

Report to: Council

## Annual Council Meeting

Date of Meeting 14 May 2025

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### Annual Report of the Scrutiny Committee 2024 – 2025

#### Report summary:

To review the work of the Scrutiny Committee during the civic year 2024 – 25.

#### Is the proposed decision in accordance with:

Budget Yes ☒ No ☐

Policy Framework Yes ☒ No ☐

#### Recommendation:

That the Council notes the work undertaken by the Scrutiny Committee during the civic year 2024 – 25.

#### Reason for recommendation:

To keep the Council informed of the Scrutiny Committee's ongoing work.

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Portfolio(s) (check which apply):

- ☒ Climate Action and Emergency Response
- ☒ Coast, Country and Environment
- ☒ Council and Corporate Co-ordination
- ☒ Communications and Democracy
- ☒ Economy
- ☒ Finance and Assets
- ☒ Strategic Planning
- ☒ Sustainable Homes and Communities
- ☒ Culture, Leisure, Sport and Tourism

**Equalities impact** Low Impact

**Climate change** Low Impact

**Risk:** Low Risk;

**Links to background information**

Link to [Council Plan](#)

Priorities (check which apply)

- ☒ A supported and engaged community
  - ☒ Carbon neutrality and ecological recovery
  - ☒ Resilient economy that supports local business
  - ☒ Financially secure and improving quality of services
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## **Report in full**

### **1 The Role of the Committee**

The role of the Scrutiny Committee is to review how the Council is delivering services and working for the public. The Committee also checks that Council policies have been implemented effectively. The Committee does this by reviewing activities in the Council Plan and checking if targets set for delivering services have been met.

The Scrutiny Committee is also described as a “critical friend” to the Cabinet. This means that it can review their decisions and make recommendations. For example, what lessons can be learnt from how an issue was handled in the past. It can also act as a “critical friend” to other authorities and agencies, making recommendations about issues outside of the Council’s remit.

The Scrutiny Committee cannot make decisions on behalf of the Council, but does try to influence the decision makers by investigating an issue, and making recommendations based on the evidence it has found.

### **2 Chair’s Comments**

Scrutiny is an important Committee and is a critical friend to the Council and Cabinet. The Committee has always acted in the best interests of the Council and a significant change this year was the introduction of Spotlight Session events which we will see develop further in 2025/26.

I would encourage more members to consider areas they would like the Committee to investigate so we can deliver for our residents. We also encourage residents to contact us with areas they believe we should scrutinise. This coming year is going to see major changes for our Council as we move to unitary and Scrutiny will do all it can to assist.

### **3 The Civic Year 2024 – 2025**

During the year May 2024 to April 2025, the Committee has held six meetings. Of those, two meetings were joint meetings, both held with the Overview Committee: a meeting in December 2024 to consider the Council’s draft Directorate plans and a meeting in January 2025 to consider the draft budget. The Committee has also met informally on several occasions during the year to plan its work programme and to consider the implementation of the Scrutiny Action Plan following the recommendations arising from the Scrutiny Improvement Review undertaken in late 2023. The first Scrutiny Spotlight Session was held during the year, with further details below. Two meetings had to be cancelled due to severe weather and a potential bomb alert in the locality.

#### **3.1 Scrutiny Improvement Review**

Following the Scrutiny Improvement Review, the Scrutiny Action Plan was prepared and approved by full Council on 17 July 2024. To date the following actions have been undertaken, or are on-going:

- A review of the Committee's terms of reference is currently being undertaken by the Constitution Working Group, for approval at the Annual Council meeting in May. Following a joint meeting of the Chairs and Vice-Chairs of the three scrutiny function committees, it was envisaged that the number of meetings would reduce to four meetings per year, plus the joint Directorate plans and budget meetings with the Overview Committee.
- It was agreed that the Monitoring Officer would be assigned to the Committee as its senior Officer to provide advice and expertise at meetings. The Director of Place attends on occasions should the Monitoring Officer be unavailable.
- Members attended an online training session provided by the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny in November 2024. Training was focussed on preparing an effective work programme in line with the Council's priorities.
- Officer support for the Scrutiny Committee continues to be provided by the Democratic Services Manager, supported by a dedicated Democratic Services Officer. Following the announcement of Local Government Reorganisation in December 2024, it is now unlikely that a Scrutiny Officer post will be created.
- The three Democratic Services Officers who support the scrutiny function committees attended scrutiny training provided by the Association of Democratic Services Officers in November 2024 and the Centre for Governance & Scrutiny annual conference in March 2025.
- Following a Member's proposal for a scrutiny review, it was agreed to hold the first "Scrutiny Spotlight Session" focussed on planning enforcement in place of the formal Committee meeting in April. This enabled Members to obtain in depth information regarding the planning enforcement service. The Spotlight Session was received positively as an effective way for the Committee to conduct information gathering which may, or may not, lead to a request for a full scrutiny review as appropriate. It was agreed that further Spotlight Sessions would be arranged when required.

