Cabinet

Report for:	Cabinet
Title of report:	Scrutiny: Recommendations following the Review of Scrutiny by the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny
Date:	28th January 2025
Report on behalf of:	Councillor William Allen, Portfolio Holder for Corporate and Commercial Services
Part:	I
If Part II, reason:	N/A
Appendices:	Review report from the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny (CfGS) (appendix 1) Scrutiny Scoring Criteria (appendix 2) Committee Timetable for 2025/26 (Appendix 3) Community Impact Assessment
Background papers:	None
Glossary of acronyms and any other abbreviations used in this report:	Centre for Governance and Scrutiny (CfGS)

Report Author / Responsible Officer

Mark Brookes, Assistant Director (Legal and Democratic Services)

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Catherine Silva Donayre, Strategic Director (Corporate & Commercial Services)

✉ ☎ Mark.brookes@dacorum.gov.uk / 01442 228236 (ext. 2236)

Catherine.silvadonayre@dacorum.gov.uk / 01442 228332 (ext 2232)

Corporate Priorities	
	Community engagement: Engage with residents and partners to have a real say on our services and the borough.

	Service improvement and delivery: Running the Council efficiently and putting residents at the heart of everything we do.
Wards affected	ALL
Purpose of the report:	For Cabinet to consider the recommendations for the future operation of the scrutiny function and alignment of Cabinet and Council meetings.
Recommendation (s) to the decision maker (s):	That Cabinet: (1) Recommends Council considers and agrees the action plan supporting each recommendation in the report. (2) Recommends that Council agrees the proposed revised committee timetable (Appendix 3)
Period for post policy/project review:	The changes proposed in this report will be kept under continuous review and reported to Cabinet and Council if further changes are required.

1.   Background

1.1   In the autumn of 2023, the Council commissioned the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny (CfGS) to undertake a review of the Council's scrutiny function. The review took place between October and December last year and resulted in the report and recommendations attached as Appendix 1. The review was largely positive about how Scrutiny is carried out at the Council, recognising a good level of engagement and a willingness for the scrutiny function to develop and evolve.   The report puts forward suggestions for change so that the function can become more productive and effective.

1.2   The report sets out the recommendations from CfGS in bold in section 2 below and an action plan has been drafted, by the author of this report, to propose how the Council can put the recommendations into best effect.

1.3   In summary, the review did not suggest that the current model of three scrutiny committees is changed, but that these committees focus on thematic work rather than dive into more operational/performance detail, achieved by an annual plan for each committee.

1.4   It is proposed that Scrutiny committee meetings will be tied into the programme of Cabinet and Council meetings and reduced to five Scrutiny meetings a year for each committee plus the Scrutiny budget meeting in December with an optional second meeting in January or February if there are any material changes to the budget presented in December.

1.5   It is proposed to realign the timetable for Cabinet and Council to follow the scrutiny cycle and reduce the number of Cabinet meetings from 11 to 5. Provision will be made in the Committee Timetable for an additional 5 'contingency' Cabinet meetings in case they are needed for urgent business, which cannot meet publication deadlines for the main meetings, but otherwise these meetings will not be used.

Council will continue to have 5 meetings plus the Annual Council as it does at present. Audit Committee will also be reduced from 6 to 5 meetings for consistency.

1.6   It is proposed that a new Members' portal will be developed to share service performance information, service updates, report scrutiny progress and for Member development and training, which will allow more time for scrutiny meetings to focus on broader corporate and strategic matters, which can add greater value to the Council.

Background: frequency of meetings and agenda sizes

1.7   Currently, the Council has seven main Overview and Scrutiny Committee meetings for each committee plus two joint budget scrutiny meetings, eleven Cabinet meetings, and five full Council meetings plus Annual Council.   The Council also has six audit meetings.

1.8   Over the period from September 2023 to July 2024, Cabinet averaged 6 reports per meeting with an average meeting duration of 20 minutes. Finance and Resources OSC averaged 6 items over 7 meetings during this time frame with an average meeting time of 1h:13 mins, Housing and Community OSC 6 reports with an average meeting time of 56 minutes, Strategic Planning and Environment OSC (SPAE) averaged 5 items a meeting with an average meeting time of 1h:51 mins The number of reports for Scrutiny meetings includes the quarterly performance reports which would be removed from agendas but a more condensed performance report will still come twice a year to scrutiny meetings. Full data is set out at the end of this report for each meeting over the last 12 months; including the start and finish times for each meeting.

