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Civic Offices
Shute End
Wokingham

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Dear Susan,

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 Wokingham 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 further.

As part of this feedback stage, we would like to facilitate a workshop with members and officers to reflect on this review and to discuss options for improvement.

Background

Wokingham Council commissioned CfGS to advise and support its members and officers in the review of the Council's Scrutiny function. The aim was to ensure that Scrutiny is effective in delivering accountability, improving policy and decision making, and that scrutiny makes a quality contribution in the delivery of Council plans and overall improvement.

Wokingham Borough Council changed political control in May 2022 after a long period of being consistently led by a Conservative administration, it is now a council with no overall control and has Lib-Dem minority administration.

This change has created some new challenges as roles change and politicians take new positions.

This review was therefore able to explore how scrutiny had coped during this transition. To see what, if any, changes – positive or otherwise are emerging and how scrutiny could be developed in the future. It was also a timely check that scrutiny is meeting reasonable expectations of democratic accountability and transparency, and that the interface of decision-making and Scrutiny is effective and relevant.

A Local Government Association (LGA) Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) which reported in November 2021, made reference to the need for scrutiny to be the focus of constructive challenge and to contribute to producing good policies and decisions. Although this review pre-dates the change in political control, this scrutiny improvement review explored the progress made since the recommendations of the CPC were presented.

Wokingham Council's governance structure is based on a Executive-Cabinet model. Its current Scrutiny arrangements consists of an Overview and Scrutiny Committee, which has a co-ordinating role plus three Scrutiny committees.

CfGS undertook a review of these scrutiny arrangements, involving evidence gathering through conversations with members and officers during 10th – 21st June 2022.

CfGS met with elected members and officers, including Leader, Executive members, Group Leaders, Scrutiny Chairs and members of the Scrutiny Committees.

The review was conducted by:

- Ian Parry – Head of Consultancy, Centre for Governance and Scrutiny
- Sarah Jones – Associate-Consultant, Centre for Governance and Scrutiny

The findings and recommendations presented in this letter are intended to advise the Council on strengthening the quality of scrutiny activities, increasing the impact of its outputs, and through its members, develop a strong and shared understanding of the role and capability of the Scrutiny function.

Summary of findings

1. Scrutiny has the conditions for success

1.1 The conditions for successful scrutiny are clearly present at Wokingham; there is a shared understanding from members and officers that good governance involves scrutiny, and when used effectively, scrutiny can add value to decision-making. All of those interviewed believed that improvements can be made to make scrutiny more effective and to add greater value.

1.2 Members recognise the benefits of change and improvement, and this presents a good opportunity for the Council to further develop the way in which scrutiny operates from its current position. Strengthening its role could also aim to elevate the status of scrutiny, so that it is recognised as a strategic function and is fully utilised as a resource to support continuous council improvement.

1.3 It is also important to note that this review has the support of the Leader of the Council, Leader of the Conservative Group Chief Executive, who expressed a desire and willingness to support Scrutiny and confirm that its role is central to open, transparent decision-making and accountability in the Council.

We therefore would stress that this confirmation and buy-in at the most senior political and officer level is crucial to improvement.

1.4 Our review identified several positive indicators for Scrutiny, most notably; the positive attitude and commitment of Members and officers, the reasonable level cross-party working in scrutiny working groups and most committee meetings, the overall capacity and range of experience of members, as well as the strong belief that more can be achieved. The council has a strong cohort of committed councillors across the council and is therefore in a good position to progress. There were other positive behaviours and practices which do support good scrutiny and can therefore provide some foundations for further building, which this report will also highlight.

1.5 The commitment of members and officers to this review and the ambition to drive improvement in Scrutiny was further indicated by good attendance of those who were invited to meet with the CfGS review team. We appreciated this high level of participation and everyone's constructive contributions in interviews and discussions. The review team were impressed by this high level of commitment.

2. Officer support and organisational culture

2.1 The foundations for good Scrutiny start with the context in which it operates and the position it holds within the council.

