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Dear Mark,

Scrutiny Improvement Review – CfGS consultancy support

I am writing to thank you for inviting the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny (CfGS) to carry out an evaluation of Dacorum Borough Council's scrutiny function. This letter provides feedback on our review findings and offers suggestions on how the Council could develop its scrutiny process.

As part of this feedback stage, we would like to facilitate a series of workshops with Members and Officers to reflect on this review and to discuss options for improvement.

1. Introduction

The Centre for Governance and Scrutiny were invited by Dacorum Borough Council to conduct a Scrutiny Improvement Review and this work took place between October and December 2023.

The Council had not undertaken a comprehensive review of its scrutiny arrangements for some time. With a recent change in administration and several newly elected Councillors, this review provides an ideal opportunity for the Council to reflect on existing practice and to identify where improvements might be beneficial.

We want to acknowledge at the outset an appreciation of the positives that emerged through our work. These include:

- Officer support is recognised and valued.
- Members are engaged in the formal meetings / good level of questioning skills.
- There is a willingness to embrace change and think about how to do things differently.
- Both Officers and Members have a desire to learn from best practice elsewhere.
- There is a firm commitment from Members to link scrutiny work to issues that are of relevance to local people.

In terms of political support, member engagement, and council senior leadership support, there are strong building blocks upon which scrutiny could successfully develop. However, there is a sense that the function lacks impact, and therefore it is not as valued as it could and should be. In addition, there is recognition that work programming across all scrutiny committees needs to be focussed and aligned to the council's priorities with flexibility to consider emerging areas of concerns, especially those arising from residents.

2. Methodology

The review explored the following:

- **Structure.** What might the most appropriate structure be in terms of improving outcome delivery and taking account of resource pressures?
- **Culture.** What is the mindset and mentality underpinning the operation of the overview and scrutiny process?
- **Working practices.** How is information is prepared, shared, accessed, and used?
- **Impact.** How to ensure that scrutiny is effective and that it makes a tangible difference to the lives of people in Dacorum through improving outcomes.

CfGS's scrutiny improvement reviews (SIRs) follow a standard methodology, which involves some flexibility to incorporate whatever bespoke elements authorities need to take account of local circumstances. The standard methodology can be found at www.cfgs.org.uk/sir .

Full details of the evidence gathering;

- The survey was sent to 85 individuals (51 Elected Members and 34 Officers)
- 39 people (13 Elected Members and 23 Officers) completed the survey which was a 25% of Members and 68% of the Officers that it was circulated to;
- carried out 17 conversations; 11 Elected Members (including Leader, Deputy Leader and a number of Cabinet Members and Scrutiny Chairs and their Deputies) and 6 officers (including Chief Executive, Monitoring officer and S151 officer)
- reviewed agendas, minutes and reports of overview and scrutiny committee meetings:
- observed recorded meetings;
- explored work programming and topic prioritisation;

The review was conducted by:

- Cath Buckley – Senior Governance Consultant, CfGS
- Annette Aitkin – Researcher, CfGS

Quality assurance was provided by Ian Parry, Head of Consultancy, CfGS

3. Findings

3.1 Structure

This section examines the current structure and what might the most appropriate structure be in terms of improving outcome delivery and taking account of resource pressures.

There are currently three overview and scrutiny committees in Dacorum which follow a thematic approach. These committees support the work of the Cabinet and Council as a whole and are overseen by the Democratic Services team who support these committees alongside a range of other regulatory committees and responsibilities.

Finance and Resources Overview and Scrutiny Committee

- The purpose of this committee is to perform the overview, scrutiny and policy development role in relation to all matters and business associated with the Cabinet Portfolio for Finance and Resources.
- There are 14 Members on the committee (including the chair and the vice-chair).
- Between January 2023 and September 2023 this committee held 5 meetings (January 2023's meeting was cancelled).

Housing and Community Overview and Scrutiny Committee

- The purpose of the committee is to perform the overview, scrutiny and policy development role in relation to all matters and business associated with the Cabinet Portfolios for and Housing and Property Services, excluding general fund property which is covered by the Finance and Resources committee.
- There are 14 Members on the committee (including the chair and vice-chair).
- Between January 2023 and September 2023 this committee held 6 meetings.

