

How Should Swindon Borough Council be run?



Questionnaire

Swindon Borough Council provides many services, for you and your community, these include housing, education, social services, highway maintenance, accommodation and care for the elderly, libraries, leisure facilities, refuse collection and strategic and local planning. Local Councillors are involved in making policy decisions about these services and they also represent the interests and concerns of the local community.

- How can individuals and communities be given more say in decisions that affect them?
- How can young people be encouraged to participate in their local communities?
- What type of arrangement should Swindon Borough Council adopt to make sure that decisions are made in a way that is clear, open and accountable?

These are just some of the questions that Swindon Borough Council will be posing over the next few months.

The following questionnaire is an opportunity for you to let the Council know what you think about these issues.

New Ways Of Working

Traditionally councils have made decisions by way of the "Committee System". All councillors are involved in making key decisions either in the full Council or, more usually, through a number of committees and sub-committees.

The Government feels decision making needs to be more streamlined with a division between elected members who make and implement key decisions and other councillors who concentrate more on representing the people who elected them and on holding the main decision-makers to account.

The Local Government Act 2000 therefore requires all councils to change the way decisions are made. Instead of committees and sub-committees making decisions, the Act requires the Council to look at new ways of working so that there is a strong leadership and it is easier to identify who is making the decisions that affect you.

There are three options Swindon Council can use, and the new Act requires that we consult with local people on these options to see how they want their Council to be run and the type of decision making arrangements they would like to see.

The three options the Government has identified are set out below.

It is important to note that each of the options will cost about the same to put into practice. Whatever option is chosen for Swindon, all 59 councillors will continue to meet regularly in the full council meeting. They will:-

- set the overall direction of the Council;
- determine the budget and your Council Tax;
- decide the broad policies within which the "executive" must work;
- agree the rules under which the Council operates - the "constitution".

Each of the three options involves the establishing of an "executive" at the head of the Council.

Option A: A Mayor with a Cabinet.

This option would mean you would have the opportunity to directly elect a Mayor. A directly elected Mayor would have considerable political power. The Mayor would be elected in a separate election from other Councillors. The Mayor might then ask a number of elected Councillors to then join in the leadership of the Council in a small group called the Cabinet or "Executive". The Mayor and the Cabinet would then be responsible for the main, day to day decision making.

Option B: A Leader with a Cabinet.

You would elect Councillors to the Council as you do now. They would then choose a Leader and also a Cabinet of a small number of Councillors to help him or her make decisions. The Leader and the Cabinet would provide leadership of the Council and be responsible for the main, day-to-day decision making.

Option C: A Mayor with a Council Manager.

You would have the opportunity to directly elect a Mayor (as in Option A). The Mayor and the elected Councillors would then appoint a Council Manager. The Mayor would provide political leadership and the Council Manager would provide the managerial leadership. Together they would be jointly responsible for the day to day decision making.

More information on how each of these models would work is provided on the four page enclosure with this questionnaire.

In the new Council overview and scrutiny bodies have the job of “counter balancing” the powerful “Executive”. They examine how well the “Executive” and Swindon Council is performing, challenging decisions if they think it is appropriate. They offer advice to both the “Executive” and the full Council on how policies should change and your services be developed and improved. They will be made up of councillors representing the various political parties on the Council, but not members of the “Executive”. The “Executive” must keep them informed of the issues they are discussing and the decisions they have taken. If requested, members of the “Executive” must appear before them to explain their decisions.

Standards Committee

The Local Government Act requires each Council to set up a “Standards Committee”. The role of this Committee is to consider the probity and conduct of Councillors and officers of the Council. It ensures that appropriate Codes of Conduct are in place and are followed. It must be made up of at least two Councillors and at least one independent person.

Planning and Other Committees

Under the Local Government Act this is one area where the existing “Committee” approach will continue. Regulatory matters, such as Planning and Licensing will as now be dealt with by “multi party” Committees and Sub-Committees.

Area Forums

The Act makes it possible for decisions only affecting one part of the Borough to be made by an area committee of the councillors representing that area. As an alternative, the Council, could chose to make these bodies a forum for the public and local councillors to meet and exchange views and help develop meaningful services and policies for the local community.

The Swindon Pilot

Prior to the Local Government Act becoming law Swindon Council decided to introduce from May 2000 on a trial basis, new decision making arrangements based on the “Leader of the Council and Cabinet” model. Under the pilot structure, the full Council (on which all 59 Councillors serve) decides the broad policies within which we deliver your services. It sets the Budget and the Council Tax. It approves all the plans that govern the way the Council operates and serves you. It elects a Leader and a Deputy Leader of the Council and 8 Lead Members to form a Cabinet. Each Lead Member has a portfolio for a group of inter-connected services. One Councillor serves on the Cabinet “without portfolio”. Currently this post is held by the Leader of the second largest political group on the Council. The remaining portfolio holders are drawn from the largest political group on the Council.