2.   Centre for Governance and Scrutiny Recommendation 1

Consider how the scrutiny committee structure could be reprofiled to allow for more in-depth scrutiny work. *We recommend that the current structure of three committees is maintained but are clearly articulated and that the frequency of formal meetings is reviewed to provide the space for more Member led strategic scrutiny to take place. (Whilst noting that this could require review of all Council committees).*

2.1   Summary of action plan proposals:

❖ Reduce to five Overview and Scrutiny meetings per committee plus one budget meeting, with an optional second budget in January/February meeting if there are material changes to the budget presented in December.

❖ Realign Cabinet and Council to follow each Scrutiny meeting, reducing the number of Cabinet meetings to five per annum from eleven (plus 5 contingency meetings) Council to five, plus Annual Council (remains the same number) and Audit to five meetings from six.   Please see annexed to this report a proposed revised committee timetable for 2025/26.

The timing of the implementation of the new timetable will take effect from May 2025, if agreed by Members.

❖ Committee to focus on more strategic thematic issues and reduce time spent on service performance updates.

❖ Quarterly Performance reports for service areas to be distributed via a newly developed Members' Portal so Members can raise questions through the Portal and receive answers, as required, outside meetings.   Following feedback from Members through Group briefings, it is proposed that there will still be two meetings each year which will have a dedicated section for formal performance reporting.

2.3   The review recognised that there is a tendency at the Scrutiny committees for Members to focus too much into the operational detail of the services rather than on more strategic issues. This can mean that the meetings become too bogged down in the details of delivery, which can be addressed elsewhere (see below).

2.4   To address this, it is recommended that an annual plan is drawn up for each Scrutiny Committee; with a plan for the key areas upon which the committee wishes to focus over the year; Scrutiny chairs will need to liaise in advance of the finalisation of the plans to ensure that there is no duplication across committees. There will still remain the opportunity to add pre-Cabinet scrutiny reports as currently exists.

2.5   At present, each Scrutiny Committee meets nine times in each municipal year. This is very frequent and the review identified that this was more than many councils and has significant implications upon the time required from Members and officers and the Council resources that this frequency consumes.   It is proposed that, in future, each committee meets five times per year (plus a budget scrutiny meeting) and that these meetings precede the Cabinet meetings (also reduced in frequency to five main meetings); which will in turn be followed by meetings of Council.

2.6   If this proposal is adopted, it is proposed that the meetings are divided into two distinct parts. The first part will cover scrutiny of the relevant Cabinet reports. The second part will be devoted to discussing the thematic work of the Committee. Examples of the type of thematic work may include focussed review of the work or particular service areas within the remit of the Committee, delivery against corporate plan objectives falling within the remit of the Committee, new or growing areas of customer demand in the area.   These are just a few examples, but themes will be developed and discussed with Scrutiny chairs/vice chairs and agreed with the wider Committee.

2.7   These changes will also free up time for Members to have specific working/task and finish groups to look into the identified issues in more depth if required and should add value to the scrutiny function.

2.8   Finally, whilst it is not felt a good use of time for Members to go into operational performance detail at committee, it is recognised that it is entirely right for Members to be aware of performance matters across service areas. Accordingly, details of performance across the Council will be available through a new Members' Portal, which will enable Members to raise questions with the relevant senior officer if they have concerns and for answers to be provided through the Portal.   Performance reports may also assist Members to consider particular work areas where they may like to request a specific 'deep dive' report at a future meeting. It is still proposed that that Scrutiny committees allocate part of two of their meetings annually to consider service performance against key performance indicators and this will be considered further as the workplans are developed.

3.   **Centre for Governance and Scrutiny Recommendation 2**

        Developing regular communication between Scrutiny Chairs. *This could be achieved through default position of sharing work programmes and insight on working practices. This should also engage the Chair of Audit and Cabinet Members to highlight future issues and the part which Scrutiny could play in testing and shaping these forward plans.*

3.1   Summary of action plan proposals

        ❖ Scrutiny chairs/vice chairs to agree overall work programme and programme for each committee. This will involve attendance at one main work planning workshop each year plus quarterly reviews where initial work plan ideas will be developed.

        ❖ Workplans will be shared electronically on the Members' Portal to ensure that Chairs have oversight of each other's workplans and eliminate duplication.

