

Scrutiny Committee – 15th January 2009

11. Review of Role of the Chairman of South Somerset District Council (SSDC) and Elected Member Profiles

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Purpose of the Report

To report back to the Scrutiny Committee the findings of the Commission on

- a) The Role of the Chairman of SSDC
- b) Elected Member Profiles

Action Required

That Members consider the recommendations of the Scrutiny Commission as outlined on page 37 of the report to go forward to District Executive.

Background

In response to a request from the current chairman, who is keen to develop the role of Chairman in order to continue to promote SSDC and civic values, members of the Scrutiny Commission agreed to establish an Overview Commission to review the role.

The Independent Members Allowances Panel recently submitted proposals relating to the basic allowance for elected members. As part of their review, it was noted that the role descriptions used for both frontline councillors and those with SRA's would benefit from some updating to reflect the new and emerging roles and responsibilities for elected members and the Scrutiny Commission agreed to review the generic profile.

The Commission

The members of the Commission were:

Cllr Sue Steele (Chairman)
Cllr Tom Parsley
Cllr Jenny Kenton
Cllr Ros Roderigo
Cllr Martin Wale

Other members supporting the commission

Cllr Nigel Mermagen
Cllr Dave Greene
Cllr Ian Martin

Officers supporting the review:
Lyn Lockyer – Member Development Officer
Jo Morris - Committee Administrator

The Commission members scoped the review at their meeting on 16th October 2008 and agreed the following objectives:

- To define how SSDC sees the role of Chairman including roles and responsibilities
- To compare the role of Chairman of Council with others in similar authorities
- To review the current hospitality budget allocated to supporting the role of Chairman of Council
- To review the current member profile to ensure it is 'fit for purpose' and accurately reflects the tasks and responsibilities for all frontline councillors
- To inform the Members Allowances Panel as requested by Full Council (July 2008)

The Chairman of the Commission thanked members for all their hard work and for assisting in the review.

The Review

Role of Chairman

Prior to the meeting of the Commission the current chairman was asked to respond to several questions in writing (*Appendix A*)

Cllr Mermagen and Greene, who had previously held the role of Chairman of Council, were asked to attend the commission to give evidence of their experience. Hazel Merrifield was asked to attend but was unable to do so due to a prior engagement. All notes from this meeting are available as *Appendix B*

The Member Development Officer had obtained role descriptions from Mendip, West Somerset and North Dorset (*Appendix C*). These were distributed and discussed.

It was agreed that the role descriptions were all very similar. However 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.

There was a consensus of opinion that members were sometimes unaware of events within their ward/area that were attended by the Chairman of Council. Ward members had often worked particularly hard to secure a project within their ward and would appreciate some recognition for their part in the hard work. Members thought it would improve communication if, on a fortnightly basis, all members were sent an up to date list of Chairman's engagements to be attended in the forthcoming fortnight. This would alert ward members to anything within their wards that they wished to attend.

Members of the Commission discussed the similarities and differences between the role of Mayor and that of Chairman of Council. They thought that the Mayor held a more traditional role and thought it important that the role of Chairman of SSDC did not

become full time and agreed that each Chairman would bring their own individuality to the role.

All ex Chairman and the present Chairman agreed that the role would not be possible without officer support for both the chairing and civic responsibilities of the role. The support currently provided was sufficient.

The hospitality budget is currently £3240.00 and rises each year with inflation. It is up to the discretion of the elected Chairman to choose how the budget is spent. A report from Financial Services for the past 4 years expenditure from this budget had been requested and details showed that the allocated budget had always been under spent. The Chairman of Council also receives a Special Responsibility Allowance for assistance towards expenses and is able to claim mileage for any journeys made on approved council business. Following discussion members thought that in the current economic climate and the council's policy of lean thinking it was unwise to increase the budget.

Members also discussed, but discounted the possibility of the office of Chairman of Council having a time limit of two years, with the Vice Chairman taking a more active role in the second year of office to ensure a smooth hand over, although they thought it would be a good idea to promote this in principal.

There was a perception that by attending group meetings prior to Full Council the Chairman may be considered to not be impartial, however after discussion members decided that attendance at these group meetings should be at the incumbent Chairman's discretion.

All members of the Commission and the current Chairman had received a draft of the proposals for a new role profile for the Chairman of Council. Following discussion it was agreed to recommend the role profile (*Appendix D*)

Member Role Profile

All members of council had received the proposed role profile for elected members (*Appendix E*) and asked for their opinion. The Member Development Officer said that the basis for the new role profiles had been taken from both those recommended by the Welsh Local Government Association and those developed by Kirklees Council, who had won an award for their work on member development, including role profiles. She said that all role profiles were still work in progress and would be taken to the Member Development Group for comment before progressing any further. She stated that the assistance and input of members in the preparation of role profiles was much valued.

Conclusions

Members wished to make the following recommendations to the Scrutiny Committee

Recommendations of the Scrutiny Commission:

The Scrutiny Committee is asked to comment and endorse the recommendations of the Review Commission.

- (i) that the revised role profile for the Chairman of SSDC be approved
- (ii) that the role of Chairman should be achievable by any eligible member of Council who wishes to stand for election
- (iii) that the role of Chairman is non –political and impartial
- (iv) that the Chairman takes a greater influencing role in the preparation of the Full Council Agenda
- (v) that any member newly elected to the role of Chairman of Council attends

- a comprehensive chairing skills course relevant to the role of Chairing Council meetings
- (vi) that at the July meeting of Full Council each year the elected chairman puts forward a proposal, within the allotted hospitality budget, for any major civic events to be hosted
 - (vii) That the Chairman informs all members with a list of forthcoming events on a fortnightly basis
 - (viii) that currently the Chairman's hospitality allowance should not be increased other than in line with inflation.
 - (ix) that the revised role for all members of SSDC be approved

Financial Implications

There are no financial implications

Implications for Corporate Priorities

Well-managed Services valued by our customers

Background Papers: Scrutiny Commission Minutes 20th November 2008
