

Governance Committee

Meeting held 14 December 2023

**PRESENT:** Councillors Sue Alston (Deputy Chair), Mike Chaplin (Substitute Member), Simon Clement-Jones, Mike Levery, Laura Moynahan, Paul Turpin and Dianne Hurst (Substitute Member)

**1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

1.1 Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Fran Belbin, Sioned-Mair Richards, Alison Norris and Garry Weatherall. Councillors Mike Chaplin and Dianne Hurst attended as substitutes.

**2. EXCLUSION OF PUBLIC AND PRESS**

2.1 No items were identified where resolutions may be moved to exclude the press and public.

**3. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

3.1 There were no declarations of interest made at the meeting.

**4. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING**

4.1 The minutes of the previous meeting held on 22 November 2023, were agreed as an accurate record.

**5. PUBLIC QUESTIONS AND PETITIONS**

5.1 The Committee received 4 questions from a member of the public, prior to the meeting

**5.2 Ruth Hubbard**

1. Is the committee able to articulate clearly and succinctly the overall purpose of the review (that is what you are trying to achieve and why), and its key aims (that is, its main or priority goals or targets)? I've asked these kinds of questions before and expressed concern about the lack of clarity of purpose and aims (even if these need to be refined a bit in situ), that helps to focus activity and evidence, and against which you can measure progress and evaluate the work. At the moment it's described as an "holistic" review. And then in describing the scope there's this very wide ranging list of lines of enquiry. Is this what the committee intends? (And

why?) is it practical and realistic to do all this well, and within the resource and capacity available? Are there specific priorities that it might be useful to articulate e.g. to rationalise councillor and officer workloads where possible (and examine the potential for cost-savings)? Or to identify improvements to the quality of policy and decision-making? Or to identify gaps and overlaps and propose specific improvements/rationalisations? Or to examine the role of the finance committee? Or to improve alignments to strategic contexts? Or to assess approaches to cross-cutting issues? Or to improve LAC-policy committee links and revisit decision-making roles and remits of each? At the moment the report gives the impression the committee is intending to do all this and more. Or is the report more of an initial exploratory document laying out all the possibilities rather than the “proposed approach” (as stated) and from which a concise scoping document and workplan will clarify the review goals, requirements and activities? If it’s intended to be rather scattergun at this stage then there are at least potentially four things missing. Firstly, alignment with design principles. This is what full council charged the committee with doing for the six-month Governance Review, but this was not done at all. The report does mention the design principles later in the document but only as a point of reflection rather than action or constitutional tweaks to tackle the great gaps between principles and practice, rhetoric and realities. I also suggest for this that it’s worth looking back and relooking at stakeholder input and intentions on these because much of this was decimated by the Governance Committee in the name of brevity but threw away the baby with the bath water in the process. As they are now, Design principles 1, 11 and 16 may be particularly relevant anyway. Secondly considering best or innovative approaches, solutions or practices elsewhere is absent (including relevant statutory interventions) which gives the report an insular or parochial feel. Looking up and out a bit certainly might be important if there’s any desire to be at the forefront of thinking and practice for policy committees in a committee system. Thirdly, the lack of attention to identifying and embedding clear scrutiny functions and processes in transition to the committee system represents, at least to me, a current and considerable risk. Though the word scrutiny is mentioned it should arguably have greater prominence in a review of policy committee remits. Fourthly mechanisms for the integration or embedding of stakeholder voice or influence is absent (as is consideration of public information and communications about policy committees and their work). I note the GC has consistently rejected this and, as a result, stakeholder involvement in formal committee bodies has actually decreased in the new system - very occasionally, at least, the old scrutiny committees did bring in the odd relevant stakeholder, though this didn’t necessarily always appear particularly functional or best-used. A related consideration here might also be the very variable amount of public questions across different committees. So, if the review is to be “holistic” as stated - the equivalent of a 360 degree appraisal - then can I please request these omissions be included? (Alternatively, even if the review remains described as “holistic” I suggest much clearer aims still need to be identified to focus work etc - and there will always be limitations on what can be done (as well as ensuring alignment with resource to see it through).

2. I must mention another longstanding but unaddressed or rejected concern that I've raised several times before. Sheffield has created the most bloated committee system anywhere, currently standing at 9 policy committees. I remind the committee of statutory interventions at Wirral council at the end of 2021 requiring a reduction from 7 committees, backed up by a subsequent LGA review in 2022 - because of challenges of coordination, risks of fragmentation, and Officer workloads. I also consider the Governance Committee to have misrepresented and/or clearly cherry-picked (for whatever reason) from the evidence they collated, and in stating they believed committee sizes of 8-10 were best. Brighton, for example, has 10-14 on its committees and Cheshire East 13, and both function perfectly well. (And personally, our committees regularly simply feel too small to me.). Whilst I can actually see certain advantages for citizen scrutineers in the current bloated system, if there is any suggestion to rationalise workloads for councillors and officers, achieve efficiencies or potential savings, or reduce overlaps/better coordinate, then fewer and slightly bigger committees will also, at least, make us not the extreme outlier we currently are. I can only think that political party (and the holding of roles) considerations have steered towards the relative monster of a system we currently have, and I probably think revisiting this should be an important consideration for the review.

