

Getting you thinking

Can do! 2

Steve, Emma and Akari set about finding out how to contact the people at the council who could help. They rang the main council switchboard and asked to talk to someone who could help them. They were put through to the Environment and Amenity Services department and explained their plan.

They were told that it would cost quite a lot, that the council had responsibilities to provide all sorts of other services and that money was short. They were told they should talk to the person who was responsible for community development.

They were also told they should talk to the members of the council's **cabinet** responsible for public toilets and community development. They decided that an email or letter might be the best way to make contact, because being a councillor is a spare-time job and councillors would be at work during the day. With the help of their local councillor, they set up a meeting to explain the plan.



- 1 Who makes decisions about local leisure and recreation issues?
- 2 What differences are there between the councillor and the person who works in the Environment and Amenity Services department?
- 3 Why do you think the council has to make choices between spending money on developing the public toilets and on other services, such as those for the elderly?
- 4 Why do you think the council listens to people who come to them with ideas about developing their community?

How is the council organised?

Every area of the country elects a councillor. When the council first meets after an election, it elects a leader and the members of the cabinet. The leader and cabinet all come from the political party that won the most votes: they have the **majority**.

Each member of the cabinet will have responsibility for one area of the council's work; for example, education, social services, finance, and leisure and recreation.

Apart from electing the cabinet, the council also elects overview and scrutiny committees to make sure the council is run properly.

Being a councillor carries a lot of responsibility, but the role is mainly voluntary. Councillors are paid travel expenses and an attendance fee for meetings, but they don't usually receive a salary.

How does the council do its work?

All the councillors meet to put together the plan for the year. They set the budget for each area of spending. The overview and scrutiny committees then make sure this plan is followed.

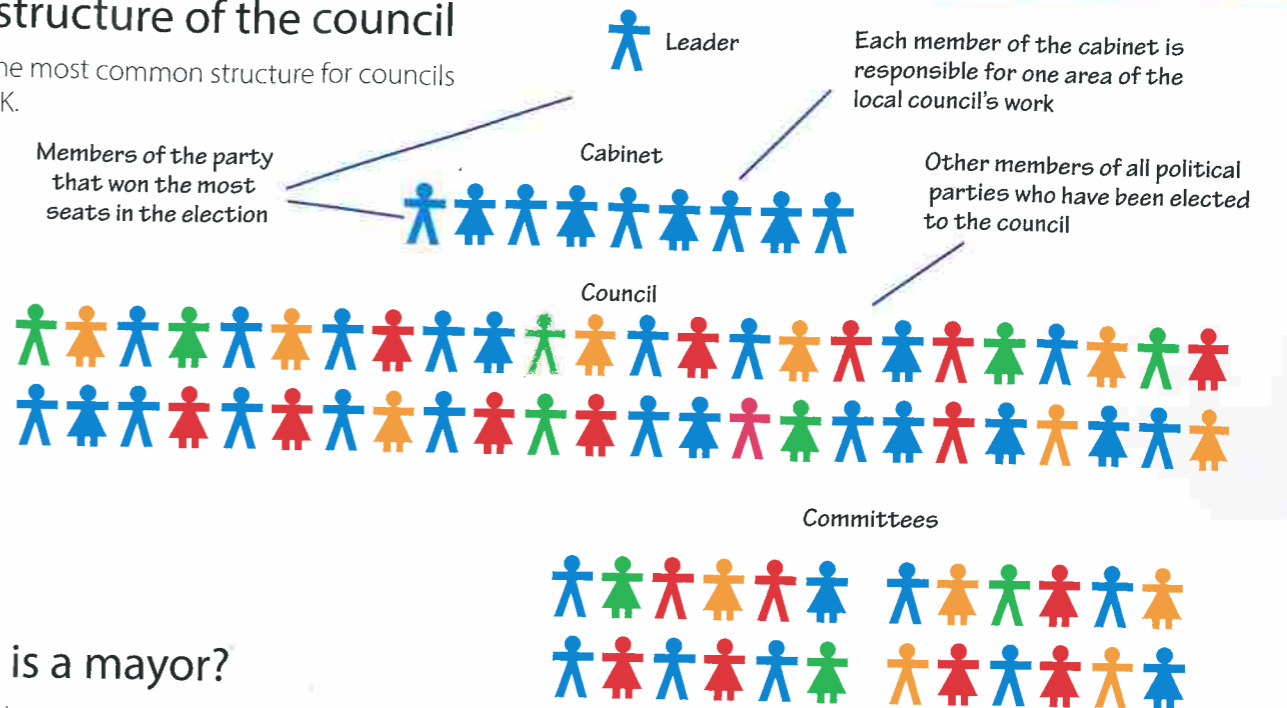
There are some areas, such as planning for things like housing and road building, that the council as a whole controls. Planning decisions are made according to laws laid down by central government, so the council sets up a committee to make sure that the rules are followed.

All councillors, whether they are members of the cabinet or not, must represent their ward in council decisions. They have a vote in council meetings and must use it in a way that serves their ward best.

As most of the officers on the council have full-time jobs, they cannot run the services as well. A **Chief Executive** is appointed to take responsibility for this. In each department, people who are experts in their field are employed to make sure it all runs smoothly.

The structure of the council

This is the most common structure for councils in the UK.



What is a mayor?

In most places, a **mayor** has little power but takes part in local ceremonies. When the Queen or other famous people come to visit, the mayor puts on the chain of office and meets them. In May 2002, elections for directly elected mayors were held in a number of towns for the first time. Elected mayors have a lot more power, as London's mayor has shown.

These people make recommendations to the cabinet about developments they would like to see in the area. The **Scrutiny Committee** checks up on the work of the cabinet.

Action

Have a look at your local council's website. Two example addresses are:
www.suffolkcc.gov.uk www.hullcc.gov.uk.

- 1 How is your council organised? Is there a cabinet and leader?
- 2 Which political party, if any, has control of your local council?
- 3 Find out about the work a councillor from your ward does.
- 4 Who would Steve, Emma and Akari have to talk to if the public loos were in your area?

Check your understanding

- 1 What does the council's cabinet do?
- 2 Who decides how much money to spend on each part of the council's work?
- 3 What do councillors do for their wards?
- 4 What's the difference between a councillor and a Chief Executive?

Another point of view

'The public loos should be converted.'

Key terms

cabinet: the main decision making body of the council

Chief Executive: an employee of the council, responsible for the smooth running of services

majority: the party with a majority has won a bigger proportion of the votes than the others

mayor: a member of the council who is selected to be its representative on ceremonial occasions; in some areas they are also the elected leader