



Fairness & Belonging

Independent Scrutineer Practice Guide

Applying a Fairness & Belonging Lens to Independent Scrutiny
in the North West of England

Co-produced with North West Independent Scrutineers, Parents, and the Performance, Quality
and Assurance, Inter-agency Trainers and Business Managers networks.

This guide does not explain independent scrutiny to you.
 You know what that is.

It asks a different question: **what does applying a Fairness and Belonging (FAB) lens change about how you do it?**

FAB scrutiny is not an additional role. It is a specific orientation, a habit of asking who is absent before asking who is present, and of connecting what scrutiny finds to the governance decisions that shape children's lives.

Independent scrutineers are uniquely positioned

- Independent enough to name what systems cannot see about themselves
- Connected enough to ensure that finding reaches governance
- Trusted — when properly resourced — to provide challenge that is honest, evidenced and consequential

Three things this guide offers:

1

A shared framework for applying a FAB lens across all scrutiny contexts

2

Practical prompts to use before, during and after scrutiny activity

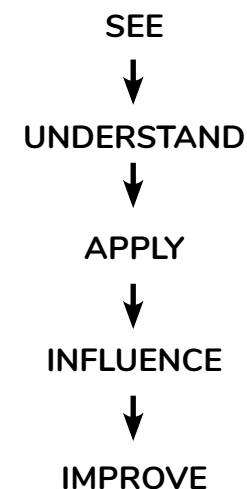
3

Real examples of what changes when the lens is applied

This guide was built from:

- Conversations and development sessions with Independent Scrutineers across the North West
- Contributions and feedback from the North West Performance, Quality and Assurance, Inter-agency Training and Business Managers Networks
- Direct input and co-facilitation from a parent with lived experience of safeguarding systems
- Voice and participation insights from research and activities with young people & parents collated by Participation People

The reader journey





Lived experience is the starting authority for this work — not an illustration of it. The messages below come from parents, carers and young people who have direct experience of safeguarding systems. They are shared with permission.

“ It can’t really be independent scrutiny when scrutineers are only hearing from the local authority. Talk to us. Talk to parent carer forums. We have things to tell you.”

Parent co-facilitator, North West FAB Scrutineer Development Programme 2026

“ Not everyone’s needs are going to be the same and everyone manages differently. So a system that worked for one, may not work for another, and it isn’t fair to put us all in the same box.”

Young person, co-design email feedback 2026

“ When no one addresses the elephant in the room, why would families engage? When I ask families directly about race and their experiences, they always want to talk about it. Always.”

Independent scrutineer, co-design feedback session 2026



Talk to us	Notice what is missing	Follow through
– Independent scrutiny that does not include family and community voice is not truly independent – Connect with parent carer forums, they hold knowledge that no performance report contains – Ask about experiences of racism, discrimination and immigration status. We want to be asked.	– Notice what systems chose not to count, not to ask, not to record – Our full experience is rarely in the records – Absent data is a decision, not a neutral gap	– We have had involvement for years. What changed? That is the question. – Return. Not once. Repeatedly. – The ‘so what?’ is not scrutiny’s question to itself. It is what families have been asking all along.



Fairness

How children and families experience safeguarding systems, not only the outcomes those systems produce. A system can report compliant outcomes while failing children and families through how it makes them feel: unheard, unseen, misunderstood, or treated as a

Belonging

The felt sense, for children, families, and practitioners, of being genuinely included, valued and able to influence the systems that affect their lives.

A child who does not belong in the system's imagination will not be kept safe by it.

FAB

Requires consideration of the full range of characteristics and circumstances that contribute to unequal experience, access or outcomes.



EVIDENCE INTO ACTION

The North West Equity, Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EEDI) Discovery Phase found that while partnerships have invested significantly in data and performance infrastructure, equity-focused questions are not consistently visible in analysis, reporting or governance conversations.

Scrutiny reflection: Where are the equity questions in the governance conversations you attend?

Statutory foundations – UNDERSTAND / FOCUS

Independent scrutiny operates within a strong statutory and policy framework that expects fairness, inclusion and equity as central to safeguarding systems and practice.



EVIDENCE INTO ACTION

Working Together 2026 is clear: fairness, anti-racism and inclusion must be visible in practice, governance and outcomes, not just stated in policies.

Scrutiny reflection:
update to: *How is Working Together informing the governance conversations you are part of?*



Equality Act 2010

Protects people from discrimination and requires due regard to advance equality in public services



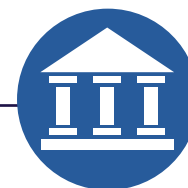
Working Together to Safeguard Children 2026

Requires partnerships to create inclusive, anti-discriminatory cultures and challenge inequity



Inspection Frameworks (Ofsted / CQC / HMI-CFRS)

Evaluate how well partnerships identify and respond to inequality and ensure inclusion.



Independent Scrutiny

Provides impartial challenge, insight and assurance to strengthen learning and accountability.



Fairer outcomes for children and families

When systems embed fairness and belonging, children and families are better protected and supported.



Pause & Reflect

How are statutory duties reflected in the scrutiny you are undertaking right now?

Working Together 2026 – what partnerships must be able to answer AB analysis should enable governance to answer all five questions. Where it cannot, that is itself a finding to report.



1 Who experiences different outcomes, and by what characteristic or circumstance?



2 What system-level explanation has been tested?



3 What action is planned or underway to address disparities, and by when?



4 Is it making a difference, what has changed as a result of actions over (time) ?



4 How is insight used to improve fairness and belonging?

Core concepts – UNDERSTAND / FOCUS



These concepts underpin a fairness and belonging approach to scrutiny. They are not abstract theory, they help you see systems more clearly.



Pause & Reflect

Which of these six concepts is least visible in the scrutiny conversations you currently have, and what might it take to introduce it?



Intersectionality

People experience multiple, overlapping characteristics and inequalities.

For scrutiny

What assumptions might be influencing how we interpret what we see?



Anti-racism

Racism must be proactively recognised and challenged within systems, not assumed absent.

For scrutiny

Where has race and racism been considered — and where has it been avoided?



Discrimination

Can be direct, indirect, harassment or victimisation.

For scrutiny

How might different groups be treated less favourably, intentionally or not?



Cultural humility

A lifelong practice of self-reflection, curiosity and learning from others.

For scrutiny

What assumptions might be influencing how we interpret what we see?



Structural inequality

Outcomes are shaped by the wider social, economic and policy context.

For scrutiny

What system factors may be contributing to these patterns or outcomes?



Fairness Learning

Learning only becomes meaningful when it changes decisions and practice.

For scrutiny

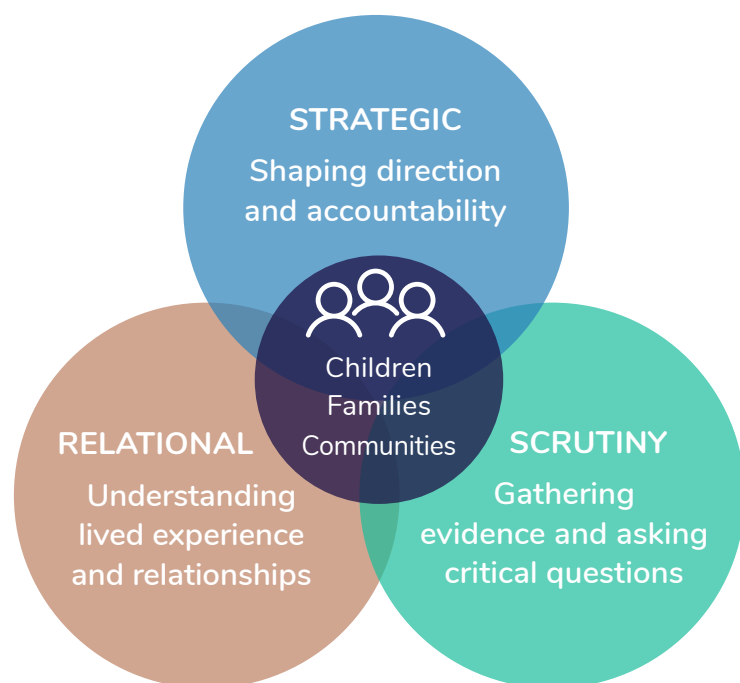
What changed because this was identified, and how will we know it changed?

Practice Tip

Use these concepts to guide your questions, not to label or judge. The question 'how might racism be present here?' opens a door. The claim 'this is racist' closes a room.

The FAB Practice Framework – UNDERSTAND / APPLY / FOCUS

This frame helps scrutineers orientate themselves before any scrutiny activity. It asks a simple question: which domain am I operating in right now, and what should I be focusing on?



