

Response ID ANON-19FT-GMSK-P

Submitted to **Call for Evidence - Governance Review 2019**

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Introduction

1 What is your name?

Name:

Robin Hughes

2 What is your organisation? (If applicable)

Organisation:

Hallamshire Historic Buildings

You or Your Organisation

3 Which of the following applies to you? Please select one statement.

A local organisation

Sheffield City Council - Decision Making

4 What does good decision making look like to you?

Please write comments below:

Good decision making puts the needs and concerns of people first, and seeks their understanding and support. Decisions are made on the basis of facts, and focus on what can and will be done, and why. It does not follow a party political agenda or the whims or prejudices of Councillors or officers.

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

Please write comments below:

As heritage campaigners, it is important to us to know what decisions are being considered that affect heritage before those decisions are made, and when it is still possible to provide input to them. We also want to have a realistic chance of affecting decisions on the historic environment. Regardless of the outcome, we need to know what decision was made, all the reasons for which it was made, and for it to be clear that it was determined by the interests of the people of the city. It is particularly important that decision makers show their awareness of the law and policy on heritage protection and that they consider alternatives, as required by these.

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

Please write comments below:

We are often critical of decisions that affect the historic environment and how these are made. There are few examples of good practice, but one notable exception is the ongoing discussion with heritage organisations about the next phases of Heart of the City II. By providing the opportunity for conversations about the scheme and listening to the outcome of historical research, it has been possible to design a scheme that works with and celebrates heritage, without compromising viability. This is new. Normally the first opportunity to provide input is during the application process, when the Council's approach has already been finalised and consultants have been brought in to ensure it gets through the application process unchanged. The more open and inclusive approach will result in a more successful scheme, compared with the adversarial "take-it-or-leave-it" attitude so often seen in the past, and should be a benchmark for all decisions.

Sheffield City Council - Decision Making continued

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

Please write comments below:

There is far too much politics in decision making. The fate of heritage can depend on the personal prejudice of a single individual. Alternative proposals, whether from campaigners or from other parties, are seen as hostile and result in defensiveness or dismissal. Decisions taken by individuals are frequently made by people who lack the skills and knowledge required, and do not feel under any obligation to consult. Cabinet portfolios are reshuffled often enough to ensure that it is difficult for any individual member to gain the experience required, and sometimes a portfolio may be reassigned between members with diametrically opposed views.

In the last year, heritage - still not formally acknowledged as part of any cabinet or senior officer portfolio - has been particularly badly affected by instability and poor decision-making. A change in cabinet meant that a Councillor keen to pursue the advantage of heritage was replaced by an enthusiast for unfettered development. That individual cancelled the public consultation on the Castlegate Conservation Area at short notice, breaking a repeated Council commitment to create such an area, apparently without consulting cabinet or officers. When this was challenged, a review was announced of all the city's Conservation Areas with the implied intention that some would be cancelled, again apparently without discussion - in fact, the Council leader subsequently denied the existence of such a review. The loss of one particular heritage asset is already likely to result from the first decision, with a significant risk of others to follow. Had the second decision been carried through, the potential for significant damage to the historic environment would have led to widespread public concern and harm to the city's

reputation nationally. Inward investment based on the distinctive character of the city would have been deterred, and the proven economic and well-being benefits of the historic environment would have been lost. A single individual should not be in a position to take such a risk, let alone change the Council's stance on an issue overnight.

Also very troubling are the proposed cuts to the planning department, which could see the loss of many specialists, including conservation officers and the urban design team. The Council is pursuing an agenda of less expertise, less knowledge and less scrutiny, which will lead to even poorer decision making - the exact opposite of what they should be trying to achieve. Heritage has been identified by the It's Our City! campaign as a huge issue for local people in areas across the city. It is certainly an area where local people find decision-making to be lacking.

As individual members outside the cabinet do not participate in many decisions, they do not inform themselves or build relevant skills. Some decisions are taken by committees, for example the Planning committee, but even here decisions are taken without much understanding, based on the officer's recommendation, which will have been presented at length, only a few minutes being allowed for any contrary view. On the rare occasions when the committee disagrees with the recommendation, they often lack the knowledge to understand what options they have to change it. Unfortunately, some controversial decisions divide the committee along party lines, even though decisions are supposed to be strictly non-political.

8 What features would you like to see in any new decision making structure in Sheffield?

Please write comments below:

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. For matters of heritage, which can be relevant to many different portfolios, there are several organisations whose members have not only historical knowledge but understanding of matters such as planning and economics, and these should be made use of. The Council also has a ready source of expertise in the Conservation Advisory Group, a very good example of highly motivated local people, many of them professionals, offering their services at no charge to help the Council to make good decisions.

There should be a Heritage Committee, charged with seeking opportunities for harnessing the economic and social power of the historic environment, and with ensuring that all Council decisions not only make the most of these but are consistent with statutory and policy requirements to preserve or enhance heritage assets.

It is essential that community representatives are able to build relationships with committees. This means that changes to committee membership should be kept to a minimum. Some change is needed to bring in new thinking, but members will need time to build familiarity and long service will help continuity.

As many Councillors as possible should be members of at least one committee, and should be expected to acquire and maintain relevant knowledge. The Council must ensure that they provide training to members to make this possible.

Inter-committee communication is absolutely vital, to ensure that decisions are not made in silos. Agenda must be visible to all committees, and awareness maintained of where business may be relevant to more than one committee. Joint sub-committees or inviting representatives from other committees to attend can help with this.

Committee decisions must be communicated in a way that is both clear and useful. Ordinary members of the public do not have the time required to examine multiple minutes, so should have access to a short statement covering all decisions. The input and influence of the community should be explicitly acknowledged and welcomed, to build confidence and trust that the wishes of the community are being respected.

9 Is there anything to avoid in any new decision-making structure in Sheffield?

Please write comments below:

The committee system must not replicate the cabinet system by allowing committee chairs or others to dominate. Committees need to appoint multiple chairs, from all parties. This also applies across committees: the same people should not turn up on multiple committees or be able to spread their influence too widely. Committee size needs to be limited to ensure that members are there because of their interest and motivation. This will improve efficiency.

The appointment process needs to avoid selecting members on the basis of their political allegiance.

Additional Information

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

Please write comments below: