

READING BOROUGH COUNCIL
REPORT BY MONITORING OFFICER

TO:	COUNCIL		
DATE:	23 FEBRUARY 2022		
TITLE:	FREEDOM OF THE BOROUGH		
LEAD COUNCILLOR:	CLLR BROCK	PORTFOLIO:	LEADERSHIP
SERVICE:		WARDS:	ALL
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1. PURPOSE OF REPORT AND EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1 This report sets out a recommended annual process for considering the creation of Freeman of the Borough as well as Honorary Aldermen and Alderwomen. It also describes the criteria by which nominations for these honorary titles will be assessed.

Appendices:

- Appendix 1 Criteria for Freedom of the Borough
- Appendix 2 An annual procedure for considering nominations to the Freedom of the Borough, including for organisations
- Appendix 3 Codification of the criteria and procedure for creation of Honorary Aldermen and Honorary Alderwomen

2. RECOMMENDED ACTION

- 2.1 That the criteria for the award of Freedom of the Borough of Reading be adopted as set out in Appendix 1 to the report.
- 2.2 That the procedure for consideration of nominations to the grant of Freedom of the Borough of Reading be adopted as set out in Appendix 2 to the report and, to facilitate this procedure, the Civic Board's terms of reference be amended to include the additional responsibility to consider any such nominations on an annual basis.
- 2.3 That the criteria and procedure for creation of Honorary Aldermen and Honorary Alderwomen be adopted as set out in Appendix 3 to the report.

3. POLICY CONTEXT

- 3.1 Currently, the Council's granting of Freedom of the Borough has been conducted on an ad hoc basis with no established criteria, apart from a short reference in the Constitution to the relevant procedural rules in the 1972 Local Government Act.

- 3.2 A related consequence of the present practice is that organisations never receive Freedom of the Borough, and individuals are rarely admitted to the ranks of Freemen. The last Freeman to be created was a former Councillor and Mayor, Bob Green, in November 2008.
- 3.3 Secondly the Council also has the power to create Honorary Aldermen/Alderwomen but this ability has been held in permanent abeyance. Alderman/Alderwoman is a title with a long history of civic dignity and is a more appropriate way of recognising retired councillors than bestowing the title of Freeman.
- 3.4 As a result, the current practice for granting honorary titles would appear to make it more difficult for deserving individuals and organisations to be given an opportunity to be considered for and receive these awards.

4. THE PROPOSAL

Option Proposed

- 4.1 The proposal seeks to address the ad hoc approach to the creation of Freemen and Honorary Aldermen and Alderwomen by introducing an annual process to consider nominations through the all-party Civic Board. The intention is to enable more individuals and organisations to receive the recognition they deserve through the granting of these honorary titles.
- 4.2 The Council is asked to adopt criteria for the award of Freedom of the Borough and Honorary Aldermen and Alderwomen, alongside a process for assessing the nominations for these titles. Details of the criteria and process are set out in the Appendices to this report.

Other Options Considered

- 4.3 The alternative to adopting a structure for assessing nominations would be to continue with the existing current ad hoc practice. This approach has not granted an honorary title since 2008 and is therefore not recommended.

5. CONTRIBUTION TO STRATEGIC AIMS

- 5.1 There are none specifically arising from this report, as it is a procedural report. However, it will provide more scope for recognising organisations and individuals contributing consistently to the Council's strategic aims and Team Reading values.

6. ENVIRONMENTAL AND CLIMATE IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 The Council declared a Climate Emergency at its meeting on 26 February 2019 (Minute 48 refers).
- 7.2 There is nothing within this report which is of relevance for the Council's strategic priority of Climate Change.

7. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND INFORMATION

- 7.1 Section 138 of the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 places a duty on local authorities to involve local representatives when carrying out "any of its functions" by providing information, consulting or "involving in another way".
- 7.2 A related consequence of the recommended change to present practice is that it will provide an annual opportunity for organisations and individuals to be considered to receive the Freedom of the Borough, which is a positive outcome given the strength of our voluntary and community sector.

8. EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT

8.1 Under the Equality Act 2010, Section 149, a public authority must, in the exercise of its functions, have due regard to the need to:

- eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct that is prohibited by or under this Act
- advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it
- foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it

8.2 An Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) is not relevant to this report. Communities and citizens will not be disadvantaged by the introduction of a more structured process to consider granting the titles of Freeman of the Borough or Honorary Alderman/Alderwoman.

9. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

9.1 Freemen of the Borough and Honorary Aldermen/ Alderwomen are created under the provisions of Section 249 of the Local Government Act 1972, 'Honorary Titles'.

9.2 Granting Freedom of the Borough and the title of Honorary Alderman/Alderwoman requires a vote at a specially convened Council meeting passed by not less than two-thirds of the members voting.

10. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

10.1 There are no direct financial implications arising from this report, but Section 249(9) of the Local Government Act 1972 allows a relevant authority to spend a reasonable sum on presenting an address or a casket containing an address to a person on whom the authority has conferred an honorary title.