2.2 We were reassured by the Council's senior leadership team's commitment to properly supporting Scrutiny, even if at times the understanding of the Scrutiny objective can be unclear. Our conversations with members were positive about the assistance they received from officers who support Scrutiny and overall they were satisfied that support meets their current needs.

2.3 Organisational culture is also identified as foundational in improving the quality of Scrutiny. This review noted that Scrutiny mainly operated in space that was generally free from adversarial political activity and generally aimed to be collaborative, but not consistently. Scrutiny's ability to effectively carry out its business, rests on the strength of organisational and committee-based culture. This includes but is not limited to:

- Mutual respect between members – within the context of robust political debate and disagreement, and Members respecting officers as professionals.
- Members and officers understanding their mutual roles and responsibilities – in the most basic sense, that councillors lead on strategy and overall direction, while officers lead on delivery and implementation.

2.4 These cultural aspects above are present at Wokingham Council, but more needs to be done to position and orientate Scrutiny as a total-council, cross-party collaborative endeavour with clear objectives which are widely understood and have broad buy-in from members.

2.5 The presence of some party-political activity in scrutiny is evident. We were told that it was present in the previous council and continued after the May election. It was also noted by the LGA's CPC review. It is inevitable that political differences exist. Political Groups will hold mandates from their electors and will wish to differentiate on key areas of policy. A level of political debate is therefore to be expected in a democratically elected body. However, too much adversarial politics risks diluting the effectiveness of scrutiny and can cause it to miss the crucial point of its role – to add value and impact to good policy making and key decisions.

2.6 Yearly elections seem to add a level of sensitivity to the scrutiny challenge as issues that can affect political support are more carefully managed and can potentially crowd-out collaborative working.

2.7 There are signs that leaders of the main parties want scrutiny to become a more neutral environment where cross-party working can focus on constructive challenge, improvement, and accountability in decision-making.

2.8 To assist this process more could be done to engage earlier with Executive Members to help shape and improve through early constructive challenge. Furthermore, there is a real opportunity for Scrutiny to be better aligned with core corporate plans of the council. We explore this further in this report letter.

2.9 Overall we found that Scrutiny is valued in the council as an important part of governance, democracy and accountability and receives strong support from political leaders, corporate officers and an experienced democratic services team who provide the right framework for good scrutiny.

3. Clarity on Scrutiny's role and responsibilities

3.1 Scrutiny's overall role is to hold the Executive to account, to assist policy development, contribute to improved decision-making, and channel the voice of the public. A good Scrutiny function is one that provides robust, effective challenge. But equally, is recognised and valued as a positive influencer of policy and key decision-making through constructive challenge, positive enquiry, and quality insight.

3.2 Through our evidence gathering, members involved in Scrutiny could articulate the role that Scrutiny should play in being an integral part of the Council's governance structure and contributing to the council's budgetary and policy making function. However, some members seemed to be unclear on how exactly Scrutiny should be holding the Executive to account. Committee meetings can spend a lot of time focusing on officer presentations and less time in enquiry and scrutiny mode. It is essential that Scrutiny meetings do not become classrooms for learning and information up-dates, but remain focused on the scrutiny task, challenge, and improvement.

3.3 We observed that Executive participation in Scrutiny could be limited and their purpose in attending unclear. We suggest that scrutiny meetings are clearly framed around Executive Members with robust, constructive (but respectful) challenge, with the aim of producing compelling and constructive recommendations for the Executive Member to take away to consider or for a flow of questions and debate that lead to good accountability and assurance. Executive Members would find the experience tough and challenging but equally useful, supportive and beneficial. We suggest that a 'select committee' style would be appropriate at Wokingham Council, where the strategic challenge to Executive Members could be strengthened.

3.4 The Leader, Executive and Scrutiny members all say that they want to see more emphasis on shaping policy, challenging, and holding to account. Therefore, Scrutiny will need earlier access to and involvement with the core policy and decision-making activities of the Executive. We heard that information and reports can often arrive at scrutiny after Executive has received them, rather than allowing scrutiny to play a role in shaping and improving. This is potentially a process weakness and missed opportunity.

