



Civic Office of the Year 2018

Submission by Sevenoaks District Council



Sevenoaks District Council is a unique place to work. It's a place where positive and passionate people deliver some of the very best services in local government.

We are honoured to be recognised as one of the most efficient, well managed councils in the country. We are IIP Platinum, among only a handful of organisations. We were incredibly proud to be the first district to be LGC Council of the Year in 2016, and to be the overall winners of The Guardian Public Service Awards in 2016.

We are proud of our commitment to keep our services in-house. We invest in partnerships and sharing our services but we hold a deep belief that we can provide the services our residents and Members want without the need to outsource them. Empowering staff to innovate and supporting them to do so is part of our unique culture. Our Civic Team is empowered to work closely with the Chairman and the Communities and Business team and to operate in the most innovative way. They provide their services to our Chairman, to the Council and to the community in a distinctive Sevenoaks style and, as our MP Michael Fallon says "excellence on a shoestring".

Quality and Innovation

- **In the service we provide to our Chairman**

As with many other councils, civic support has found itself located within the Democratic Services section. However, unlike many other councils, there is no single officer dedicated to the support of the Chairman. The Democratic Services team consists of one team leader and two Democratic Services officers (3fte DSOs) who between them service between 80-90 meetings a year as well as supporting the Chairman. In order to assimilate the work the team has developed a particular method best described as ‘hive working’. The idea behind this is that any one of the 3 fte DSOs can answer the phone, and deal with an enquiry or invitation.

This is achieved with the use of a Chairman Email account, an electronic diary and detailed spreadsheet. It requires the team to maintain discipline and record/communicate all the individual steps taken. Each event is given a file number, any correspondence is kept electronically (though postal invites are kept and passed to the Chairman at the appropriate time). The invitation is detailed within the Chairman’s diary and a corresponding entry is placed in the spreadsheet at the same time, both of which are colour coded. The principle behind is that any team member need only check the diary entry for a quick idea of what is happening, and refer in more detail to the spreadsheet which ensures all steps (such as chains permission requests for an out of district event) is fully recorded. In accordance with the Council’s paperless office aspiration, everything is kept in its own electronic file, should there be a need to view historic information in more detail.

The colour coding gives a very simple visual idea of what is happening.

	Invitation with Chairman for consideration
	Declined by Chairman and with Vice Chairman for consideration
	Declined by Chairman and Vice Chairman
	Chairman attending
	Vice Chairman attending
	Postponed

Democratic Services took on the basic administration of the Chairman’s invitations and events after a restructuring and the retirement of a dedicated civic officer within the Chief Executive’s office. In line with the drive for efficiency the office of Chairman took a far more active and personal management role, and the Democratic Services team had to become familiar with civic protocol. At this time the team was larger and had a dedicated resource in the form of an administrative officer, with DSOs helping out with any events or absence, and valuable assistance and advice from the Clerks at the Kent Lieutenancy’s office and NACO.

After two years it became apparent from feedback, and from dwindling invitations, that the Chairman’s visibility within the community was diminishing. A new Chairman who wanted more support and diary management along with a recognised need to promote the role gave

an opportunity to look at what the Chairman wanted to achieve, and to develop a robust and proactive system to support the role, the council and the community.

From the outset, officers have been focussed on our “one team” approach, and on digital first, in line with our paperless office aspirations.

The Team were already responsible for the administration of responses to Freedom of Information requests, and decided to base their approach on an already known and workable system spreadsheet. Over the years this had been honed with constant team feedback and elements such as colour coding had been introduced.

What the Team wanted to achieve was seamless customer delivery and service. Regardless of who answers contacts us, the customer will have their question dealt with. This resulted in the creation of the “hive”, with any of the three officers able to handle the Civic Office duties alongside their many other responsibilities. *“You really feel the one-team approach”* (Cllr Pat Bosely, Vice Chairman)

The system takes discipline and teamwork, but the investment in creating this system means that so far there have been no problems and the team is constantly striving to improve and to offer a tailored delivery for each chairman, whatever the event or activity. DSOs also noticed that correspondents tended to prefer to respond to an individual; thus, as well as always sending out from the correct email account, a ‘joint’ signature is also now used to sign off so that customers become familiar with the fact that they can indeed speak to any of the officers.