The Council has introduced two Scrutiny Commissions and two Policy Commissions. Scrutiny Commissions monitor and assess the performance of both the Cabinet and the Council as a whole. Policy Commissions help the Cabinet and the Council develop policies and improve services. These Commissions are made up of Councillors not serving on the Cabinet and are “multi-Party” reflecting the strength of the various political parties in the Council.

Six area panels have been set up for Northern, North Central, South, South East, East and West Swindon. Panels are made up of the ward councillors for the areas concerned and local people, parish and community councils and others who can help the Council to develop meaningful services for their area and for Swindon, are invited to attend and participate. They have a consultative and advisory role and do not make decisions.

The Council continues to have a “Planning Committee” and has Committees and Sub-Committees for Licensing, Appeals and Officer Appointments. It also has a Standards Committee made up of three Councillors and three independent members of the public to consider issues of probity and establish codes of conduct.

The vast majority of meetings of the Council, including the Cabinet, are open to the public.

WHAT SORT OF COUNCIL WOULD YOU LIKE TO SEE IN SWINDON?

1. Having considered each of the three options, which do you think would be best for Swindon?

(Tick one box)

- Option A: A Mayor with a Cabinet
- Option B: A Leader with a Cabinet
- Option C: A Mayor with a Council Manager

Please use the space below to comment on your preferred option

2. Which of the three leadership options (if any) in your view would make it more likely that Swindon Borough Council could achieve the following aims.

Option A - Mayor & Cabinet
Option B - Leader & Cabinet
Option C - Mayor & Manager
None of these
All of these
I don't know

Take decisions more efficiently and effectively.

Balance power and the risk of abuse of power with effectiveness and efficiency.

Make it clear who makes decisions.

Option A - Mayor & Cabinet
Option B - Leader & Cabinet
Option C - Mayor & Manager
None of these
All of these
I don't know

Produce decisions more in touch with local views.

Involve the public more in decision making.

3. Have you seen any information about the proposed changes to Local Government in the local or national press?

Yes No I don't know

4. If yes, where? **(Tick all that apply)**

- Swindon News/Council Publications
- Local Press
- National press
- I can't remember
- Other (please state)

5. What, if anything do you feel you know about these proposals? **(Tick one box only)**

- A great deal
- A fair amount
- Not very much
- Nothing at all
- I don't know

The New Council "Executive Cabinet"

6. In options A or B each member of the Cabinet could be assigned a specific area or issue to represent and in some circumstances, make individual executive decisions on behalf of the Cabinet, "like a Government Cabinet Minister". Would you like to see this happen?

Yes No I don't know

The Council and Your Area

7. Swindon Borough Council is currently piloting local area panels to give people a greater say in the issues that affect their areas.

Do you think that geographic or area working should be part of any new arrangements for Swindon Borough Council?

Yes No I don't know

8. If the Council sets up a local panel or committee serving your area what would you like to see discussed as a priority?
Use the space below to tell us about the three most important issues which need to be discussed.

1.

2.

3.

9. If these issues are discussed at a local panel in your area who do you think would be the best person to represent your views?

(Please rank the following, 1 = most important & 5 = least important)

I would attend to represent my own views

My councillor

A local person who has been selected

An interested volunteer

A representative from a local group

Other...please state

10. Which of these statements comes closest to your own view about Council meetings in your area?

I am not interested in attending any Council meetings in my local area.

I am not interested in how decisions are made for my local area.

I would like to know what my local area panel is discussing but am happy to let them get on with it.

I would like to have the opportunity to discuss and debate issues when I feel it's important

I would like to represent my local area at a local area panel.

11. How important do you think the following are in representing the interests of your local area.

Very important
Important
Neither important
or unimportant
Unimportant
Very unimportant

My local councillor should chiefly spend time working for me in my local area.

My local councillor should play a crucial part in the decision making process that affects my local area.

People have a right to hear issues debated publicly and to be able to present their views.

The views of people who may be affected should be sought before decisions are made.

My councillor should be given the power to make some local spending decisions.

My councillor should scrutinise decisions that affect my area made by other councillors.

Thank you for taking the time to fill out this questionnaire. If you have any queries or need any help you may ring Sally McGuire on Swindon 463608 or Ian Willcox on Swindon 463601.

IF IT IS NOT POSSIBLE FOR YOU TO LEAVE YOUR COMPLETED QUESTIONNAIRE WITH US TODAY, PLEASE RETURN IT TO;
SALLY MCGUIRE
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