

**Report to:** Council

**Date of Meeting** 13 May 2026

**Heading/Title:** Annual report of the Scrutiny Committee 2025-26

**Cabinet Member(s):** Culture, Leisure Sport and Tourism; Environment – Nature and Climate; Environment – Operational; Assets and Economy; Finance; Coast, Country and Environment; Place, Infrastructure and Strategic Planning

**Director/Assistant Director:** Director for Place

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**Key decision No:** N/A

**If a Key Decision has it appeared on Forward Plan:** N/A

**Document classification:** Part A Public Document

**Exemption applied:** None

## 1. Background

- 1.1 Overview and Scrutiny is a non-executive function carried out by three committees, the Scrutiny Committee, the Overview Committee and the Housing Overview & Scrutiny Committee, within a set of guiding principles of effective scrutiny promoted by the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny.
- 1.2 The Scrutiny Committee principally holds the Cabinet to account by reviewing decisions and performance, ensuring proper consultation, identifying areas for improvement, and making recommendations. It also monitors progress against Council priorities and policies and can call in unimplemented Cabinet or Portfolio Holder decisions for reconsideration.
- 1.3 Specific functions of the Scrutiny Committee, relating to policy development and review, include:
  - Holding the Cabinet (the Council's policy and decision-making group) to account.
  - Examining decisions that have been made by the Cabinet and Council officers.
  - Evaluating performance and progress in relation to the Council Plan priorities, Council's policy objectives, performance targets and/or particular service areas.
  - Ensuring that consultation, where necessary, has been carried out

- Highlighting areas for improvement.
- Making recommendations to the Cabinet and/or Cabinet arising from the outcome of the scrutiny process.
- Exercising the right of call-in, for reconsideration of decisions made but not yet implemented by the Cabinet and/or a Portfolio Holder member of the Cabinet.
- Ensuring services are effective and responsive to the needs of East Devon's residents by:
  - Reviewing services, including the performance of other public bodies in the area.
  - Ensuring the public are consulted where change is being proposed.
  - Ensuring that services delivered represent value for money.
  - Encouraging public involvement:
    - Considering issues that are of interest to the local community.
    - Providing accessible information on the scrutiny process and activities.
  - Carrying out the role of the Crime and Disorder Committee, as required for the purposes of section 19 of the Police and Justice Act 2006, including the scrutiny of the East and Mid Devon Community Safety Partnership.

1.4 The Chair of the Scrutiny Committee for 2025-26 was Councillor Mike Goodman and Councillor Duncan Mackinder as the Vice-Chair.

1.5 Words from the Chair:

1.5.1 As Chair of the Scrutiny Committee, I am pleased to present this Annual Report, summarising the Committee's work during the 2025–26 civic year. Scrutiny plays an essential role in good governance: it provides constructive challenge, helps ensure decisions are well-evidenced and transparent, and supports continuous improvement in the services residents rely on.

1.5.2 This year the Committee has considered a wide range of matters, including customer complaints and service improvement, safeguarding, emergency planning and community resilience, progress on scrutiny improvement actions, budget and directorate planning, and a number of detailed reviews and call-in business. In doing so we have sought to add value by focusing on outcomes, managing risk, and promoting value for money, while recognising the challenges of capacity, changing demand and the wider context of local government reorganisation.

1.5.3 I would like to thank Committee Members for their commitment and constructive approach, the Vice-Chair for their support, and the officers who have provided reports, evidence and follow-up. I also thank members of the public and partner organisations who have contributed to our discussions. The Committee remains committed to strengthening the impact of scrutiny, tracking recommendations, and engaging early on the issues that matter most to our communities.

1.6 The following examples summarise the Scrutiny Committee's work over the 2025-26 civic year.

**1.7 Annual Complaint Monitoring and Service Improvement Report 2024/2025**

The Scrutiny Committee considered the annual complaints and service improvement report for 2024/25, noting that rising complaint levels reflected national trends, with planning and housing generating the most complaints.

