



Community
Action Southwark

creating a stronger voluntary and community sector

How Does Southwark Council Work?

A Simple Guide for the Voluntary and Community Sector

Summary

Local government policy can be **difficult to navigate**, and the council's systems and procedures can sometimes appear **complicated**. It can be difficult to get to grips with what different committees do, and the ins and outs of the decision making process.

It is important that the sector has a **basic understanding** of how the council works. This is more pronounced at a time of reduced funding. If an organisation does not understand how funding decisions are arrived at, or who makes the decisions, it can make it harder to make a case for that funding.

CAS has put together this guide with the aim of simply **explaining council processes**, so that those in the sector feel informed about **how their local authority functions**.

This easy to read guide explains **how the council works**, who the **key individuals are**, and how **decisions are arrived at**.

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1. What is the Council Assembly and what happens at its meetings?

The Council Assembly contains all 63 ward councillors that represent the borough of Southwark. Post the 2014 elections, the vast majority of these councillors are from the Labour party. 48 are Labour, 13 are Liberal Democrat, and just 2 are Conservative.

The Council Assembly meets in full **four times a year**. As with all Southwark Council's public meetings, the date, time and agenda for these will appear on the council's [meeting calendar](#). Their meetings usually occur at 7pm at the offices on [Tooley Street](#).

At an Assembly meeting, a variety of different events will take place. [Click here](#) for an example of a Council Assembly agenda.

Since April 2011 there have been [themed debates](#) at council meetings. Themed assembly meetings mean that there is more opportunity for residents to get involved and make their voices heard.

Both the public and councillors have the opportunity to ask [questions](#), and receive **answers** to these. For example, someone could ask the council what they are doing to tackle gang crime, and they would be entitled to a written answer from the relevant Cabinet member. At the meeting, the person is then given the chance to ask an additional question on the same issue.

Councillors will “**move**” (introduce) **motions** that they have written – these are **statements of intent** that they want the council to approve. After a motion has been moved, a debate will take place, followed by a vote. If the council votes in favour, the motion is **carried**, and the council is committed to it – if not, it fails, and does **not** represent a commitment by the council.

For example, a councillor could move a motion that commits the council to building new cycling infrastructure in the borough. If the motion carries, the council **must act on** the commitments detailed in the motion – so would therefore need to start thinking about cycle lanes, bike racks, or whatever else was mentioned.

Council Assembly meetings are where **party political** debates take place, and are the real platform for councillors to show their political colours! Sometimes debates can get heated.

As well as questions and motions, Council Assembly is bound by Southwark's constitution to take **certain decisions**. These are so important that it is deemed necessary for the whole Assembly to agree on them.

These include (but are not limited to) the approval of the council's budget, capital strategy (where it will spend money on infrastructure), and important policy documents such as the children and young people's plan.

Council Assembly meetings are strictly limited to three hours – 10:00pm is what is called the **guillotine**. This means, quite simply, that councillors have to stop talking, and the meeting must end.

2. What is the Cabinet, and what happens at its meetings?

The [Cabinet](#) is a select group of councillors (it needs to be more than 2, but cannot be more than 10) who come together to make important council decisions. Cabinet members are usually from the political party that dominates the council; in this instance; all the Cabinet members are Labour.

Members of the Cabinet each have a specific area of responsibility, or ‘**portfolio**’, in which they work. These include important issues for the council such as housing, children and young people, and adult social care. You can read more about the duties of individual council meetings further on in this document.

The Cabinet meets monthly at Tooley Street, usually at 4pm. Cabinet meetings are open to the public, but if a confidential item is considered, the press and public will be asked to leave the room. A confidential item is usually one containing information that is deemed to be business sensitive.

The Cabinet is responsible for:

- Drafting the council's **budget** and **policy** framework

- Taking important decisions on **priorities**, and where to allocate **resources**
- **Overseeing services** that are being delivered by the council
- Making sure any **consultation** is being carried out properly (where it needs to be)

At a Cabinet meeting, the relevant Cabinet member will usually introduce an item on the agenda, and then an officer will briefly lay out the details of a council report on the topic.

The Cabinet will then discuss the item and decide whether they would like to agree it or not. If a majority of the Cabinet members want to agree the item, it will be agreed. **This isn't the end of the story**, as the decision will then be scrutinised by other councillors, but this is explained in the next section.

3. What are the different committees, and what do they do?

Councillors sit on a vast number of different committees, which all fulfil different council functions. Here's a simplified breakdown of what each committee is and what it does:

[Overview and Scrutiny Committee:](#)

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee has responsibility for scrutinising (examining) decisions made by the Cabinet. It currently contains 11 councillors – 8 are Labour, and 3 are Liberal Democrat. The Overview and Scrutiny sets some priorities, or a [work programme](#), for the year, which outlines its areas of focus. For 2014/15, this includes topics such as the redevelopment of Peckham Rye, and work on a procurement strategy. It will produce reviews or recommendations for Cabinet on these topics.

More is explained about the role of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee in the decision making process further on in this document. Essentially, the committee has the power to ask the Cabinet to reconsider a decision before it has been implemented.

It has three sub-committees: the [Education and Children's Services](#), [Healthy Communities](#), and [Housing and Community Safety](#) Scrutiny Sub-

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Committees. These committees are responsible for scrutinising decisions in their particular area of focus. They each contain 7 councillors. You can view their priorities (their work programme) via the links above.

[Planning Committee](#) and [Planning Sub-Committee](#)

The planning committee and sub-committee are responsible for determining the outcome of planning applications. The planning committee is responsible for larger applications, and the sub-committee considers the smaller ones. Not all applications go to these committees – only ones which are considered important, are of a particular size, or are controversial (have received a number of objections).

