Selecting the Chairman of the Council

At Watford Borough Council we use a **seniority system** to select the Chairman of the Council. This means that Councillors who have the longest cumulative service may be Chairman if they have not done so before. General practice has been to go down the list and ask those who have the longest service whether they wish to take up the role.

There are other options/methods to use to select a Chairman which Members may wish to consider. I have outlined a few below which are taken from the 'Civic Ceremonial' book by Paul Millward (5th edition.)

Majority voting
This is used by Bournemouth Borough Council. According to their constitution they ask Members to write to the Chief Executive with any nominations for the Mayor. The Chief Executive then writes to those nominated by two Members to ask whether they would be willing to accept the position if elected.

The person presiding at the Council meeting announces who has been recommended and asks for those members to be formally proposed and seconded. If only one person is nominated then they will become the Mayor. If two or more are nominated then there is a vote

Points system
This is used by Three Rivers District Council. Each political party group receives one point for each seat held at the AGM. The political party group with the most points is entitled to take the Chair. The following year 48 points is deducted from their points total (48 is the total number of Councillors at Three Rivers) and the Group who then has the highest points takes the chair.

Choice of majority party
Not outlined in the Millward book but used by County, Welwyn Hatfield, Dacorum, Hertsmere and Stevenage. The majority party selects a Chairman. The name may be shared with the opposition party in advance of the meeting.

An alternative suggestion is explained later in the paper.

Advantages and Disadvantages

Seniority system

The advantages of our current system are that the Member knows a considerable amount about the workings of the Council and the town. They can then apply this knowledge to the post and will have seen previous office holders so they have a feel for what the role of the Chairman is and how it should be conducted.

The disadvantages of the current system are that some Members with long service do not wish to be Chairman and there may be others further down the list who would enjoy the role. Although other Members may have less Council service they may have been active in the community for a long time which would bring valuable skills to the role.

It is also the case currently that there are fewer members with long service, in 2015/16 the majority of members had less than 10 years service. From the 12 who do have more than 10 years service, 8 have already been Chairman/Civic Mayor (one is the current Elected Mayor.)

Majority voting

The advantages are that an enthusiastic candidate could be put forward who may not have had the opportunity to do so under other systems. It may give other parties more of a chance at having a Chairman (although the role is politically neutral).

Disadvantages are that it could lead to an actual election at Annual Council rather than a ceremonial one. It would be better if a candidate could be agreed behind the scenes from those nominated rather than in public. As Paul Millward states:

"…the basic ingredient of any successful procedure is goodwill on all sides. It is, of course, preferable that the decision to choose a Mayor [or in our case Chairman] at the Annual Meeting is unanimous and anything that can be done behind the scenes to achieve unanimity should be pursued. The dignity accorded to the office of the Mayor is not assisted by squabbles in public." (p. 63)

Points System

The advantages of the points system is that each group could administer their own procedure for selecting a Chairman if they are the group with the most points. Therefore, candidates who are very keen do not have to wait until they are the most senior councillor willing to take on the role.

The disadvantages are that the majority group is likely to dominate as it will take smaller groups longer to build their points back up.

An example: (based on Three Rivers)

I have taken Watford's political make-up for the last year and used this for 3 years. Groups get 1 point for each seat they hold at Annual Council.

Year 1
Liberal Democrat: 18
Labour: 13
Conservative: 5
(as Elected Mayor cannot be Chairman the seat is not included in this calculation)

Therefore, the Liberal Democrat Group would select the Chairman as they have the most points. For Year 1 we would deduct 36 points from the Liberal Democrat group, leaving the group on -18.

Year 2
Liberal Democrat: 0
Labour: 26
Conservative: 10

In Year 2 the groups would again receive 1 point per seat held. Therefore, as the Liberal Democrat Group have 18 seats but started on -18 it means they have a total of 0 points. The Year 2 Chairman would be from the Labour group. We would then deduct 36 from their total. This would mean the Labour group would be on -10.

According to the Three Rivers system, if a Councillor changes or leaves their party mid-year or there is a by-election, this change would not affect the control of the Chair. Also if there are any vacant seats at the time of Annual Council then the party who last held the seat would receive the point.

Year 3
Liberal Democrat: 18
Labour: 3
Conservative: 15

This means that the Liberal Democrat group would be able to select a Chairman again.

If there were 2 parties with the same points in the year, it could be resolved in the following way:

1. The party who held the post most recently would concede the Chair to the other party.
2. The group taking up the Chair would then have 36 points deducted
3. The other group would retain their points

If a party had the most points but did not want to take the role of Chairman then they would lose 26 points. The role would then be offered to the group with the next highest score (who would subsequently lose 10 points). Each year 36 points must be deducted so the final total is always 36 (as each year we add on 36 seats at Annual Council).

Majority group selection

The advantages of this system are that it is easier to administrate as it is left to the group to decide themselves internally. The disadvantage could be that a long serving councillor in an opposition group may not have the opportunity to hold the role.

Alternative suggestion

Looking at the options above there is an alternative suggestion for how Watford could consider selecting a Chairman. I have assumed that the current practice would continue: that the Vice Chairman would become Chairman in the following municipal year.

- Councillors are invited to put nominations forward as to who they think should be the next Vice Chairman.
- Anyone receiving 2 nominations would be contacted by the Monitoring officer to check they would be happy to take on the role (Member Development and Civic Officer could talk to anyone nominated about the role, time commitment etc)
- Nominations would then go to the Standards Committee as a part B report. Nominators would have to say why they had nominated that person in a written nomination. Standards Committee could then vote on who to put forward for Annual Council election. If there is a tie the Chair could have the casting vote
- The nominations from Standards Committee for the Vice Chair could then go to Annual Council where all Councillors would be invited to vote.
- If the Vice Chair decides at the end of their year that they do not want to become Chair (or are not re-elected) then the above process could be repeated but nominations would be requested for both positions.

Other Councils' Selection Methods

Council	Selection Method
Hertsmere	Selection of nominee is from among members of the majority group. Their name is shared with the opposition group so it can be agreed upon on the night.
East Herts	The majority group ballots its members on candidates who put themselves forward – effectively for Vice Chairman who (almost always) automatically becomes Chairman the following year. Whoever wins becomes the candidate formally put forward (by the majority group) at the Annual Council meeting.
Hertfordshire CC	The nomination is determined by the controlling group on the nomination of the Leader, following soundings. The Leader's recommendation has not been declined by the controlling group since 1989. In making their recommendation, the Leader seeks to identify a colleague who has the skills and experience to fulfil the role. This points towards a colleague who is fairly senior in terms of length of service.
Welwyn Hatfield	Selection is done by the administration party
North Herts	The ruling party in the District Council decide on the next Vice Chairman. They try to make sure he/she comes from a different town or village from the one before (North Herts District Council contains Letchworth, Hitchin, Baldock, Royston and more villages)
Dacorum	Majority party elects a Mayor and Deputy Mayor each year. Generally the Deputy Mayor takes over from the Mayor. This would only not be the case if the ruling party changed. They also have 2 Mayor's representatives who assist with attending engagements and have badges of office.
St Albans	Points system
Stevenage	Majority group who then select according to length of service