The Six Steps to Independent Scrutiny
Integrated Practical Tool (2025)

Introduction

The *Six Steps to Independent Scrutiny* was first published in 2019 by Jenny Pearce, in the context of significant reform to statutory safeguarding arrangements following the Wood Review and the introduction of multi-agency safeguarding partnerships. At that time, the role of independent scrutiny was new, locally determined, and still emerging. The Six Steps provided an early, practical framework to support safeguarding partners and independent scrutineers to understand what effective scrutiny could look like within these new arrangements.

Over the past six years, independent scrutiny has become an established — though still evolving — part of the safeguarding system. During this period, scrutineers across England have continued to use, adapt, and refine the Six Steps in a wide range of local contexts. Its longevity reflects its core strengths: a focus on outcomes for children rather than compliance; flexibility to support different local scrutiny models; and an emphasis on inquiry, reflection, and constructive challenge rather than inspection.

Throughout this time, together, the author and The Association of Safeguarding Partners (TASP) have periodically updated the framework to reflect changes in statutory guidance, emerging research, and learning from practice. This has included updates following revisions to *Working Together to Safeguard Children* and insights from national and local evaluations of multi-agency safeguarding arrangements.

This latest iteration represents a further stage in that evolution. It integrates learning from:

- Evaluation of the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Arrangements (2024) and TASP Guide to the MACS Evaluation Framework (TASP, 2025)
- Checklist for Independent Scrutiny (Pearce, Stratton, Parker and Thorpe, 2022)
- The Six Steps to Independent Scrutiny (TASP, updated 2024)
- NW Multi-Agency Safeguarding Learning and Support Hub's Indicators to support "True to Us" discussion.
- Working Together 2023

As well as sustained dialogue with members of the TASP Independent Scrutineer Network. Importantly, it remains grounded in the original principles of the Six Steps, recognising independent scrutiny as a distinct system function that supports assurance, learning, and continuous improvement across safeguarding partnerships. (Table 1 provides a structured comparison across these pieces of work).

The Six Steps is not an inspection framework, nor a checklist designed to produce 'right' answers. It is intended as a practical tool to support independent scrutineers, safeguarding partners, and relevant agencies to think together about the effectiveness of local arrangements, the impact on children and families, and the conditions needed for improvement. It acknowledges that not all questions will be answerable positively at any given time and encourages honest reflection about constraints, priorities, and longer-term system change.

Used well, the Six Steps provides a shared structure for inquiry and dialogue, enabling independent scrutiny to fulfil its role as a critical friend — offering support, challenge, and assurance in the best interests of babies, children, young people, and their families.

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For cross reference Working Together (2023) (Page 37) identifies 7 key Functions of independent scrutiny role.

- Provide safeguarding partners and relevant agencies with independent, rigorous, and effective support and challenge at both a strategic and operational level (steps 1 to 6 inclusive).
- Provide assurance to the whole system in judging the effectiveness of the multi-agency safeguarding arrangements through a range of scrutiny methods (steps 1 to 6 inclusive: see also the 'what to scrutinise' and how to scrutinise' in The checklist for Independent scrutiny (www.theasp.org.uk).
- Ensure that statutory duties are being fulfilled, quality assurance mechanisms are in place, and that local child safeguarding practice reviews and national reviews are analysed, with key learning areas identified and effectively implemented across the safeguarding system (step 4 and 5).
- Ensure that the voice of children and families is considered as part of scrutiny and that this is at the heart of arrangements through direct feedback, informing policy and practice (step 3).
- Be regarded as a 'critical friend' and provide opportunities for two-way discussion and reflection between frontline practitioners and leaders. This will encourage and enable strong, clear, strategic leadership (steps 1 to 6 inclusive).
- Provide independent advice when there are disagreements between agencies and safeguarding partners and facilitate escalation procedures (Main focus steps 1 and 2).
- Evaluate and contribute to multi-agency safeguarding published arrangements and the annual report, alongside feeding into the wider accountability systems such as inspections (step 1)