Domain	Areas of focus	Key questions for this domain
STRATEGIC	Boards, governance, DSPs and LSPs, resource allocation	What governance decisions are being shaped by this data and analysis? What is not on the strategic agenda that should be? Where are the risks of inequity or exclusion?
SCRUTINY	Reports, audits, deep dives, thematic reviews, case file analysis	What questions would a FAB-informed audit ask? How was the data collected and analysed? Where are blind spots or gaps in the evidence?
RELATIONAL	Partners, practitioners, children, families and communities	How might children and families experience this system? What barriers exist to trust, engagement or understanding? Are community and family voices genuinely present?



Pause & Reflect

Which domain is your primary focus right now — and which is receiving least attention? What would it take to rebalance that?

The FAB Practice Framework – APPLY / PRACTICE

This is the guide's central working tool. Three levels of question, applied to any data, report or conversation. The questions build — **Notice** reveals the surface, **Probe** explores the reasons, **Challenge** drives the change.



Pause & Reflect

Which type of question are you most comfortable with?
Which is hardest for you, and why?

NOTICE

What stands out?

- What do we see in the data?
- What is visible or trending?
- What is missing or not counted?
- What is over / under represented?
- What disaggregated data is used, and what isn't?



Common pitfall:

Focusing only on what is present and not asking what is absent.

PROBE

Why might this be?

- What might explain this pattern?
- What assumptions are being made?
- Whose experience is missing?
- What are the underlying causes?
- What does this tell us about access, experience or outcomes?



Common pitfall:

Accepting the first explanation without exploring deeper.

CHALLENGE

What should happen?

- What needs to change?
- Who is accountable for changing it?
- How will we know it has changed?
- What barriers or resources are needed?
- How will we hear from families and communities on this?



Common pitfall:

Raising challenge without clarity on next steps or accountability.

These three levels apply across all three domains of the FAB Practice Framework.

The combination produces the sharpest scrutiny.

NOTICE

Strategic

PROBE

Scrutiny Activity

CHALLENGE

Relational

Applying the framework – APPLY / PRACTICE

Apply the **Notice** • **Probe** • **Challenge** levels across all three analytical domains.

This grid gives you the most important questions for each combination.

	STRATEGIC	SCRUTINY ACTIVITY	RELATIONAL
NOTICE	– Is this data disaggregated by ethnicity, disability, age? – Who is over/under represented, and is that named? – What is not on the strategic agenda that should be?	– What data gap or absent population does this report contain? – Is ethnicity specific enough to be useful, or too broad? – What question did this report fail to ask?	– Which communities are in the system but absent from the analysis? – Is community or family voice present, or only referenced? – Who experiences the most adverse outcomes? Is that named?
PROBE	– What explanation has the partnership tested, not just offered? – Are racism or ableism being masked by language about 'complexity'? – Did Working Together 2026 shape this decision?	– Who decided what to count, and how might that shape what is visible? – Is intersectionality considered, how do multiple factors combine? – What do safeguarding adult reviews (SARs), serious incident notifications (SINs) or complaints data reveal that routine data does not?	– What barriers, language, trust, immigration status, are shaping the data? – Is lived experience used as intelligence, or only as illustration? – What do practitioners say about the challenges? Has anyone asked?
CHALLENGE	– What equity finding from the last cycle was acted on, specifically? – Is challenge reaching governance, or staying in sub-group? – What needs to change, who is responsible, and by when?	– What change do the data gaps require, structurally, not just in reporting? – Are complaints, SARs and SINs informing practice, or filed? – Are scrutineers given the disaggregated data they need? If not, what changes?	– What does the community say, and how has the partnership formally responded? – If families were asked whether scrutiny is making a difference, what would they say? – What is the 'so what?', now, not in the next report?



Education and exclusion

Why this matters

Attendance and compliance measures can obscure children's genuine needs. Children who do not fit the system's definition of success can become invisible at precisely the point they are most at risk.

Common areas of ignorance

- Data focuses on attendance, not experience
- Exclusions not explored by ethnicity or disability
- Special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) and neurodiversity needs misunderstood
- Voice of children missing

NOTICE

- Who is excluded, suspended or absent? How is this disaggregated? Who is not in the data?
- Are informal exclusions and managed moves counted?
- Is alternative provision visible e.g. elective home education?