3.5 Overall, our assessments concluded that Executive members and Scrutiny all recognise and say that greater collaboration and engagement would be strongly beneficial, but there is an obligation on everyone to ensure that it is delivered.

We recommend:

- **Political group leaders play a key role** in resetting the level and standard of collaboration and transparency in scrutiny to allow it to function as a crucial part of council governance – accountability, policy and decision-making and improvement. Leadership is a must have ingredient in making this change. Leaders need to set the standards for others.
- **A clearer focus on democratic accountability** - Scrutiny of Executive members should form a key part of the work plan, with Executive members regularly attending Scrutiny to answer questions on items falling within their portfolio responsibilities is vital.
- **Leader to attend Scrutiny on a quarterly basis** to present an integrated finance and performance report and to be held to account for Council performance and progress. Perhaps adopting a 'select committee' style.
- **More emphasis on scrutiny's shaping role** - With a clear mapping for scrutiny in early policy development and key-decisions. Involving scrutiny early and sharing information in a transparent way, based on trust and co-operation.
- **Scrutiny avoids the main focus on updates and presentations.** The task of providing Scrutiny members with the essential core knowledge to be sufficiently effective in the scrutiny task could be developed as briefings or 'master classes' where the topic is complex. Lengthy learning exercises can squeeze scrutiny capacity.
- **Resist scrutiny being a source of political point-scoring.** Intentionally targeting scrutiny as a forum to gain a media headline is a disruptive and diluting activity. This does not prevent disagreement or different perspectives being debated.

4. Collaborative approach to Scrutiny

4.1 We were told that there is limited dialogue between scrutiny and Executive. There is no facility for Chairs of Scrutiny and appropriate Executive Members to meet to discuss how scrutiny and the executive can work together. Such meetings are fairly familiar in other councils.

4.2 This might involve arranging triangulation meetings between officers, Scrutiny and Executive members to explore and collaborate on the key areas of delivery by Executive and the essential focus of Scrutiny. This may help to achieve greater alignment between Scrutiny and Executive in terms of efforts of both being focused on the same key areas of the council plan and council or community priorities.

4.3 Their purpose is to share plans and agree where alignment might be useful. They are also intended to be a meeting of equals where scrutiny and Executive have parity and can form useful relationships that support and benefit each other. This process can be particularly beneficial to policy development work.

4.4 Overall our assessment is that Scrutiny can become a space for robust challenge?, where constructive challenge is welcomed by the Executive without any negative repercussions. But scrutiny needs to be 'let-in' and mutual trust and respect be developed.

We recommend:

- **Developing regular communication and information sharing so that Scrutiny can be a resource to inform (often improve) Executive decision making.** This could be achieved through holding triangulation meetings between scrutiny chairs, Executive members, and relevant Directors to consider future issues and the part which Scrutiny could play in testing and shaping these forward plans. It would also present an opportunity to share and discuss opportunities to involve Scrutiny as an improvement asset.

5. Scrutiny's focus and workplan

5.1 We heard that Scrutiny could try to take on too much, without spending enough quality time on big corporate issues or emerging pressures and risks. Orientating through a vast array of potential issues that could be scrutinised is itself a 'first base' task. This review was not convinced that Scrutiny utilises its resources to best effect and with maximum efficiency and impact? What Scrutiny is scrutinising (work programmes and agendas) is essential to quality outputs from scrutiny.

5.2 Work programmes across committees do tend to have an air of repetition or member interest, rather than corporate and community focus. We could find no clear methodology for the design and content of work programmes or rationale for some items which were included that appeared not to have any solid link with the council plan or priority.

5.3 Scrutiny work programmes are therefore not as well developed as we would expect. However, a change in political control and new council priorities from an incoming administration may take some time for scrutiny to adjust. This area does need further work to get Scrutiny into a place where it can comfortably and confidently prioritise and focus on key issues.

5.4 Scrutiny could benefit from a simpler approach to prioritisation of topics. There is strong evidence that when Scrutiny focuses on fewer things of greater importance, more is achieved. The 'less is more' maxim can readily be found in quality scrutiny.