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Table 1 – Comparison of Six Steps, focus for new steps, MACS Evaluation Framework, The IS Checklist Updated Six Steps 2024) and the NW True to Us principles and indicators

Integrated Six Steps (*new)	Scrutiny Focus for new Steps	MACS Evaluation Framework	Independent Scrutiny Checklist	Six Steps (updated 2024)	NW "True to Us" Alignment (MoU Principle + Indicators)
1. Strategic Leadership and Governance	Vision, governance, EEDI, joint direction	Leadership	Who leads; independence; accountability structures	Step 1 – Leadership	**NW MoU Principle:** *To collaborate better… nurturing a culture of trust, accountability and support* **Indicators:** Co-created vision; evidence that strategic direction is informed by shared principles; early identification of risks; joint decision-making with partners at strategic and operational levels
2. Accountability Across Statutory and Relevant Agency Partners	Data-informed assurance; challenge culture	Accountability	What is scrutinised; assurance; transparency; challenge	Step 4 – QA and Data	**NW MoU Principle:** *Be transparent and open to challenge* (mutual support, trust, honesty) **Indicators:** Partners hold each other to account; CYP/families can hold partners to account; assurance of timely multi-agency response across continuum of need
3. Collaboration	Multi-agency working effectiveness; QA systems	Collaboration	How scrutiny is undertaken; shared methods; learning	Step 2 – Relevant Agencies	**NW MoU Principle:** Share practice and expertise to allow effective collaboration **Indicators:** Multi-agency working is aligned to shared vision; information sharing is robust; workforce is skilled, supported, and able to collaborate across boundaries (MASH, MACE, Family Hubs, CP teams)
4. Voice, Experience and Influence	Influence; feedback loops; accessibility; babies' experience	Participation	Inclusion of voice; representation; experience; EEDI	Step 3 – CYP and Families	**NW MoU Principle:** Be Child and Family Led (views, experiences and needs at centre) **Indicators:** Participation shapes strategy; voice integrated into decision-making; inclusivity and fairness; CYP/families recognise/report safety concerns; community participation in safeguarding responses; EEDI embedded in participation practices

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5. Managing and Integrating Learning from Reviews, Research and Scrutiny	Embedding learning; culture change	Culture	Learning; integration of findings; reflection	Step 5 – Learning and Research	**NW MoU Principle:** Offer mutual support and professional development (learning culture) **Indicators:** Learning is understood, acted upon, and embedded; just and fair culture; reflective practice driven by leadership; research-informed decision-making; learning from local and national reviews cascaded into practice.
6. Workforce and Continuous Improvement	Training; reflective practice; improvement	Collaboration and Culture	Workforce capability; applying learning; sustainability	Step 6 – Workforce Development	**NW MoU Principle:** Share practice and expertise… enable collaboration and effective practice **Indicators:** Skilled and supported workforce; multi-agency training aligned with values and shared vision; strong communication between partners; workforce equipped with knowledge and skills to work equitably with diverse CYP, families and communities

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Step 1 – Strategic Leadership and Governance

Focus: Vision, governance, and leadership accountability.

Core Principles

- Leadership is shared, visible, and co-created with babies, children, young people, families, and communities.
- Leaders promote a shared culture that is relational and enables psychological safety and learning across the partnership.
- Strategic direction is informed by evidence, professional expertise, and lived experience.
- Decision-making is transparent and multi-agency, with education, health, and VCSE partners actively engaged.
- Governance structures set out clear accountability lines enabling leaders to hold each other to account (LSPs, DSPs, sub-groups).
- Leadership models and measures equity, equality, diversity, and inclusion (EEDI) in policy and decision-making.
- Leaders models the partnership learning culture.

Areas for Scrutiny

- Clarity and accessibility of strategic vision and priorities.
- Evidence that LSPs act collectively and hold their agencies to account.
- Cross-partnership connectivity and influence on shared priorities.
- Representation of education and community sectors.
- Mechanisms for independent oversight and scrutiny.