Strategic Planning and Environment Overview and Scrutiny Committee

- The purpose of the committee is to perform the overview, scrutiny and policy development role in relation to all matters and business associated with the Cabinet Portfolios for Place and Neighbourhood Operations.
- There are 14 Members on the committee (including the chair and vice-chair).
- Between January 2023 and September 2023 this committee held 6 meetings.

Non Statutory Health and Well-Being Scrutiny Committee

In addition to the above committees, the Council also operates a non statutory Health Scrutiny Committee. Whilst the review did not explore this committee in great depth, it was clear that it has potential to add value, however there is some work to do to ensure that its functions link into the wider health and social care environment and do not seek to duplicate activity elsewhere.

Audit Committee

There were mixed levels of understanding in relation to the Council's Audit Committee. Some of those interviewed viewed this committee as part of the Overview and Scrutiny function, rather than as a regulatory board. There is clearly some work to do to ensure that all Elected Members have regard for these two distinct roles. In practice we would look to see Audit consider whether the policies and procedures were working, and scrutiny consider whether the policies and procedures that the Council has chosen to implement are the right ones and having the desired outcomes. Both functions could use management information to form the basis of these deliberations and might share their findings with each other. Good practice could see a discussion over how best to consider an issue – whether it is a scrutiny or an Audit concern with a default position of sharing work programmes. Working together enables agreement on the issues that can be passed between committees, avoiding duplication, and could also consider engaging Members of the Audit Committee on scrutiny task groups or in budget scrutiny. CfGS have produced guidance for Councils on this matter which can be accessed [by clicking this link](#).

Research from previous reviews conducted by CfGS has found that committee structures can be a sticking point in relation to the quality of scrutiny's work and impact. There is often a belief that if structures are altered then the effectiveness of scrutiny will increase, but this is often not the case. Our research highlights that there is no 'ideal' scrutiny structure or optimum number of committees. There is no connection between the size and number of committees and their effectiveness, but there is a clear connection between having a clarity of purpose and a function that adds value and realises impact.

The overall thematic approach to structure in Dacorum is akin to that of many other borough councils of similar size and demographic. However, the frequency of meetings is higher than in most other councils, whilst this did not provide a concern to those spoken to, we did hear that Members are keen to conduct more in-depth scrutiny outside of the formal meeting space. As such, there may be opportunities to reduce the number of formal meetings that take place to provide the space for more in-depth scrutiny (review panels), however it is understood in Dacorum that this may also entail reviewing the frequency of other Council committees.

Additionally, whilst the three main overview and scrutiny committees follow a thematic approach, this structure does cause a degree of confusion amongst some Officers in relation to where each item should be taken. This could be due to a recent staffing restructure which has posed some issues with alignment between the work of committees and the Councils directorate areas. Dacorum's Constitution clearly sets out the remits however, there requires some further communication to aid wider understanding of where specific issues should be scrutinised.

3.2 Culture

This section explores the relationship between scrutiny Members and Cabinet, the interface between Members and Officers and whether relationships are effective. It also explores the mindset and mentality underpinning the operation of the overview and scrutiny process.

The chart below demonstrates the aggregated responses in the survey to questions about culture. This shows that there is some room for improvement in terms of how well the organisation understands the intended role of scrutiny. Conversely half of respondents thought that Scrutiny input was welcomed at the council, with 39% of respondents expressing that there was some room for improvement in this area.

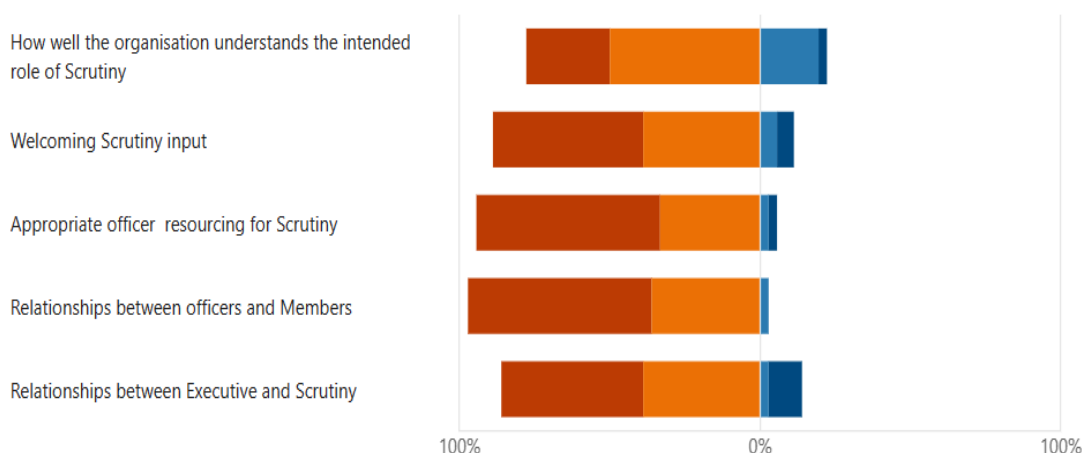
Overall, it appears that officer resourcing for scrutiny is appropriate, however 33% did feel that there was room for improvement. It is important to note that there is no dedicated scrutiny officer post in Dacorum and the function is currently supported by democratic services officers who also manage a range of other committees and responsibilities.

