

## Appendix B

### South Somerset District Council

Notes of an informal meeting of the **Scrutiny Commission** reviewing the Role of the Chairman and Member Profile for all Elected Members held on **Thursday 20<sup>th</sup> November 2008** at 10.00am in the Main Committee Room, Brympton Way, Yeovil

(10.00 a.m. – 1.05 p.m.)

#### Present:

#### Members:

Sue Steele (Chair)

Jenny Kenton  
Nigel Mermagen  
Tom Parsley  
Ros Roderigo  
Martin Wale

#### Officers:

Lyn Lockyer	Member Support Officer
Jo Morris	Committee Administrator

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Councillor Sue Steele welcomed members to the second meeting of the Commission. She reiterated that the Commission was tasked with looking at the role of the Chairman and that personalities should not be taken into consideration.

#### 1. To consider Evidence of Previous Chairmen

Previous Chairmen Councillors Dave Greene and Nigel Mermagen were welcomed to the meeting.

The previous Chairmen were asked how they saw the role of Chairman. In response to questions put forward by Members of the Commission, the following points were noted:

- The role of Chairman was non-political and impartial;
- It was a privilege to undertake such a role;
- The role was to present a favourable face to the Council and to be Chairman of Full Council meetings;
- The need to control Council meetings tactfully but with authority and humour;
- It was important for the person in the role to possess communication and people skills;
- The role was to represent the Council in the best possible light;
- The role involved attending a vast number of civic and ceremonial events and it was therefore essential to have a supportive partner;
- The Chairman was legally re-elected on an annual basis, although some Councils did operate a four-year term of office. It was felt that two years was the optimum amount of time for the job;

- Historically the Chairman tended to be from the ruling party, although the opposition could put forward a candidate;
- It was advantageous to have an experienced Chair when a new Council was appointed;
- The Chairman should be a representative of frontline Councillors and not be too associated with the District Executive although had to work closely with the Leader of the Council;
- It was useful for the Chairman to attend District Executive meetings;
- The Chairman needed to stand apart from the District Executive and leadership of the Council but needed to be aware of issues raised, particularly those that were contentious;
- It was preferable for the Chairman to have undertaken the role of Vice Chairman in order to get an understanding of the role;
- The Chairman attended a pre-agenda meeting with the Democratic Services Manager and was given advice on technical matters at the meeting;
- Each individual brought their own personality to the role;
- It was important to be able to control Full Council meetings;
- Attending civic and ceremonial events was an important and time consuming part of the job;
- The Area Chairs were called upon if the Chairman and Vice Chairman were unable to attend an event;
- It was possible to undertake a dual role of Chairman and ward councillor;
- The job was impossible to undertake without the support of a PA;
- All members were given the opportunity to attend chairing skills training;

During this item Members discussed the following issues:

- The possibility of introducing a practice for two years, although the Chairman would still need to be elected annually. It was recommended that the Vice Chairman would also be elected for two years and would then take over the role of Chairman;
- Whether it was preferable for the Chairman not to attend the Political Group pre-meetings prior to Full Council;
- The relationship between the Chair and Mayors/Councillors was important;
- The need for the Chairman and Area Chairs to have more of a direct relationship;
- The perception of lavish hospitality events and whether there was a need to return hospitality amongst the 'chain gang'.

In response to a Member question concerning the expansion of the civic role, the Member Support Officer reported that she had looked at the duties of the last four Chairmen and that there was very little difference between the number of events that each Chairman had attended. It was noted that each Chairman could choose how to spend their hospitality budget.

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## **2. To consider updated role profile for Chairman of SSDC**

A copy of the draft role description for Council Chairman was circulated to Members. The following amendments to the role description were suggested:

- The Chairman to have more of an influencing role in the preparation of the Full Council agenda;
  - The Chairman to be responsible for proposing to the Council an annual programme of major events with projected costings to run from July to June.
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### **3. To consider written response from the existing Chairman**

Members of the Scrutiny Commission noted the questions circulated to the existing Chairman together with his responses. The suggested changes to the role and function description of Chairman of Council put forward by the existing Chairman were also noted.

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### **4. Discussions with existing Chairman**

Councillor Ian Martin was welcomed to the meeting and was asked how he saw his role as Chairman.

In response to questions put forward by members of the Scrutiny Commission, the following points were noted:

- As well as chairing full Council meetings, the role of the Chairman involved projecting the Council out into the community;
  - The community looked upon the Chairman as being the point of contact for the community;
  - The role of the Chairman involved being available to give guidance to frontline councillors;
  - The role of the Chairman and Area Chairs involved working in partnership;
  - The Chairman was happy to see ward members/portfolio holders etc. attending events, as he was not someone to replace key people involved. He was often invited to attend events and had no control over the invitation;
  - The importance of being prepared for Full Council meetings including attending pre-agenda, making personal notes and communicating with appropriate officers/members etc.;
  - The Chairman attended District Executive meetings unless a civic events precluded him from doing so;
  - The role of Chairman was neutral and he would not allow himself to be politically manipulated;
  - There were some financial/constitutional constraints to the role and it was felt that there could be opportunities to project the Council more;
  - A bigger percentage of time was spent on the civic side of the role rather than attending Full Council;
  - The Chairman would be happy to provide a list of forthcoming engagements to all members;
  - If a programme of events were to be set at the beginning of the year, the Chairman felt this would have an affect on the budget and the inability to attend other events that may arise throughout the year;
  - The support for the Chairman had improved;
  - The vastness and variation of the role should be recognised;
  - There was a need for the budget to be reviewed to allow civic events to be provided to a certain standard and to be able to return hospitality on an annual basis.
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### **5. Update on information from other Councils**

Members were provided with information from Mendip, North Dorset and West Somerset District Councils on the role and function of their Chairman. It was noted that these descriptions were similar to that of South Somerset.

Members particularly noted the role for the North Dorset Chairman whereby the Chairman of the Council was responsible for proposing to the Council an annual programme of civic events.

The possibility of introducing a similar practice for the Chairman of South Somerset was discussed and supported by members of the Commission.

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## **6. Update on previous spending on the Chairman's Hospitality Budget**

Members were provided with details of the Chairman's hospitality expenditure over the past four years. It was noted that expenditure had remained within budget and that the budget was increased annually in line with inflation.

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## **7. Update on Member Profile for all elected members**

Members noted the draft role description for Ward Councillor as circulated at the meeting.

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## **8. Considerations for Draft Report to Scrutiny**

It was agreed that the final report would be presented to the Scrutiny Committee in January 2009.

The following recommendations were put forward to be included in the final report to Scrutiny:

- The role was non-political and impartial;
  - The role needed to be achievable by any member;
  - It was essential for the Chairman to attend a chairing skills course;
  - The Chairman needed to have more of an influencing role in the preparation of the Full Council agenda;
  - The Chairman to provide members with a list of forthcoming engagements;
  - The Chairman to be responsible for proposing to the Council an annual programme of major events with projected costings to run from July to June.
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## **9. Date of Next Meeting**

To be arranged.

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