

Executive Summary:

The Governance Committee was asked to look at the role of the Chairman of the Council and it recommended that a Working Group be set up to report back to the Governance Committee overall.

*This report supports the Key Aim of Effective Use of Council Resources
Portfolio Holder
Contact Officers*

Recommendation to Governance Committee:

- (a) That it be recommended to Council that either
- i) the recommendations in the Governance Committee Working Group report (appendix A) be agreed or
 - ii) a different recommendation be agreed

Recommendation to Council:

- (a) That it be recommended to Council that either
- i) the recommendations in the Governance Committee Working Group report (appendix A) be agreed or
 - ii) the recommendations agreed by the Governance Committee be agreed or
 - iii) a different recommendation is agreed

Reason for recommendation:

Background

Introduction

Working Group

At the Governance Committee meeting held in July 2019 it was agreed to set up a Working Group to look at the role of the Chairman and vice-Chairman of the Council. At the July Governance meeting, four Members of the Committee were voted to meet as the Working Group. Subsequently the Working Party collected information by interview and also held three meetings in August, September and October.

Key Implications

Financial

Legal Implications and Risk Assessment Statement.

Equality Assessment

**Report of the Governance working group on the role of the Chairman and vice-Chairman
October 2019**

- (1) The Council had last discussed the role of the Chairman (and vice-Chairman) around a decade ago at the beginning of the Council's work on its then proposed ten-year budget. At that time significant changes were made to the financing of the role and in particular to the officer administration supporting the role. The Governance Committee was asked to look again at the overall situation.
- (2) **The Chairman of Sevenoaks District Council chairs full Council meetings. He or she is not a Member of any working committee during their year in office. As the First Representative of the District, the Chairman would represent the District in certain formal ways (such as Royal visits for example). These activities are constitutional and are not part of this discussion.**
- (3) Sevenoaks District Council sees itself as a Seriously Different Council and the Working Group felt that the Council and its Chairman need not follow the civic traditions of other Councils however longstanding those traditions and Councils are.
- (4) The Working Group considers that whilst pageantry for District Councils is not common, the wearing of robes by the Chairman at formal occasions should be accepted and left to the discretion of the Chairman.
- (5) The Working Group discussed in detail the evidence it had gathered which showed the widening imbalance between the increasing number of activities by the Chairman (and vice-Chairman) over the last 3-4 years against the administrative support that increasing workload requires.
- (6) The Working Group noted the reduction in size by the Democratic Services team over the period since the role of the Chairman was last considered some ten years ago alongside the increase in activity of the role of Chairman.
- (7) Despite the protestations throughout this process by the Democratic Services team of how successfully they currently support the role of the Chairman – and that success is clear for all to see, it is also abundantly clear to the Working Party that this is due in large part to the extra commitment and additional working of individual members of the Democratic Services team.
- (8) The Working Party sees the potential danger of the impact on the routine working of the team and the pressure on individual members of the team the additional work undertaken on behalf of the Chairman could have.
- (9) A significant level of effort by the current Democratic Services team would need to be replaced to completely separate the active support the Chairman's office currently receives.
- (10) The Chairman of Sevenoaks District Council receives a Chairman's allowance (over and above his or her normal elected Member's allowance) and typically claims reimbursement of travelling expenses.
- (11) The Working Group also noted and repeated Councillors' congratulations for the successful award-winning support work of the Council to its civic duties.
- (12) The Working Group recognised the importance of supporting a charity in a civic year, particularly when the charity is close to the heart of the Chairman.
- (13) The Working Group felt that the money raising aspect of the Chairman's role should be secondary to the support for community and charity groups within the District and if raising the visibility of the Chairman's chosen charity.
- (14) The Chairman currently raises funds directly for a particular charity through fund-raising events by the Council and especially an annual "black-tie" event. These do appear to need a significant level of back office planning and operational support and put the Council at significant risk of a cost rather than raising funds. Officer time is funded as corporate overhead and not against the income derived from Chairman's events.

