



Report to Policy Committee

Author/Lead Officer of Report:
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Report of: Director of Policy and Democratic Engagement
Report to: Governance Committee
Date of Decision: 28th February 2024
Subject: **Public Questions and Petitions Review: latest draft proposals and next steps**

Type of Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) undertaken	Initial <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Full <input type="checkbox"/>
Insert EIA reference number and attach EIA: 2608		
Has appropriate consultation/engagement taken place?	Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>
Has a Climate Impact Assessment (CIA) been undertaken?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Does the report contain confidential or exempt information?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
If YES, give details as to whether the exemption applies to the full report / part of the report and/or appendices and complete below:-		
<p><i>“The (report/appendix) is not for publication because it contains exempt information under Paragraph (insert relevant paragraph number) of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972 (as amended).”</i></p>		

Purpose of Report:
This report provides the Governance Committee with the developing draft proposals and recommendations from the review of public questions and petitions.

The paper in Appendix 1 provides a working draft of the report from the review along with the draft recommendations which have been developed with citizens and Members.

The report proposes that citizens are invited to provide final comments on the proposals by 6th March by both at the Governance Committee meeting on 28th February and via the Have Your Say Sheffield online engagement portal.

The finalised detailed proposals will be presented to Governance Committee for consideration on 27th March 2024.

Recommendations

That Governance Committee:

1. Thank citizens and stakeholders for their contributions to the review of public questions and petitions
2. Consider and comment on the draft proposals to reform public questions and invite contributions from citizens who wish to participate in the discussion at the committee
3. Invite citizens and stakeholders to provide feedback on the current draft proposals by 6th March 2024
4. Agree to receive a final draft set of proposals at the next meeting of the Governance Committee on 27th March 2024.

Background Papers:

Six Month Review of New Governance Arrangements,
<https://democracy.sheffield.gov.uk/documents/b27181/Item%20%20-%20Six%20Month%20Review%20of%20Governance%20Arrangements%20-%20report%20Wednesday%2017-May-2023%2011.30%20Council.pdf?T=9>

Lead Officer to complete:-		
1	I have consulted the relevant departments in respect of any relevant implications indicated on the Statutory and Council Policy Checklist, and comments have been incorporated / additional forms completed / EIA completed.	Finance: N/A
		Legal: David Hollis, General Counsel
		Equalities & Consultation: Ed Sexton, Senior Equalities and Engagement Officer
		Climate: N/A
	<i>Legal, financial/commercial and equalities implications must be included within the report and the name of the officer consulted must be included above.</i>	
2	SLB member who approved submission:	James Henderson, Director of Policy and Democratic Engagement
3	Committee Chair consulted:	Cllr. Fran Belbin, Chair of Governance Committee
4	I confirm that all necessary approval has been obtained in respect of the implications indicated on the Statutory and Council Policy Checklist and that the report has been approved for submission to the Committee by the SLB member indicated at 2. In addition, any additional forms have been completed and signed off as required at 1.	
	Lead Officer Name: Laurie Brennan	Job Title: Head of Policy and Partnerships
	Date: 20 th February 2024	

Public Questions and Petitions Review

Latest draft proposals and next steps

1. Proposal

- 1.1 Working with citizens and stakeholders, Governance Committee have been developing proposals to renew Sheffield City Council's approach to Public Questions and Petitions to make participating in our democratic meetings accessible to all and to ensure that citizens receive timely and accurate responses to the questions raised.
- 1.2 This paper sets out an initial draft of the proposed recommendations of the review for Governance Committee and citizens to discuss and provide feedback and comments.
- 1.3 The final draft set of recommendations will be presented to Governance Committee at its meeting on the 27th March 2024 at which point, Governance Committee will be asked to propose the changes to Full Council as part of its Annual General Meeting (AGM) in May 2024.

2. Developing the final proposals to reform our approach to public questions and petitions

- 2.1 The paper attached sets out an initial package of proposals with high level recommendations to improve the approach to public questions and petitions at SCC. These are the product of insight from citizens, Members and officers about their experiences of the existing public questions model and also their ideas for how we could improve the model to make it more accessible to more citizens.
- 2.2 The perspectives of citizens involved in the review identified challenges which impacted on the effectiveness of the current system, including a lack of awareness of the ability to ask public questions; the complexity of the process; and the physical and equality and diversity barriers which prevent or deter people from asking questions. Most fundamentally, many people who have asked questions said that they didn't feel listened to and that the response they received did not meet their expectations.
- 2.3 In response, Governance Committee have worked with citizens and stakeholders on proposals to create a more coherent package of ways in which citizens can engage in Sheffield's democratic meetings – be that through written questions and responses, verbal supplementary questions, or statements. The proposals also seek to establish better supportive infrastructure with a simpler way to submit questions; a tracker so that the progress and answer to a question can be easily found online; and using hybrid

options to reduce the physical barriers to participating in our public meetings.

