

## **RUNNYMEDE BOROUGH COUNCIL**

### **DECISION MAKING PROCESS**

#### **Introduction**

Everybody's life is affected by the decisions of their local Council, whether they concern the collection of household rubbish, improvements to a housing estate, the type of facilities on offer at a sports centre or simply the level of Council Tax. Most of these decisions are taken in Committee meetings – but who by? How? When? And Where? This article sets out to answer those questions and explain the process by which Runnymede Borough Council takes decisions on its services to the local community.

#### **The Decision Makers**

There are 42 Members of the Council (Councillors), 3 for each of the 14 Wards, elected to represent the public. Councillors undertake official duties in their own time and receive a small allowance, mainly to cover out of pocket expenses.

The elected Councillors are responsible for the overall policy direction of the Council and take all of the significant decisions concerning the Authority's services and expenditure.

All 42 Councillors meet together several times a year in order to approve the budget, the level of the Council Tax and a variety of key policy documents. However, because of the vast range and volume of complex and often urgent business the Authority deals with, it is not practical for all issues to be discussed at these full meetings of the Council. Business is therefore conducted through a network of Committees and Sub-Committees, each comprising between 5-15 Members. The main Policy Committees meet five times a year except for Planning Committee, which meets every three weeks to consider major planning applications and development related policy, and Corporate Management, which meets eleven times a year. Their decisions are generally final although recommendations on some policy matters must subsequently be approved by the full Council.

The effectiveness of the Council's services and decisions is scrutinised by the Overview & Scrutiny Select Committee. This has the powers to 'call in' for reconsideration decisions made but not yet implemented. The Committee can also investigate any aspect of the Council's services or performance, together with any other matter which affects the area or its inhabitants. In addition, the Committee is charged with reviewing and developing policy. It does not have any decision making powers but can make recommendations for change to the appropriate Policy Committee or Full Council, if necessary.

The Crime and Disorder Committee reviews and scrutinises actions taken by authorities exercising crime and disorder functions, community safety strategy and Safer Runnymede initiative.

A Standards and Audit Committee, composed of five Councillors and two people who are not Councillors, meets periodically to promote and maintain high standards of conduct by the 42 Councillors and to assist them to observe the Council's Code of Conduct.

On a day to day basis the Council is run by paid employees (Officers) who make routine decisions in accordance with policies previously approved by Councillors.

#### **Meetings**

The press and public are welcome to attend meetings of the Council and the Committees in order to observe the proceedings, although it is sometimes necessary for a confidential matter to be considered in private. In certain circumstances, the public may speak or ask questions at meetings of the Full Council, and speak at Planning Committee, provided advance notice is given.

With one or two exceptions Councillors are entitled to attend all meetings whether or not they are Members of the Committee in question. Members of the Committee, and other Members of the Council, sit at tables in the Council Chamber. Officers are also present to advise the Committee on technical, professional and procedural matters. The Chairman of the relevant Committee sits at the centre of a table on a raised platform in front of the other Members. Officers also sit either side of the Chairman to advise and support the Committee.

Most meetings are held at the Council Chamber in the Runnymede Civic Centre, Station Road, Addlestone on Wednesday or Thursday evenings and start at 7.30pm. Copies of the Agendas and Minutes can be found on the Council's website, [www.runnymede.gov.uk](http://www.runnymede.gov.uk) and at local libraries.

Details of the meetings are displayed on all Council notice boards and on the Council website.

### **Conduct of the Meeting**

The order of business for each meeting is set out in the agenda. The agenda contains detailed reports prepared by Officers on each item under consideration.

Unless a matter is exceptionally urgent it cannot be debated if it has not been included on the agenda. At the end of most reports is the course of action recommended by Officers. This is not a formal motion before the Committee unless one of the Members specifically moves it (in which case you may hear the expression "move as set down"). However, Members are at liberty to put forward a different motion if they wish.

Once a motion has been moved and seconded it may be considered by the Committee in accordance with the rules of debate set out in "Standing Orders" (the Council's internal rules and regulations). Councillors who are not members of the Committee may speak with the permission of the Chairman but cannot vote. Officers introduce agenda reports to the Committee and give technical and professional advice but do not otherwise participate in the debate. They are not allowed to vote. If a vote is taken and the result is a tie the Chairman may exercise a second, or casting, vote.

### **Declarations of interest**

All Councillors are required to observe the Runnymede Code of Conduct to ensure high standards in the way they undertake their duties. Under the Code, Councillors are under a strict duty to "declare an interest" at the meeting if they have a personal interest in any matter under debate. What happens then depends upon the nature and significance of their interest. A Councillor with a personal and prejudicial interest must leave the room while the matter is discussed. If the interest is not prejudicial the Councillor will be able to remain in the meeting and participate in the proceedings. The Council has also adopted a supplementary Code of Conduct which applies to Planning matters.

### **Exclusion of Press and Public**

Although as much as possible of the Committees' business is conducted in public there are, inevitably, some items which need to be considered in private. In order not to inconvenience the public these are usually dealt with towards the end of the meeting. The press and public must be excluded from the meeting if it is likely that "confidential" information will be discussed. This only applies where statute, Court Order or the Government specifically prevent the Council from disclosing information and is very rare. However, the Committee may also choose to exclude the public if certain sensitive information is likely to be discussed. This might, for example, relate to the financial or business affairs of a person or organisation, personnel matters, commercial and contractual information or legal advice. This is known as "exempt" information.

Most confidential and exempt reports are listed in Part II of the agenda and have not been made publicly available. However, the Committee may also decide to consider any item listed

in Part I in private if it becomes apparent that exempt information might be discussed during the debate.

### **Agendas, Background Papers and Minutes**

All Committee meetings have an Agenda, which is published 5 clear working days ahead of the meeting. Copies are sent to the local libraries, local newspapers, local radio and a copy placed on reception at the Civic Centre. Copies can also be seen on the Council website and are available in the public gallery on the night of the meeting.

The Agendas are available for inspection for a period of 6 years from the date of the meeting.

The Minutes are a concise written record of the decisions taken at a meeting. They usually include a summary of the principal reasons for each decision, but are not a verbatim account of the debate. The Minutes are normally available on the Council's website within four weeks of a meeting. A hard copy of the Minutes will be circulated with the Council Summons on five occasions each year

The Minutes of the former Egham Rural District Council (1894-1906), the Chertsey Urban District Council (1896-1974), and Egham Urban District Council (1906-1974), and Minutes for Runnymede Borough Council (1974 onwards) are on loan for reference purposes to the Surrey History Centre at Woking (Tel: 01483 518737)

Background Papers referred to in Agenda reports are retained for 4 years and are available for public inspection.

### **Public Speaking**

The Council allows the public to address the Planning Committee if at least three people have written to the Council to object to a planning application, and you are one of them. Details of your rights are set out in a leaflet which is available from the Council or on the website.

The Council also allows the public to speak to ask a question at meetings of the Full Council. Details of your rights are also set out in a leaflet which is available from the Council or on the website.

### **How to Contact your Councillors**

Details of your local Councillors are available on the Council website.

To email your Councillor use the following format: [cllr.firstname.surname@runnymede.gov.uk](mailto:cllr.firstname.surname@runnymede.gov.uk)

Dated: January 2010