PROBE

- What support was offered beforehand? What do children and families describe their experience?
- Is neurodivergent behaviour being misread as conduct?
- What does the child's voice say about why?

CHALLENGE

- What changes are needed in practice or policy? How will improvement be evidenced? By when?
- Are education partners held to the same FAB accountability?
- What happens to children who leave education entirely?

Fab in Practice

Attendance data improved, but parents said their children still felt unwelcome at school.

[ND] Neurodiversity

Why this matters

Neurodivergent children and parents frequently experience misunderstanding. Trauma responses and neurodivergence can be misread as non-compliance or risk — with serious and sometimes irreversible consequences.

Common areas of ignorance

- Needs not identified early
- Behaviour seen as a problem, not communication
- Pathways and transitions not designed with neurodiversity in mind
- Adult learning inconsistent

NOTICE

- Are needs identified early? Are assessments timely and appropriate? Who is missing?
- Is neurodivergence broken down by type, autism, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), dyspraxia?
- What do waiting lists show?

PROBE

- How are behaviours understood? What support is available? How do families experience the process?
- Is neurodivergence being conflated with trauma or attachment?
- Are neurodivergent parents' capacities assessed without accounting for their neurodivergence?

CHALLENGE

- What changes will make services more neuroinclusive? How will we co-produce these changes?
- Are referral pathways and assessment frameworks genuinely neuroinclusive?
- What training have practitioners received?

Fab in Practice

A child was repeatedly suspended. A FAB question asked: what unmet need was this behaviour trying to communicate?

**[DA] Domestic abuse****Why this matters**

Victim-blaming language persists in records and professional conversations. Assessments may not reflect the living reality of the person experiencing abuse, particularly where race, disability, or immigration status intersect.

Common areas of ignorance

- Language not audited in case records
- Non-abusing parent positioned as risk, not protection
- Intersecting factors (immigration, disability, race, ableism and racism) not explored
- Barriers to disclosure not named

NOTICE

- How is the non-abusing parent referred to? Is victim-blaming language present in records and reports?
- Is DA data broken down by ethnicity, disability, immigration status?
- Is the child's voice captured separately?

PROBE

- What barriers exist? Language, immigration status, no recourse to public funds, trust?
- Is coercive control understood and explored, or only physical violence?
- Whose account is given most weight in records?

CHALLENGE

- Has victim-blaming language identified in audit led to a named change in practice?
- Are DA services accessible to all survivors, including those with no recourse to public funds?
- Who is accountable for the change, and by when?

[CT] Care transitions**Why this matters**

System fragmentation at 18 creates barriers at the point of greatest vulnerability. Adultification, treating care-experienced young people as ready for independence the system has not equipped them for, is a recurring and serious concern. Less attention may be paid to cared for children in scrutiny.

Common areas of ignorance

- Data stops at 18
- Corporate parenting partners not all engaged
- No mechanism for young people to report their transition experience
- Intersecting needs (disability, immigration) not tracked

NOTICE

- What happens at 18? Is there data tracking? What are the longer-term outcomes e.g. homelessness, mental health, criminal justice?
- Are disabled young people or those with neurodivergent needs specifically visible in transition data?
- When do pathway plans begin?

PROBE

- Are transitions planned with young people, or done to them?
- Is the corporate parenting duty enacted by ALL partners — health, housing, education?
- Are there cultural or race-specific considerations in how transition support is designed?

CHALLENGE

- Would those with corporate parenting responsibility accept this pathway for their own children? If not, what changes?
- What named change is the partnership committing to, and who is accountable?
- Is there an adult voice from care-experienced people informing how support is designed?

Fab in Practice

An audit found 'failure to protect' language for a parent who had fled repeated violence. The scrutineer named this and drove a recording practice review.

Fab in Practice

A young person cared for since aged 10 said no one had asked what she needed from the transition. One conversation changed the plan.

**[IM] Immigration, asylum and refugee experience****Why this matters**

Immigration status and lived experience of seeking asylum are routinely absent from case records and safeguarding data, even where directly relevant to understanding a child's or family's risk and experience.

Common areas of ignorance

- Ethnicity recorded in broad, unhelpful categories
- Displaced and newly arrived children not visible across all cohorts
- Language and interpreter needs not tracked
- No recourse to public funds not flagged

NOTICE

- Is immigration or asylum status recorded where relevant?
- Are displaced and newly arrived children visible in all relevant cohorts, or only in specialist pathways?
- Are language needs and interpreter provision tracked across the system?

