

Extract from the draft minutes of the Governance and Audit Committee meeting of 13 March 2023

355. Honorary Alderman Eligibility Criteria

The Committee considered a report asking that it consider a proposal to amend the eligibility criteria for the conferment of the title of Honorary Aldermen of the City of Colchester on former Councillors.

Andrew Weavers, Monitoring Officer, attended the meeting to introduce the report and assist the Committee with its enquiries. The Committee was advised that there had been a typographical error in the paragraph 4.4 of the report, which stated that “the proposal was full discussed”, when it should have stated “the proposal was fully discussed”.

Alderman Bober, the Chair of the Honorary Alderman Group, attended the meeting and addressed the Committee in accordance with the Council’s Have Your Say! provisions. The Committee heard that the proposals which were contained within the report had come as a bolt out of the blue to existing Aldermen, as they had spent some time reviewing the Aldermanic Criteria themselves and believed that their approved criteria had been signed off by the Portfolio Holder. The current criteria worked well, were tried and tested, and there was no reason to alter them. Addressing the suggested alterations to the criteria, Alderman Bober considered that the position of Leader of the Council was a political appointment by a ruling group whereas the appointment of Aldermen was linked to civic endeavour and service and not political affiliation. Although in some areas of professional or military life it was possible to make posthumous awards, it was not considered that this approach was necessary or appropriate for Aldermen who had carried out a civic duty. Alderman Bober considered that the current length of service criteria were correct, as they established the criteria for exceptional service and created a uniqueness which was special to Colchester. The changes which had been proposed to the Committee, in the view of the current Aldermen, undermined that status, and were being proposed to pacify ex-Councillors who did not meet the current criteria, which was inappropriate.

Alderman Sir Bob Russell attended the meeting and addressed the Committee in accordance with the Council’s Have Your Say! provisions. He endorsed all the points which had been made by Alderman Bober, and further considered that the proposals should not have been brought before the Committee as the views of the current Honorary Aldermen had not been sought, which was discourteous and disrespectful. The Local Government Act 1972 enabled Councils to appoint Honorary Alderman in recognition of their service, and Colchester Council had taken the view that this appointment would be given only to those who had served as Mayor, before the criteria were relaxed to allow Councillors with at least 20 years’ service, which was

exceptional service, to be appointed as Aldermen. Both of these criteria were non-political, whereas the Leader of the Council was a political appointment. Alderman Sir Bob Russell also queried the source of the proposals, noting that the Committee had been advised that the 4 Group Leaders of the Council had approved the proposals, but when he had spoken to members of the Green and Liberal Democrat Groups, they had not been aware of the proposals. He called on the Committee to reject the proposals which had been placed before it.

Alderman Sonia Lewis attended the meeting and addressed the Committee in accordance with the Council's Have Your Say! provisions. She requested that the Committee consider the implications of what was being proposed, and advised the Committee that she had confirmation from the Leader of the Conservative Group at the Council that this Group was due to discuss the proposals at its meeting on 20 March 2023, and had not yet agreed them. This was at odds with the suggestion that the Aldermen had been told that Group Leaders were supportive of the proposed changes. Her personal opinion was that the requirement for 20 years' of service was perhaps slightly too long, however, at a recent Aldermen meeting, 10 Aldermen of the 11 who were present had voted against the proposals, with only 1 vote in favour of them.

Alderman Theresa Higgins attended the meeting and addressed the Committee in accordance with the Council's Have Your Say! provisions. She explained to the Committee that at the recent Aldermen, hers had been the vote in favour of the proposals. She explained to the Committee that she was also an Alderman of Essex County Council, and this title was bestowed on Councillors after 16 years, or 4 full terms of service. She considered that the proposals which were now before the Committee were as a result of some current Councillors feeling that 20 years' service was far too long, and some members of the Council would relish being an Alderman if they retired after 16 or 17 years' service. The title was a very honourable one, however, Alderman Higgins did not consider that in the future there would be many Councillors who would serve the full 5 terms of office that were currently required, and thought that the minimum length of service should be reduced to 16 years in line with the requirements of Essex County Council. She was not against giving the title of Honorary Alderman posthumously, however, she would not support awarding the title to past Leaders of the Council.

Councillor Smith, as Chair of the Committee, welcomed the comments that had been made by the Honorary Aldermen at the meeting, considering that the effort that had been made in attending the meeting to address the Committee was a very favourable reflection on the esteem in which the title of Honorary Alderman was held. He clarified that the matter had been brought before the Committee as the result of a request that he had made when he had assumed the role of the Chair of the Committee, as he was conscious that the rules had not been reviewed for a considerable period of time. It was right that the rules were periodically reviewed, particularly in the light of the reduction in the number of City Councillors which had occurred, to ensure that the rules remained relevant and met the needs of the

Council. His personal view was that the length of service should be reduced in line with the reduction in the number of Councillors. He further believed that since the introduction of the Cabinet system, the role of elected Leader had been a very demanding one, and wondered whether it was appropriate to reflect that route of service as well?

A Committee member confirmed that there had been some discussion among the Labour Group about the proposed changes to the eligibility criteria at its most recent meeting, but that a clear consensus had not been reached in the Group.

The Committee noted and welcomed the comments which had been made by visiting Aldermen, and careful consideration was given to the points which had been made. In discussion, the Committee accepted that the eligibility criteria for Aldermen had been changed in the past, and it was recognised that there was no consensus among other Local Authorities, with the length of service being required by some being as short as 8 years. Given the changes which had been made to the number of Councillors who were elected each year, and potential future changes which could be made, for example in relation to ward boundaries, the Committee was satisfied that it was appropriate to recommend that the length of service required be reduced to 16 years.

The Committee expressed reservations with regard to the suggestion that former Leaders of the Council be automatically considered for eligibility, and it was suggested as a compromise that the highly demanding nature of the role of Leader be recognised in some form. It was therefore proposed that the criteria be amended to state that any Councillor who had held the role of Leader of the Council for a total combined period of at least 4 years, be considered eligible, provided that they had also served as a Councillors for a minimum of 8 years. It was not necessary for the years of service to be consecutive.

No support was offered by the Committee for the suggestion that the title of Honorary Alderman should be bestowed on qualifying Councillors posthumously.

RECOMMENDED TO COUNCIL that:

The eligibility criteria for Honorary Aldermen be amended to be:-

Former Councillors who have either:-

- i) Acquired at least 16 years' service as Members of the Council; or
- ii) Who have held the office of Mayor of the City; or
- iii) Who have held the office of Leader of the Council for a combined period of at least 4 years, and who have additionally acquired a minimum of 8 years' service as a Member of the Council.

A link to the report considered by the Governance and Audit Committee when making this recommendation can be accessed via the link below:-

[Honorary Alderman Eligibility Criteria](#)