



COTSWOLD

District Council

Council name	COTSWOLD DISTRICT COUNCIL
Name and date of Committee	OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY – 1 JUNE 2026 COUNCIL - 15 JULY 2026
Subject	OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE ANNUAL REPORT 2025/2026
Wards affected	None
Accountable member	Councillor Gina Blomefield, Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee. Email: gina.blomefield@cotswold.gov.uk
Accountable officer	Angela Claridge, Monitoring Officer Email: angela.claridge@cotswold.gov.uk
Report author	Julia Gibson, Democratic Services Officer Email: julia.gibson@cotswold.gov.uk
Summary/Purpose	To receive the annual report of the work of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.
Annexes	Annex A – Executive Scrutiny Protocol (Part E10 of the Constitution) Annex B – Recommendations to Cabinet 2025/26 Annex C – Current Overview & Scrutiny Committee Work Programme
Recommendation(s)	That the Committee resolves to: 1. Approve the Overview and Scrutiny Committee Annual Report 2025/26 for submission to full Council.
Corporate priorities	• Delivering Good Services • Responding to the Climate Emergency • Delivering Housing • Supporting Communities • Supporting the Economy
Key Decision	NO



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Exempt	NO
Consultees/ Consultation	Overview and Scrutiny Committee, Director of Governance, Executive Director - Corporate Services (Publica), Cotswold Management Team



1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1** An annual report may be submitted to Full Council to demonstrate the impact of Overview and Scrutiny and the effectiveness of the Executive Scrutiny Protocol under Part E10 (point 10.3) of the Constitution.
- 1.2** The Council therefore is asked to note the report for the previous civic year and the future work programme for the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1** A Corporate Peer Challenge Report published in October 2022 highlighted differing views regarding the effectiveness of the Council's Overview and Scrutiny function. The report welcomed the requirement for the Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee to be an opposition member as a mature constitutional change that provided a strong foundation. The report also noted that the Leader and Cabinet were clear that they wished to be held to account by the Overview and Scrutiny process.
- 2.2** Following the Peer Challenge report, the Council has refocused the role of Overview and Scrutiny on holding Cabinet to account and contributing to policy development on behalf of the local community.
- 2.3** The Council under the Cabinet and Leader model now has an effective Overview and Scrutiny Committee which provides pre-decision scrutiny of Cabinet decisions and contributes to the development of the Council's Budget and Policy Framework. The Committee is also empowered to consider other issues that affect the district or its people.
- 2.4** Decisions to be taken by Cabinet are (subject to urgency rules) published on the Forward Plan for a minimum of 28 days in line with the statutory provisions of The Local Authorities (Executive Arrangements) (Meetings and Access to Information) (England) Regulations 2012. This includes Key Officer Decisions, delegated by Cabinet. For completeness, Council decisions are also included on the Forward Plan.
- 2.5** The Committee of 10 Members, chaired by an opposition Member, provides oversight of the work of the Cabinet and will question Cabinet Members about proposals within their portfolio responsibilities.



- 2.6** Council in November 2022 adopted the Executive Scrutiny Protocol which sets out the relationship between the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and the Executive (Cabinet).
- 2.7** The protocol describes how effective working relationships between the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and the Cabinet enable strong and effective decision-making.
- 2.8** Paragraph 10.1 of the protocol sets out the following requirements to demonstrate the success of the protocol. These are:
- Recognition of the value of scrutiny;
 - A clear record of constructive challenge;
 - Valuable scrutiny reviews that achieve impactful outcomes;
 - An open and accountable decision-making process
- 2.9** Officers have also taken into account guidance from external bodies such as the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny to support the Committee in applying best practice in delivering the aims of the Protocol.

3. THE VALUE OF SCRUTINY AND CONSTRUCTIVE CHALLENGE

- 3.1** For Overview and Scrutiny to be effective, it must be able to demonstrate its ability to scrutinise the work of Cabinet and provide 'critical friend' analysis of proposals due to come before it.
- 3.2** Under the Executive Leader and Cabinet Model operated by the Council, Overview and Scrutiny has a key role in providing democratic checks and balances in relation to the Cabinet.
- 3.3** In the 2025/26 civic year, the Overview and Scrutiny Committee has continued to undertake effective pre-decision scrutiny of selected Cabinet reports.
- 3.4** Annex C provides the current Overview and Scrutiny Work Programme. This work programme is agreed annually but reviewed at each meeting and adjusted to take account of emerging priorities and any adjustments to the Cabinet Forward Plan.
- 3.5** At each meeting, Overview and Scrutiny provides pre-decision scrutiny of reports, hearing from the Leader/Cabinet Member responsible for each report. There is then the opportunity for the Committee to discuss the reports in detail and ask the Cabinet Member questions. On occasions, other Members or public speakers may also make representations to the Committee which inform its deliberations.



