Local politics: information and explanations

Democracy in action at the Fjord
The City Council is the elected political representation for all of Kiel’s residents. It makes all the important decisions for the capital city of the state - and is therefore an important component of a living democracy. In accordance with local government regulations, the City Council has 49 members. However, this number can also increase due to overhang seats and levelling seats, depending on the election result.

The Council Members lay down the objectives and principles for the administration of the city. Municipal kindergartens, retirement homes, construction projects, schools, roads, sports and cultural institutions, environmental protection measures - all these are topics which the City Council publicly debates and ultimately votes on. In addition, the City Council authorises the city administration’s expenditures. The Council is headed by the President of the City Council. The composition of the parliament in the City Hall (Rathaus) is decided by the citizens of Kiel.

After the Second World War, an initial City Council was appointed by the British occupiers in December 1945. In the first free elections legitimised by the German Basic Law, Kiel’s citizens elected their own first representative City Council in October 1946. It was also the German Basic Law which then allowed the local authorities to take responsibility for their own fate: the right to self-government is anchored in Schleswig-Holstein’s local government regulations.

In 1998, the minimum age for voters in local elections was reduced from 18 to 16 years. Since then, even young people can actively participate in the democratic discourse. In addition, the participation of children and young people is explicitly anchored in Section 47 of the local government regulations. EU citizens living in Kiel are also invited to cast their votes in the City Council elections, which are held every five years.
The City Council

In the main entrance, up a flight of stone stairs, through the venerable rotunda of City Hall, along the passage to the left is where you can find the City of Kiel’s Council Chamber (Ratssaal), and thus the place where the political fortunes of the city are decided. The Council Members assemble here once a month. They are all citizens of Kiel, who serve the city in an honorary capacity. They make decisions on many matters which directly affect the daily lives of almost 250,000 residents of Kiel.

Their most important task is approving the city budget. The budget is the financial plan which provides the framework for the city administration to carry out its tasks.

As in all German parliaments, all members of the City Council are not bound by party instructions, and act freely according to their convictions in the interests of the public. Council Members who belong to the same party or electoral group form a parliamentary group or fraction. Only Council Members who are represented with just one seat have no parliamentary fraction status.

All of this is open to the public, as is usual in German democracy. All those who are interested can follow the meetings, for example live in the public gallery of the Council Chamber, or even via the public broadcaster Offener Kanal Kiel.

In addition, the Offener Kanal Kiel broadcasts the meetings live on television and via the internet. The city’s website www.kiel.de also provides recordings of the meetings for subsequent viewing.

In the City Council meeting itself, the motions of the parliamentary groups, Council Members or local advisory councils and other advisory councils are then put to the vote. The Mayor provides information about new developments, and presents significant decisions for voting.

Every time a vote is held in the Council, the following applies: the majority decides. The Council Members usually vote by a show of hands, but a roll-call vote or a secret ballot are also possible upon request.

In addition, each Council Member can address the Mayor directly with any small issues or inquiries they may have regarding classic parliamentary instruments. Longer and more detailed inquiries in that regard are posed by parliamentary groups, or with the support of at least one third of all Council Members.
The President of the City Council is the head of the council, and at the same time is also the city’s highest representative, along with the Mayor. He or she, together with two deputies and the chairpersons of the parliamentary groups, constitute the Council of Elders. The Council of Elders meets in non-public sessions to discuss parliamentary matters. The Mayor is also represented in an advisory capacity.

Kiel is a cosmopolitan and internationally-networked city. The President of the City Council maintains the international relationships with the partner cities of Brest (France), Coventry (UK), Gdynia (Poland), Kaliningrad and Sovetsk (Russian Federation), Tallinn (Estonia), Vaasa (Finland), Stralsund (Germany), Samsun, Hatay (Turkey), Moshi Rural (Tanzania) and, more recently, also with San Francisco (USA).

The City Council elects a Central Committee from among their number, as well as the chairperson of this committee. Although legally this Central Committee is on an equal footing with the other committees, it has a prominent role because it is assigned specific key tasks in the local government regulations.

As such, the Central Committee monitors the work of the other committees and the implementation of the objectives and principles laid down by the City Council.
In order to be able to carry out its manifold tasks, the City Council forms numerous specialist committees, whose members are elected by proportional representation. In addition to the Council Members, other citizens can be elected to the committees by the City Council - for instance, Kiel residents who can offer special expertise. Thus, for example, the youth assistance committee includes experts who belong to prominent youth welfare organisations.

The positions and views expressed in the specialist committees are mostly the result of a long process of opinion formation. The members of the parliamentary groups deliberate in these committees on the pros and cons of a plan or project. Ideas are shared and proposals are made, discussions held, compromises reached - and finally decisions are taken.

Local Advisory Councils - whose members are also elected by the City Council - serve a coordinating role between residents and the city. All citizens can stand for election to these councils. The composition is based on the results of the local elections in the respective city district.