- 2.4 The proposals are currently in a draft form, converting the ideas from citizens, Members and officers into more formalised recommendations which can be presented to Full Council in May as part of the AGM.

3. Seeking further views – developing the final proposals for Full Council

- 3.1 Ahead of the AGM in May, we have an opportunity to refine the proposals, seeking further perspectives from citizens and Members about whether they feel the draft proposals address the issues raised in the review.
- 3.2 We also need to develop the technical and, in some cases, constitutional specifics for how the proposals will work in practice. At present, the recommendations are in draft and reflect the ideas that have been developed in response to the issues raised through the engagement activity. For example, we need to consider the interplay between the proposed approaches to written questions and responses, verbal supplementary questions, and statements, particularly in how this would operate within a meeting setting. To be effective any system needs to have the appropriate resource to respond to it. There are implications for officers in terms of the time to manage any revised system and to ensure that responses are tracked and answered in a timely fashion.
- 3.3 For citizens and stakeholders, we are proposing a number of approaches:
- The Chair of Governance Committee has written to all citizens who have contributed to the Review to date, inviting them to attend the Governance Committee on 28th February to contribute to the discussion on the public questions item.
 - For anyone who can't or doesn't want to participate in the Committee on the 28th February or anyone else that wishes to contribute, a short survey has been made available on Have Your Say Sheffield to enable people to offer comments on each set of recommendations. The survey will be available until the Wednesday 6th March.
- 3.4 A finalised version will then be presented to Governance Committee for consideration and for Members to recommend to Full Council for the AGM in May 2024.
- 3.5 Timetable for the next steps

20 th Feb 2024	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Papers published for Feb Governance Committee • Invite sent from Governance Committee Chair inviting participants to attend Feb Committee and/or respond to the Have Your Say Sheffield survey • Have Your Say Sheffield feedback form published
28 th February	Governance Committee discussion
6 th March	Deadline for comments on the proposals
7 th – 15 th March	Analysis and development of final proposals
19 th March	Publication of Governance Committee papers for 27 th March
27 th March	Governance Committee discuss final proposals
April	Write-up of papers for Full Council
7 th May	Publication of papers for AGM
15 th May	AGM

3.6 It is proposed that the new proposals will be implemented for 12 months and we will keep the new system under review to continuously improve the system and address any unforeseen issues that may result from the implementation of the new system.

4. Risk analysis and implications of the decision

4.1 Equality Implications

4.1.1 Our legal duties under the Equality Act 2010 include having due regard to the need to:

- eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and other conduct,
- advance equality of opportunity, and
- foster good relations

4.1.2 The developing proposals to reform public questions and petitions are intended to improve inclusivity and accessibility to participating in our democratic meetings. This includes enabling citizens to ask questions via hybrid links, enabling questions to be read out on behalf of citizens, and enabling people to remain anonymous on the public record (while contact details must be supplied upon submission).

4.1.3 An initial Equality Impact Assessment has been started and will be updated and published with the final proposals in March.

4.2 Financial and Commercial Implications

4.2.1 Not applicable at this stage as expected that the changes will be delivered within current resources.

4.2.2 As with the overall impact of the proposals, the resource and capacity implications of the proposed changes to the public questions model will be kept under review.

4.3 Legal Implications

4.3.1 There is no legal requirement to have public questions in any form at the public meetings of the Council. Currently the ability to ask questions is included in the Council's constitution that is maintained under s9P of the Local Government Act 2000.

4.3.2 It is proposed that in future the ability for public questions is retained in the constitution, but that the detail of how questions should be asked are contained in a scheme published on the Council's website. Such scheme should be published by the Monitoring Officer and overseen by the Governance Committee.

4.3.3 The Council publishes both the questions and answers as part of its minutes and is there potentially liable for matters contained in that publication. The scheme should contain provisions as to the scope of public questions permissible and when and how any questions might not be permitted.

4.4 Climate Implications

4.4.1 N/A

5 Reasons for recommendations

5.1 The paper provides an initial draft of the proposals to reform public questions and petitions. The recommendations set out an opportunity for Members and citizens to provide final views and comments before the proposals are developed in more detail and presented to Governance Committee for consideration in March 2024.