

Thank you very much Lord Kerlake for that warm welcome.

I'm delighted to be here and very pleased to see from your agenda that one of today's aims is to ensure local government is leading the way in keeping democracy and scrutiny at the heart of decision-making.

As Minister for Local Government, I am fully aware of the impact local councils have on people's lives.

As I was told soon after taking up this post, '*they register your birth, register your death and do a hell of a lot in between*'.

And this is why scrutiny is so important.

It may be not a subject that often grabs the headlines, but I really do appreciate the important role it plays in ensuring the local accountability that helps deliver effective services and a real improvement in the lives of local people.

I'd like to touch on three specific things this morning.

Firstly, to outline the Government's current approach and framework for scrutiny.

Secondly, to emphasise the vital role good information plays in the scrutiny process.

And lastly, to remind ourselves that culture is key.

So, to start with with the current framework and system of scrutiny we have.

At its core is the idea that authorities are primarily accountable to their electorate.

This is the very foundation of local democracy, and where services in a local area are suffering it is local people themselves who should deliver judgement and hold their elected representatives to account.

Alongside this core belief, I share the conviction that councillors and officers are best-placed to know which scrutiny arrangements suit their own individual circumstances.

I know you all welcome the freedom and flexibility you have, and you'll be pleased to hear that I have no plans to change this.

Now, Government does have a role to play in ensuring councils are aware of what effective scrutiny looks like and how to carry it out.

I'll touch on our updated statutory guidance in a few moments, but I should also mention the £20m funding we give to the Local Government Association for sector support, a proportion of which goes on scrutiny training for the sector.

And as you are all aware, overview and scrutiny is just one element in the wider accountability framework for local government.

There is also:

Independent audit - with councils having to use external auditors who review how finances are managed, and also act as receivers for whistle-blowing claims;

Statutory officers - including Monitoring Officers, section 151 officers, and for certain authorities, a scrutiny officer;

And the presence of an independent local press. The local media plays an important role in holding local government to account:

highlighting areas of local interest,

scrutinising particular decisions;

maintaining pressure on an authority to see through scrutiny recommendations;

and ultimately preventing an abuse of power.

All these sit alongside the biggest sanction of all – the ballot box - to ensure authorities are held to account for the decisions they take.

Next, I'd like to emphasise how effective scrutiny is impossible without transparency of information.

It is already the case that local people are able to review a whole range of financial and other data from their authorities in a far more transparent way than was the case prior to 2010.

But earlier this year I took part in a parliamentary debate where MPs from all parties emphasised how important it is for scrutiny committees to be able to access relevant, timely information in a format they can actually use.

I was surprised to hear during that debate that some scrutiny members have had to resort to submitting Freedom of Information requests.

That can't be right.

Of course for many councils this isn't an issue.

In fact, my officials told me that at a stakeholder event they put on earlier this year there was general amazement among the scrutiny councillors and officers present that access to information was even on the agenda.

They just didn't see it as a problem. Nevertheless, our new guidance will remind members and officers of what they should be doing.

In particular, I would encourage any scrutiny councillors and officers among you to ensure you are familiar with the law - it already provides enhanced powers to scrutiny members to access exempt or confidential information.

I would also recommend you secure access to a regularly available source of key information about the management of your authority - particularly on performance, management and risk.

And while your authority will undoubtedly hold important information, please don't forget the need to consider supplementing it with data and intelligence from external sources.

Remember that there is a huge amount of very useful information from a wide variety of sources that is already in the public domain.

For example, think about all the information the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman makes publicly available.

Complaints from members of the public are a vital source of information in working out where services might not be operating as they should.

Not only does the Ombudsman investigate thousands of these complaints every year,

he also shares his findings through reports on investigations, annual complaints data for every council, and thematic reports which identify trends and issues in the sector.

Each of these will pose questions that scrutiny members can use to inform their work programme and evidence sessions.

So in sum, transparent information is a vital ingredient in a properly functioning scrutiny process.

And those engaged in scrutiny should make sure they have access to what they need to do their jobs properly.

Lastly, I wanted to talk about something less tangible.

It's the old truism 'culture eats strategy for breakfast' – it's not what you do it's the way that you do it.

We in central Government can put in all the structures and frameworks and rules we want, but ultimately it relies on people on the ground – all of you - making it work.

What I've been struck by most about scrutiny is just how important establishing a positive and open organisational culture is.

Ultimately, it's the behaviours and attitudes an authority adopts that will largely determine whether its scrutiny function succeeds or fails.

Those who welcome challenge and recognise scrutiny's value reap the benefits. But this really does depend on strong commitment from the top - from senior members and senior officials.

Our updated statutory guidance – which will be published shortly - will set out a number of ways in which authorities can establish a culture that lets scrutiny flourish. They include:

Identifying a clear role and focus for scrutiny - because authorities can find it difficult to support a scrutiny function that carries out generalised oversight across the wide range of issues experienced by local people.

Being aware of the distinction between the executive and scrutiny functions – let's be clear that the executive should not try to exercise control over the work of the scrutiny committee.

Ensuring officers are free to give impartial advice – this is fundamental to effective scrutiny, and senior officers in particular should play a key role in making this happen.

Communicating scrutiny's role to the wider authority – increase the visibility, awareness and recognition among both members and officers about the role of scrutiny, who is involved and its relevance to the authority's wider work; and

And lastly, engaging the public - authorities should try to ensure scrutiny has a profile in the wider community and is seen by the public as an important council function.

Now I know some of you have raised concerns about a couple of the recommendations made by the Commons Select Committee that I agreed to include in the statutory guidance,

namely the requirement for scrutiny to report to full Council, and limiting executive members' participation in scrutiny meetings.

So I'd just like to take this opportunity to assure you that I'm aware of your concerns and can confirm that the guidance will provide you with the flexibility you're seeking on these matters.

I see from the agenda that you have a very busy schedule and will be hearing from some excellent speakers.

So I'll end by asking you to read the guidance when it comes out.

Please cast a critical eye over your existing scrutiny arrangements, working out where you might be able to improve your approach, and encourage that vital, open learning culture in your authorities.

Getting this right isn't just about process. It ensures that millions of residents get the benefit of their local council striving to be the absolute best they can. And that will make an enormous difference to their day to day lives.

I wish you all the best and hope you have an enjoyable day.