but interviewees suggested that meaningful change is more likely to arise from participatory and co-production approaches that actively involve children and young people in designing solutions and influencing safeguarding activity. Some participants described this as an important next stage in the development of child-centred scrutiny arrangements.

Tangible Changes Driven by Lived Experience

In some areas, children and young people's feedback influenced safeguarding practice and the way support was delivered. Interviewees pointed to concrete examples where lived-experience input led to visible change. For example:

- Changes to health assessments (e.g. offering online alternatives)
- Alterations to language used in assessments and plans ("mind your language" training)
- Priorities reshaped by young people's views on safety, trauma, and wellbeing
- Young people directly involved in redesigning safeguarding partnership website content.
- Young people involved in the recruitment process for the Independent Scrutineer

One scrutineer described how young people challenged professionals to make safeguarding plans more meaningful and understandable to them. As one young person explained:

"We need to know what you want doing with our family this month. What are the goals? How will I know that that's been achieved?"

Across the interviews, participants emphasised the importance of answering the "so what?" by ensuring that young people could see how their contributions had influenced practice or decisions. Several also argued that effective scrutiny requires a willingness to hear challenging perspectives arising from lived experience. As one interviewee explained:

"they need to...see the benefit of if they put their views forward, where those can kind of go and be helpful in the system."

Independent Scrutiny Driving Improvement in Child Voice

One partnership described how independent scrutiny identified a gap in the extent to which children's voices were informing partnership activity. While individual agencies had established participation mechanisms scrutiny found that this was not consistently influencing partnership-level decision-making. In response, the partnership invested in dedicated engagement events and strengthened opportunities for children and young people to contribute to priority setting, business planning and improvement activity.

Interviewees described this as a significant shift in approach. Rather than treating participation as a standalone activity, the partnership moved towards embedding children's voices throughout its work. Scrutiny subsequently monitored how lived experience was being incorporated into business plans, audits, reviews and improvement activity. One interviewee described the partnership as being "in a totally different place" in relation to children's voice compared with previous years.

Examples of impact included:

- Young people helping to shape partnership priorities.
- Co-production of website content and resources for children and families.
- Direct engagement between young people and senior safeguarding leaders.
- Observational visits with children in care to understand their lived experiences.
- Children's voices being embedded within audits, rapid reviews and learning reviews.
- Feedback mechanisms demonstrating how young people's contributions had influenced decisions and change.

The partnership also sought to ensure that child voice was woven throughout its improvement activity rather than treated as a separate workstream. For example, a trauma-focused programme of work began with engagement with young people, incorporated their views throughout implementation, and planned further engagement at the end of the process to assess its impact. Young people were also involved in developing materials, communications and awareness-raising resources.

This example demonstrates how independent scrutiny can help partnerships move beyond from gathering children's views to embedding those views within decision-making, governance and continuous improvement.

Case study example: From lived experience to tangible change

One partnership described how independent scrutiny helped translate children and young peoples' lived experience into tangible changes in practice. Feedback from children and young people highlighted anxiety associated with routine processes, including assessments and appointments. By bringing together lived experience, audit findings and practitioner feedback, the independent scrutineer helped reframe the issue as a system concern rather than isolated practice issues.

This led to targeted changes, including more flexible approaches to engagement and clearer guidance for practitioners. Follow up activity focused on whether these changes were reflected in practice and experienced positively by children and young people. Interviewees emphasised that the value of scrutiny lay not in amplifying children's voices alone, but in ensuring those voices informed decisions, actions and review, strengthening confidence that participation led to meaningful change rather than symbolic engagement.

Ethical and Practical Challenges

Partnerships acknowledge significant challenges, including:

- Ethical risk of repeatedly drawing on the same children to “prove” engagement
- Emotional impact of asking children to revisit traumatic experiences
- Time required to build trust and readiness
- Sustainability issues (young people age out, move on, or gain employment)

As a result, some partnerships consciously:

- Use existing data and lived-experience insights more intelligently
- Integrate children's voices already captured through practice, reviews, and services
- Focus on *how* voices are used, not just *whether* they are collected

Survey findings reinforce these challenges. While most partnerships report reliance on feedback collected by agencies, far fewer indicate direct engagement or use of young scrutineers, underlining interview accounts that meaningful participation remains uneven and resource dependent.

Resourcing and Consistency Remain Uneven

While good practice exists, partnerships repeatedly noted that:

- Participation work is often time-limited or grant-funded
- Dedicated partnership capacity varies widely across the country
- Local authorities often carry most of the burden
- Digital and innovative engagement methods are promising but costly

Some interviews expressed the view that national or regional support could reduce duplication, strengthen consistency, and help scale effective participation models, particularly where partnerships lack dedicated infrastructure.