3.2   The review pointed out that there was insufficient communication between the Scrutiny Chairs, risking duplication across the work programmes of the three committees. To reduce the risk of this the chairs will meet before the work programmes are finalised at an annual work planning workshop to agree what the overall thematic scrutiny programme should look like over the following year.   Quarterly work planning review meetings with take place with Chairs and lead service officers (Strategic Directors, ADs or Heads of Service) to review workplans and ensure they are up to date. Workplans will then be shared amongst all Chairs on the Members' Portal.

3.3   Quarterly meetings of chairs can monitor progression, aided by a portal for chairs and vice chairs set up on the Members' portal so that the overall workplan and progress for each committee can be more easily monitored.

4.   **Centre for Governance and Scrutiny Recommendation 3**

        Develop an awareness raising programme for Members and Officers. *This should be in addition to the current package of learning and development support for Elected Members and Officers across the Council. Wider awareness raising should be explored to build, refresh and enhance organisational knowledge and understanding of the role, purpose, and powers of scrutiny. This should be built into induction training for new Elected Members and include officer support for drafting and presenting reports to committee.*

4.1   Summary of action plan proposals

        ❖ Induction training for all new Members will be provided as part of the Member development programme. This is currently part of the Member induction programme and will be retained.

❖ In addition, the Members' Portal will be used to give a range of short written briefings and video training opportunities on relevant scrutiny matters.

❖ Opportunities will be considered for short briefings before scrutiny meetings where appropriate. For example, this could be scrutiny governance/process training, general scrutiny skills, or finance updates if required.

4.2 As the review recognised, the Council already has a substantial Member training programme. However, building in short briefing sessions, whether in person or on-line, on matters which are of relevance to the functions of the committee or relating to matters the committee will be discussing at the meeting, or possibly at forthcoming meetings, will be actioned.

5. Centre for Governance and Scrutiny Recommendation 4

Review the process for developing work plans for each Scrutiny committee. Engaging Members, Officers, partners, and the public to inform work programming and to prioritise the topics for review in a proportionate way. This should include planned space for the detailed scrutiny of forthcoming decisions alongside the capacity to conduct in-depth scrutiny outside of the formal meetings.

5.1 Summary of action plan proposals

❖ February - Annual call for workplan ideas for Councillors and the public
❖ March/April - Annual work planning workshops with Scrutiny chairs/vice-chairs to help select and prioritise workplans.

Members will still be able to raise ideas for new items at each meeting, which will be subject to assessment in accordance with the workplan selection tool to help select and prioritise workplan matters (see proposal in see Appendix 2).

5.2 The idea behind this is to enable Scrutiny Committees to focus on the activities that will impact most beneficially on the Council's corporate priorities and/or matters of significant local concern. This will need to be adjusted from time to time in line with other changes so that alignment is achieved across the Council's activities and overall priorities.

5.3 The workplan selection tool will enable Scrutiny chairs/vice chairs to prioritise the different ideas and select appropriate items to ensure time for more in-depth scrutiny into items which can make a real difference to the Council. The annual workplan will give officers advanced notice and time to develop reports.

5.4 The annual 'call' for workplan ideas will give an opportunity for the public and Councillors to submit ideas for scrutiny – this could be done through the Council's on-line engagement platform, which can then be assessed through the workplan selection tool and agreed between chairs/vice-chairs and senior officers for agreement by Committee. It will also allow chairs and vice-chairs the opportunity to consider inviting individuals, groups or stakeholders to appear at Committee to give their views on matters where relevant and agreed with senior officers.

6. Centre for Governance and Scrutiny Recommendation 5

Create a regular information digest for all Elected Members. This would provide the opportunity for Members to be cited on performance data and other high-profile work which is for information rather than taking up space on the formal agenda. This digest should also be used to identify those issues which may require further in-depth investigation.

6.1 Summary of action plan proposals

❖ This will be achieved through the development of a new Members' Portal.

6.2   The greater use of the Members' Portal referred to above will provide a resource for Members. It is intended that this will be developed (as outlined above) to include performance information on services (similar to current performance reports but more concise) to enable Members, should they wish, to both interrogate this information and be interactive, enabling Members to raise questions and issues, and make suggestions, directly through to the relevant senior officers.

6.3   Members will be able to identify through the portal, the performance information that they would find most useful and comparison data can be developed, enabling benchmarking internally as well as externally. Details of and knowledge shared in the training sessions referred to above will also be included on this portal.

6.4   The Portal will also be used to promote training opportunities; provide on-line video recordings of training provided for review and enable Members to track training   they have attended and are required to attend (mandatory courses).