5.5 Work planning is key to ensuring Scrutiny stays focussed on strategic issues where it can make an impact, whilst making the best use of time and resources. From our conversations we noted that many members felt that they have little opportunity to influence work plans, and the way that issues are prioritised. Wokingham's scrutiny function may need to consider how it organises its work plans in a way that is led by all members of the committees to have ownership over committee activity.

5.6 It is important to emphasise that work planning is an ongoing process and not just a one-off event. Whilst a workshop will help identify priorities and provide structure to work for the months ahead, there will need to be flexibility in the workplan, and time set aside to regularly revisit the relevance of topics in meetings as the local context changes.

5.7 Work programmes will also clearly influence agendas. We saw and we heard that agendas can also become dominated by presentations, up-dates and for information items, which again lean into the scrutiny-classroom scenario. Too much time on these issues where the value scrutiny can add is limited or questionable can consume valuable time which could be better spent on the bigger, more crucial topics. Scrutiny could be more discerning about what it permits on its agendas.

5.8 Scrutiny currently can tend to be more retrospective, rather than forward looking. It is important that Scrutiny carries out reviews and assesses performance, but there is an important missed opportunity for it to add value to council policy and strategy through greater emphasis on the big challenges and opportunities ahead for the council. The future is where the opportunities, challenges, risks and threats are present, and scrutiny has a vital role to play in asking about the Executive's plans and preparedness for what is ahead. Evidence from elsewhere clearly indicates that scrutiny's absence in this space can be a significant factor in subsequent failures.

5.9 The Council's corporate plan should significantly influence Scrutiny's focus, this is where it can help to shape policy and hold decision makers to account for the delivery of the plan. The plan can readily be allocated across respective committees. Currently scrutiny business does not always seem to be aligned with either the Council's overall priorities, the 3-month rolling programme of Executive decisions or with pressing corporate performance or risks and challenges - when topics are reviewed the focus can lean towards operational rather than strategic or outcome focused.

5.10 Task and finish style working was cited as some of the most successful examples of scrutiny by members, where it has selected key issues to scrutinise and to explore. These could be further improved if Scrutiny focused on making compelling, quality recommendations based on its activity.

5.11 We found that budget and finance scrutiny is based on good foundations and is well-placed to be more effective if member skills and input can be increased. Members take this task seriously and responsibly. The process starts early and there are several briefings for scrutiny members. Officers are determined to ensure transparency and access for scrutiny.

5.12 For scrutiny members, council finance and budget can seem technical and daunting, particularly if they attempt to become too forensic or immersed in detail. We would suggest that Members are not expected to act or have the skills of an accountant or a finance expert, but to view the budget as a resource for the council plan. The task of councillors is therefore more strategic and concerned with priorities, risks, pressures, opportunities and medium-term resilience.

5.13 From the positive position we observed, we wondered if scrutiny would need even more support, officer time, development, and training to equip it for this task. We would also recommend following the guidance in CfGS & CIPFA (2020) 'Financial Scrutiny, practice guide' - https://www.cfgs.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Financial-Scrutiny-practice-guide_proof3.pdf

5.14 Similarly, the review concluded that both the Children's O&S and Health O&S committees are well intentioned, and Members recognise the gravity and essential nature of scrutiny in these areas. Both have good officer support and advice. However, both committees appear to struggle with the size and complexity of the task. There is a weakness in the alignment of what might be considered to be critical areas and the agenda topics being considered. Overall, we must conclude that they fall short of robust scrutiny of key areas and will need to take a greater responsibility for what they are scrutinising rather than depending on officer direction or in fact simply having agendas managed by officers.