Summary

The findings suggest that most partnerships recognise the importance of embedding the voices and lived experiences of children, young people and families within scrutiny, but approaches remain varied and unevenly developed. While many partnerships rely on participation activity undertaken by partner agencies, relatively few involve children and young people directly in scrutiny processes. Interviewees emphasised that effective scrutiny requires more than consultation alone, with increasing focus on participation, co-production and ensuring that children's experiences inform priorities, assurance activity and improvement work. Dedicated participation infrastructure, intentional efforts to reach less-heard groups, and strong feedback loops were identified as key enablers of meaningful engagement. Although examples of innovative practice, including young scrutineer models, were evident, participants highlighted ongoing challenges relating to capacity, sustainability, representation and resource. Overall, the findings suggest that embedding the voice of children and young people is widely viewed as a core component of effective scrutiny but remains an area requiring continued investment and development.

Reflective Questions for Partnerships: Voice of Children

1. How embedded is the voice of children as a "golden thread", rather than an add-on?
2. Are we hearing from a diverse range of children, or repeatedly from "safe" voices?
3. How do we demonstrate "you said, we did" in practice?
4. To what extent does lived experience shape scrutiny questions, not just inform answers?
5. What investment is needed to move from consultation to co-production?
6. How do we ensure participation is: ethical; sustainable; impactful?

Conclusion

This research shows that independent scrutiny is now an established part of safeguarding partnership arrangements and is widely seen as making a valuable contribution to learning, accountability and improvement. Across the interviews and survey responses, there is strong support for the role and a clear sense that independent scrutiny adds value beyond formal assurance processes.

At the same time, the findings show that independent scrutiny continues to operate through a wide range of local models. Partnerships differ in how scrutiny is commissioned, resourced and positioned within local arrangements. Some scrutineers are closely connected to quality assurance and improvement activity, while others operate at greater distance and focus more explicitly on assessing the effectiveness of partnership arrangements. This variation reflects the flexibility within statutory guidance but also means there is no single, shared understanding of what excellent scrutiny looks like in practice.

The report also shows that effective scrutiny depends heavily on the conditions within which it operates. Strong leadership, a positive learning culture, clear governance arrangements, business unit capacity, access to evidence and analytical support were all identified as important enablers. Where these foundations are weak, scrutiny was more likely to face barriers regardless of the capability of the individual scrutineer. Effective scrutiny was most associated with mature partnerships that welcomed challenge and saw scrutiny as a routine part of learning and improvement. Conversely, resource pressures, organisational instability, unclear role expectations and defensive responses to challenge were identified as factors that can limit the influence and impact of scrutiny.

A recurring theme throughout the research is the need to balance independence and influence. Interviewees consistently described the importance of scrutineers having sufficient access to people, information and partnership activity to understand how the system is functioning. However, they also highlighted the importance of maintaining enough independence to provide objective challenge and credible assurance. The findings suggest that effective scrutiny requires both proximity and distance, and that partnerships continue to navigate this balance in different ways. The research also suggests there is no consistently shared understanding of where that balance should sit. Partnerships described differing interpretations of how closely scrutineers should be involved in assurance, improvement and priority-setting activity, raising important questions about how independence is maintained while remaining sufficiently connected to influence practice.

The research also highlights an important distinction between influence and responsibility. Independent scrutineers are often valued for their ability to surface evidence, challenge assumptions, ask difficult questions and support reflection. However, interviewees were clear that responsibility for decisions, service delivery and improvement should remain with safeguarding partners and relevant agencies. The role of the scrutineer is not to lead

or deliver change, but to strengthen the partnership's ability to identify where change is needed and hold itself to account for delivering it.

The findings suggest that the impact of independent scrutiny is most often seen through its contribution to wider improvement activity rather than through direct attribution.

Interviewees described how scrutiny can influence learning, shape priorities, strengthen accountability, improve self-awareness and support better decision-making. However, they also recognised that scrutiny operates alongside many other drivers of change, including audits, reviews, inspections and leadership activity. As a result, impact is best understood through evidence of learning, action, follow-through and improvement over time rather than through simple cause-and-effect measures.

The voice of children and young people emerged as both a priority and an area for further development. While examples of innovative and meaningful participation were identified, many interviewees felt that more progress is needed to ensure lived experience consistently informs scrutiny activity, partnership priorities and improvement work.

Finally, the research suggests that independent scrutiny is continuing to mature as a professional function. Participants broadly supported greater clarity about the purpose of scrutiny, stronger support networks, improved opportunities for learning and development, and more consistent approaches to assessing impact. However, there is little appetite for highly prescriptive national requirements. Instead, interviewees favoured clearer expectations combined with continued local flexibility.

Overall, the findings suggest that independent scrutiny has become an important part of the safeguarding system. Its greatest contribution lies not in inspection or compliance, but in its ability to provide constructive challenge, promote reflection, strengthen accountability and support continuous improvement. As safeguarding partnerships continue to evolve, maintaining the right balance between independence, influence and impact will remain central to the future development of the role.



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