- (15) Events run directly by the District Council raise visibility and publicity for the Chairman's chosen charity / charities within the District.
- (16) Events held by the Chairman and to which Chairmen / Mayors of other Councils in the South East region are invited and can attend (and vice-versa where the Sevenoaks' Chairman attends the events of other Councils) can inform and publicise both the District's business development and the District Council's tourist agenda.
- (17) However the Working Group did not see a strong link between visits by the Chairman to the areas of other Councils and a useful level of knowledge that could be used by the Council in the development of its business and tourist development agendas.
- (18) The Working Group felt that this investigative role would be better served by officer to officer and direct contact between Portfolio holders between the councils involved.
- (19) The Working Group did not recognise a successful link between individual charitable fund raising by the Chairman and how the role of the District Council's Chairman is viewed overall by ratepayers in the District.
- (20) The Working Group wanted to recognise that the Council could continue to support a Member to represent the Council as its Chairman irrespective of the Member's private income.
- (21) Sevenoaks District is predominantly rural and many community groups and charities in the District's area are in places which are not easily visited by public transport. The Working Group recognised that most Members on Sevenoaks District Council are able to drive themselves but this review must recognise the potential situation where a Member cannot drive or does not have suitable transport.
- (22) The Chairman in Sevenoaks currently has mileage costs refunded from the Council's Members' budget. The Working Group noted that there is currently no effective budget to provide a car and driver. The cost of providing a vehicle and an independent driver is so disparate to the normal refund of mileage costs and does not currently have any assigned budget in the Council's 10-year plan that this remains a difficult issue which will require additional work should a future prospective Chairman fall into such special circumstances.
- (23) The Working Group notes the increasing tendency for Councils in the South East and London to reduce their overall civic budgets (whether that be in dedicated officer time, specialist roles such as Wardens, or in removing the provision of a car and driver).
- (24) The Working Group agreed that the role of the Chairman should continue to set and develop an individual agenda driven by the incumbent Chairman concentrating within the Council's area.

Members of the working group:

Cllr Eyre (Chairman)

Cllr Bayley

Cllr Harrison

Cllr Pearsall

Conclusions

The role of the Chairman is a key and publically visible one for the Council. Aside from the role of the Chairman as chairman of district council meetings and as the representative at major regional and national events, it also projects the Council publically to its residents, ratepayers in particular to the many volunteer, community and local groups active in the District. Recognition of groups by the Council in this way is both a boost for publicity and membership but also a vote of thanks for the work put in for the charity or people involved.

- (1) The role of the Chairman (and vice-Chairman) should be focussed on the local benefit of developing and increasing community and charitable links within the District.
- (2) Civic functions attended by the Chairman should focus on the benefit developed for the Council's objectives
- (3) Visits to charitable and community groups should concentrate on publicity and visibility for the group rather than specifically on fund-raising.
- (4) Visits to individual Wards should always be communicated to Ward councillors to allow them to support the Chairman and the event in their Ward.
- (5) The Chairman should work closely with Chief Officers and Portfolio Holders of the Tourist Economy, Business Development and other areas of the Council's activities to promote and develop the District and the Council's objectives.
- (6) The role of Chairman is neutral and the Working Group does not see any business or Council conflict where the Chairman may visit or open individual businesses or community groups new or expanding in the District. The Working Group sees these as opportunities for publicity and development to assist the objectives of the Council.
- (7) The Council should develop an information strand in parallel but separate from those currently used which more widely and more regularly informs Sevenoaks ratepayers and business & groups of the activities of the Chairman.
- (8) The Chairman and vice-Chairman should wherever possible make visits separately to increase the effectiveness of the role of the Chairman's office with the vice-Chairman acting as a replacement for the Chairman when needed where different events take place at the same time at different locations in the District.
- (9) The Working Group agreed that the role of the Chairman should continue to set and develop an individual agenda driven by the incumbent Chairman concentrating within the Council's area.
- (10) The Council should consider providing some additional resource to provide some additional administrative support solely for the office of the Chairman which could and should be a small part-time addition to the Democratic Services team. Whilst difficult to quantify the initial recommendation would be one day per week (0.2 FTE) to be monitored and reviewed.
- (11) The Working Group recommends to the Governance Committee that these conclusions move ahead in transition between now and the start of the civic year 2020/2021 and that a review and update be considered at the February 2020 Governance Committee meeting.