Examples of Scrutiny Questions

1. How is the shared vision co-created and communicated?
2. Do decisions demonstrably reflect data, scrutiny findings, and lived experience?
3. How do LSPs and DSPs evidence shared accountability for outcomes?
4. How does leadership demonstrate openness to challenge and inclusivity?
5. Are governance and assurance arrangements reviewed for effectiveness?
6. How do leaders cultivate psychological safety as the bedrock of partnership learning?

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Step 2 – Accountability Across Statutory and Relevant Agency Partners

Focus: Data management, assurance, and constructive challenge, safeguarding with babies, children, young people, families and communities.

Core Principles

- Partners hold one another to account through open, respectful challenge.
- Scrutiny is independent but aligned with continuous assurance activity.
- Priorities and improvement actions are data-driven (qualitative and quantitative), evidence-based drawing on lived experience.
- Holding each other to account for managing EEDI practice; [helping the partnership to think very broadly around minoritised communities]
- Assurance focuses on *impact*, not only compliance.
- Escalation processes are clearly understood and used confidently.

Areas for Scrutiny

- Quality, accessibility, and interpretation of multi-agency data.
- Transparency and use of information-sharing arrangements.
- Culture of professional challenge and escalation.
- Links between data trends and strategic priorities.
- Visibility of follow-through on scrutiny and audit recommendations.
- Quantitative and qualitative data informs a shared understanding of ongoing practice as well as emerging needs across the partnership.

Examples of Scrutiny Questions

1. Is there a full portfolio of data from all partners informing priority-setting and leadership decisions?
2. How do partners test and challenge each other's assurances?
3. Are escalation routes trusted and effective?
4. Is challenge viewed as a strength and a route to improvement?
5. How does the partnership evidence the difference it makes?
6. How does quantitative and qualitative data inform a shared understanding of agencies activities and contribution within the partnership?

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Step 3 – Collaboration

Focus: Multi-agency working, quality assurance, and collective accountability.

Core Principles

- Collaboration is grounded in shared purpose, trust, and clarity of roles.
- Professional practice is co-created in collaboration and with mindful observation of babies, children, young people, families, and communities.
- Multi-agency teams collaborate effectively - for example across MASH, MACE, Family Hubs, and Child Protection Teams - to deliver coordinated safeguarding responses.
- Quality-assurance systems assess collective impact, not only single-agency compliance.
- Information sharing is timely, proportionate, and outcome focused.
- Scrutiny considers *how partnerships act together* to implement and sustain learning.

Areas for Scrutiny

- Effectiveness of joint working within and between MASH, MACE, Family Hubs, and Child Protection Teams.
- Integration and functionality of multi-agency QA systems.
- Communication and feedback mechanisms across agencies and communities.
- Shared analysis and ownership of learning and improvement.
- Balance between operational delivery and strategic collaboration *(note – needs refinement later)*.

Examples of Scrutiny Questions

1. How effectively do multi-agency teams coordinate safeguarding responses?
2. What enables or hinders joint decision-making across operational settings?
3. How are QA findings shared and acted upon collectively?
4. Do partners jointly analyse and learn from audits and reviews?
5. How does the collaboration with babies, children, young people, families and communities influence partnership working?
6. Do partners know of and understand each other's pressures, constraints and world views?
7. How does disagreement, challenge and change inform constructive collaboration?

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Step 4 – Voice, Experience and Influence

Focus: Participation, equality, and representation throughout strategy and practice.

Core Principles

Strategic Level

- Babies, children, young people, families, and communities influence partnership vision and planning.
- Voices of users with lived safeguarding experience inform leadership decisions, governance papers, review activity and operational practice.
- The partnership actively identifies and addresses the impact of bias, discrimination, disadvantage, and contextual factors (e.g. poverty, disability, culture, identity) on whose voices are heard.