PROBE

- What is the experience of children and families with no recourse to public funds?
- Are displaced and newly arrived pathways clear and equitably resourced?
- What specific risks arise from the intersection of asylum-seeking status with other vulnerabilities?

CHALLENGE

- Are displaced and newly arrived children subject to the same standard of safeguarding as all other children?
- What would the partnership need to change in data systems to make this group fully visible?
- Which community organisations hold knowledge this partnership currently does not?

Fab in Practice

A child was recorded only as 'Black Other.' He was a 15-year-old displaced child from the Democratic Republic of Congo. Nothing in the record reflected his journey, his culture or his specific risks.



What becomes possible when scrutiny asks the question the data has not asked.

When a record says almost nothing	
SITUATION	During a deep dive into contacts and referrals, a scrutineer noticed that a child's ethnicity was recorded as 'Black Other' across multiple agency records, police, health and social care.
QUESTION	'What is the most specific information available about this child's cultural background, nationality and immigration status? What does this record tell us about how the system sees this child?'
CHALLENGE	The scrutineer challenged not the individual record but the data collection system that made it possible, and asked what else might have been missed by the same practice.
IMPACT	A formal review of ethnicity data quality across all cohorts was commissioned. Recording guidance was revised. MASH team briefings were arranged.

When a young person says what no report recorded	
SITUATION	A scrutineer met directly with a young woman with over ten years of safeguarding involvement. Nothing in the professional records suggested she had experienced anything beyond what was written down.
QUESTION	The scrutineer asked about her experience. She disclosed that she had been strip searched by police on multiple occasions. It appeared in no agency report. No professional had thought to ask.
CHALLENGE	The scrutineer challenged both the agency's recording practice and the partnership's mechanisms for capturing young people's direct experience, particularly of police contact.
IMPACT	Data analysis suggested children in her area were significantly more likely to experience strip search than the national average. The partnership chair committed to a formal investigation.



“ Good FAB scrutiny means children and families’ voice and experience genuinely matter, not as a gesture, but as the measure against which everything else is tested.”

Co-produced statement, North West Independent Scrutineers 2026



Strategic

- Asks what changed 8–10 months on, not just after a recommendation
- Escalates when sub-group challenge is not being heard
- Secures direct access to executive meetings
- Reflects family voice back to strategic level
- **⚠ Watch for:** challenge that stays in sub-group
- **❓ Ask:** What equity finding was acted on, and what changed?

Scrutiny activity

- Audits language in reports — names victim-blaming directly
- Observes meetings e.g. CP conferences: curious about the child, not only compliance
- Uses deep dives to hear family narratives
- Scrutinises ethnicity data quality at referral stage
- **⚠ Watch for:** reports that describe but don't explain disproportionality
- **❓ Ask:** What question did this report fail to ask?

Relational

- Visits parent and carer groups directly
- Connects to parent carer forums, knowledge no data holds
- Speaks to children and young people with system experience
- Takes a longitudinal view, returns to the same question at 3, 6, 9 months
- **⚠ Watch for:** treating lived experience as a quote, not insight
- **❓ Ask:** When did you last speak to someone who experienced this system?

Influence & improvement – INFLUENCE / IMPROVE / REFLECT



The improvement pathway

Scrutiny is only as valuable as what changes because of it.
A finding that does not travel is not yet scrutiny, it is observation.

FINDING	Scrutiny surfaces what data obscures. A finding only has value if it travels beyond the room in which it was made.
CHALLENGE	Challenge lands when it is specific, evidenced and addressed to the right level of governance, not left in a sub-committee minute.
DECISION	A decision made without the finding is a decision made in the dark. Scrutiny's role is to ensure decision-makers see what they would otherwise miss.
ACTION	Action without a named owner and a named date is aspiration. Ask: who is responsible, and by when?
REVIEW	Return to the same question. Three months on. Such as six months on. Twelve months on. Sustained scrutiny produces sustained change.
LEARNING	The loop is complete when something has changed and the system has an indication of why — and feeds that learning forward.

Collective asks of partnerships

What scrutineers need from partnerships to make FAB scrutiny sustainable, not dependent on individual goodwill.

