



# Report to Overview & Scrutiny Management Committee 28<sup>th</sup> November 2019

---

**Report of:** Head of Policy & Partnerships

---

**Subject:** OSMC Governance Review – Online Call for Evidence

---

**Author of Report:** Emily Standbrook-Shaw  
Policy & Improvement Officer  
[emily.standbrook-shaw@sheffield.gov.uk](mailto:emily.standbrook-shaw@sheffield.gov.uk)

---

## **OSMC Governance Review – Online Call for Evidence**

As part of the OSMC's work on governance, an online Call for Evidence was set up to enable groups and individuals to share their evidence with the Committee.

This report sets how the Call for Evidence worked, and feeds back the key themes, messages and issues that people who responded raised.

The full response to the online Call for Evidence is attached as Appendix 1.

---

## **The Scrutiny Committee is being asked to:**

Consider the information provided through the Call for Evidence, and discuss how the Committee may wish to reflect this information in its work on developing principles that should underpin any future decision making structure in Sheffield.

The Committee may wish to pay particular attention to the areas it has previously identified for consideration including: Speed of decision making; Cross party Member involvement; Delegations; Openness, transparency, clarity and visible accountability; Scrutiny and evaluation of decisions; Forward planning of decisions.

---

**Category of Report:** OPEN

## **Report of the Head of Policy and Partnerships** **OSMC Governance Review – Call for Evidence**

### **1. Introduction**

- 1.1 The Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee is in the process of considering the Council's governance arrangements and developing principles that should underpin any future decision making system.

There are different elements to this work - Select Committee style hearings, where the Committee will take evidence from a range of people including Council Officers on how decision making currently works in Sheffield, experts in governance and groups with an interest in how Sheffield City Council makes decisions; and visits and conversations with Councils that operate different models of decision-making.

To enhance this work and to provide a mechanism for groups and individuals to provide evidence to the Committee, an online Call for Evidence was set up using the Council's Citizenspace system.

The Call for Evidence ran between the 31<sup>st</sup> October and the 17<sup>th</sup> November, and was promoted alongside the Big City Conversation. It was set up to provide a mechanism for people who wanted to provide evidence to the Committee, rather than as a consultation or a representative survey of public opinion. As such, the questions asked are of a qualitative nature rather than designed for quantitative analysis.

The Call for Evidence asked a series of questions of local organisations and individuals:

- a. What does good decision making look like to you?
- b. What is important to you or your organisation about how Sheffield City Council makes decisions?
- c. What do you like about the way Sheffield City Council currently makes decisions?
- d. What don't you like about the way Sheffield City Council currently makes decisions?
- e. What features would you like to see in any new decision making structure in Sheffield?
- f. Is there anything to avoid in any new decision making structure in Sheffield?
- g. Would you like to add any further information regarding Sheffield City Council's decision making processes?

There were a separate set of questions for national organisations with expertise in local governance:

- a. What are the key features of good decision making? What can we learn from best practice?
- b. What are the relative strengths and weaknesses of the Leader and Cabinet model and a Committee System?

- c. Are there any reports or other documents that you think we should particularly consider?

The call for evidence also invited people to get in touch if they wanted to present their evidence to the Committee in person, which some people will be doing at the Committee's meeting on the 28<sup>th</sup> November 2019.