Housing complaints were expected to reduce over time as service improvements continued, while recent recruitment had already helped lower planning-related complaints. Additional resources had cleared the housing complaints backlog, and tenant feedback indicated positive impacts. Ombudsman findings showed one upheld complaint with a 100% satisfactory remedy rate.

Councillors welcomed progress but highlighted the need for greater transparency, including sharing the Housing Action Plan, providing clearer breakdowns of housing repair complaints, and improving proactive communication to prevent complaints. Improvements in managing anti-social behaviour and repairs oversight were noted, alongside confirmation of complaint response targets and contractor accountability. Concerns were raised about the cost and disruption of decanting tenants during repairs and about ensuring scrutiny arrangements remained clear between committees.

The Committee agreed to note the report.

## **1.8 Changes to Agricultural Property Relief and Business Property Relief**

The Scrutiny Committee reviewed an update on its investigation into proposed inheritance tax reforms affecting agricultural and business property relief, announced in the Autumn Budget 2024. These reforms had generated significant concern within the farming community and prompted a Council motion in December 2024. The Committee's work focused on understanding the potential local impact, particularly on family farms, drawing on engagement with the National Farmers Union.

Members noted limitations in available data and representation and acknowledged that the Council had no direct influence over national tax policy. It was agreed that the lack of detailed, local-level information made it difficult to accurately assess the reforms' impact on farms in the District.

The Committee resolved to note the report and recommend to Council that the issue be addressed at a national level, with continued support for local farmers through improved consultation, a full impact assessment, and consideration of delaying or revising the proposed reforms.

## **1.9 Update on progress with the Scrutiny Action Plan**

The Scrutiny Committee received an update on progress against the Scrutiny Action Plan following the Scrutiny Review. Changes to committee membership and structure were agreed by Council, with further work under way through the Constitution Working Group on meeting frequency, quorum and clearer, complementary terms of reference, due to be reported to Council in October.

Support arrangements have improved, with trained Democratic Services Officers now supporting scrutiny, directors assigned to each committee, and regular engagement beginning with committee chairs. Learning and development activity has included external training on work programming and a programme of spotlight briefing sessions for members.

Work is ongoing to better coordinate work programmes across the three scrutiny bodies, enable cross-party pre-meetings when needed, provide officer training on scrutiny roles, and improve how scrutiny recommendations and their impact are tracked and publicised. It was noted that there is currently no formal process for agreeing pre-meetings, which will be followed up by officers. The update was noted.

### **1.10 East Devon Safeguarding annual review 2024/2025**

The Committee received a report on safeguarding activity during 2024–25. The Portfolio Holder introduced the item and thanked staff, and the Assistant Director highlighted key aspects of the Council's safeguarding work. Members discussed anti-social behaviour, noting the role of the Anti-social Behaviour and Community Safety Lead and the resumption of Community Safety Group meetings. Around one fifth of referrals progressed to safeguarding cases, consistent with the national average. Improving Councillor uptake of mandatory safeguarding training was emphasised, with agreement to update training by June 2026 and to account for any equivalent external training.

The Committee noted improved staff awareness and confidence and acknowledged the importance of safeguarding across the Council.

### **1.11 Review of emergency planning and responses 2024/2025**

The Committee considered a report on emergency planning and response activity in 2024–25. The Portfolio Holder introduced the item and the Assistant Director (Environmental Health) highlighted the work undertaken, noting that future team capacity and resourcing would need to be reviewed. Discussion focused on improving emergency preparedness among Town and Parish Councils, including raising awareness through Councillor newsletters, parish agendas, and possible guidance materials.

Members discussed terrorism risks, the implications of the Terrorism (Protection of Premises) Act 2025 (Martyn's Law), and learning from the 2023 Newton Poppleford flooding. It was noted that parish collaboration was strengthening resilience and that officers were maintaining regular contact with Parish Clerks.

