

POLICY REVIEW AND DEVELOPMENT PANEL REPORT

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| REPORT TO: | Joint Panel | | |
| DATE OF MEETING: | 22 October 2025 | | |
| REPORT AUTHOR: | Monitoring Officer | | |
| OPEN | | WILL BE SUBJECT TO A FUTURE CABINET REPORT: | Yes |

SCRUTINY GOVERNANCE REVIEW

SUMMARY:

This report presents the findings of the Scrutiny Governance Review (set out at Appendix 1) carried out during July-September, which assessed the effectiveness of the Council's current Overview and Scrutiny arrangements against statutory guidance and recognised best practice.

The review identified inconsistent focus and limited strategic impact within the existing three-Panel structure (four with Joint Panel). The outcome of the review was that structural change is needed, and the recommendation of this report is to adopt a new two-Panel model to provide clearer separation between firstly internal performance scrutiny and secondly policy review and development complemented via external scrutiny.

In addition, a new Scrutiny and Executive Protocol is proposed to strengthen collaboration and accountability between these functions of the Council's governance model.

KEY ISSUES:

- Scrutiny impact is inconsistent, with only pockets of evidence that recommendations influence Cabinet decisions or shape policy at an early stage, with the Policy Review and Development function being underused.
- Member and officer resources are spread thinly, with significant time spent on overlapping meetings with low impact agenda items that add questionable value.
- Benchmarking shows that most similar Councils operate with one or two panels, achieving greater focus and efficiency on high-impact, strategic matters that improve outcomes for residents. This is creating a skills gap between Members of this Council and other Councils, which will potentially put Members of this Council at a disadvantage post Local Government Reorganisation.
- The relationship between Scrutiny and the Executive lacks consistently applied protocols, leading to variable engagement and mutual expectations.
- There is a need for stronger strategic alignment between scrutiny work programmes and the Corporate Strategy.

OPTIONS CONSIDERED:

Option 1 – Two-Panel, Two-Stage Approach (Recommended):

Stage 1: December 2025: Combine Regeneration & Development and Environment & Community Panels into one Panel of 12 Members called Regeneration & Community – Chair to be appointed at Full Council

Stage 2: May 2026: Move to a two-Panel model: one focused on internal scrutiny and one on external scrutiny and policy development. The Panels would be called the '*Corporate Performance Scrutiny Panel*' and the '*Strategic Policy and Stakeholder Review Panel*'

Option 2 – Two-Panel, One-Stage Approach:

Stage 1: May 2026: Move to a two-Panel model: one focused on internal scrutiny and one on external scrutiny and policy development. The Panels would be called the '*Corporate Performance Scrutiny Panel*' and the '*Strategic Policy and Stakeholder Review Panel*'

Option 3 – Single Scrutiny Panel:

Consolidate all scrutiny and policy development work into one panel supported by task-and-finish groups.

Option 4 – Maintain Current Arrangements:

Retain the existing three/four-panel structure.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. The Regeneration & Development and Environment & Community Panels are combined into one Panel of 12 Members called the '*Regeneration & Community Panel*'. The Chair and Panel Members shall be appointed by Full Council on 27 November 2025 with two Vice-Chairs to be appointed at the first meeting of the Panel. Authority is delegated to the Monitoring Officer to make all consequential changes to the Constitution and Members Allowance Scheme.
2. At Annual Council in May 2026, a two-Panel scrutiny model shall be adopted with an internal scrutiny Panel titled the '*Corporate Performance Scrutiny Panel*' and an external scrutiny and policy development Panel titled '*Strategic Policy and Stakeholder Review Panel*' with terms of reference adopted into the Constitution as set out at Appendix 2. Authority is delegated to the Monitoring Officer to make all consequential changes to the Constitution and Members Allowance Scheme.
3. The '*Scrutiny and the Executive Protocol*' at Appendix 3 is approved for adoption into the Constitution, to be reaffirmed annually by the Leader and Scrutiny Panel Chairs.

REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS:

To streamline officer and Member time and create space and resource for additional scrutiny workshops and training to be delivered to Members over the next 6 months.

The three-panel structure has resulted in duplication and limited strategic alignment. The revised two-panel model will ensure scrutiny activity is concentrated on matters of highest corporate significance and public value. The new structure will provide a clear distinction between internal and external scrutiny functions, ensuring that Panels can specialise, develop expertise and deliver impactful recommendations that influence outcomes.

Adopting a new Scrutiny and Executive Protocol reflects the feedback from the Scrutiny Governance Review and published guidance and best practice.

1. Terminology

Scrutiny is shorthand for 'Overview & Scrutiny' which was a legislative function and concept first introduced by the Local Government Act 2000. Under the Council's Constitution, Scrutiny is undertaken by the Policy Review and Development Panels.