We recommend:

- **Work planning to be a committee-based responsibility** – review the need for a Co-ordinating committee to oversee this.
- **Review the process for developing work plans for each Scrutiny committee** - Engaging members, officers, partners, and the public to prioritise the topics for review.
- **Build on the current approach to financial Scrutiny, MTFs/ budget scrutiny.** We have produced guidance on financial scrutiny with CIPFA¹, setting out scrutiny activity to complement Councils' annual financial cycle. The guide suggests ways to move budget and finance scrutiny beyond set-piece scrutiny 'events and quarterly financial performance scorecards being reported to committee.
- **Set clear priorities for Children's, Adult Social Care and Health scrutiny** as areas where scrutiny must be fully engaged and properly focused. (Especially LAC, Safeguarding, SEND, changes to health and social care [with potentially large cost implications], and others.

6. Scrutiny committee structure and scheduling

6.1 Wokingham Council scrutiny committee structure includes an Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee. The council constitution states: *The Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee is responsible for co-ordinating the Council's arrangements for holding the Executive to account. This includes undertaking policy development and review performance monitoring and external Scrutiny.*

6.2 We are uncertain about the value of the O&S Management Committee, since individual committees could readily identify and agree their own work programmes and ensure that they are prioritising the right issues. This could be something to consider further.

6.3 The three main Scrutiny committees follow a logical pattern covering the big areas of council activity: Children's Services, Health and ASC and Community and Corporate. This structure of three committees would seem to be sufficient to provide sufficient capacity for effective scrutiny.

6.4 We would also suggest that scrutiny does not readily benefit from too much detail or lengthy reports. Detail can become counter-productive in helping Scrutiny to stay strategic and we would suggest that more consideration is given to the way committee meetings are constructed to ensure short agendas and information provided that is designed to serve the Scrutiny objective. To make this work will take some understanding and collaboration between Scrutiny and corporate officers.

6.5 We found that without some refocusing Scrutiny could continue to drift towards more performance management of officers, rather than being forward looking, focusing on important areas of challenge and opportunity which is largely the focus of Executive, and we suggest Scrutiny also.

6.6 We were told about several successful examples of task and finish group work. Scrutiny could benefit from further use of task and finish groups or 'spotlight events' where single issues of major importance to the Council or community can be considered and explored in greater detail. This can add significant impact and quality to scrutiny activity.

6.7 But all task and finish projects need to be clearly scoped, resourced, time-limited and with clear objectives to be useful and effective. The current structure does provide for up to three task and finish projects per committee. We suggest that this would seem a lot in terms of support and resource capacity.

6.8 Task and finish style working is often where Scrutiny can do its best work by focussing on a single issue and drilling down to provide clear analysis to inform policy making.

We recommend:

- **Review the need for the O&S Management Committee.** Or consider its purpose and its role within the overall scrutiny structure,
- **Consider extending the use of task and finish group work – or alternative scrutiny arrangements –** To ensure the most effective use of time and resources and to deliver maximum impact.

7. Scrutiny's output and impact

7.1 When asked more specifically about Scrutiny's output and impact, most members and officers found it difficult to point to consistent work that has made a real difference or tracking recommendations that have been accepted and implemented. Again, we think it is reasonable to make some allowance for the change of council administration and the change in priorities and scrutiny roles this has created.

7.2 Some substantive items are considered by scrutiny committees, but too often the objective is unclear. And the conclusion of these discussions does not always have an articulated outcome or recommendation to Executive. Scrutiny meetings can often appear to be for the purpose of obtaining information or to obtain updates rather than scrutinising, shaping and recommending. The practice of reports being presented 'to note', or inviting speakers only to share information, should be avoided.

7.3 Overall, our assessment is that Scrutiny does a reasonable job, but could be much more productive, if it is embedded and included and well sighted on the core and critical business of the council. It needs to be let in. To be trusted by others and itself to be accountable - for its actions and the responsibility it carries.

7.4 Committee agendas can become overburdened and even cluttered with too many items which are arguably not particularly something that scrutiny can add much value to or are for information. Scrutiny should not be viewed as an approval process.

7.5 Scrutiny must be clear in its purpose to add value to the issue or subject being considered. If Scrutiny cannot add value, then arguably the subject should not reach the agenda. As a matter of general principle, items for information or updates could be shared with members as briefing notes outside of committee, leaving more capacity for constructive activity.