## **2. Response to the Online Call for Evidence**

- 2.1 We received a much higher than anticipated response to the Call for Evidence – 691 responses in total. The vast majority of these were from individuals – 677. This process was set up as a call for *evidence*, however the majority of the responses received from individuals have been in the spirit of a consultation or a survey – so much of the information gathered through this process is a reflection of the opinions of the people who chose to respond. We committed to publishing all of the responses received, and have done this at Appendix 1, however where opinion has been expressed in an inflammatory or offensive way, comments have been redacted. An analysis of the key themes emerging from individuals' responses is detailed in section 3 below to assist the Committee in their consideration of the responses.
- 2.2 Of the responses we received to the online Call for Evidence, 3 completed the section for national organisations with expertise in governance. Closer analysis showed that of these, only one, from the Centre for Welfare Reform, was submitted on behalf of an organisation and so we have categorised the others alongside individuals. The response from the Centre for Welfare Reform is set out in section 4 of the report. Other national organisations with expertise in governance that have provided the Committee with written evidence have chosen not to use the Citizenspace Online Call for Evidence. They have/are attending meetings of Committee to present their evidence, and their written submissions can be found on the Council's website [here](#) (see Item 6).
- 2.3 22 respondents said they were from a local organisation. In 13 of these responses it was clear that the response was on behalf of a named organisation. Where no organisation name was given, or the response did not appear to be on behalf of an organisation, responses have been included as individuals. An analysis of the key themes raised by local organisations is set out in section 5, and their full responses are included in the spreadsheet at Appendix 1.

### **3 Analysis of responses from individuals**

An analysis of the key themes emerging from each question is detailed below to assist the Committee in their consideration of the responses.

#### **3.1 What does good decision making look like to you?**

- 3.1.1 This question received a broad range of responses, across a range of themes. Key areas involved transparency, democratic decision making and accountability; with many of the comments relating to the scrutiny process and ways in which decisions should be able to be challenged or questioned by the public.
- 3.1.2 The themes which came across strongly were the need for decisions to be made after robust consultation, including a strong evidence base, and for decisions to be made by equal representation from all councillors. Many responses indicated that when residents elect a councillor they expect them to be able to make decisions in the interest of their area and not for it to be the decision of only a select number of councillors.
- 3.1.3 Some responses also discussed the importance of timeliness when making decisions; some in terms of making decisions quickly, whereas others said it should take the length of time needed.
- 3.1.4 The need for thorough communication was expressed in many responses and the need for people to understand the system of decision making in place. Some people felt they could not comment on what good decision making would look like as they do not currently understand the process.

#### **3.2 What is important to you or your organisation about the way Sheffield City Council makes decisions?**

- 3.2.1 Many respondents expressed concern about the concentration of decision making power in a small number of elected Councillors, and felt that there should be a meaningful role for all Councillors in the decision making process. Some respondents would like to see a more consensual approach to decision making, and more cross-party working.
- 3.2.2 Respondents also consistently suggested that decision making should be open and transparent; that decision makers should be accountable; and that there should be clarity and communication about what decisions are being made, who is making them, the rationale behind decisions, and mechanisms for holding decision makers to account.
- 3.2.3 Respondents felt that decision making should be informed by thorough and timely public involvement and consultation, listening to a range of voices – especially those affected by a proposal. There were also many comments about the importance of decision making being evidence based, and the benefits of bringing external expertise into decision making.
- 3.2.4 Respondents felt that decision making should be fair, putting the needs of the whole city before party politics or commercial interests, and taking

a long term view. Some respondents felt that the system needs to help build trust between decision makers and the public.

- 3.2.5 Other comments included the need for the decision making system to deliver 'good' decisions; encourage innovation; to deliver good, value for money public services; to be able to respond to climate and environmental issues and tackle inequality.

### **3.3 What do you like about the way in which Sheffield City Council makes decisions at the moment?**

3.3.1 This question was specifically focused on identifying the positives about the current model of decision making in Sheffield but only around one in ten were positive. There was some appreciation for the existing channels for public involvement, including webcasting, public meetings and social media. Some respondents also expressed a liking for the council's principles and ethos, such as a commitment to fairness and consultation, and mitigating the effects of austerity.

3.3.2 However, by far the most common response to this question was a simple "nothing" or "not a lot". Many went on to give reasons for disliking it, though a substantial number indicated that they didn't know enough about how decisions are made at the moment.

3.3.3 Of those who gave reasons for disliking the current model, the themes were reflective of the responses to other questions, with the main objections being that the decision-making process is opaque and that power is undemocratically concentrated into the hands of a few people.

