

## REPORT TO CABINET

<b>Open</b>		Would any decisions proposed :			
<b>Any especially affected Wards</b>	Discretionary	Be entirely within Cabinet's powers to decide YES Need to be recommendations to Council NO  Is it a Key Decision NO			
Lead Member: Councillor Beales, Leader of the Council E-mail: <a href="mailto:Alistair.beales@west-norfolk.gov.uk">Alistair.beales@west-norfolk.gov.uk</a>		Other Cabinet Members consulted: Cabinet as part of the Scrutiny Governance Review			
		Other Members consulted: Constitution Informal Working Group, current and former Panel Chairs and Vice Chairs and Group Leaders as part of the Scrutiny Governance Review			
Lead Officer: Alexa Baker, Monitoring Officer E-mail: <a href="mailto:alexa.baker@west-norfolk.gov.uk">alexa.baker@west-norfolk.gov.uk</a>		Other Officers consulted: Kate Blakemore, Chief Executive			
Financial Implications YES	Policy/ Personnel Implications YES	Statutory Implications YES	Equality Impact Assessment  Pre-screening attached	Risk Management Implications YES	Environmental Considerations NO
If not for publication, the paragraph(s) of Schedule 12A of the 1972 Local Government Act considered to justify that is (are) paragraph(s)					

Date of meeting: 11 November 2025

### SCRUTINY GOVERNANCE REVIEW

#### Summary

This report presents the findings of the Scrutiny Governance Review (set out at Appendix 1) carried out during July-September 2025, which assessed the effectiveness of the Council's current Overview and Scrutiny arrangements against statutory guidance and recognised best practice. The term 'Scrutiny' will be used going forwards to mean all 'Overview & Scrutiny' functions, including policy review and development, unless the context dictates otherwise.

The review identified duplicated focus and limited strategic impact within the existing three-Scrutiny Panel structure (four with Joint Panel). The outcome of the review was that structural change is needed.

A recommendation to adopt a new two-Panel model was presented to Joint Panel on 22 October 2025, which proposed to provide separation between:

- internal performance scrutiny and pre/post decision scrutiny; and
- policy review and development complemented via external scrutiny

Joint Panel's recommendation to Cabinet was to maintain the status quo, i.e. the three Panel model plus Joint Panel, but with further work to improve work programming being carried out and a training programme for Members to be introduced. This means four Panels conducting all scrutiny functions, save that only CPP that undertakes call-ins.

In addition, a new Scrutiny and Executive Protocol (attached as Appendix 2) was submitted to Joint Panel for consideration, with a stated aim of strengthening collaboration and accountability. Joint Panel made no recommendations about this Protocol.

The Gap Analysis conducted as part of the Scrutiny Governance Review identified the following gaps in the way Scrutiny operates within the Council:

- 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

There was broad recognition at Joint Panel with regards to these gaps, with Joint Panel making a specific recommendation made about improving work programming and undertaking training for Scrutiny Members.

Irrespective of the issue of the number of Scrutiny panels, the report to Joint Panel identified that addressing the findings of the Gap Analysis would be progressed. These are recognised as necessary development and upskilling requirements for Members and officers.

In the last year, there have been 32 meetings of all three Panels and Joint Panels. Whilst the value placed on Scrutiny by Joint Panel is fully recognised, it remains the case that maintaining this many meetings, plus addressing all the identified gaps, which would ordinarily involve strategically planning of one 'deep-dive' area per meeting, would be a wholly disproportionate level of Member and officer resource when set against the need to maintain day-to-day services, deliver against the Corporate Strategy and the Council's Transformation Programme, including delivery of Local Government Reorganisation (LGR).

Accordingly, this report proposes a constructive and collaborative way forward: to focus on building Members' understanding of effective Scrutiny through a programme of workshops and development sessions with Scrutiny Members, Cabinet and

relevant officers. Once this shared understanding is in place, Members will be better informed to consider the future structure of Scrutiny with full insight into the resource, governance and effectiveness implications.

## **Recommendation**

### Cabinet Resolves:

1. The Gap Analysis identified within the Scrutiny Governance Review attached as Appendix 1 is endorsed.
2. To approve the delivery of a programme of training and facilitated workshops on effective Scrutiny for all Scrutiny Members, Cabinet Members and relevant officers following agreement of the budget with the section 151 officer.
3. Following completion of the training and the workshops, a further report is to be presented outlining any options for the future structure and operation of the Scrutiny function along with a revised Scrutiny and Executive Protocol, which are to be considered as part of the workshop sessions.

## **Reason for Decision**

To recognise the development gaps in the Council's Scrutiny function and to provide the opportunity for all Members and relevant officers to develop a shared understanding of what effective Scrutiny looks like before considering structural change options.

## **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. Scrutiny Governance Review**

The 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

### **3. Consideration by Joint Panel**

#### **Recommendation to Joint Panel**

The following was proposed to Joint Panel as a means to address the outcome of the Scrutiny Governance Review:

Adoption of a Two-Panel, Two-Stage Approach:

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.