The Committee agreed to recommend regular emergency planning updates via the Councillors' newsletter and noted the emergency planning activity for 2024–25.

### **1.12 Scoping document – impact of the ban on the use of glyphosate**

The Committee considered a scoping document for a proposed review, with Councillors noting the importance of consulting Ward Members to identify

specific problem areas. If progressed, it was agreed the review should report in February 2026, ahead of the growing season.

Members highlighted the need to consider biodiversity impacts, the effectiveness of alternative weed control methods, distinctions between harmful and unsightly weed growth, clarity of land ownership responsibilities, staff capacity and duty of care, and resource implications for wildlife improvement areas.

The review should also take account of the March 2022 Cabinet report and its agreed actions. The Committee agreed to proceed with the review on the basis outlined.

### **1.13 Finance Report: Agency and Consultant Expenditure for 2023/202 and 2024/2025**

The Committee considered a report on spending on consultants, specialist advice, and agency staff for 2023/24 and 2024/25. Expenditure was described as tightly managed and used only where necessary, such as to cover staff absences, address capacity gaps, or secure temporary specialist expertise. Agency staff and consultants accounted for around 16% of the workforce, with differing levels of use across directorates.

Notable progress was highlighted within the Housing and Health Directorate, where reliance on agency staff had been reduced through permanent recruitment. Members discussed budget provisions for consultancy costs, value for money, year-on-year expenditure fluctuations, legacy costs linked to the Blackdown House relocation, potential impacts of local government reorganisation, benchmarking against comparable authorities, and the role of capital projects—particularly in the Place Directorate—in driving consultancy use.

The Committee thanked Officers for the report and noted the contents.

### **1.14 Call-In request: Cabinet decision 3 December 2025 – In perpetuity funding for management of Clyst Meadows SANG – Cabinet minute no. 118**

The Committee considered a valid call-in of a Cabinet decision from 3 December 2025 to create a £1.1m CIL-funded investment to provide in-perpetuity funding for the management of Clyst Meadows SANG. The call-in, signed by five Councillors, raised concerns about value for money, the use of scarce CIL funds, alternative funding approaches, and risks associated with long-term investment returns.

Officers explained that the proposed investment offered the lowest-risk option to guarantee long-term funding, complied with Natural England requirements, and was based on a well-established local authority investment fund.

Members debated the risks, alternative funding models, and broader infrastructure priorities, while noting that the delivery of the SANG itself was not in question.

Following discussion, the Committee resolved not to refer the decision back to Cabinet, and therefore the Cabinet decision of 3 December 2025 stands.

### **1.15 Directorate Plans 2026 – 2028**

The Committee considered Directorate Plans for 2026–2028, presented as two-year plans pending Local Government Reorganisation, with arrangements in place for ongoing review and monitoring.

- **Place Directorate:** The Plan outlined delivery across four service areas and seven portfolios, highlighting significant risks, time-critical projects, and capacity pressures. Key issues discussed included decarbonisation projects, staffing challenges in Streetscene, funding for major schemes, climate change engagement, updating the Playing Pitch Strategy, delivery of the Tree, Hedge and Woodland Strategy, and planning performance metrics.
- **Housing & Health Directorate:** The Plan focused on service pressures and opportunities, preparations for LGR, trauma-informed training, improved void turnaround times, emergency planning and community resilience, uncertainty over funding for anti-social behaviour wardens, and the timing of fees and charges reviews.
- **Finance Directorate:** The Plan highlighted work on the Poverty Strategy, place-based initiatives with DWP, digital service improvements, and preparations for potential LGR finance system integration. Discussion covered council tax collection, support schemes, digital exclusion and the Customer Charter, and future monitoring of anti-poverty work.
- **Governance Directorate:** The Plan set out the new Directorate structure, key appointments, strengthened procurement and project oversight, ongoing town and parish council training, revised report templates, and recent launch of the People Strategy, noting that LGR would significantly affect priorities.