7.   **Centre for Governance and Scrutiny Recommendation 6**

Review the content and detail for scrutiny reports and briefings. This would ensure consistency of communication and reporting formats as well as help focus on purpose of an item for consideration by scrutiny and expectations of the level of detailed contained within agenda packs. This could be done alongside Elected Members and officers so that all parties were clear on expectations and content.

7.1   Summary of action plan proposals

❖ The template for Scrutiny meeting agendas and reports will be reviewed in the light of the finalised action plan for the other recommendations (including Recommendation 7 below).

❖ The aim will be to create a more inclusive template, which can prompt debate and discussion.

❖ The structure of performance reports/updates to go on the Portal will also be reviewed and agreed with the Performance Team to ensure they are concise and give members an overview of the service area.

8.   **Centre for Governance and Scrutiny Recommendation 7**

Reviewing how the recommendations are made and how impact is measured. This could include a process for any recommendations made being captured and reported back to Scrutiny to show how Cabinet has reflected on comments made and to orientate towards outcomes-focused meetings. This recommendation will be important following the review of work programming and the space having been provided for in-depth scrutiny work.

8.1   Summary of action plan proposals

❖ Committee agendas will include standard agenda items noting how recommendations from Scrutiny have been progressed, if they have been acted upon, and what the impact has been.

8.2   The review reflected that there was comparatively little public participation in the work of the Committees. This can be improved by identifying experts who could add value when the Committee is considering certain issues. More public participation, and the wider communication about the desire for this and how it can be achieved, both in looking at subjects and assessing impact from scrutiny work, would broaden the involvement with the public and enable greater resident input into the work of the Council.

9. Audit Committee

9.1 Whilst the report mentioned the role of the Audit Committee, it did not contain any recommendations about its operation. Nonetheless, the role of the Audit Committee is an important one and one that is rightly separate from both Cabinet and Scrutiny.

9.2 It is recommended that there be greater oversight of workplans between Audit and Scrutiny chairs to ensure that there is no duplication of work. This can be facilitated through the Members' Portal. It is also recommended that the frequency of Audit Committee is reduced to five meetings from six so that meetings can be timetabled in a consistent format to Scrutiny, Cabinet and Council meetings. This recommendation has been discussed with the S.151 officer who has no specific concerns subject to agreeing final timetabling.

10. Options

10.1 The Council could decide to continue with the current way in which scrutiny operates or could decide to adopt a different approach other than that recommended by the review.

10.2 Consideration has been given to other formats for scrutiny including reducing the number of Scrutiny Committees to one or two main committees rather than the current three. The CfGS believed that the current structure of three committees worked well and whilst some authorities do adopt different approaches, including some who only have one committee, the view of CfGS is that this can cause work planning issues as there may not be enough capacity to adequately scrutinise the full range of services that the Council provides. A smaller one or two committee structure may also mean Councillors could become disenfranchised as some will not be involved in the scrutiny process at all and would therefore miss the opportunity to become involved in strategy, policy and project development and to scrutinise matters which really matter to their constituents.

11. Consultation

11.1 There has been consultation with the Council's Corporate Leadership Team and Cabinet Members as these proposals have been developed.

11.2 The recommendations have also been considered by the Council's three scrutiny committees who have considered and debated the proposals in detail.

11.3 The comments received from scrutiny committees are summarised below, but are not intended to be a full verbatim record of all comments:

  ➢ Positive comments over the development of the Member's Portal and how effective this could be for Member communications.
  ➢ Concerns highlighted that the Committee should not lose focus on performance.
  ➢ Concerns over reducing the number of meetings – will there still be time to debate all of the issues properly?
  ➢ Positive comments over current training for scrutiny, and an acknowledgement that more 'bitesize' training opportunity could be beneficial. Training should be available for all members (experienced as well as new members).
  ➢ Members acknowledged that workplans should be member driven.
  ➢ Greater involvement of the public was welcome, but it needs to be managed effectively
  ➢ Ideas for the development of workplans were welcome, but committees and Chairs need to make sure that all committee members are involved in work planning and can bring forward ideas for scrutiny.
  ➢ Greater focus on strategic matters rather than service performance was welcome
  ➢ Some concerns raised whether the proposals would make a difference, but there was a willingness to work with the proposals and keep them under continuous review.

11.4 All of the comments received will be kept under review as the proposals are implemented and trialled in the early months of the new municipal year and changes agreed with scrutiny chairs where appropriate.