3. It looks like Bristol, however, are about to make the same mistake in creating a bit of a monster. Bristol council papers report that Sheffield has provided advice and support on their transition to a committee system. Can I please ask if this is council officer advice and support, or political advice and support (and/or through core cities)?

4. *In respect to item 8 (Citizen Participation and Community Involvement)*

I note the report is suggesting a rather rigid or fixed, fairly resource-heavy, potentially unwieldy, and unimaginative model for citizen and VCFSE involvement in its proposed working group to "lead the transformation of citizen participation and community involvement". Can I please ask why this model was considered appropriate and what other models were considered?

5.3 The Chair of the meeting (Councillor Sue Alston) confirmed that questions 1, 2 and 4 would be picked up as part of items 7 and 8 on the agenda. She explained that the Chair of the Governance Committee (Councillor Fran Belbin) would be responding to Ms Hubbard regarding question 3.

## **6. REVIEW OF POLICY COMMITTEE REMITS**

6.1 The Committee received a report from the Director of Policy and Democratic Engagement.

6.2 The Head of Policy and Partnerships (Laurie Brennan) introduced the report.

He explained that in line with the recommendations of the Six-Month Review of New Governance Arrangements, it was proposed that the Governance Committee established a new task and finish group which will start meeting in 2024 to lead the review of policy committee remits.

6.3 The Head of Policy and Partnerships confirmed that the report set out some suggested initial lines of enquiry, these could be found on page 4 of the report (page 22 of the agenda).

6.4 The Head of Policy and Partnerships explained that the approach to undertaking the review was for the Members of the task and finish group to discuss and agree, but it was recommended that the following should be considered:

- Analysis of existing evidence (e.g. from the Six-Month Review)
- Reflection on the original design principles for the Committee System and the Constitutional responsibilities of Policy Committee
- Involvement and engagement of citizens, Members and officers in the review, both in assessing the existing and in developing recommendations
- Views of strategic partners and external organisations – including business and city anchor institutions (e.g. NHS) and delivery partners.

6.5 Following the introduction to the report, Members of the Committee asked questions and made comments, and the key points to note were: -

6.6 The Chair of the meeting (Councillor Sue Alston) referred to questions 1 and 2 submitted by Ruth Hubbard, stating that these issues had been addressed as part of this report.

6.7 A Member of the Committee raised the importance of keeping in mind the lessons learnt throughout the transition period to a committee system. They added that it would be good for all Members to be involved in the task and finish group as there was a wide range of expertise within the Governance Committee.

6.8 A Member of the Committee did not believe the culture of Committees and how they engaged with the public appeared as part of the report.

The Head of Policy and Partnerships explained that this was the intention. He mentioned that he did not want to specify a scope at this time as he believed this was for Members to look at as part of the task and finish group work.

6.9 A Member of the Committee asked who could hold Members to account, if the committee system was not being adhered to as it was intended.

The General Counsel (David Hollis) stated that he was responsible for ensuring

the constitution was adhered to.

6.10 RESOLVED: That Governance Committee:

- (1) discussed and agreed the initial scope for the review of Policy Committee remits in line with the recommendations of the Six-Month Review of Governance Arrangements;
- (2) agreed to establish a dedicated Task and Finish Group to lead the review of Policy Committee remits from January 2024; and
- (3) agreed the composition of the proposed Task and Finish Group be the same composition of the Governance Committee.

## **7. CITIZEN PARTICIPATION AND COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT - IDENTIFYING MEMBER LEADS**

- 7.1 The Committee received a report from the Director of Policy and Democratic Engagement aiming to identify cross-party Members representation for a Working Group to lead the transformation of citizen participation and community involvement at Sheffield City Council.
- 7.2 The Head of Policy and Partnerships referred to a recommendation agreed at the previous meeting *'That the Governance Committee sends the Involve report to the citizens involved in the workshops and to thank them for their contributions and to encourage them to feed their views back on the report so that it can be fed into this work as it goes forward and with the aim to continuously involve them from this point on'*. He confirmed that this action had been carried out.
- 7.3 The Head of Policy and Partnerships explained that the report set out that this piece of work would not just be led by Members, as this was a real opportunity to involve citizens, stakeholders and VCFSE partners from Sheffield.
- 7.4 The Head of Policy and Partnerships asked that the Committee provided him with names of Members to lead on this piece of work. It was suggested that this should include up to five Members from the Governance Committee, with up to three from Labour and Liberal Democrats and two from the Green Party and Sheffield Community Councillors and a Maximum of two Members from each of the main political Groups, ideally including at least one Member that sits on a Policy Committee. He asked that names be provided to him by the end of the following week (22 December 2023).
- 7.5 Following the introduction to the report, Members of the Committee asked questions and made comments, and the key points to note were: -
- 7.6 A Member of the Committee mentioned there were Members representing 4 different political parties on Governance Committee and that the recommendation was to nominate a maximum of 5 Members. Therefore, asked

if the recommendation was too refined and could cause a hindrance in creating a Working Group to lead on this piece of work. The Chair of the meeting (Councillor Sue Alston) mentioned how it was important to be flexible, she suggested that the recommendation not be changed but the Committee could look at the recommendation again if an issue arose. The Head of Policy and Partnerships stated that if the number of Members leading on this needed to exceed 5 then that would be fine.