The final piece of the improvement jigsaw is the involvement of the Chief Officer for Communities and Business, who took over the responsibility for the Civic Office after the Strategic Management Team was restructured. This has proved key in the promotion of the Chairman’s role within the council and in the community, as she is able to ensure her department think ahead about how the Chairman can be involved in the community, and in key events. The team has access to this detailed information and can use it to add value to the role of the Chairman and the work of the council.

- **In the service provided to your Council**

The Council punches well above its weight because of the knowledge, skill and hard work of our staff.

We’ve worked hard to develop a “no blame” culture among the people that work here. It’s a place where staff take responsibility for the work that they do and are empowered to take the decisions that help them to do their job effectively. We encourage new ideas and innovation and provide people with the support and training that they need to become the very best at what they do.

Our customer focus is enshrined in our mantra: ‘the customer is anyone who isn’t me’ helps to grow strong and positive working relationships across our council services as well as ensuring our residents, businesses and partners receive the very highest quality of service

each time they contact us. The Team have worked hard to restructure their service in order to deliver this in what could be seen as a non-traditional way, putting the customer first, being led by Members and the Chairman, and providing a better service without recourse to a dedicated officer system.

The Team have developed and continue to maintain an excellent relationship with the Chairman and Vice Chairman, and with other teams in the council, by strong team working and communication with each other. By developing this system, they have effectively saved the Council money by absorbing the responsibilities into their daily work, rather than having to allocate a specific resource to it.

The Team have actively sought to break down barriers with staff. For example, when initially taken over, the annual staff carol service was attended by a limited number of staff with a small function in a meeting room afterwards. There was also a traditional day before Christmas where the Chairman would come and speak to staff. The Team e-mails all staff to actively encourage them to participate in the carol service, (which does not have to be taken out of working hours), the staff lunchtime singing group are invited to perform in front of



colleagues and Members, and the hosting church offers coffee and mince pies to everyone immediately afterwards. Year on year numbers have increased. Once back at the Civic Centre, the Chairman now does a walkabout to all departments and teams, laden with tubs of chocolates to distribute. This way, all staff members have a chance to meet and speak with him. Although the Team plan a

timetable for each department so they know when to expect him, we have found that this often gets stretched as conversation flows and the Chairman and Vice Chairman visibly enjoy their encounters with staff, increasing their understanding of the work they do.

The Depot at Dunbrik is visited after Christmas at their request, post the busy Christmas waste collection period.

The staff have their own Social Club and the Chairman and Vice Chairman often lend their support to the causes the Social Club supports. For example, how many members of a Civic Office would don an adult Pudsey costume, then tour the building raising funds for Children in Need? They have judged our very own fund-raising Bake Off event, and made sure that staff are always welcome at flag-raising events that occur at the council buildings, and to participate in silences respecting the sacrifices others have made in war and peace time. This

approach all supports our “one team” ethos, and while preserving the respect due to the office of Chairman, makes it more accessible within the council.

Staff are also warmly welcomed to join other Members at fundraising events such as the Chairman’s quiz in support of his charity of the year, Ellenor. Established in 1994 and serving the West Kent community, Ellenor is the first children’s hospice “at home” service in the UK, and the only charity in Kent to provide this service – including around the clock care for terminally ill children at the end of life - in the sanctuary of their own home. The Chairman’s Quiz in support of Ellenor raised £900, and the Member’s Team in the Dragon Boat Race raised a further £675.



And - there is also the vital diplomatic work of the Chairman: umpiring the annual cricket match between Members and officers!

Fostering this excellent rapport with staff provides a sense of civic pride and purpose, and further supports and enhances the one team ethos. It also helps staff think about events the Chairman could be involved with.

The service provided to our Community

Sevenoaks has a number of very demanding communities: residents are passionate about protecting the 97% of the district that is green belt (with 63% an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty). There are wealthy commuters around Sevenoaks town and we have the highest number of gypsy traveller public plots in the whole of Kent, as well as farming and isolated rural communities to look after, and pockets of deprivation especially to the north.

Whatever the community, we have pride in our entire district, and whoever our customers are, they have high expectations which we want to meet and wherever possible, exceed. Our aims and objectives for the new Corporate Plan have a clear focus on well-being in all its forms.