3.3.4 Other points include that, with the webcasting of meetings, it would be beneficial for members of the public to have a way to ask questions and interact remotely. A few respondents mentioned that they were unimpressed with the conduct of councillors at public meetings. One specific idea was that leadership positions should have a fixed term of office.

### **3.4 What don't you like about the way in which Sheffield City Council makes decisions at the moment?**

3.4.1 Key areas cited by respondents involved transparency, equal involvement in decision making of all Councillors, and accountability; with many of the comments relating to party political agendas and not delivering the best outcomes for the city.

3.4.2 In answering this question many responses highlighted expectations for a councillor to be able to represent them in their area and the model of

governance preventing this. Many disliked the concentration of power amongst a select group of members, stating it is a lack of equal representation.

- 3.4.3 Some responses highlighted concerns about consultations not being open enough or promoted in a way to reach the whole community.
- 3.4.4 Some responses also mentioned the importance of considering community opinion when making decisions and how the community assembly model was removed but nothing which has replaced them has been as successful.
- 3.4.5 Many responses mentioned defensive attitudes when having dealings with the Council and the need for a more open attitude to public participation and evidence based decision making. However, officer involvement in decisions was mentioned as an area which should occur less.

### **3.5 What features would you like to see in any new decision making structure in Sheffield?**

- 3.5.1 There is a distinct theme running throughout the responses to this question, with many respondents advocating either the return to, or the implementation of a committee system. It is clear that there is significant concern about the concentration of decision making power in a small number of individuals, and party tribalism, with many respondents echoing the need for all Councillors to have full voting rights.
- 3.5.2 In addition there is a clear desire for greater openness and transparency across the decision making process, with strengthened public involvement and the ability to call upon subject matter experts where appropriate – whether this is from within the public, private or voluntary sector.
- 3.5.3 The appetite for change and to move away from the current strong Leader/Cabinet model is apparent in the majority of responses, with a common call to for Sheffield to “move into the future” and to adopt the Nolan principles / the recommendations set out in the ‘It’s Our City’ campaign.

### **3.6 Is there anything to avoid in any new decision-making structure in Sheffield?**

- 3.6.1 The most common response to this question was that the current model, or a model which concentrates power in the hands of a small number of decision makers or doesn’t allow for all Councillors to be involved in decision making should be avoided in any new structure. Tribal and party politics was seen by many respondents as something to be avoided.

- 3.6.2 Many respondents felt that secrecy should be avoided in any new structure, and stressed the importance of transparency. There was a strong feeling that decision making should be open and accountable, and not take place behind closed doors.
- 3.6.3 The importance of consultation being meaningful, not designed to achieve a specific outcome and listening to a range of views – not just those that shout the loudest - was highlighted by some respondents.
- 3.6.4 Some respondents felt that an overly bureaucratic or complicated system should be avoided, and should facilitate efficient and evidence based decision making, without delegating too many decisions to unelected officers.
- 3.6.5 Of a move to a committee system, respondents suggested mechanisms such as Chairs being selected from all parties, to prevent replicating a system where power is concentrated in a small number of decision makers. It was also suggested that any committee system needs to have a mechanism for urgent decision making.
- 3.6.6 A wide range of other issues were highlighted. Some respondents wanted to see that any new structure has high ethical standards, to avoid cronyism, corruption and bullying; additional costs should be avoided; there should be adequate training and support for Councillors in the new system.

**3.7 Would you like to add any further information regarding Sheffield City Council's decision making processes?**

- 3.7.1 This question attracted a wide range of responses, covering territory such as service delivery, procurement decisions, approaches to engagement, budget cuts and austerity, as well as the immediate issue of governance arrangements and associated issues.
- 3.7.2 There was a strong emphasis on inclusivity and public involvement, with a large number of responses focused on how the Council should listen to residents of the city better and a number focusing on ensuring an equal role for all Councillors in decision making. There was also a focus on openness and transparency, accountability and strong democratic systems, and on the view that there is a need to have decision making arrangements that allow the Council to look forwards and plan for the future.
- 3.7.3 A number of respondents expressed the view that change to decision making processes and structures is essential, with a number suggesting that the Council should work to avoid the need for a referendum. Both

implicitly and explicitly, a large number of respondents touched on issues of trust.

