

THE COUNCIL'S CONSTITUTION

St. Helens Council has agreed a constitution which sets out how the Council operates, how decisions are made and the procedures which are followed to ensure that these are efficient, transparent and accountable to local people. Some of these processes are required by the law, while others are a matter for the Council to choose.

The Constitution is divided into 16 articles which set out the basic rules governing the Council's business and, in general, will not be subject to frequent change. More detailed procedures and codes of practice, which are broadly about how the Articles will be put into effect, are provided in separate rules and protocols at the end of the document.

WHAT'S IN THE CONSTITUTION?

Article 1 of the Constitution commits the Council to exercising all its powers and duties in accordance with the law and this Constitution. Articles 2-16 explain the rights of citizens and how the key parts of the Council operate. These are:

- Members of the Council (Article 2)
- Citizens and the Council (Article 3)
- The Council Meeting (Article 4)
- Chairing the Council (Article 5)
- The Cabinet (Article 6)
- Overview and Scrutiny of Decisions (Article 7)
- Regulatory and Other Committees (Article 8)
- The Standards Committee (Article 9)
- Councillor Improvement Fund (Article 10)
- Joint Arrangements (Article 11)
- Officers (Article 12)
- Decision-Making (Article 13)
- Finance, Contracts and Legal Matters (Article 14)

- Review and Revision of the Constitution (Article 15)
- Suspension, Interpretation and Publication of the Constitution (Article 16)

HOW THE COUNCIL OPERATES

The Council is composed of 48 Councillors with one-third elected three years in four. until May 2021. From 2022, whole Council elections will commence for all Councillors and will take place every 4 years thereafter.

Councillors are democratically accountable to residents of their ward. The overriding duty of Councillors is to the whole community, but they have a special duty to their constituents, including those who did not vote for them.

Councillors have to agree to follow a code of conduct to ensure high standards in the way they undertake their duties. The Standards Committee trains and advises them on the code of conduct.

All Councillors meet together as the Council. Meetings of the Council are normally open to the public. Here Councillors decide the Council's overall policies and set the budget each year. The Council will appoint the Leader and hold the Cabinet to account. There will be an opportunity for members of the public to ask questions at Council Meetings.

HOW DECISIONS ARE MADE

The Cabinet is the part of the Council which is responsible for most day-to-day decisions. The Cabinet is made up of the Leader, who is appointed by the Council, and a Cabinet of up to 9 Councillors whom he/she appoints. When major decisions are to be discussed or made, these are published in the Cabinet's Public Notice of Key Decisions insofar as they can be anticipated. If these major decisions are to be discussed with Council officers at a meeting of the Cabinet, this will generally be

open for the public to attend except where personal or confidential matters are being discussed. The Cabinet has to make decisions which are in line with the Council's overall policies and budget. If it wishes to make a decision which is outside the budget or policy framework, this must be referred to the Council as a whole to decide.

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY

There is an over-arching overview and scrutiny commission and a number of overview and scrutiny committees that support the work of the Cabinet and the Council as a whole. They allow citizens to have a greater say in Council matters by holding inquiries into matters of local concern. These lead to reports and recommendations which advise the Cabinet and the Council as a whole on its policies, budget and service delivery. Overview and scrutiny commissions also monitor the decisions of the Cabinet. They can 'call-in' a decision which has been made by the Cabinet but not yet implemented. This enables them to consider whether the decision is appropriate. They may recommend that the Cabinet reconsider the decision. They may also be consulted by the Cabinet or the Council on forthcoming decisions and the development of policy.

COUNCILLOR IMPROVEMENT FUND

The Council has established a Councillor Improvement Fund which allocates funding to the eighteen wards of the Borough in proportion to the number of residents in each ward. This enables the ward councillors in each ward to put forward environmental schemes for consideration to enhance the ward environment.

THE COUNCIL'S STAFF

The Council has people working for it (called 'officers') to give advice, implement decisions and manage the day-to-day delivery of its services. Some officers have a specific duty to ensure that the Council acts within the law and uses its resources

wisely. A code of practice governs the relationships between officers and members of the Council.

CITIZENS' RIGHTS

Citizens have a number of rights in their dealings with the Council. These are set out in more detail in Article 3. Some of these are legal rights, whilst others depend on the Council's own processes. The local Citizens' Advice Bureau can advise on individuals' legal rights.

Where members of the public use specific Council services, for example as a parent of a school pupil, they have additional rights. These are not covered in this Constitution.

Citizens have the right to:

- vote at local elections if they are registered;
- contact their local Councillor about any matters of concern to them;
- obtain a copy of the Constitution;
- attend meetings of the Council and its Committees except where, for example, personal or confidential matters are being discussed;
- petition to request a referendum on a mayoral form of Cabinet;
- participate in the Council's question time and contribute to investigations by the overview and scrutiny commission;
- find out, from the Cabinet's Public Notice of Key Decisions, what major decisions are to be discussed by the Cabinet or decided by the Cabinet or officers, and when;
- attend meetings of the Cabinet where key decisions are being discussed or decided;
- see reports and background papers, and any record of decisions made by the Council and Cabinet;

- complain to the Council about the standard of service, actions, or lack of action, by the Council or their staff affecting an individual customer or group of customers;
- complain to the Ombudsman if they think the Council has not followed its procedures properly. However, they should only do this after using the Council's own complaints process;
- complain to the Monitoring Officer if they have evidence which they think shows that a Councillor has not followed the Council's Code of Conduct; and
- inspect the Council's accounts and make their views known to the external auditor.

The Council welcomes participation by its citizens in its work.