Respondents thought that the relationships between Officers and Members worked well (61% of respondents). Relationships between Members and the Executive are more mixed, with a near equal split between those who thought that this worked well (47%) and those who thought that there was some room for improvement (39%). This indicates that there could be some specific issues rather than a more widespread concern. In terms of responses from Officers and Members there was no significant difference between the viewpoints held in relation to culture.

8. Culture- Thinking about your recent experience, how well do you think these elements work:

[More Details](#)

■ Works well ■ Some room for improvement ■ Does not work well and could be changed ■ Don't know



Findings from the survey, desktop research and conversations showed that the scrutiny function has the conditions to improve and succeed, during the conversations there was a realisation from both Members and Officers that scrutiny performance could be more effective and productive and there was a willingness and commitment to make changes to allow this to happen.

There is recognition that since the change of political control, there are several newly elected Councillors who lack experience and knowledge of ways of working. And whilst this can be of concern to some, it can also be a positive in terms of bringing new ideas and fresh perspectives. We heard a definite will to embrace change and explore new ways of working and look at best practice from elsewhere, a range of such examples can be drawn from the CfGS publication, [The Good Scrutiny Guide](#). There is a good level of buy in amongst Councillors and it will be important to harness this and support the newer Councillors to increase their knowledge of the council, its services and ways of working so that they are able to navigate governance systems and fully understand their role within it. Whilst training has been provided in relation to the role of scrutiny, audit committee and specific training for leading and chairing scrutiny, these have not always been well attended.

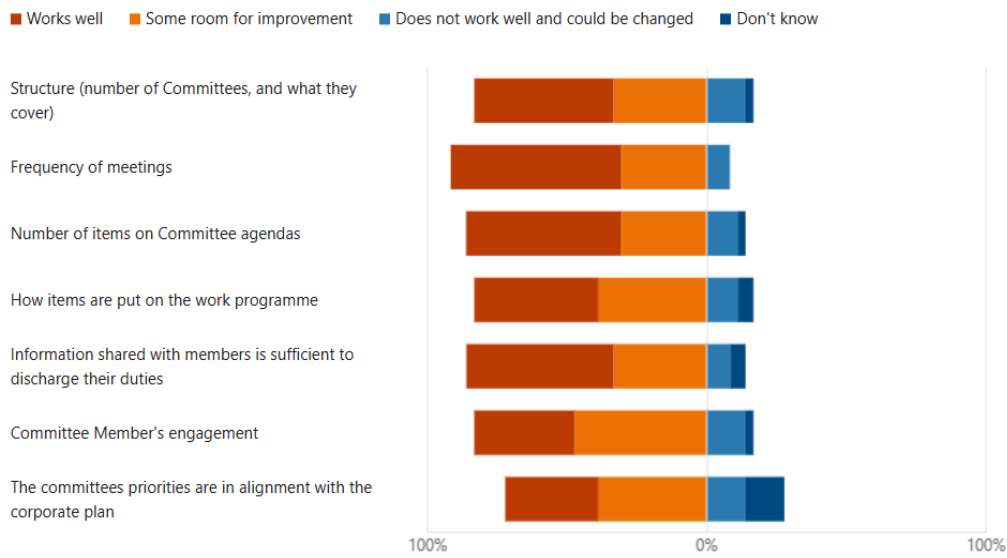
Member-officer relationships are overall positive. Both the survey and interview evidence highlighted strong working arrangements and a sense of mutual respect. There is faith in the senior leadership team and Members express the view that they are fortunate in having excellent dedicated Officers to support them. However, in a more strategic sense, there are mismatches in perception and expectation on how scrutiny is carried out. The frequency of meetings produces support problems for Officers preparing reports for those meetings and it is not always clear to Officers why reports are being requested, and communication of Members' objectives in bringing items to committee does not always happen.