The Team are a hugely important part of this. The Chief Officer for Communities and Business now looks after the Civic side of the Team’s work, and the knowledge of her team’s community events is a clear advantage. The Chief Officer is able to encourage her department to have the Chairman’s potential involvement at the forefront of their mind; as a result, his attendance at a range of events from business breakfasts to family fun days has increased significantly. We were proud to be win the award of Dementia Friendly Organisation from the Kent Dementia Alliance last year, and the Chairman put his support behind our continued activity in this cause by firing the starting pistol for the district’s first

ever Dementia “Run, Walk or Push” which took place in the historic Knole Park last year and raised over £4,500.

The event was spearheaded by the Chairman, giving the cause and the community group behind it a well-deserved profile. In addition to fund-raising, the aim was also to support the group to help themselves, to start a new event that could then be planned by them independently in the future. Council teams worked closely with the group (Sevenoaks Areas



Dementia Friendly Community) to pass on skills, knowledge and expertise that would enable them to do this. The Chairman actively encouraged on-going participation by not only placing a medal on every single participant, but by asking them to come back next year, and by presenting the cheque for the amount raised

to the Dementia Forum, and officially opening the Forget – Me –Not Café at Knole House.

The Chairman attended the joint visit of the HERO and Rural Kent Project Coffee Caravan morning back in November in Farningham. HERO provides integrated, holistic support on housing, health, employment and a range of other issues such as debt, in order to help people plan for the future and encourage independence. The purpose of this visit was to reach out to the residents in isolated and rural communities within the district.

Approximately 15 people dropped by for a teatime chat where a council officer introduced and promoted the HERO advice service to the local community of Farningham. We were able to bring along HERO merchandise and information of what the project does and how to contact us, all of which was received very positively, and helped us to reach residents who can be isolated from services if they are not easily accessible on their doorstep.

The Chairman chatted to all those who dropped by, and with Parish Wardens in attendance, it was a team event where we worked together to support potentially vulnerable individuals. This is very different from the traditional, more formal events associated with a Civic Office and shows how the Civic Team is working across the council to promote our primary objective of well-being.

The Chairman holds a strong support for the armed forces based on his own experiences, and in his role as Armed Forces Champion plays a key part in events to promote the Sevenoaks District Community Covenant. At the launch he presented a welcome talk, cut the cake and

engaged with the district's services involved in the celebration day and in supporting the armed services. He has also represented the Council and met armed forces organisations



across the county such as the Kent Armed Forces Event in Folkestone, Veterans Day, and Military Conference.

In order to promote the importance of maintaining health he has even been known to take part in an exercise class, held by the Royal British Legion Industries event last year! The Communities and Business team also includes an economic development and

the Chairman is encouraged to attend events intended to support and highlight our local economy. He has lent profile to the district by attending networking events for businesses and organisations involved in the visitor economy, Visit Kent events taking place outside of the district, and at the start of this year, supporting a new business partnership between Sunbright and Magic Box International. The Chairman was invited to make a speech and cut a ribbon for the official opening of Magic Box International at Woodlands Garden Centre.

In August last year we were visited by the Kent Ambassadors, a grouping of highly successful and experienced people who either live or work in Kent and who have come together, by invitation, in a voluntary arrangement to help all aspects of life in Kent. Their visit was to find out how a district council works; they were formally welcomed by The Chairman, who worked closely with the Leader of the Council and other Senior Officers to impress on the Ambassadors the vital work of district councils.



So far we have officially recorded the Chairman has already attended close to 200 events, the majority of which have been charity and community group events. .

Promotion of the Office of Mayor/Chairman

The Office of Chairman is generally held to be a symbol of authority, open society and expression of social cohesion. The Team marry this with council aims and objectives by the service they deliver to him, and by the quality engagements he supports, raising the profile of council, providing a key interface with staff and with the community. Our aims and

objectives are all connected with well-being. We want our residents to lead long, happy and healthy lives, and our businesses to thrive and prosper. This means working to ensure our communities have suitable homes to live in, within a safe, healthy and protected environment, and supporting a strong local economy that provides the jobs and services we need.

All of this is underpinned by excellence, quality and value for money. The Communities and Business Team provides services including economic development, housing, community safety, health and community development; it therefore makes sound sense to have strong links between both Teams in order to make maximum use of the Chairman's role to communicate our aims and objectives.

Our Council magazine, InShape, delivered to every household in the district, regularly features the work of the Chairman, and provides details of his twitter account, and how to invite him to events, specifying: *"Larry welcomes invitations to attend community events"*. There is a close working relationship with the Council's Communications Team who support the Chairman's twitter account, and alert press and other media to his events and activities. The Communities and Business Team also tweet on the Chairman's behalf, when he is supporting events for them.

