

Overview & Scrutiny Governance Review

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Borough Council of
King's Lynn &
West Norfolk



Purpose of Review

The purpose of the review is to determine whether a revised structure is required for the Council's Overview & Scrutiny function which:

- Focusses on key strategic issues that add value
- Helps shape policies before decisions are made
- Identifies gaps, challenges and missed opportunities in the executive function at early stages
- Provides constructive and critical friend challenge
- Operates from a well populated Forward Plan linked to the Corporate Strategy, focussing on high impact agenda items
- Receives dedicated officer support and regular training



Structure of the review

- Survey to all Councillors (senior officers also invited to respond)
- Consultation with the Constitution Informal Working Group.
- Informal discussion with current Panel Chairs and Vice Chairs.
- Informal discussion with previous Panel Chairs and Vice Chairs.
- Informal discussion with Group Leaders.
- Undertake benchmarking.
- Discussion with CLT and Cabinet

Whilst also incorporating the LGA peer review feedback...



Peer Review: Key Governance Findings

- Meetings too long and questionable what value was being added to the decision-making process
- Duplication of effort was noted
- Scrutiny structure – need for 3 panels (and then also Joint Panels) highlighted and questioned - many Councils of similar size only have one scrutiny committee with task and finish groups reporting to it.
- System of ‘everything’ going through scrutiny is creating bottlenecks – what is actually adding value?
- Member roles at scrutiny meetings unclear – who was chairing, who was on the Panel, etc
- Refocussing and streamlining the scrutiny panels to focus on outcomes would be of benefit



Survey results

- **21 responses – 18 Councillors** so broadly one third of Councillors
- **Preferred number of panels:** Majority (62%) support **three panels**
- **Majority view:** Current scrutiny arrangements is “**Somewhat effective**” (62%)
- Some value the **opportunity to question and contribute**, while others feel scrutiny **lacks impact** or is **poorly structured**
- **Panel size:** 67% say **12 members is about right**; others suggest 10–15 depending on structure
- **Opposition to one-panel model:** Seen as too broad, too much work, and risks diluting scrutiny
- **Desire for more impact:** Many felt scrutiny could be more influential and better aligned with Council priorities.



Survey results

- **Two Panels.** One that focuses on 'Internal Scrutiny' and one that focuses on 'Policy Development and External Scrutiny' – **76% they didn't like this suggestion**
- **Two Panels.** Keep Corporate Performance Panel in its current format but merge R&D and E&C into the Regeneration & Community Panel - **57% they didn't like this suggestion**



Local Benchmarking – 1 of 2

- Breckland Council (10am start time)

1 Overview & Scrutiny Commission - 12 Members

- North Norfolk District Council (9.30am start time)

1 Overview & Scrutiny Committee - 12 Members

- Fenland District Council (10am start time)

1 Overview & Scrutiny Panel – 12 Members

- South Holland District Council (6.30pm start time)

1 Performance Monitoring Panel – 15 Members

1 Policy Development Panel – 16 Members

Joint Panel combining the two Panels



Local District Benchmarking – 2 of 2

- Great Yarmouth Borough Council (6.30pm start time)

1 Scrutiny Committee - 13 Members

- Norwich City Council (4.30pm start time)

1 Scrutiny Committee - 12 Members

- Broadland District Council (6-6.30pm start time)

1 Overview & Scrutiny Committee – 15 Members

3 Policy Development Committees (Housing & Planning, Economic Success, Environmental Excellence)

- South Norfolk Council (10am/2pm start times)

1 Scrutiny Committee – 9 Members

3 Policy Development Committees (Planning & Economic Growth, Health & Leisure, Environment)

Local District Benchmarking

Observations:

- Most local district Councils have one overview and scrutiny panel
- Where there is more than one, this is with a separation between the scrutiny function and the policy review and development functions
- We are out of step in terms of having three panels carrying out scrutiny and without a clear focus on policy review and development



Chairs/Group Leader Feedback

1. Scrutiny Process and Effectiveness

Need for robustness in scrutiny was emphasized by multiple participants.

Scrutiny is seen as **effective** but **inconsistent**, with **peaks and troughs** in workload.

There's a call for **more time** to be allocated to scrutiny and for **earlier access to papers** to allow better preparation.

2. Cabinet Member Engagement

Mixed views on Cabinet involvement: Some felt there was **too much Cabinet input** previously. Others stressed the importance of **Cabinet Members being scrutinised** and **answering questions**.

A suggestion to **update the Scrutiny and Executive Protocol** to clarify roles and expectations.



Chairs/Group Leader Feedback

3. Panel Structure and Participation

Concerns about **reducing the number of panels**, which could lead to:

Overloading a single panel

Loss of councillor experience and engagement

Joint Panels and **meetings between Chairs and Vice Chairs** were seen as working well.

SO34 provision (allowing all councillors to contribute) was highlighted as important.

4. Policy Development

The **policy development function is underused**.

Panels should be treated as **formal consultees** during policy formation.

A suggestion to **split the work programme** between scrutiny and policy development or have **separate panels** for each.



Cabinet Feedback

Overall picture of:

Do not really feel scrutinised

Policy Review and Development function lacking

Low impact – Panel recommendations have had limited impact in changing or moulding a course of direction



External Focus Gap

The Terms of Reference for all 3 Panels say:

- review the performance of other public bodies in the area and invite reports from them by requesting them to address the relevant Policy Review and Development Panel about their activities and performance;
- question and gather evidence from any other willing person.
- make reports and/or recommendations to the full Council and/or the Cabinet in connection with the discharge of any of their functions

Aside from the Transport Strategy informal working group, this function has rarely been exercised



Member and Officer Resource

- For one item going through the democratic process, a responsible officer may need to attend 7 different meetings just to see the item through to decision (briefings, CLT, sifting and the convened meetings)
- Case study added up all the cumulative time of officers and Members getting one item through all stages of the democratic process – total was **37 hours**
- Member and Officer time is a resource and it is finite – how should this time be spent to achieve maximum impact and added value?



Gap Analysis

- 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

Summary

- 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 LGR and what scrutiny may be like in a new unitary 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



Options for Change

a. Two Panels - Two stage approach:

Immediately: merge R&D and E&C into one Panel called Regeneration & Community – appoint two Vice Chairs to R&C. No more Joint Panels.

May 2026: CPP becomes primary internal scrutiny panel and R&C becomes external scrutiny panel and performs the policy review and development function. No more Joint Panels.

b. Two Panels - One stage approach:

May 2026: CPP becomes primary internal scrutiny panel and R&C becomes external scrutiny panel and performs the policy review and development function. No more Joint Panels.

c. One Panel – One Stage approach:

May 2026: Change manage the transition to build up to new one Panel approach in May 2026

d. No changes:

Leave in situ until LGR



Next Steps

- Joint Panel – 22 October
- Cabinet – 11 November
- Full Council – 27 November