12. **Financial and value for money implications:**

The changes proposed in the report will be cost neutral to the Council, but there may be some savings in officer time due to the reduction in the number of meetings; however, this time will be redirected in other areas to ensure greater focus on the development of workplans and focused scrutiny reports.

13. **Legal Implications**

The Council must, by law, have a scrutiny function and this will continue to be provided within the new framework proposed. The aim is to increase the quality of the scrutiny function, and this will be kept under continuous review to ensure that the changes are effective.

14. **Risks**

The role of scrutiny is important and a statutory function in a Local Authority that operates an executive model of governance, such as at Dacorum. It is a way of the wider Council holding the executive to account and so the scrutiny function must be kept up to date and must operate as effectively as possible. If sufficient resource is not devoted to the support of scrutiny, the governance of the Council is at risk with reputational and other consequences, including a lack of public confidence.

15. **Equalities, Community Impact and Human Rights:**

There are no negative Equalities, Community Impact or Human Rights implications arising from this report. Impact assessment is annexed to the report. A reduction in evening meetings should assist some members and officers who have caring and/or work commitments.

16. **Sustainability implications.**

There are no sustainability implications arising from this report.

17. **Council infrastructure (including Health and Safety, HR/OD, assets and other resources)**

There are no implications arising from this report.

18. **Statutory Comments**

Monitoring Officer:

This is a report of the Monitoring Officer in his service capacity as Assistant Director, Legal and Democratic Services and therefore comments have been incorporated within the report.

S151:

The proposed action plan and revised committee timetable is not expected to have an impact on major financial decision-making processes going forward, with the standard Cabinet and Council authorisations and approval processes unchanged.

19. **Conclusions**

The report highlights a number of recommendations which aim to develop the Council's scrutiny function. The recommendations, if agreed, will be kept under review and further changes proposed to ensure that the function continues to adapt and improve.

Cabinet and Overview & Scrutiny meetings (excluding Joint Budget)

01/08/2023 to 31/08/2024

	Meeting Date	Start time	Finish time	Meeting duration	No. of reports
Cabinet	12/09/23	19:30	19:44	00:14	7
	17/10/23	19:30	19:57	00:27	8
	21/11/23	19:30	19:40	00:10	3
	12/12/23	19:30	19:50	00:20	6
	30/01/24	19:30	19:45	00:15	7
	13/02/24	19:30	20:00	00:30	10
	19/03/24	19:30	19:33	00:03	4
	23/04/24	19:30	20:00	00:30	5
	21/05/24	19:30	20:00	00:30	6
	18/06/24	19:30	19:38	00:08	4
	23/07/24	19:30	20:00	00:30	8

Cabinet average duration of meeting =   **00:19**
Cabinet average number of reports per meeting =   **6**

	Meeting Date	Start time	Finish time	Meeting duration	No. of reports
Finance & Resources OSC	05/09/23	19:30	20:35	01:05	7
	03/10/23	19:30	20:21	00:51	4
	07/11/23	19:30	20:44	01:14	6
	09/01/24		Meeting cancelled		
	05/03/24	19:30	21:17	01:47	8
	04/06/24	19:30	20:30	01:00	5
	15/07/24	19:30	20:56	01:26	5

F&R OSC average duration of meeting =   **01:13**
F&R OSC average number of reports per meeting =   **6**

	Meeting Date	Start time	Finish time	Meeting duration	No. of reports
Housing & Community OSC	13/09/23	19:30	20:20	00:50	8
	11/10/23	19:30	19:58	00:28	5
	08/11/23	19:30	20:10	00:40	5
	17/01/24	19:30	21:09	01:39	5
	13/03/24	19:30	20:30	01:00	9
	05/06/24	19:30	20:06	00:36	3
	15/07/24	19:30	20:55	01:25	5

H&C OSC average duration of meeting =   **00:56**
H&C OSC average number of reports per meeting =   **6**

	Meeting Date	Start time	Finish time	Meeting duration	No. of reports
Strategic Planning & Environment OSC	06/09/23	19:30	21:10	01:40	6
	04/10/23	19:30	21:10	01:40	4
	01/11/23	19:30	20:40	01:10	5
	10/01/24	19:30	22:40	03:10	3
	06/03/24	19:30	21:52	02:22	8
	11/06/24	19:30	20:10	00:40	3
	15/07/24	19:30	21:45	02:15	7

SPAE OSC average duration of meeting =   **01:51**
SPAE OSC average number of reports per meeting =   **5**