The Team writes to community groups and schools at the beginning of and half way through the municipal year, to remind them of the part the Chairman could play in supporting their community work. Cabinet members are sent the list of events every two weeks, are encouraged to promote the role of the Chairman with Portfolio Holders attending events and activities if the Chairman or Vice Chairman cannot attend to maintain the Council's visibility.

The Chairman's support for the armed services has led to increasing engagement with schools, veterans and cadets, and schools also come into the council offices to engage in debates in the council chamber, and to learn about voting and elections.

Although events within the district are prioritised, we recognise the need to foster neighbourly relations and the Team advise the Chairman accordingly. We have a number of partnerships and shared services with other councils, both formal and informal, and the Team's close relationship with the Communities and Business team and other council departments means that the Office of Chairman can be used to good effect in this regard, opening it out from a more insular approach. We join in with the Sevenoaks Town Council Remembrance ceremony rather than duplicate it; this creates unity and prevents Members who serve on both councils from being torn between two separate events.



Two years ago we started an annual Community and Voluntary Sector Awards event, in order to showcase and promote the highly valuable contribution that the sector makes to the wellbeing of so many residents in the district. The Chairman officiates at this event, alongside a local celebrity, giving them well-deserved profile by his involvement, and shining a light on their good work. The

feedback from the sector for the recognition they receive is overwhelmingly positive.

How you have used your resources to best effect?

Sevenoaks District Council is unique in that we are the first council to become financially self-sufficient: we are no longer dependent on Government grant. We have done this by implementing a 10 year rolling budget, a Property Investment Strategy that is yielding well above the current interest rates, and by investing in our new Economic Development and Property Team. However, inflation, uncertainty surrounding Brexit, the current debate around the public sector pay cap to name but three issues, all mean that we still have to deliver year on year savings and demonstrate that we are using taxpayers money to best effect. The Civic Team have demonstrated this by redrawing the way support is provided to the Office of Mayor/Chairman.

There is no longer a single dedicated officer, but a hive of 3 officers who integrate the work they do as a 'Civic Team' with their other legal and democratic responsibilities. Any member of the team (subject to any new recruits requiring training) can answer an enquiry or go to a briefing session; there is therefore always capacity regardless of workloads.

'Due to varying circumstances beyond their control the team have often/mainly operated with only two staff this municipal year. Despite this they have managed to maintain an exceptionally high level of support due to the one-team approach and the new systems that have been put in place''' (Cllr Larry Abraham, Chairman)

Specific examples of using resources to best effect include:

- The Office of Mayor/Chairman has neither a car or chauffeur; the Office Holders drive themselves and claim mileage, and should a car be needed, the Civic Team ring round for quotes, rather than using only one taxi company as used to be the case
- Chairman and vice chairman receive an allowance and manage money themselves but provide cheques for tickets etc.,

- The price of food for annual council has been reduced to 25% of what it was prior to the new Civic Team taking over, simply by shopping around.

The Team also recognises that the best resource they have is the staff who work for the council. Using the individual or collective talents and knowledge in other departments, especially those of colleagues in the Communities and Business team, mean that we can target the valuable time of the Chairman to best effect. Their detailed “inside knowledge” gives us plenty of scope for accurate and up to date information for briefings and speeches and suggestions of locations in the district that would serve to promote the work of the Chairman and increase their public profile.

The Team have worked hard to build up trust across Council teams, so that once an engagement is confirmed, the Chairman is “handed over” in the knowledge that he will be well looked after and supported by colleagues on site. Likewise, any speeches are always drafted by those who know the subject best, and make sure it is accurate, relevant and engaging for the audience.

Throughout this submission we have referred to the ‘Team’ rather than “civic office” or “civic team”, as we feel this term reflects our non-traditional approach, and does more to demonstrate the support offered to the Chairman not only by the core team of Democratic Services Officers but also by our colleagues within the Council which we wish to acknowledge and reflect.

The people that work for Sevenoaks District Council care deeply for what they do, that they are creative, embrace risk and work hard to deliver exceptional service to our customers and to improve the Sevenoaks district. *“I’m confident that I can speak on behalf of all Councillors when I say that it’s our team of people that makes Sevenoaks District Council unique”.* (Cllr Peter Fleming, Leader of the Council).

We hope you agree.