- Sufficient and consistent investment in independent scrutiny — current variation across the region is too great
- Disaggregated data on differential outcomes as standard — not by request
- LSPs and DSPs to engage directly with children, families and parent carer forums as part of their role
- Scrutiny findings tracked and responded to at governance level, not acknowledged and filed
- Scrutineers to have formal access to parent carer forums as recognised intelligence sources
- A sustained discipline of asking the 'so what?' about fairness, every reporting cycle
- Clarity on what Working Together 2026 requires of independent scrutiny, shared across all partners



Pause & Reflect

Where in this pathway does scrutiny in your partnership currently stop? What would it take to complete the loop?

"The 'so what?' question is not a challenge to scrutineers. It is a test for the system."

Scrutineer feedback, NW FAB development series 2025



Good scrutiny starts with reflection



Pause & Reflect

What will I do differently in my next scrutiny activity?



Pause & Reflect

What support or learning do I need to strengthen my impact?



Pause & Reflect

Who will I share my learning with, and how?



EVIDENCE INTO ACTION

Scrutineers in this network who applied a FAB lens found that the questions they asked changed what partnerships saw, and in some cases, changed what systems recorded, tracked and responded to.

Scrutiny reflection:

What would change in your partnership if every scrutineer asked one more FAB question per meeting?

My commitment

" My next scrutiny activity, I will notice..."

" I will probe..."

" I will challenge..."

" In three months, I will return to ask..."

Commitments from scrutineers in this network

Shared as illustrations of specificity — what a commitment looks like when it is accountable, not aspirational.

- To request that performance data is broken down by social characteristics
- To include a dedicated FAB section in impact reports
- To raise FAB questions at the start of induction meetings with LSPs and DSPs
- To include progress updates on workforce equality, diversity and inclusion in scrutiny reporting



What will yours be?



Resources & further reading

Statutory and policy

LAW

Working Together to Safeguard Children 2026

Sections on Fairness & Belonging and Independent Scrutiny are essential. Read these before any strategic scrutiny activity.

assets.publishing.service.gov.uk

LAW

Equality Act 2010 and the Public Sector Equality Duty

Grounds FAB scrutiny in legal requirement. The duty to advance equality is active, not passive.

legislation.gov.uk

Research and evidence

RESEARCH

"It's Silent": Race, racism and safeguarding children (Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel, 2025)

Key evidence on the absence of race and racism from safeguarding analysis.

assets.publishing.service.gov.uk

RESEARCH

Child Safeguarding Learning Support and Capability Project (Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel, 2025)

Findings on equity, diversity and inclusion in safeguarding systems. Supports the case that FAB is not optional, emerging, or a 'quick fix'.

assets.publishing.service.gov.uk

Referencing

When referencing this document, please cite as:

Brown, L. (2026). Fairness and Belonging: Independent Scrutineer Practice Guide. North West Children's Safeguarding Partnership.

Tools and insights

INSIGHT

Why Fairness Fails When Systems Can't Learn (Laurelle Brown, 2026)

The Fairness Learning Theory proposition.

brownlaurelle.substack.com

TOOL

FAB: Data Principles (Beese, J and Brown, L., 2026)

Companion resource. Six principles for FAB data analysis and the WT2026 questions partnerships must answer.

nwadcs.org.uk/fairness-and-belonging

Keep learning, keep connected

North West Children's Safeguarding Partnership (NWCSP)

All NWCSP tools, information and guidance

www.nwadcs.org.uk/north-west-childrens-safeguarding-partnership-mou

NW FAB resources

Scrutineer Practice Guide and further FAB resources.

www.nwadcs.org.uk/fairness-and-belonging

Get in touch

Share insights, ask questions, contribute to the ongoing work, contact:

hello@laurellebrown.co.uk

Acknowledgments

This guide was made possible through genuine co-production. Our heartfelt thanks go to **Kylie Wegener**, whose leadership as parent co-facilitator in designing and co-delivering the Independent Scrutineer Development Programme, and whose insight and challenge, have shaped this toolkit from beginning to end.

We are also deeply grateful to the young person who generously shared their experience of education, which features throughout this guide, to Independent Scrutineer, **Mel John-Ross**, for her instrumental role in curating and driving this workstream, and to every Independent Scrutineer whose expertise, challenge and commitment made this first regional resource possible.



LAURELLE BROWN
TRAINING & CONSULTANCY



The children and families in every data set you scrutinise are real.

The questions you ask, or don't ask, shape what the system sees.

Keep asking them.

North West Children's Safeguarding Partnership • Fairness & Belonging Programme • 2026

nwadcs.org.uk