Scrutiny's success is dependent on the right Members, with the right capabilities and attributes, leading and managing the scrutiny function. Scrutiny Chairs have a vital task in leading the committees, setting the culture and working together to uphold high standards of behaviour and good cross-party working. There is an opportunity for the Chairs to work together to share learning between one another with the option to also engage with the Chair of the Audit Committee on a regular basis (as highlighted in 3.1) and also for the Chairs to explore how they can develop further into their roles as committee leaders.

3.3 Working practices

This section discusses the practices in place that support the scrutiny function and relates to how items are selected and how information is prepared, shared, accessed and used.

Working practices- Thinking about your recent experience, how well do you think these elements work:



Responses to the survey indicated that people generally feel that working practices are effective. However, there is room for improvements to be made in relation to committee member engagement (53% of officers stating there is some room for improvement and 17% stating that it does not work well, and 38% of Elected Members stating that there is some room for improvement and 8% stating it works well). In relation to the alignment of priorities of scrutiny to those within the Corporate Plan there is also room for improvement (43% of officers stating some room for improvement and 13% stating that it does not work well or that they don't know, and 31% of Elected Members state this area requires some improvement, with 16% stating it does not work well and 15% stating that they do not know).

Feedback from the conversations undertaken indicated that there are a number of Elected Members who are unhappy with the information supplied within agenda packs, and whilst the survey highlighted people are largely satisfied that the information is sufficient for Members to discharge their duties, our 121 conversations indicated that sometimes this information is too detailed. We would concur that too much detail in scrutiny can become counter-productive and detract from scrutiny's ability to be strategic. It will be important for the committees (led by their Chairs) to be clear about content sought in report and presentations and to be able to feed this to those drafting the documents so that they are always linked to the objectives sought from the area under consideration and contain the level of detail that the committee feel is appropriate for them to fulfil their duties.

Analysis of previous minutes showed that Members are engaged in the formal meetings, make valid contributions, and pose a range of detailed questions to witnesses. There is a tendency for committees to operate as though they are holding Officers to account, rather than the Cabinet Members. At times, the detail focused on is operational rather than strategic and whilst some scrutiny Members do make effort to be strategic and focus on the areas of importance, this sometimes falls short. Scrutiny can very often become an information exchange or become too operational to add value to the bigger strategic issues. This can be addressed through better topic selection that is more closely aligned to the Council's strategic priorities.

We found that without some refocusing Scrutiny could drift towards a performance management role and the practice of receiving quarterly performance reports is not something that all Members or Officers see as the purpose of scrutiny or where it can offer useful value. We would concur, as often by the time such data reaches committee, it is likely already to be out of date. Whilst it is important that scrutiny assesses performance information, there also needs to be useful commentary provided as to where and how scrutiny's oversight can be utilised. Quarterly reports might be used as a source of insight to support topic selection rather than an opportunity to conduct line by line data analysis, that rarely leads to valuable recommendations being made. This shift in approach would assist the committees in adding value to council policy and strategy through greater emphasis on the big challenges and opportunities ahead. We would suggest that, instead of taking performance information to committee as a default position, Elected Members receive it informally, perhaps as part of a wider information digest which they can use to drive and inform their regular work.

Refining the approach to work programming would achieve better results from scrutiny's work. There are comprehensive tools that other local authorities apply to improve work programming and raise the productivity and impact of scrutiny. Some Councils invite practical suggestions from members of the public and other stakeholders in dedicated planning sessions, or via an online consultation. This is a way to get a sense of what others feel is important for Councillors to be reviewing, and used alongside a meaningful overview of management information to inform deliberations can provide a long list of potential topics where scrutiny can add value. This process is aligned with best practice in section 6 of the [Statutory Scrutiny Guidance](#). Once the long-list is created each scrutiny committee can determine the topics that they wish to scrutinise using a prioritisation tool that highlights which items have the potential to add most value, the use of such a tool justifies how and why a decision has been taken to include certain issues and not others. This will also support greater member-ownership of the scrutiny agenda and provide an opportunity to build in the voice of the public into the work of Dacorum's scrutiny committees.