The Committee thanked Officers and recommended that Cabinet approve the Directorate Plans for 2026–2028 for the Place, Housing & Health, Finance and Governance Directorates.

### **1.16 Draft Revenue and Capital Budgets 2026 – 2027**

The Committee considered the draft revenue and capital budget for 2026–27, presented by the Director of Finance, who outlined the budget process and timetable leading to Council approval on 25 February 2026.

Local Government Reorganisation and the Fairer Funding Review were identified as major factors influencing the budget. Members discussed issues including the affordability of Council debt, changes to interest income and payments, funding requirements for the proposed Marcombe new town, staffing cost movements, reserves, tree maintenance budgets, digital inclusion, and confirmation that funding was in place to keep Exmouth station toilets open.

The Committee reviewed proposed Special Items for inclusion in the budget and agreed to recommend to Cabinet:

- A Play Park Consolidation Study (£20,000);
- Cultural Strategy delivery (£37,500) and Tourism Strategy delivery (£30,000), formerly funded through UKSPF;
- Continued funding for the CVC service by Devon Communities Together (£63,000);
- Additional Streetscene operational staff capacity (£118,000 and £34,000) to address growth and seasonal pressures.

A proposed LATCo client-side manager post was withdrawn.

The agreed items were to be incorporated into the draft budget, and the Committee recommended that Cabinet approve the draft revenue and capital budgets for 2026–27, including the fees and charges schedule.

### **1.17 Review of the impact of the ban on the use of glyphosate**

The Committee considered a report on the impacts of EDDC's 2022 ban on the general use of glyphosate and the results of trials of alternative weed control methods. The report covered only areas maintained by EDDC's Streetscene service, noting that concerns raised by Councillors largely related to land maintained by Devon County Council. Consultation feedback from Councillors was limited, suggesting no significant issues on EDDC-managed land.

Officers outlined trials of glyphosate-free alternatives, including vinegar and hot foam, and confirmed that EDDC does not currently have an approved weed management or glyphosate policy. Discussion focused on the comparative environmental and health impacts of glyphosate and dicophar, the lack of viable alternatives for sports pitches and amenity turf, resource and capacity constraints, biodiversity impacts (including pollinators), and the need to balance environmental considerations with tidiness and public wellbeing. It was also noted that glyphosate continued to be used selectively for invasive species such as Japanese knotweed.

The Director of Place highlighted the integrated weed management framework, under which chemical use should be a last resort, and agreed to explore bringing this forward for wider consideration.

Recommendations to Cabinet were to:

1. Discontinue the use of hot foam treatment and continue with glyphosate-free alternatives and manual methods until trial outcomes are clearer.
2. Consider further development of the integrated weed management framework and report this to the Overview Committee, including resource implications.
3. Encourage Councillors and Town and Parish Councils to continue reporting weed issues on pavements and roadsides to Devon County Council.

### **1.18 Climate Change Action Plan Review**

The Committee received a review of progress against the Climate Change Action Plan, with the Portfolio Holder highlighting achievements over the past year and thanking Officers. The Assistant Director (Environmental Health) presented the report, noting that it related to an interim Action Plan, with a new draft Strategy and Action Plan in development and to be considered through Councillor workshops before formal committee consideration.

Members discussed recent performance, noting a rise in emissions in 2023–24 followed by an almost 5% reduction in 2024–25, and acknowledged the challenges of measuring scope 3 emissions. The importance of community-led action, carbon literacy training, embedding climate considerations across all Council projects, increased tree and hedgerow planting, and balancing mitigation with adaptation was emphasised. Concerns were also raised about the increasing difficulty of achieving emissions targets and the wider national policy context.

The Committee thanked Officers for their work and formally complimented the service on the progress being made in delivering the actions within the Climate Change Action Plan.

### **1.19 UK Shared Prosperity Fund evaluation update report**

The Committee considered a report on UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) activity for 2024/25 and the findings from the Year 3 evaluation.