4. TASK & FINISH GROUP – THE FARMING MOTION

- 4.1** During the year, the Overview and Scrutiny Committee established a cross-party working group to examine the potential impact of the Government's proposed changes to Agricultural Property Relief and Business Property Relief for Inheritance Tax on farming businesses within the Cotswold District.
- 4.2** Over a four-month period, the working group gathered evidence from a range of stakeholders, including the National Farmers' Union (NFU), local farmers, land agents and accountants. The review considered the likely implications of the proposed reforms for family farms, succession planning, rural businesses, sustainable land management and the wider rural economy.
- 4.3** The Working Group concluded that the proposed changes could have significant unintended consequences for the Cotswolds, where over 90% of the district's land is agricultural and farming plays a vital role in supporting the local economy, landscape and tourism sector. The review identified concerns that the proposals did not adequately reflect the economic realities of farming businesses, could hinder succession planning, include essential operational assets within the taxable estate, delay investment, place additional pressure on farming families and potentially undermine environmental and biodiversity objectives.
- 4.4** Following consideration of the working group's findings, the Committee made recommendations which were endorsed by Council 16 July 2025. These included writing to the Chancellor of the Exchequer to express the Council's concerns and to advocate for alternative approaches that would achieve the Government's taxation objectives whilst safeguarding the long-term sustainability of family farming.

The Council's recommendations included:

- considering a "pay on sale" Capital Gains Tax approach in place of taxation on death;
- exempting land held in continuous ownership for at least seven years from Inheritance Tax;
- reviewing Inheritance Tax thresholds to better reflect high-value agricultural areas such as the Cotswolds;
- providing exemptions for working farmers and those undertaking recognised environmental or sustainability transition programmes, while maintaining full taxation for non-farming landowners; and



- introducing a full exemption for land leased to young tenant farmers to support generational renewal within the farming sector
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4.5 As a result of the review, the Leader of the Council wrote to the Chancellor outlining the Council's concerns and setting out the evidence-based recommendations developed through the scrutiny process. The review demonstrated the value of Overview and Scrutiny in bringing together evidence, engaging with stakeholders and informing the Council's response to a matter of significant local importance affecting the district's rural communities and economy.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS MADE TO CABINET

- 5.1** Overview and Scrutiny have the authority to make recommendations to Cabinet on any issue that it considers appropriate, regardless of whether it relates to a Cabinet decision. Whilst the majority of recommendations made to Cabinet relate to pre-decision scrutiny items, other topical recommendations are also made from time to time.
- 5.2** Annex B provides the list of recommendations that have been presented to Cabinet in the 2025/26 civic year. Any recommendations are agreed by the Committee at the conclusion of each agenda item, with the Chair and Vice-Chair confirming with officers the final wording of the recommendations after the meeting if necessary.
- 5.3** Cabinet Members are then given the opportunity to consider that the recommendations and the responses are agreed collectively by Cabinet, before being reported back to the next meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.
- 5.4** In total, the Overview and Scrutiny Committee made 18 recommendations to Cabinet in 2025/26, of which 17 were accepted or partially accepted. This compares with 9 recommendations in 2024/25, all of which were accepted, in whole or in part, by Cabinet.
- 5.5** A number of these recommendations made a noticeable contribution to the quality of Cabinet decision-making, notably in relation to the Local Plan.
- 5.6** Overview and Scrutiny also made a number of important recommendations to Cabinet on other community and Council priority issues, including the the Council's communication channels and accessibility for Cotswold residents.



- 5.7** The Committee discussed these topics with the relevant Cabinet Members and officers to gain background knowledge and understanding of the issues involved.
- 5.8** Key areas of public concern received focused scrutiny this year, particularly in relation to the Local Plan, support for the Cotswold District retail and hospitality sector, and Local Government Reorganisation.
- 5.9** During the 2025/26 civic year, the Committee also considered proposals for future scrutiny arrangements associated with Local Government Reorganisation (LGR). Members received a presentation on options for joint scrutiny arrangements across the Gloucestershire councils during the transition period and considered the governance implications of the models presented.
- 5.10** The Committee discussed the importance of maintaining effective democratic oversight and constructive challenge throughout the LGR process, whilst also ensuring appropriate cross-council engagement and transparency in decision-making arrangements.
- 5.11** Following consideration of the options presented, the Committee supported the proposed Scrutiny Panel model. A Joint Scrutiny Panel is a temporary cross-council scrutiny body established during LGR to provide democratic oversight of the transition to new authorities.
- 5.12** It exists to ensure that major decisions taken during the reorganisation are properly scrutinised, even though existing councils are being abolished as a flexible approach to enabling joint scrutiny arrangements during the transition period whilst maintaining links to the existing scrutiny functions of individual councils.
- 5.13** The agreed key principles for the Panel are:
- 5.13.1.1** There is a clear commitment to meetings held in public while reserving right to meet in private if necessary.
- 5.13.1.2** The request is that each council nominates two representatives with the recommendation that these should include one representative from each of the two main parties (nominations are solely at the discretion of each council).
- 5.13.1.3** There will be clear lines of reporting/feedback set out in Terms of Reference.