Operational Level

- Practitioners seek, hear, and act on babies', children's and families' lived experiences in everyday safeguarding work.
- Feedback is routinely shared with children and families to show how their views shaped actions.
- Inclusive methods ensure babies and pre-verbal children are represented through observation, developmental expertise, and advocacy.
- EEDI practice includes translation, accessible communication, and trust-building approaches tailored to identity and need.

Areas for Scrutiny

- Voice in strategy and decision-making.
- Voice in practice — how babies' and children's experiences shape intervention.
- Representation — who contributes and who is missing.
- EEDI — how discrimination and disadvantage are recognised and addressed.
- Feedback loops and communication of outcomes to participants.

Examples of Scrutiny Questions

1. How are babies', children's, and families' experiences captured and used to inform priorities?
2. How does the partnership close the feedback loop ("you said / we did together")?
3. How are seldom heard and marginalised voices sought and supported?
4. How is the delivery of service co-created and informed by those with lived experience?
5. Are practitioners fully consulting those for whom they work in day-to-day operational practice?
6. How does leadership monitor and respond to the impact of discrimination or contextual disadvantage on voice and engagement?
7. Are young people or family representatives directly involved in scrutiny or advisory roles?
8. How does practitioner bias shape interpretation of children and families' voices especially in the context of ethnic diversity and racism?

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Step 5 – Managing and Integrating Learning from Review, Research and Scrutiny

Focus: Learning culture, integration of evidence, and systemic improvement.

Core Principles

- Learning from local, regional and national case reviews, audits, research, and independent scrutiny informs collective reflection and continuous improvement.
- Review processes are transparent, timely, and proportionately resourced.
- A "just and fair" culture supports open reflection and reduces blame.
- Learning is disseminated and embedded through QA, training, and single and multi-agency supervision.
- Impact of learning is demonstrable and revisited.

Areas for Scrutiny

- Clarity and quality of review processes.
- Integration of findings into strategy, policy, and workforce development.
- Evidence of collective reflection and system change following reviews.
- Leadership oversight of learning implementation.
- Cultural readiness for reflection and improvement.
- Priority of purpose and rational of scrutiny activity.

Examples of Scrutiny Questions

1. How are learning points tracked and embedded across agencies?
2. Do action plans emerging from learning appropriately include all partner contributions in creation and implementation?
3. What evidence shows that learning changed practice?
4. How are children's and families' experiences included, understood and reflected in reviews (rapid and CSPRs) and then shape action plans (that is "nothing about me, without me")?
5. Do leaders use learning to advance their own practice and how?
6. Do leaders champion learning and collective reflection across the partnership?
7. How is the effectiveness of the learning system itself reviewed?
8. How is learning from Scrutiny used and reviewed?

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Step 6 – Workforce Development, Training and Continuous Improvement

Focus: Capability, confidence, wellbeing, and reflective culture.

Core Principles

- Multi-agency training is planned, delivered, and evaluated collaboratively.
- Training priorities derive from local data, reviews, and staff feedback.
- Workforce wellbeing, stability, and diversity are monitored and addressed.
- Reflective practice and supervision underpin professional curiosity.
- Continuous improvement is embedded as routine, not reaction.

Areas for Scrutiny

- Strategy and governance for training and workforce development.
- Evaluation of training impact on practice and outcomes.
- Workforce stability, inclusion, and wellbeing.
- Use of research and innovation in training design.
- Culture of learning, reflection, and support.

Examples of Scrutiny Questions

1) How are training and development priorities identified?
2) How do partners measure whether training changes practice?
3) Drawing on multi-agency practitioners experience, are there opportunities for multi-agency
   a) Supervision?
   b) reflective learning?
   c) peer learning?
4) How does the partnership support agencies to assess and promote staff wellbeing and inclusion?
5) What mechanisms sustain improvement between review cycles?
6) What mechanisms sustain continuous improvement to drive collaborative approaches which are relational and restorative in nature and how is this modelled through Partnership Leadership?

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