[Licensing Committee](#) and [Licensing Sub Committee](#)

These committees are responsible for approving the council's licensing policies and considering licensing applications.

[Appointments Committee](#)

The appointments committee advises the council assembly about the appointment of individuals to certain posts.

[Corporate Parenting Committee](#)

The corporate parenting committee is charged with securing the best life chances for the borough's looked after children

[Audit and Governance Committee](#)

This committee provides scrutiny of the council's performance and finances.

[Standards Committee](#)

The Standards Committee is responsible for ensuring that both councillors and council officers are complying with the council's code of conduct. It deals with complaints.

[Health and Wellbeing Board](#)

The Health and Wellbeing Board is a relatively new body, and is responsible for putting together a Joint Strategic Needs Assessment and [Joint Health and](#)

[Wellbeing Strategy](#) to inform health priorities for the borough.

4. What are Community Councils?

[Community Councils](#) are not the same as committees – they exist to take decisions about local matters. They also play a key role in consultation, and make sure that local people are involved in and aware of council policies.

There are five Community Councils, with one for each of the following areas: [Bermondsey and Rotherhithe](#); [Camberwell](#); [Peckham and Nunhead](#); [Borough, Bankside and Walworth](#); and [Dulwich](#).

Community Councils hold their meetings around 5 times a year in different local venues.

5. What's the council's process when making a decision?

A decision on council action may need to be made for a number of reasons. It could be a response to **local pressures, national policy**, or a **predetermined council responsibility** such as setting the budget.

When a decision is coming up, it will be listed on the council's [forward plan](#). This document contains details of all [key decisions](#) that are going to be taken by the Cabinet, individual cabinet members, and chief officers. This is published on a monthly basis and includes decisions for the next four months, as well as potential decisions for the next eight months.

As described earlier, Cabinet members will consider a decision at a meeting. If they agree a decision, there will be a 5 day period following this to allow the Overview and Scrutiny Committee to review it.

This is called a 'call-in'. If the chair and three other members of the committee ask that a decision is 'called-in', this means that it **can't be implemented until the committee has considered it**.

This system provides important **checks and balances** – it ensures that Cabinet cannot simply make a decision without all councillors having the chance to scrutinise it.

The committee has the power to recommend to Cabinet that they **change their decision**, or **reconsider it**. However the Cabinet do not have to do this if they wish to stand by their original decision.

As mentioned earlier, **some decisions** (extremely important ones) will then need to go to the full Council Assembly for approval. These include, but are not limited to, approving the policy framework (important strategies such as the Children and Young People's Plan), setting the budget, and appointing a council Leader.

6. What's the council's process when procuring a service?

The council's procurement processes can be quite complex; this is an **extremely simple version** of how things happen!

You can find more documents about the procurement process on our influencing resources page. You can also view a full list of different terms associated with commissioning and what they mean in our [VCS glossary](#).

The council will regularly review its service delivery to see if it needs to **procure additional services**. If it does, it will begin a **procurement process** to meet its needs.

If a contract is worth more than **£75,000**, the council will need to consider **Gateway Reports** when making decisions about procurement. Each of these needs to be approved by Cabinet, and are as follows:

Gateway 1: The council decides on a procurement strategy.

Gateway 2: The council decides to award a contract.

Gateway 3: The council decides on a variation to the existing contract (for example, an extension).

Once a contract has been awarded, it will appear on the council's [Contracts Register](#).

7. Who are the different Cabinet members, and what do they do?

Cabinet members are councillors that hold a **specific portfolio**, or **area of responsibility**, and attend Cabinet meetings to make important decisions.

Here's a list of Cabinet members and their responsibilities:

- [Cllr Peter John](#), Leader of the council
- [Cllr Ian Wingfield](#) - Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Business, Employment and Culture
- [Cllr Fiona Colley](#) - Cabinet Member for Finance, Modernisation and Performance
- [Cllr Stephanie Cryan](#) - Cabinet Member for Adult Care and Financial Inclusion
- [Cllr Barrie Hargrove](#) - Cabinet Member for Public Health, Parks and Leisure
- [Cllr Mark Williams](#) - Cabinet Member for Regeneration and New Homes
- [Cllr Victoria Mills](#) - Cabinet Member for Children and Schools
- [Cllr Richard Livingstone](#) - Cabinet Member for Housing
- [Cllr Darren Merrill](#) Cabinet Member for Environment and Public Realm
- [Cllr Michael Situ](#) - Cabinet Member for Communities and Safety

8. Who are the different strategic directors, and what do they do?

[Eleanor Kelly](#) is Southwark's Chief Executive with responsibility for regeneration, planning, human resources, and corporate strategy.

The other directors and their areas of work are listed below:

- **David Quirke-Thornton**, Strategic Director, Adults and Children's Services

- **Gerri Scott**, Strategic Director, Housing Services and Community Services
- **Deborah Collins**, Strategic Director, Environment and Leisure
- **Duncan Whitfield**, Strategic Director, Finance and Corporate Services

9. What's the difference between councillors and council officers?

Councillors are **elected representatives**, who each represent one of the borough's 63 wards.

They differ from council officers, who are employed by the Council and are **not political**. Local elections are held every four years; therefore councillors are elected for a **four-year term**.

It is easiest to think of councillors as those that **make decisions**, whereas officers are those that **carry out actions**.

The role of officers is to give **advice** to councillors, to deliver **services** and to **carry out** the decisions that councillors make.

10. What does Southwark's Mayor do?

Southwark's Mayor acts as the Chair for the Council Assembly meetings, but other than this, his role is largely **ceremonial**.

If you need further information on Southwark Council, and advice on how we can help you, please contact **Rachel Clarkson, Policy Officer** via Rachel@casouthwark.org.uk