6. AN OPEN AND ACCOUNTABLE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS



- 6.1** Through the mechanisms described in the previous sections, Overview and Scrutiny promotes open and accountable decision-making which is a fundamental part of the Council's governance structure.
- 6.2** Cabinet is expected, in accordance with the Protocol to be open and transparent with the Committee and to support its scrutiny of decisions before it.
- 6.3** Cabinet Members for items are invited to meetings of Overview and Scrutiny and are substituted by the Leader or another Cabinet Member where possible if they are not able to attend.
- 6.4** Whilst senior officers in the room may assist in providing specialist details to the Committee, the focus of the Committee has been to engage with Cabinet Members.
- 6.5** In addition to the pre-decision scrutiny approach outlined above, all Cabinet decisions, Cabinet Member decisions and key decisions taken by officers are subject to call-in by any three members of the Committee (who must be from at least two political groups) within 5 working days of the decision being taken. Call-in is intended to be used in exceptional circumstances where a decision is believed to be contrary to the authority's decision-making principles.
- 6.6** If a valid call-in is made, the decision will be referred to the next meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee (which may be a specially convened meeting). The Committee will hear why the decision was taken and why it was called in before deciding whether the decision can stand and be implemented immediately, or whether the decision is referred back to the decision maker with comments, or in some circumstances, referred to Council.
- 6.7** No decisions were called in during the 2025/26 civic year.

7. PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT AND EXTERNAL SCRUTINY

- 7.1** Overview and Scrutiny continued to provide opportunities for public engagement during the 2025/26 civic year through the inclusion of public participation at Committee meetings. This included the consideration of 5 public questions and/or statements, which informed Members' discussions on a range of issues including representation at the Farming Motion Working Group (South Cotswold Labour Party), the Local Plan Regulation 18 timetable, planning enforcement timescales, and environmental and antisocial behaviour concerns relating to recent aircraft deployment from RAF Fairford.



- 7.2** In addition to direct public participation, Overview and Scrutiny has also taken account of a range of external stakeholder views and consultation evidence where available as part of reports presented for scrutiny. During 2025/26, this included representations and engagement with Bromford Housing Association, Freedom Leisure and UBICO as part of the Committee's consideration of relevant service and community issues.
- 7.3** Community concerns raised by Members, through public engagement and via other Council channels have also helped to inform the development of the work programme, ensuring that scrutiny activity reflects issues of significance to residents across the district.

8. CONCLUSIONS

- 8.1** The relationship between the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and Cabinet is an important element of the Council's overall governance arrangements.
- 8.2** Overview and Scrutiny play a key role in holding the Cabinet to account and providing an effective mechanism for addressing community issues.
- 8.3** The Executive Scrutiny Protocol (Part E.10) agreed by Full Council sets out the framework for this relationship to ensure effective policy development and pre-decision scrutiny.
- 8.4** The work of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee over the 2025/26 Civic Year is evident in its scrutiny of Cabinet decisions and its contribution to policy development, including through the work of Task and Finish Groups when required.
- 8.5** In doing so, the Committee demonstrates its capacity to provide constructive and insightful input within the Council's decision-making processes.

9. PRIORITIES FOR 2026/27

- 9.1** In the 2026/27 civic year, Overview and Scrutiny will continue to support the Council's governance arrangements through effective pre-decision scrutiny, constructive challenge and contribution to policy development.
- 9.2** A key focus will remain the scrutiny of Cabinet proposals to ensure that decisions are informed by appropriate Member consideration prior to implementation.
- 9.3** The work programme for 2026/27 will continue to focus on key strategic issues affecting the Council and the district. Priority areas are expected to include:



- updates from Freedom Leisure and UBICO;
- progression of the Local Plan;
- the ongoing implications of Local Government Reorganisation;
- scrutiny of the Budget and Medium-Term Financial Strategy; and
- delivery of priorities within the Council Plan.

9.4 The work programme will continue to be reviewed throughout the year to reflect emerging issues, changes to the Cabinet Forward Plan and matters of significant public interest.

9.5 In line with the Executive Scrutiny Protocol, the focus of Overview and Scrutiny will remain:

- constructive and effective challenge;
- open and accountable decision-making;
- evidence-led scrutiny and policy development; and
- positive working relationships between Overview and Scrutiny, Cabinet and officers.

9.6 Consideration will also continue to be given to opportunities to enhance public engagement in the scrutiny process and improve awareness of the role of Overview and Scrutiny within the Council's governance arrangements.

10. ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

10.1 Council is asked to note the effectiveness of the Protocol and the scrutiny processes. It may request that officers bring a future report in a different format if it wishes to do so.

10.2 Council can refer any constitutional matters regarding scrutiny processes to the Constitution Working Group should any such concerns arise.

11. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

11.1 There are no specific financial implications associated with this report.

12. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

12.1 There are none arising from the report.

13. RISK ASSESSMENT

13.1 None.

14. EQUALITIES IMPACT



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14.1 Not applicable to this report.

15. CLIMATE AND ECOLOGICAL EMERGENCIES IMPLICATIONS

15.1 Members are required to travel to Overview and Scrutiny Committee meetings in-person as required by statutory provisions which may have a climate impact. The Committee reviews the progress against the Climate Emergency and Corporate Plan actions against climate change and carbon reduction.

16. BACKGROUND PAPERS

16.1 None.

(END)