#### **4 Response from national experts with expertise in governance: Centre for Welfare Reform**

The following presents the response submitted by the Centre for Welfare Reform to the Call for Evidence.

##### **4.1 What are the key features of good decision making? What can we learn from best practice?**

“Good decision-making has 3 components:

1. Made at the right level - decisions that are too centralised will be unable to appreciate the value of views, resources and opportunities that can only be seen at the local level. However some decisions can only be made at a higher level.

2. Considered - decisions that are not capable of challenge, debate and discussion will tend to be incompetent and will squeeze out important and creative alternatives. Sometimes ‘executive decisions’ are required to react quickly - but such executive decision-making must be limited.

3. Democratic - everyone (within the scope) of the decision must be able to influence it. Ideally decisions are made by consensus - failing this by majority. However rights also give individuals or others a veto over decisions that may impact them too violently.

Broadly - good governance is about creating a balanced framework which protects human rights, social justice, peace and the natural world. Such a framework is called a constitution - and ideally this will be clear and transparent.”

##### **4.2 What are the relative strengths and weaknesses of operating a Leader and Cabinet model and a committee system?**

“In our view the current leadership system is not fit for Sheffield. A city of half a million brilliant citizens needs to build citizenship capacity and community and to create a world where everyone can thrive. The strong leader fails this test, because it centralises decisions, minimises considered debate and is barely democratic. A committee system is possibly a next step to something better, but really Sheffield is the kind of wonderful place that needs to raise its sites beyond both these options.”

##### **4.3 Are there any reports or other documents that you think we should particularly consider?**

“Heading Upstream describes the work of Barnsley Council to begin a different approach to local democracy and to my knowledge is the best

model to build from. We could go much further than Barnsley, but we should start by collaborating with them and learning from them.”

#### **4.4 Would you like to add any further information regarding Sheffield City Council’s decision making processes?**

“There is nothing to my knowledge which stops the Council from developing a new Constitution for the City. We have much more freedom than we think. Even where there may be certain statutory restrictions we can use existing legislation to design innovative solutions - or we can use civil society structures - which are not bound by the same statutory restrictions. Sheffield - with its strong Labour and Green base - is an ideal place to be a world leader in democratic city governance.”

### **5 Analysis of responses from local organisations**

The below provides an overview of the key themes and issues/challenges identified in the responses received from local organisations. 13 such responses were received, where it was clearly identifiable that the response was on behalf of an organisation as a whole. There are many similarities between the issues raised by local organisations and those raised by individuals.

#### **5.1 What does good decision making look like to you?**

As perhaps to be expected, there are clear and reoccurring themes emerging from across the responses to this question. Many feel that good decision making is grounded in transparency with reasoned input from all stakeholders - whether this is all local councillors, local grass root organisations, local experts etc.

In addition many respondents outlined that good decision making is based on facts, evidence (especially taking into account evidence from those individuals/groups that the decision will impact upon) and ability to evaluate and communicate decisions in a clear, consistent and fair manner.

#### **5.2 What is important to you or your organisation about the way Sheffield City Council makes decisions?**

The response to this question can largely characterised by concerns re the concentration of “power” into the hands off a limited number of people. There is a distinct recurring theme that the most important thing is that decisions should involve as wide a group of elected councillors as possible, but also listening to what citizens want and need – palpable sense that people feel a wide gulf between them and the Cabinet. There is a feeling of their voice and views not counting, and in my view has led to many wards have low voter participation.

Many cite that major decisions taken over recent years have been flawed, with a lack of evidence and clarity as to why the final decision was reached.