7.6 When members of the Executive and Senior Officers are asked to attend, scrutiny committees would benefit from being clear about what the aims and objectives are of the session (including clarity over the content of any reports and presentations). Through our recommendation of establishing pre-meetings in the next section, this can also improve scrutiny's impact by allowing the space to create a shared understanding and trying to discuss beforehand what recommendations the committee might make on the day, and how the Executive might respond to them.

7.7 In carrying out 'external' Scrutiny work, it is important to ensure that Scrutiny has a clear focus on objectives and can influence outcomes concerning the topic discussed.

We recommend:

- **Changing the way that information is provided to Scrutiny members for oversight -** Reduce the number of items coming to Scrutiny solely for information and consider how information on the following matters could be shared with councillors, outside of committee.
- **Review how reports and information is supplied to scrutiny –** so that it supports the scrutiny objective, is not excessively detailed and is understandable by members.
- **Reviewing how the recommendations are made and how impact is measured –** This could include putting a 'recommendations monitoring report' at the beginning of agendas to orientate Scrutiny towards outcomes-focused meetings, alongside an emphasis on finding strong recommendations from questioning, to present to the Executive as improvement or challenge proposals.

8. Chairing, Member development and meeting preparation

8.1 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 committee, ensuring that it builds and maintains strong relationships with the Executive, officers and relevant external partners.

8.2 Chairs can also lead on setting the working culture of Scrutiny, helping it to set and uphold high standards of behaviour, engagement, and debate, ensuring good cross-party working. The lack of opposition members involved in Scrutiny chairing roles was raised as an issue in our evidence gathering. Although there is no single 'right' approach to selecting chairs - the emphasis ought to be on selecting chairs based on skill set and capability and providing ongoing training and support.

8.3 Scrutiny provides an excellent opportunity to support members in getting an in-depth understanding of issues across the Council's services. To get the most out of Scrutiny, Members need a clear sense of what is required of them as committee members and the work involved which allows good scrutiny to happen.

8.4 Many members were unsure of how to achieve impactful scrutiny; some were also open about a lack of understanding about the specific areas they are asked to scrutinise. Members felt that more briefings to provide them with core knowledge, especially on more complex or technical issues would be welcome and equip them better as scrutineers.

8.5 We heard that the quality of questioning in scrutiny varies; in some instances, it is forensic and probing, but it is often more general and exploratory and sometimes superficial.

8.6 Wokingham Council is clearly committed to member development and regularly reviews member training needs. However, training was raised by some members who were clearly aware of the gaps in their knowledge and understanding.

8.7 From our observations of committee meetings there is little evidence of co-ordinated questions or members acting as a team with clear lines of inquiry. Pre-meetings could allow members to give voice to their objectives for meetings and allow mutual motivations to be understood and questioning strategies to be agreed. It is likely that differences will remain and will, in some cases, be significant, but the airing of these differences will make it easier for members to understand where consensus is possible.

We recommend:

- **More skills development support is offered for the key roles of Chair and Vice-Chair** – To provide them with the confidence they need in leading the scrutiny function.
- **Consider further Scrutiny development and training for all committee members** - To develop a common understanding of what "good" Scrutiny practice looks like.
- **Providing additional briefing or expert involvement as required** - To assist Scrutiny members in becoming more capable to develop questioning strategies that will deliver high-impact and value-adding Scrutiny.
- **Cross-party pre-meetings for Scrutiny committees could be established** - with a specific focus on identifying priorities and members working together to develop lines of enquiry so that recommendations are more likely.

9. Public engagement

9.1 Scrutiny should explore and experiment with ways to allow greater access, openness and involvement with the public. This could include Scrutiny going on more 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.

9.2 The council's website would benefit from easier navigation to information about committees and democracy, including scrutiny. It requires a level of determination to get through to the relevant webpages. We would also recommend exploring opportunities for scrutiny to raise its public profile, perhaps through social media or other communication channels.

Thank you and acknowledgements

We would like to thank the Chairs, members of the Scrutiny Committees, Leader and Executive members, Leaders of Political Groups and officers who took part in interviews for their time, insight and open views.

Yours sincerely,

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