

Title: Independent Scrutineer Annual Report 2025 /2026

Report of: Vicky Buchanan

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1. Purpose of Report:

The purpose of this report is to provide a summary of the key findings from the Independent Scrutineer for Oldham's Safeguarding Children Partnership. The role of the Independent Scrutineer is to carry out the independent scrutiny function as set out in Working Together to Safeguard Children (2023 / 2026). The role of independent scrutiny is to provide assurance in judging the effectiveness of multi-agency arrangements to safeguard and promote the welfare of all children in a local area, including arrangements to identify and review serious child safeguarding cases. Safeguarding partners should ensure that scrutiny is objective, acts as a constructive critical friend and promotes reflection to drive continuous improvement.

I took up the role of Independent Scrutineer for Oldham in January 2025, and this report covers the period January 2025 to 31st March 2026. This report should be read alongside the Partnership Annual Report, 2025 to 2026.

2. Methodology

The Independent Scrutiny Annual Report 2025 – 2026 is based on an evidenced based methodology, as set out under the six steps to scrutiny:

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

The Six Steps to Scrutiny are listed below:

Step 1 – Strategic Leadership and Governance

Focus: Vision, governance, and leadership accountability.

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.

Step 3 – Collaboration

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

Step 4 – Voice, Experience and Influence

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

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

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

Step 6 – Workforce Development, Training and Continuous Improvement

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

The Annual report is informed by scrutiny of:

- Partnership governance arrangements
- Partnership strategies, procedures, guidance, training and workforce development.
- Attendance at two Partnership Development Days
- Observations of Sub – Groups
- Attendance at Statutory Partners Meetings and OSCP Boards, including scrutiny of documents, reports and presentations associated with these.
- Scrutiny of the Partnership Performance Management Information.
- Scrutiny of LSCPRS and Multi – Agency Reviews
- Involvement in Multi – agency Training events
- Involvement in Multi – Agency Quality Assurance
- Two bespoke areas of scrutiny in relation to Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub and Emotional Health and Wellbeing.

This is not intended to be an exhaustive list but illustrates the breadth of scrutiny activity.

3. Key Findings and Headlines

3.1 Step1 - Strategic Leadership and Governance

Governance arrangements are well established in Oldham and comply with Working Together 2023 / 2026 and are published on the OSCP website. There is an agreed strategic vision with agreed core principles which are reviewed as part of annual development days. There is an established and attended monthly

Strategic Partnership meeting, which is attended by Delegated Safeguarding Partners to drive the strategic vision for the partnership. There is a commitment to high support, high challenge to support the strategic vision “ ***...to ensure that all children and young people are safe and feel safe within their homes, schools and communities,***”

The Oldham Safeguarding Partnership meets quarterly and includes ‘relevant agencies. This is a well-attended meeting with good representation from across the partnership and includes a range of schools and education partners and representation from the VCSFE sector.

There is also a quarterly Assurance Meeting which is an opportunity to bring both children’s and adults safeguarding partnerships together with political leaders and the Chief Executive of LA to provide assurance on the quality of safeguarding practice and supports challenge and an opportunity to explore solutions that will make a difference for families and communities.

As Independent Scrutineer I have access to all papers and reports, attend the meetings and independent challenge and scrutiny is welcomed. A framework for independent scrutiny has been developed and a programme of areas that would benefit from this approach has been agreed.

I attend each sub-group on at least an annual basis to understand the effectiveness of these.

There is a significant challenge over the next twelve months to ensure that Strategic Leadership and Governance remains strong given the changing landscape in health arrangements and the raft of national reforms being implemented across the partnership, however there are solid foundations in place.

Step 2 – Accountability Across Statutory and Relevant Agency Partners

The Strategic partners and wider partnership have access to multi-agency data that is analysed by the Performance and Quality Assurance sub- group and is used to identify areas that are working well and where we need to strengthen our partnership response.

As an independent scrutineer I have access to all reports and data and partners welcome scrutiny and are supportive of independent ‘deeper dives’ into specific areas of focus. An example of this includes spending time with partners at the MASH to understand some of the demand. At the time of that report in May 2025, Oldham was the 5th highest in the region for the number of contacts and 4th lowest in terms of conversion to referral. Oldham is the 11 highest in terms of the number of referrals, it is 5th highest in terms of rate per 10,000 population.

This has remained a challenge for the partnership to resolve, at the development day in February 2026 a presentation from the Head of Duty and Advice, EDT and

Complex Safeguarding, and data received by the partnership in March 2026 indicated that there had been little change in this position. This needs to remain an area of focus as the partnership moves to implementation of the Families First Reforms.

The partnership has worked at pace to implement the National Families First Partnership reforms; this has included a recent review and relaunch of Levels of Need. The emphasis of the reforms is ensuring that families get the help they need at the earliest opportunity, with fewer families requiring statutory interventions and this should remain an area of focus for the partnership for the next twelve months to ensure that it does have the desired impact. **(Recommendation 1)**

Data and analysis should be strengthened further to ensure that it fully aligns with the Partnerships Priorities to ensure that we are making a difference for children and families and driving practice improvement. The data set does shine a light on safeguarding practice across the partnership but should be strengthened to ensure there is a focus on reducing neglect and responding to complex safeguarding and Exploitation and Serious Youth Violence. **(Recommendation 2)**

Step 3 – Collaboration

There is strong evidence of multi – agency working across Oldham with an opportunity to develop this further in implementing the National reforms through the Families First Partnership. The challenge is moving from co – located teams for example in the MASH to fully integrated teams.