The following quote taken from the call for evidence illustrates the themes running throughout the responses to this question - “openness, honesty, transparency, listening, acting for the greater good of the city rather than political ends, be progressive, innovative and imaginative and get away from cosy closed-shop decision making”.

### **5.3 What do you like about the way in which Sheffield City Council makes decisions at the moment?**

The use of technology to open up council meetings e.g. webcasting of overview and scrutiny committees and consultation hosted on the council website , have been cited as an important step in progressing towards further transparency, however the majority of responses to this question are overwhelmingly negative. Many feel that there is a legacy of historic decision making that continues to have an adverse impact on decisions now.

Overall however, many respondents expressed concern that decisions taken were too political and not democratic as too few people involved making decisions, with many feeling that citizens are omitted from the decision making process, resulting in a lack of transparency and accountability.

### **5.4 What don't you like about the way in which Sheffield City Council makes decisions at the moment?**

Many respondents feel that the decision making process within the council is not transparent and that it often feels like there is no underlying strategy behind it. Genuine decision making -power is viewed as being concentrated between a few people, with party politics identified as hindrance to progress in the city.

There is a real sense that decision making in its current form is undemocratic, nor are decisions taken in a fair and open manner and poorly communicated with an overall lack of engagement with local councillors and communities. Scrutiny meetings in particular are identified as being as overly prescriptive and are seen as a means to rubber stamp meetings rather than inviting/listening to challenges and concerns.

### **5.5 What features would you like to see in any new decision making structure in Sheffield?**

As perhaps is to be expected, this question in particular attracted detailed responses and proposals with the focus being largely on a wish to see a greater number of councillors involved in the decision making process, greater consultation with affected parties, citizen engagement and participation – ranging from citizens sitting on scrutiny committees to citizen assemblies to community constitutions and an overall need to rebuild trust between the council and Sheffield’s residents.

There is also a strong desire to see increased cross party decisions and consultation and an end to party politics within the council and an expressed need that committees must consult with community representatives as a matter of course and should establish early on a routine for doing so, which may include co-option.

There is a call for streamlined access to information about meetings - digestible, transparent and accessible to all. Committee decisions must be communicated in a way that is both clear, transparent and useful with clear lines of accountability.

#### **5.6 Is there anything to avoid in any new decision-making structure in Sheffield?**

The responses received to this question largely mirrored the themes identified above. However there is a distinct ‘tension’ between those that express a desire for greater consultation and citizen engagement and those that believe that there is too much public consultation and questions as how representative these actually are of the general public’s views – a call for more effective consultation to inform decision making.

There are numerous concerns expressed regarding the consolidation of power/decision making being limited to a small number of individuals and a call for an end to self/party interest over the needs of the city.

Any potential committee system must not replicate the cabinet system by allowing committee chairs or others to dominate – there is a real need for cross party representation.

What is also obvious from the responses is that respondents are realistic in their outlook and recognise that any potential new model/system of governance will not be perfect immediately and the Council should have patience and keep plugging away at making the changes to a new way of working – whilst keeping everyone informed as to what's happening.

#### **5.7 Would you like to add any further information regarding Sheffield City Council’s decision making processes?**

Again, the responses here largely reiterate those discussed above - changes to the decision making process are very important and must be

supported by the wider community and transparent in order to be sustainable and effective.

Suggestion that it would be of no use attempting to establish any change in governance using traditional ways of working – rather it should be the first thing designed by a new citizens assembly in collaboration with councillors and involving others from other locations e.g. councils, advocacy groups etc.

**6 The Scrutiny Committee is being asked to:**

Consider the information provided through the Call for Evidence, and discuss how the Committee may wish to reflect this information in its work on developing principles that should underpin any future decision making structure in Sheffield.

The Committee may wish to pay particular attention to the areas it has previously identified for consideration including: Speed of decision making; Cross party Member involvement; Delegations; Openness, transparency, clarity and visible accountability; Scrutiny and evaluation of decisions; Forward planning of decisions.