During the year the Committee also considered the following matters and, where appropriate, made recommendations to Cabinet:

### 3.2 Improving green spaces for wildlife

The Committee considered a report which set out the approach, objectives for and reasoning behind targeted wildlife improvement areas. The report covered the management of designated wildlife improvement areas, legislation, policies and strategies that apply to the development and designation of wildlife improvement areas, management systems, stakeholders consultations, communication with residents and similar work by other local authorities.

The Committee made eight recommendations to Cabinet. An annual update on wildlife improvement areas will be considered by the Committee in the coming civic year.

### 3.3 Review of emergency responses during the year 2023 – 24

The Committee noted the report which provided an annual update on the Council's emergency responses during 2023-24, with particular reference to localised flooding. This resulted in a recommendation to Cabinet that every local council should be encouraged to have an emergency plan in place.

### 3.4 East Devon safeguarding annual review 2023 – 24

The first annual safeguarding report which outlined the key deliverables that had been achieved during 2023-24 as part of East Devon District Council's safeguarding responsibilities was presented to the Committee in July 2024. The report set out the general safeguarding submissions in 2023-24, details of the Safeguarding Policy which was adopted in March 2024 and the safeguarding forum and training which has been delivered since 2022.

### 3.5 S.106 and CIL processes and resources update

An update on work started during the previous civic year was considered by the Committee which noted that a full team of officers was now in place and working on reviewing current systems, addressing a backlog of work and putting in place new, more efficient processes for collecting, recording and spending CIL and S.106 contributions. Short term priorities were to recover outstanding monies, undertake effective monitoring of developments, issuing of CIL liability notices and checking of exemption applications. Following that, the priority would change to spending monies. Work was also underway to work more closely with town and parish councils and to progress matters through the CIL Member Working Group.

Five recommendations were made to Cabinet focussing mainly on improving communication with Members and with Town and Parish Councils.

### 3.6 Climate change report

The Committee considered a report which provided a review of the Climate Change Action Plan 2020 – 2040 and looked at actions achieved and impact on carbon emissions.

Recommendations to Cabinet included that lessons learnt and how these can be applied to the development of the next Climate Change Action Plan should be considered going forward and that all Members should be included in the on-going development of the Climate Change Strategy, with technical assistance provided for Members by external experts.

### 3.7 Agricultural property relief and business property relief

In December 2024, Council referred a motion to the Committee as follows:

“That In light of the confusing government department figures related to the number of farms affected by the recent Budget changes, and given that farmers' IHT is not an issue that all Members will have sufficient detailed knowledge about, and in order to give maximum consideration of what positive broad support this Council might provide to the district's farmers, Council agrees to refer this motion to the Scrutiny Committee requesting that it considers the motion, its recommendations and their implications and to report back to Council on the outcome of its deliberations.”

The Committee considered a scoping document at its meeting in January 2025 and heard from members of the local farming community. At the time of writing, work is on-going to understand and assess what information is available regarding farms in East Devon, in order for the Committee to decide the most appropriate way to proceed.

### 3.8 UK Shared Prosperity Fund (year 2: 2023-24) evaluation

The Committee considered an update report which provided an overview of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund funded activity for 2023/24 and the key findings of the evaluation work undertaken

in Year 2 (of 3) of the programme. A further update report will be provided during the coming civic year.

### 3.9 Public engagement

The Committee welcomes engagement from the public. On two occasions statements from a member of the public have been read out concerning improving green spaces for wildlife and consultancy fees for the strategic plan for Exmouth. As stated above, members of the local farming community attended and addressed the Committee regarding the introduction of inheritance tax for farms. The Committee would be pleased to consider any matters of concern which members of the public wish to raise.

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#### **Financial implications:**

There are no direct financial implications arising from this report that require comment.

#### **Legal implications:**

There are no legal implications arising.