Members thanked Officers for their delivery of the programme and noted disappointment that local growth funding would end from 2026/27. The report highlighted a strong focus on supporting disadvantaged groups, including improving access to leisure opportunities, and confirmed that organisations receiving decarbonisation grants were supported to measure carbon savings through professional assessments. It was also noted that funding passed to Devon County Council for employment hubs could not be fully evaluated due to the absence of funding beyond year one for tracking long-term employment outcomes.

The Committee noted progress against actions from the January 2025 UKSPF Evaluation Report, and noted the 2024/25 evaluation, including the challenges identified and recommendations for future project management processes.

### **1.20 Community Safety Partnership update report**

The Committee received a report on Community Safety Partnership activity during 2025, including work undertaken by East Devon District Council. Members noted a correction to the figures, confirming that 45 Community Protection Warnings were issued in 2025/26, and discussed their role within the escalation process for dealing with antisocial behaviour. Officers highlighted that these enforcement powers are a relatively new area of work and continue to involve learning, particularly around notice wording and the use of alternative dispute resolution.

Members requested improved presentation of data to show trends over time and discussed the success of street marshals in Exmouth as part of the

Hotspot Policing project, noting concerns about reduced future funding. The importance of preventative approaches, including youth engagement, partnership working, and a public health approach to community safety, was emphasised. It was also noted that the district's six Community Safety Groups were now operational, providing local forums to address concerns at an early stage.

The Committee noted the community safety activity undertaken during 2025.

### **1.21 Scoping report – Planning Enforcement**

The Committee considered a scoping report on planning enforcement and agreed that, rather than producing a formal Scrutiny report, the focus should be on improving understanding among Councillors and Town and Parish Councils.

It was agreed that the Assistant Director for Planning Strategy and Development Management would provide a presentation at a Councillor briefing and to Town and Parish Councils explaining the enforcement process and key statistics, and produce an article for the Councillors' Newsletter with a link to the published Enforcement Plan.

This approach was intended to better equip Councillors to explain the enforcement process and its limitations to residents.

## **2. Recommendations/Decision**

2.1 That Council note the work that the Scrutiny Committee has undertaken during the 2025-26 civic year.

## **3. Reasons for Recommendations/Decision**

3.1 To inform Annual Council of the work of the Scrutiny Committee.

## **4. Options**

4.1 N/A

## **5. Relevance to Council Plan/priorities**

Set out how report links to the Council Plan/priorities:

- A supported and engaged community that has the right homes in the right places, with appropriate infrastructure
- A sustainable environment that is moving towards carbon neutrality and which promotes ecological recovery.
- A vibrant and resilient economy that supports local business, provides local jobs and leads to a reduction in poverty and inequality.

- A well-managed, financially secure and continuously improving council that delivers quality services

**6. Financial Comments/Implications**

6.1 There are none arising from this report.

**7. Legal Comments/Implications**

7.1 It is a requirement of the Constitution that the Scrutiny Committee submits an annual report of the work it has undertaken to the Annual Council meeting.

**8. Risk Implications**

None.

**9. Equality Implications (Public Sector Equality Duty)**

9.1 N/A

**10. HR and Workforce Implications**

10.1 N/A

**11. Community Safety Implications (Crime and Disorder)**

11.1 N/A

**12. Climate Change Implications**

12.1 N/A

**13. Health & Safety and Health & Wellbeing Implications**

13.1 N/A

13.2 N/A.

**14. Procurement and Social Value implications**

14.1 N/A

**15. Land and Buildings (non-housing)/Asset Management Implications**

15.1 N/A.

**16. Overview and Scrutiny Committees Comments/Recommendations**

16.1 As set out in the report.

**17. Digital and Data**

17.1 N/A

**18. Consultation and Engagement**

18.1 N/A

**19. Communications**

19.1 None

**20. Next Steps**

20.1 N/A

**21. Appendices**

21.1 None

**22. Background Papers**

22.1 None