#### Joint Panel's feedback

- Several Members valued the representational breadth provided by multiple Panels and felt the structure itself was not the issue, but rather the need to improve the agenda planning and officer resourcing
- The need for supported training was recognised
- Several Members commented that whilst they were previously supportive of making structural changes after the LGA Peer Review, they no longer recognised the need to make change in the light of LGR
- It was recognised that both County and Unitary have different scrutiny structures, which further undermined the reasoning for the Borough Council to make changes now
- It was challenged whether the case for change was made out, and that the Borough Council is not significantly out of line with other Norfolk Councils
- It was noted that the review did not track the outcomes of our scrutiny structure or other Norfolk Council's scrutiny structures
- It was questioned whether the proposed two model structure and their names would land as accessible to members of the public
- The value of task groups and informal working groups was recognised.
- Observations were made that Panel agendas were too tied to the Cabinet forward work programme and they were not carrying out enough proactive work themselves independent of the Cabinet forward work programme
- It was recognised that Panels are sometimes struggling to fill agendas, and items on the forward work programmes are perpetually slipped

- Observations were made that Panels rarely got to see policies or significant decisions before they were at their final stages, meaning the opportunity for meaningful input had been lost
- The benefit of having more Members involved in scrutiny as a way of keeping more Members involved in the workings of the Council was recognised

Joint Panel's recommendation to Cabinet was to maintain the status quo, i.e. the three Panel model plus Joint Panel, but with further work to improve work programming being carried out and a training programme for Members to be introduced.

### Commentary on Joint Panel Feedback

Attention was drawn at Joint Panel to Broadland and South Norfolk Councils having four Panels respectively, meaning we were not significantly out of step with other Councils. It should be noted, however, that both of these Councils have only one Panel conducting pre-decision/post-decision scrutiny, and the remaining three Panels are carrying out solely policy review and development functions. It is therefore the case, that all other Norfolk Councils have only one Panel conducting the scrutiny element of 'Overview & Scrutiny', whereas the Borough Council has four such Panels. That is significantly out of step, which was an observation also made by the LGA in their Peer Review.

Task Groups and Informal Working Groups would continue under any revised structure; their value would not be lost by any revised structure.

The concept of 'why change now' when the Council is already operating in a period of significant change is recognised. However irrespective of the number of Panels, one of the primary reasons why change of some form is needed is to upskill Members on external scrutiny and effective policy review and development, which will be skills undertaken in a new Unitary's scrutiny structure. It is not so much the number of Panels that is pertinent; it is the skills and functions they are actively undertaking.

The proposed recommendation to Joint Panel on adopting a two-Panel model would have seen little change to CPP, save that it would carry out all pre-decision scrutiny using strategic selection criteria (i.e. not just scrutinise all decisions).

The proposed 'second panel' would undertake targeted external scrutiny and policy review and development. An illustrative example of how their forward work programme could operate is the following:

6 meetings per year:

Meeting 1:	QEH external scrutiny through the lens of Marmot Place policy development options
Meeting 2:	Marmot Place – development of policy options supported by the evidence gathered from the QEH external scrutiny

Meeting 3:	Freebridge Housing Association external scrutiny through the lens of the Housing Delivery Policy development options
Meeting 4:	Housing Delivery Policy development supported by the evidence gathered from the Freebridge external scrutiny
Meeting 5:	Crime and Disorder - Police/PCC – external scrutiny – feeding back recommendations to the Executive
Meeting 6:	Climate Change Strategy Review and Action Plan policy review and development

In the last year, there have been 32 meetings of all three Panels and Joint Panels. Whilst the value placed on scrutiny is fully recognised, it remains the case that maintaining this many meetings, plus addressing all the identified gaps, which would ordinarily involve strategically planning of one ‘deep-dive’ area per meeting, would be a wholly disproportionate level of Member and officer resource when set against the need to maintain day-to-day services, deliver against the Corporate Strategy and the Council’s Transformation Programme, including delivery of Local Government Reorganisation (LGR).

Joint Panel made no recommendations about the Scrutiny and Executive Protocol (attached as Appendix 2) which was submitted to Joint Panel for consideration, with a stated aim of strengthening collaboration and accountability. Holding the Executive to account is a fundamental statutory aim of Overview & Scrutiny, which the Scrutiny Governance Review identified was lacking, with Cabinet commenting that they did not really feel scrutinised. The value of embedding improved practice between Scrutiny and the Executive via a revised Protocol, which statutory guidance recommends to be part of the Constitution, should not be lost.

### 3. Relevant Resources

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.

### 4. Options Considered

- Retain the current structure – as supported by the Joint Panel – and address the Gap Analysis through the current structure
- Recommend one of the structural change options identified in the Scrutiny Governance Review at Appendix 1 and address the Gap Analysis
- Undertake training and development for relevant Members and officers before considering any structural changes (recommended option)

### **3 Policy Implications**

This report supports the Council's corporate priorities for Efficient and effective delivery of our services. Strengthening scrutiny will help ensure informed decision-making and transparent accountability.

### **4 Financial Implications**

There are no direct financial costs associated with the proposed interim approach beyond the resource required to deliver training and workshops on effective scrutiny, which will be subject to the section 151 officer's approval that the cost can be absorbed within existing budgets.

### **5 Personnel Implications**

None, save for supporting the facilitated training and workshops.

### **6 Environmental Considerations**

None

### **7 Statutory Considerations**

The Council's scrutiny arrangements must comply with the Local Government Act 2000 and associated regulations. Compliance with the statutory requirements is not in issue.

### **8 Equality Impact Assessment (EIA)**

(Pre screening report template attached)

A pre-screening assessment has been completed. The proposals are considered equality neutral as they relate to governance and Member development, not to service delivery.

### **9 Risk Management Implications**

Improving the effectiveness of Scrutiny will mitigate against the corporate risk on Corporate Governance.



## **10      Declarations of Interest / Dispensations Granted**

None

## **11      Background Papers**

(Definition : Unpublished work relied on to a material extent in preparing the report that disclose facts or matters on which the report or an important part of the report is based. A copy of all background papers must be supplied to Democratic Services with the report for publishing with the agenda)

None

## Stage 1 - Pre-Screening Equality Impact Assessment

For equalities profile information please visit [Norfolk Insight - Demographics and Statistics - Data Observatory](#)

Name of policy/service/function	Decision to undertake Member and officer training on effective scrutiny and endorse the Gap Analysis identified within the Scrutiny Governance Review at Appendix 1				
Is this a new or existing policy/service/function? <i>(tick as appropriate)</i>	New	N/A	Existing		
Brief summary/description of the main aims of the policy/service/function being screened.  Please state if this policy/service is rigidly constrained by statutory obligations, and identify relevant legislation.	The recommendations in this paper are designed to improve the effectiveness and impact of the Council's scrutiny function, which is a legislative and constitutional requirement.				
Who has been consulted as part of the development of the policy/service/function? – new only <i>(identify stakeholders consulted with)</i>	n/a				
<b>Question</b>	<b>Answer</b>				
<p><b>1.</b> Is there any reason to believe that the policy/service/function could have a specific impact on people from one or more of the following groups, for example, because they have particular needs, experiences, issues or priorities or in terms of ability to access the service?</p> <p>Please tick the relevant box for each group. NB. Equality neutral means no negative impact on any group.</p> <p><b><i>If potential adverse impacts are identified, then a full Equality Impact Assessment (Stage 2) will be required.</i></b></p> <p><i>*For more information on health inequalities please visit <a href="#">The King's Fund</a></i></p>		Positive	Negative	Neutral	Unsure
	Age			X	
	Disability			X	
	Sex			X	
	Gender Re-assignment			X	
	Marriage/civil partnership			X	
	Pregnancy & maternity			X	
	Race			X	
	Religion or belief			X	
	Sexual orientation			X	
	Armed forces community			X	
	Care leavers			X	
	Health inequalities*			X	
	Other (eg low income, caring responsibilities)			X	
<p><b>Please provide a brief explanation of the answers above:</b></p> <p>The proposals are considered equality neutral as they relate to governance and Member and officer development, not to a policy or service delivery. However, it is recognised that improved scrutiny can include an improved awareness of how Equality Impact Assessments are considered and EDI matters are scrutinised or addressed as part of policy review and development.</p>					

Question	Answer	Comments																				
2. Is the proposed policy/service likely to affect relations between certain equality communities or to damage relations between the equality communities and the Council, for example because it is seen as favouring a particular community or denying opportunities to another?	No																					
3. Could this policy/service be perceived as impacting on communities differently?	No																					
<p><b>If 'yes' to questions 2 - 3 a full impact assessment will be required unless comments are provided to explain why this is not felt necessary:</b></p> <p><b>Decision agreed by EWG member:</b> .....</p>																						
4. Are any impacts identified above minor and if so, can these be eliminated or reduced by minor actions? If yes, please agree actions with a member of the Corporate Equalities Working Group and list agreed actions in the comments section	N/A	<b>Actions:</b>																				
		<b>Actions agreed by EWG member:</b> .....																				
5. Is the policy/service specifically designed to tackle evidence of disadvantage or potential discrimination?	No	<b>Please provide brief summary:</b>																				
<table border="1"> <tr> <td><b>Assessment completed by:</b></td><td colspan="3">Alexa Baker</td></tr> <tr> <td><b>Name</b></td><td colspan="3"></td></tr> <tr> <td><b>Job title</b></td><td colspan="3">Monitoring Officer</td></tr> <tr> <td><b>Date completed</b></td><td colspan="3">1 November 2025</td></tr> <tr> <td><b>Reviewed by EWG member</b></td><td>Charlotte Marriott Interim Corporate Governance Manager</td><td><b>Date</b></td><td>04/11/2025</td></tr> </table>			<b>Assessment completed by:</b>	Alexa Baker			<b>Name</b>				<b>Job title</b>	Monitoring Officer			<b>Date completed</b>	1 November 2025			<b>Reviewed by EWG member</b>	Charlotte Marriott Interim Corporate Governance Manager	<b>Date</b>	04/11/2025
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✓ Please tick to confirm completed EIA Pre-screening Form has been shared with Corporate Policy ([corporate.policy@west-norfolk.gov.uk](mailto:corporate.policy@west-norfolk.gov.uk))