- 7.7 A Member of the Committee asked what role and capacity a Member of the Working Group would be expected to provide.

The Head of Policy and Partnerships mentioned that this was still yet to be defined. He stated that the purpose of the report was to establish a Working Group so that this piece of work could begin early next year.

- 7.8 A Member of the Committee asked if there were any clear gaps in regard to who the Working Group should be engaging with on this piece of work.

The Head of Policy and Partnerships confirmed there was a wide range of community networks in Sheffield that can be approached. He mentioned that following a recent piece of work on the City Goals, the Council were involved in a lot of collaborate conversations with community networks which can also be targeted. He added how the Local Area Committees could play a role in engaging with different people. He raised the importance that people with different characteristics from across the city be involved in this piece of work.

- 7.9 RESOLVED: That Governance Committee:

- (1) nominate and agree a maximum of five Governance Committee representatives for the community involvement Working Group;
- (2) agree for Governance Committee leads to discuss with respective Groups and identity a maximum of two Member representatives per Group (including at least one that sits on a Policy Committee) by Friday 22nd December; and
- (3) agree to receive a further paper in early 2024 setting out proposed next steps for the community involvement project.

## **8. UPDATE ON REVIEW OF COUNCIL'S APPROACH TO PUBLIC QUESTIONS**

- 8.1 The Committee received a report from the Director of Policy and Democratic Engagement.

- 8.2 The Policy and Improvement Officer (Alice Nicholson) explained that the report was to provide an update on the Committees existing task and finish group who were tasked with reviewing the Council's approach to public questions. The report recommended that the Committee noted the work carried out by the task

and finish group so far, and that they agreed that the task and finish group continued to work on this and bring back recommendation to this Committee early next year.

8.3 Following the introduction to the report, Members of the Committee asked questions and made comments, and the key points to note were: -

8.4 The Chair of the meeting (Councillor Sue Alston) mentioned that 2.1.3 of the report should include Councillor Paul Turpin's name as he was a part of this task and finish group.

8.5 A Member of the Committee stated that the citizens who were currently engaging in this piece of work seemed to be the same demographic. Therefore, a wider demographic needed to be targeted.

The Policy and Improvement Officer mentioned how the task and finish group was looking at the process around asking public questions although raised how it would be important to look at how the Council engaged with a wider range of citizens and heard from those who do not usually ask public questions.

8.6 A Member of the Committee believed there was a lot of digital exclusion within the city. Therefore, the use of technology around public questions needed to be considered.

8.7 **RESOLVED:** That the Committee:

(1) note the update on the progress of the Review of our Approach to Public Questions at Council Meetings; and

(2) agree to the task and finish group continuing with their work on this review, to bring recommendations to the Committee early 2024.

## **9. WORK PROGRAMME**

9.1 The Committee considered a report of the Head of Policy and Partnerships concerning its work programme.

9.2 The Policy and Improvement Officer (Alice Nicholson) gave an update on the programme and highlighted the key areas for Members attention. She referred to upcoming items on the programme and explained when these would likely be presented at Committee.

9.3 Members of the Committee made comments and suggestions relating to the work programme, as follows:

9.4 The Chair of the meeting (Councillor Sue Alston) was mindful that the Committee had just agreed to set up another Working Group and therefore how some Members of the Governance Committee were now involved in many Working Groups.

- 9.5 A Member of the Committee mentioned that it would be useful to compare the number of urgent decisions taken with previous years, when looking at the use of urgent decisions item scheduled for this meeting at its February 2024 Committee meeting.

The Head of Policy and Partnerships explained that this could be picked up and reported back when the item was scheduled to be presented to the Committee.

- 9.6 RESOLVED: That:

- (1) the Committee's work programme, as set out in Appendix 1 be agreed, including any additions and amendments identified in Part 1;
- (2) the Committee notes the indications of items which are likely to need more intensive work (e.g. citizen involvement, task and finish groups, policy review and development work) and consider implications for prioritisation of Governance Committee's forward workplan; and
- (3) the Committee considers any further issues to be explored by officers for inclusion on the future iteration of the work programme.

## **10. DATE OF NEXT MEETING**

- 10.1 It was noted that the next meeting of the Committee was scheduled to take place on 17 January 2024.