The Local Advisory Councils act as non-partisan bodies in all matters which concern their district, and are informed and consulted by the city administration regarding all important projects. Concerned citizens have the opportunity to express their views, suggestions and criticisms in the Local Advisory Councils, for example in public hearings on development plans. The Local Advisory Councils can table motions that specifically relate to their district to the City Council meeting and to the committees.

In addition, other Advisory Councils can be formed for socially-important groups, to provide expert support for the work of the committees and the City Council - these include the advisory council for senior citizens and the advisory council for people with disabilities. The special representatives for children and young people in Kiel, the Youth Council, is elected every two years in a direct election open to all Kiel residents from 12 to 19 years of age.

The meetings are open to the public.
The Mayor of Kiel has been directly elected by the citizens since 1997. The term of office is six years.

The Mayor is the legal representative of the city to the outside world.

The Mayor of the City of Kiel
- leads and organises the administration
- is the hierarchical supervisor of all employees, including the City Councillors
- executes the laws
- prepares the decisions of the City Council and the committees, carries them out, and reports on the status of implementation
- makes all personnel decisions within the framework of the staffing plan adopted by the City Council
- organises the administration into departments, and assigns them to the City Councillors.

Candidates for the office of the Mayor must be over 27 years of age on election day, and may not be over the age of 60 at the time of their first election. Election proposals can be submitted by any City Council fraction. Candidates can also nominate themselves - provided that their candidacy is supported by at least 290 people who are entitled to vote.

The person elected is appointed as a temporary civil servant. In principle, it is possible for the mayor to be voted out of office by the citizens before their term has expired. The initiation of such proceedings to remove someone from office requires either a decision by at least two-thirds of the Council Members, or an application supported by at least 20 percent of eligible voters.
Men and women have equal rights. The state supports the effective enforcement of this equality, and works - as prescribed in the German Basic Law - towards eliminating existing disadvantages. Each local authority in Schleswig-Holstein with its own administration appoints an Equal Opportunity Commissioner. As does the City of Kiel.

The Equal Opportunity Commissioner is appointed by the City Council, and is subject to the supervision of the Mayor, but is not bound to follow specialist instructions.

All of Kiel’s offices and businesses are required to involve the Equal Opportunity Commissioner in all projects at an early stage. If the Equal Opportunity Commissioner is not involved on time, she can invalidate the relevant decisions. She also has a right to participate in the meetings of the City Council and the committees. She has the right to be heard in all matters related to her defined tasks. Once a year, the Equal Opportunity Commissioner presents an activity report to the City Council.

The City Councillors elected by the City Council are also temporary civil servants. Their term of office is six years. They each lead a department consisting of several authorities, offices or also businesses. The City Councillors also act as deputies and representatives of the Mayor. They are officially designated as local mayors.

The four Kiel City Councillors are responsible for the following tasks:

- Urban development and the environment
- Finance, human resources, culture and order
- Social affairs, housing, health and sports
- Education, youth and the creative city

Local Mayors / City Councillors

Equal Opportunity Commissioner
The citizens of Kiel have numerous opportunities to influence projects in politics and administration. The city involves the residents of Kiel more than ever before in urban planning: many voluntary citizen-participation processes enable the contribution of individual ideas, opinions and proposals. Outside of the elected bodies, all residents of Kiel have opportunities to express their point of view to the city administration. As a matter of principle: every local politician is open to suggestions and criticism.

In many cases, suggestions and impulses also come from citizens’ associations and initiatives. Their commitment is important and indispensable for the city. In recent years, the opportunities for citizens’ participation in communal political decisions have been considerably expanded once again. Residents’ meetings, residents’ question sessions, public petitions and referendums - the people of Kiel have a wide range of possibilities to actively speak out and participate. On 18 January 2018, the City Council unanimously adopted a guideline for citizens’ participation.

The President of the City Council may convene residents’ meetings in districts, in order to inform the local residents and consult with them about important matters. The proposals and suggestions expressed by the citizens in such meetings must be dealt with by the self-government bodies (i.e. the City Council and the committees) within a reasonable period of time. In addition, all residents have the right to address suggestions and complaints to the City Council in writing.

The City Council must give residents the opportunity to pose questions during the public meetings, even regarding points on the agenda. On the other hand, the City Council can also transfer a decision directly to the citizens eligible to vote.

A majority vote in a referendum on important self-government tasks - including, in particular, new tasks for the community, such as establishing, expanding or even scrapping public facilities - has the same effect as a final decision by the City Council.

Through a public petition, citizens can demand a referendum on topics related to self-government tasks, provided that at least four percent of all citizens support the petition in a signature campaign. A petition against decisions of the City Council is also possible.

Further information is available at www.kiel.de/mitwirkung
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Address: Postfach 1152, D-24099 Kiel, Edited by: Press and Public Relations Office, Office of the President of the City Council, E-mail: stefanie.skuppin@kiel.de,
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