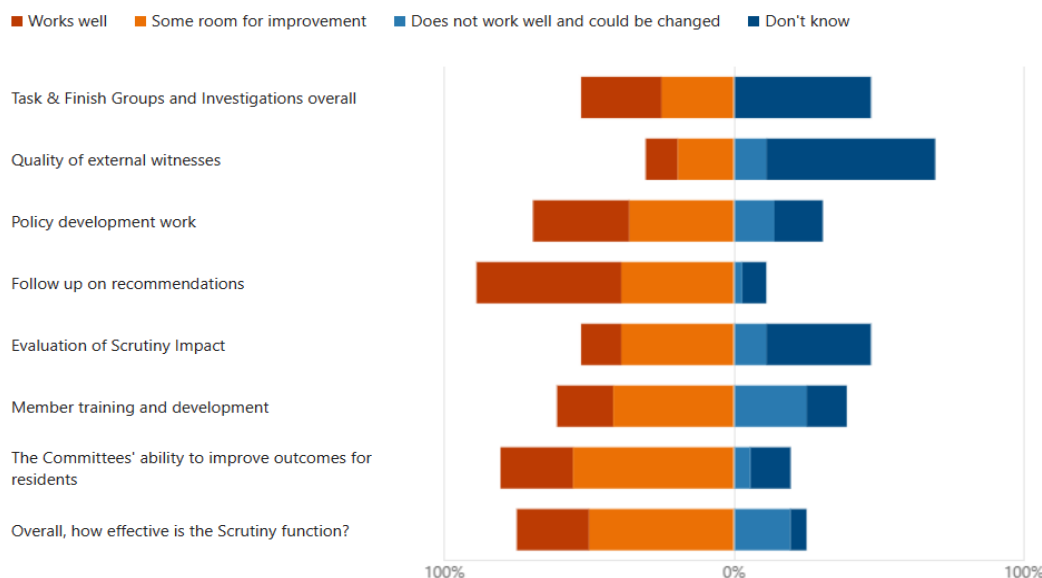
3.4 Having an impact

This section explores ways to demonstrate that scrutiny is effective and that it makes a tangible difference to the lives of people in Dacorum, through helping to shape policy, decision-making and improve outcomes.

Currently there is limited evidence of impact arising from scrutiny’s work. The graph below shows that there are a substantial number of ‘don’t know’ responses when people were considering impact. This is a far higher proportion than the other categories, suggesting that scrutiny itself is not aware of how, or even if, it can evidence having had impact.

Impact monitoring is an area that many Councils struggle with, however it is a relatively simple process to look at recommendations that scrutiny have made and whether they have been accepted and implemented. Longer term, consideration could be given to speaking to people inside and outside the council about the work that scrutiny has carried out to gather some tangible examples of scrutiny’s impact. Being able to articulate how scrutiny adds value to the work of the Council helps to further build on the work of the function and helps others to see its potential for improving services for local people.

Impact- Thinking about your recent experience, how well do you think these elements work:



Our research concluded that further work could be done to encourage public participation and to build a wider range of perspectives into scrutiny’s work. Insights gained from the survey found a lack of expert witnesses being invited to scrutiny committee meetings. Similarly, public participation is minimal and our conversations with Members also showed that there is

interest in exploring how scrutiny can amplify the voice of the public and better engage with residents and the community.

It is considered best practice to involve local people in the work of scrutiny as a way to help connect the council to the community it serves. Scrutiny could explore and experiment with ways to allow greater access, openness, and involvement with the public. This might include scrutiny a reasonable and well justified use of site visits in the community, inviting the public to offer ideas for work plans, and greater use of social media channels for resident input and communicating the progress and impact of scrutiny work. We heard that this had happened in the past, but less so recently.

4. Recommendations

4.1 Structure

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).

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.

4.2 Culture

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.

Recommendation 4

That consideration is given to providing a short term investment to the scrutiny function. This will help to ensure that the actions and recommendations arising from this report can be implemented and that 'added value' scrutiny can take place.

4.3 Working practices

Recommendation 5

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.

Recommendation 6

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.

Recommendation 7

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.

4.4 Having an impact

Recommendation 8

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 have 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.

5. Thank you and acknowledgements

Thank you to all the Officers and Members who took part in this review, your openness and willingness to share your views have helped to shape the recommendations made. It is hoped that this work enables you to build on existing good practice and help to ensure that all Officers and Members are invested in making scrutiny a success in Dacorum Borough Council.