Executive means the Cabinet, as the Council adopts the Leader and Cabinet model of governance.

2. Overview and Scrutiny Governance Review

The Overview and Scrutiny Governance Review was commissioned in response to feedback from Members, senior officers and the LGA Peer Review, which collectively identified that the Council's current scrutiny arrangements were not achieving optimal strategic impact, clarity of purpose or efficient use of Member and officer time.

The review sought to assess whether a structure change was needed to the Scrutiny function to enable it to:

- Focus on key strategic matters that add value and improve outcomes for residents;
- Provide robust and constructive challenge to the Executive ("critical friend" role);
- Shape policy development at formative stages;
- Operate from a clear, strategically aligned work programme; and
- Maximise the use of limited democratic and officer resource.

The review included: a Member and senior officer survey, consultation with Panel Chairs, Vice-Chairs, Group Leaders and Cabinet, benchmarking against other local district councils, and reference to national best practice and statutory guidance.

The outcome of the review is attached at Appendix 1.

A Gap Analysis within the review identified the following:

- External focus of agenda items is largely missing
- Policy Review and Development function not working properly
- Training, plus dedicated Chair training, needed
- Strategic Forward Work Programming needed
- The strategic impact of scrutiny needs improving
- Pre-meeting briefings would add value
- Scrutiny Officer support needed

The outcome of the Governance Review can be summarised as follows:

- The Survey returned mixed results but overall supported the status quo

- Local Benchmarking shows we are significantly out of step in terms of the greater number of Panels we have and their focus
- Feedback from Chairs, Group Leaders and Cabinet advocates for change
- Upskilling Members for Local Government Reorganisation is a key priority
- Member and officer resource should be used more strategically
- The Gap Analysis above identifies the areas for improvement
- Conclusion: structure changes are needed to achieve improved scrutiny

2. Proposal

Two-Panel, Two-Stage Approach (Recommended):

Stage 1: December 2025:

Combine Regeneration & Development and Environment & Community Panels into one Panel of 12 Members called Regeneration & Community – Chair and Members to be appointed at Full Council and two Vice-Chairs appointed at the first meeting

Retain the Corporate Performance Panel (CPP) in its current form to focus on internal performance.

Cease use of Joint Panels – joint work to be managed through coordinated programming between Panel Chairs.

Stage 2: May 2026:

Move to a two-Panel model: one focused on internal scrutiny and one on external scrutiny and policy development.

The Panels would be called the '*Corporate Performance Scrutiny Panel*' and the '*Strategic Policy and Stakeholder Review Panel*' with one Chair and Vice-Chair each.

Cease use of Joint Panels – joint work should no longer be needed with the clear distinction of roles.

3. Issues for the Panel to Consider

Key Issues and Options are set out in the cover pages to this report and the Review at Appendix 1.

Guidance from the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny (CfGS) [CfPS-Good-Scrutiny-Guide-v4-WEB-SINGLE-PAGES.pdf](#) and the Statutory Guidance on Overview and Scrutiny (MHCLG 2024) [Overview and scrutiny: statutory guidance for councils, combined authorities and combined county authorities - GOV.UK](#) emphasises that effective scrutiny should be strategic and focused on issues that will make the most impact; be valued by decision-makers; have clear alignment with the Council's priorities and Forward Plan and operates within a culture of mutual respect and trust with the Executive.

The current arrangements—three Panels plus Joint Panels—have been shown to create duplication on low impact items, reduce agility, limit strategic inquiry, dilute the policy development function and spread limited resources too thinly.

Addressing the findings of the Gap Analysis in the Governance Review with regards to training, development of Annual Work Programmes, scheduled workshops and pre-briefing and scrutiny officer support, etc will be progressed operationally.

5. Financial Implications

The proposed changes and approach to scrutiny will result in resource impacts that can be absorbed into the Democratic Services team and the Monitoring Officer function.

There will be a savings going forwards on Chairs and Vice-Chair Allowances if the proposed changes are adopted.

6. Any other Implications/Risks

The proposed changes will mitigate against the following risk in the Risk Register:

R7 Corporate Governance

The risk of failures in systems of governance within the council, within council owned/influenced organisations and partnerships and other collaboration arrangements, leading to governance issues, fraud and corruption, failures in management systems, poor policy and decision making.

7. Equal Opportunity Considerations

None.

8. Environmental Considerations

None.

9. Consultation

- Members and senior officers via a Survey
- Meetings with Group Leaders, Panel Chairs and previous Panel Chairs
- Consideration by the Constitution Informal Working Group

10. Background Papers

Minutes of the Constitution Informal Working Group Meeting on 11 June and 7 August 2025.