11. BACKGROUND PAPERS

11.1 None.

Appendix 1

Criteria for the award of Freedom of Borough of Reading

The grant of the Freedom of the Borough of Reading is awarded to persons or organisations who have, in the opinion of the Council, rendered eminent services to the Borough.

The title is honorary and does not have any rights attached to it beyond inscription on the official roll kept in the Council Chamber. The Freedom is awarded following a suggestion from a councillor and agreement by all the Party Groups.

Appendix 2

Procedure for consideration of nominations to the grant of Freedom of the Borough of Reading

- The Civic Board, as a constitutionally established cross-party group, shall convene the process for consideration of nominations to the grant of Freedom of the Borough. All Group Leaders are to be represented on the Board but may send substitutes to meetings if required.
- In September/October of each municipal year, the Chair of the Civic Board shall invite all members to submit names of individuals and organisations for consideration.
- In November/December of each municipal year the Civic Board shall meet to consider nominations.
- In general, the Civic Board shall make a maximum of only one recommendation for appointment in a given year, although it may choose to vary this in recognition of particular circumstance (e.g. Council/borough anniversaries, royal jubilees, etc.).
- The final recommendation of the Board shall be subject to due diligence checks coordinated by the Monitoring Officer.
- Subject to due diligence checks, any grant of Freedom of the Borough shall take place at a specially convened meeting of Council during March, or another date if necessary, subject to the requirements of the Local Government Act 1972.

N.B. This procedure and timetable allows ample scope for Group Leaders to informally consult with their Groups as necessary.

Appendix 3

Criteria and procedure for the creation of Honorary Aldermen and Honorary Alderwomen of Reading Borough Council

Background

In accordance with the provisions of section 249 of the Local Government Act 1972, the Council may confer the title of “Honorary Alderman” or “Honorary Alderwoman” on:

“Persons who have, in the opinion of the Council, rendered eminent services to the Council as past members of that Council, but who are not then members of the Council.”

In order for Council to confer the title of Honorary Alderman or Honorary Alderwoman, a special meeting of full Council needs to be convened for this purpose and a resolution passed by not less than two thirds of the voting members present at that meeting.

Qualification criteria

For the purposes of this scheme “eminent services” shall mean serving as a member of Reading Borough Council, or as a member for a Reading division of the former Berkshire County Council, for a total of 12 years and meeting at least one of the following conditions:

- Holding senior political office and/or serving as Mayor with distinction;
- Having an exceptional record of community service and leadership.

In exceptional circumstances, less than 12 years’ service may be considered upon the recommendation of the Leader of the Council.

No person who meets the above qualification criteria will automatically become an Honorary Alderman or Honorary Alderwoman, but they may be nominated and enrolled as an Honorary Alderman or Honorary Alderwoman in accordance with the provisions of this scheme.

Nomination and enrolment

Nominations for the position of Honorary Alderman and Honorary Alderwoman should only be made where there are exceptional cases meriting this honour.

Any serving councillor can submit a nomination in writing to the Monitoring Officer with the support of their Group Leader or the Leader of the Council. Such nominations shall be considered on an annual cycle.

Once a valid nomination(s) has been received by the Monitoring Officer, informal discussions will take place involving Group Leaders to establish whether there is sufficient support for the nomination(s). If there is sufficient support for conferring the title of Honorary Alderman or Honorary Alderwoman on the nominated person(s), full Council will be asked at its next normal meeting to agree to convene a special meeting for this purpose.

At a specially convened meeting full Council will formally resolve to confer the honorary title and will celebrate the achievements of the recipient(s) and make any presentation to them. The summons for this meeting will contain the proposal to award the honour including the reason.

Privileges

An Honorary Alderman or Honorary Alderwoman shall be entitled to the following privileges:

- To enjoy the courtesy title of “Alderman” or “Alderwoman” and to be so addressed.

- To be named as an Alderman/Alderwoman on a roll maintained in the Council Chamber.
- To receive invitations to all civic and social events to which members of the Council are invited.

The Council may decide to alter, amend, supplement or withdraw the privileges set out in this scheme.

Honorary Aldermen/women shall not have the right to influence meetings of the Council or a committee of the Council or to receive any allowance or other payment under the Members' Allowance Scheme.

Withdrawal of the title and its privileges

The Council shall retain the competence to withdraw the title of Honorary Alderman or Honorary Alderwoman and its privileges in particular cases.

Withdrawal of the title and its privileges shall be by way of a resolution passed by not less than two thirds of voting members present at a specially convened full Council meeting. The summons for that meeting will contain a proposal to withdraw the title and its privileges including the reason.

Honorary positions are non-political roles. In the event of an Honorary Alderman or Honorary Alderwoman subsequently resuming membership of the Council, they may not be addressed as Alderman or Alderwoman or benefit from any privileges that Honorary Aldermen and Honorary Alderwomen may be entitled to until they once more cease to be a councillor