Multi – agency quality assurance audits are one example of how we can improve multi agency collaboration and ensure that we are assessing the collective impact and supporting shared learning. As independent scrutineer I had the opportunity to be part of a multi – agency review in relation to Child Sexual Abuse. There was strong evidence of a partnership commitment to improving practice. There was evidence of effective challenge and an opportunity to develop a shared understanding of what good looks like for children and families. The shared learning from this informed a multi -agency practice week focussed on responding to Child Sexual Abuse. Six months on from this work I will be revisiting the learning and following up with a range of partners to understand how this has improved practice and what has changed for children. (**Recommendation 3**)

A fortnightly bulletin which is jointly produced with Safeguarding Adults Board, supports communication across the wider partnership, this includes links to 7-minute briefings where learning is disseminated in a concise way. The bulletin promotes access to multi – agency training and supports collaborative approaches with the adult's board. It would be helpful to understand how widely this is disseminated in agencies and the impact it has on frontline practitioners.

The partnership has reviewed the Protocol for Escalation and Resolution Conversations, (July 2025), there have been 1 stage 3 notification to the OSCP, this is when earlier

resolution has not been achieved, this positive and indicates that issues are resolved at the earliest opportunity. The protocol is clear about the welfare of child remaining paramount and this process should not stop agencies taking the right action to ensure the safety and well being of a child.

Step 4 – Voice, Experience and Influence

Oldham is diverse borough with 32% of residents from Black, Asian and Minority ethnic groups. Over 46% of children under the age of 16 live in poverty, Understanding the context of life in Oldham for children, young people and their families is a fundamental commitment for the safeguarding partners.

The partnership is committed to ensuring that there is participation, equality and representation throughout strategy and practice. However, this is an area where we need to challenge ourselves to do more to ensure seldom heard and marginalized voices are heard.

Multi – agency and single agency audits consider the experience and influence of babies, children and families and there are many forums across the partnerships where groups come together with lived experience to influence services.

There has been strong evidence of co – production with families as part of the planning for Families First Reforms with a series of family activity days.

Young people were involved in the development of the partnership's neglect strategy, and I have met with the youth council to understand their experiences of support around Emotional Health and Wellbeing to influence a scrutiny deep dive I was undertaking, (which I will report on in my next report).

One of the many challenges is ensuring is that we hear from a wide range of voices and as partnership we need to consider how we do this. I am keen to explore opportunities to have 'young scrutineers' to work alongside me and the partnership to ensure that there is voice and influence in everything we do. **(Recommendation 4)**

There are several 7-minute briefings that provide guidance around inclusive practice, for example, cultural competence and use of interpreters, but we need to do more to develop our understanding of how discrimination and disadvantages are addressed.

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

Oldham partners have a strong learning culture, and this is evident through the number of Rapid Reviews, Learning Reviews and Practice Reviews that are undertaken which is higher than regional and statistical neighbors. This is seen as a strength by the partnership and indicates a commitment to learning,

understanding and strengthening partnership practice.

The emphasis of all reviews is collective reflection and learning. There are a number of mechanisms that support this approach including quality assurance audit processes, research and independent scrutiny. Children's and families experiences are central to these processes and help to shape plans and subsequent actions.

The Safeguarding Review and Learning Hub bring together case review, learning and improvement and training to ensure that we close the loop on actions and work to embed improved practice. However, the partnership recognizes that whilst actions and activities are completed, there is more we need to do to ensure that those actions are having the desired impact on practice improvement and achieving positive outcomes for Babies, children and families. (**Recommendation 5**)

Step 6 – Workforce Development, Training and Continuous Improvement

The partnership has a strong multi – agency training offer which is developed by the Safeguarding Review and Learning Hub and responds to the learning identified through reviews both local and national, audit and data. There are a range of approaches described earlier in this report including Practice Weeks which focus on a particular subject, training events and 7-minute briefings,

Multi – Agency audits and single agency audits consider whether training changes practice and in my role as Independent Scrutineer I will test this out further in the coming 12months by meeting with practitioners across the partnership for example in relation to CSA.

As part of my scrutiny work I ensure that I meet with frontline practitioners to triangulate and test what happened in practice, for example spending a day within the MASH sitting alongside multi – agency practitioners and observing CP conferences which also afforded me the opportunity to speak to parents and a young person. The CSA audit described earlier was an opportunity to bring practitioners together to reflect and support peer learning and the partnership should consider how we can strengthen this approach further.

Summary and Conclusions

There are many strengths to build on for the Oldham Safeguarding Partnership and many of the building blocks are in place to support strong safeguarding practice despite the challenges facing all agencies in relational national reforms, changing landscapes of organizations and increased demand for services. Evidencing the impact of all the activities undertaken by the partnership can be challenging and it is important that we strengthen the evidence of how we make a difference and improve the experiences of Babies, Children and Families in Oldham. **(Recommendation 6)**

Recommendations to the partnership for the Next 12 Months

1. To ensure that implementation of the Families First Reforms supports the development of an Integrated Front Door to ensure that families get the help they need at the earliest opportunity.
2. Data to be strengthened to ensure it aligns with the OSCP priorities.
3. Independent scrutineer to revisit learning from CSA work with practitioners across the partnership.
4. To strengthen the voice and influence babies, children and families ensuring we hear from Marginalized and seldom heard groups.
5. To ensure that actions from the QA, and Review are having the desired impact on practice improvement and achieving positive outcomes for Babies, children and families.
6. To Strengthen the evidence of how we are making a difference and improving the experiences of Babies, Children and Families.