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1. Introduction

1.1   Sheffield has a wide and diverse heritage. Joined Up Heritage Sheffield seeks to bring together organisations and individuals interested in heritage, in all its variety, to promote better understanding, a strategic approach and a better-resourced and better-connected presentation of heritage. JUHS has published a Heritage Strategy (see https://www.joinedupheritagesheffield.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Heritage-Strategy-2021-31.pdf) that establishes a vision for Sheffield's heritage. This has the support of Sheffield City Council.

1.2   JUHS seeks to ensure that Council governance enables heritage to make the fullest possible economic, social and environmental contributions that the city urgently needs, especially as it recovers from the shock of the COVID pandemic and tackles the climate emergency.

1.3   JUHS very much appreciates both the willingness of the Council to engage with us regarding the role of heritage in the city, and this opportunity to provide evidence to the Committee System Inquiry.

2. Requirements of a governance system

2.1   In the opinion of JUHS, the following principles are vital to a committee system that puts the needs and concerns of people first, and seeks their understanding and support. Some are specific to heritage, but all could be applied to any matter.

2.2   Heritage should be seen as having broad relevance. Its value and vulnerability should inform the agenda of all committees, and should be laid out in an overarching strategy. By avoiding any risk of a silo approach, more opportunities open up.

2.3   Lines of responsibility for heritage, and the strategic role that it serves, must be clearly articulated. Structures to achieve this are suggested below.

2.4   Stakeholders need to know in advance of decisions which affect heritage or to which heritage makes (or could make) a contribution, when it is still possible to provide input. They should then have a realistic chance of affecting such decisions.

2.5   Members and their supporting officers need to be open to the great range of knowledge and skills of local people outside the Council, including campaigners, who generally ensure that they are very well-informed. There needs to be an expectation or even obligation that committees will seek out advice from this source. The dangers of an out-of-date attitude of defensiveness can thereby be avoided.

2.6   In particular, committees should take advantage of the ability to co-opt members from outside the Council, either as non-voting advisors or as full voting members where appropriate.

2.7   A different skill-set is required of committee chairs compared with cabinet members. Consensus building and collaboration will be prized. Committee chairs have a leadership role, but they are not sole actors, and remain first among equals.

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2.8   It is also important that members remain keenly aware that party politics is always subsidiary to the needs and concerns of the people of Sheffield. Their default approach must be collaboration at all times. Anything less will unavoidably reduce public trust and confidence.

2.9   A committee system requires all members to have skills and understanding relevant to their responsibilities. Members are often well-informed and highly-motivated, especially on particular topics of concern, but in the future all members will need a high level of understanding across a wide range of topics. This will need to be fostered and developed quickly.

2.10   Stable membership of committees and consistency in committee chairs will be crucial to establishing and maintaining community relationships based on trust and understanding. Clear expectations should be set for an appropriate duration of tenure, with a defined process for handover when changes do take place.

2.11   As many Councillors as possible should be members of at least one committee, and should be expected to acquire and maintain relevant knowledge. This will help to build public trust in the effectiveness of members, create a more even division of labour, limit the influence of individuals, and contribute to members' personal growth. The Council must ensure that training is provided to members to make this possible.

2.12   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.

2.13   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.

2.14   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. This could also provide a model for other areas, as a means of supplementing scarce Council resource.

3. Structures for a strategic approach to heritage

3.1   Heritage has often been misunderstood as having a limited role confined to the visitor economy, or providing ornament or interest that is worth preserving for its own sake where other priorities allow.

3.2   In fact, heritage is at the very heart of identity and community, provides the distinctiveness that is indispensable for economic success, has proven benefits to health and well-being, is a vital expression of our diversity, is a valuable educational resource, and underpins the city's pride and self-worth. It must have a central role in policy and decision making, reflected by clearly-defined responsibilities in governance.

3.3   Unfortunately, there has been no clear responsibility for heritage. Publicly-available descriptions of cabinet and senior officer portfolios have not referred to it directly, nor does the important role of Heritage Champion appear on the Council's website. This must change under the new governance arrangements.

3.4   Possible approaches to governance include:

   3.4.1   <u>Heritage Committee</u>: charged with seeking opportunities for harnessing the economic, social and environmental power of the historic environment, liaising with other committees, and ensuring that all Council decisions make the most of these and are consistent with statutory and policy requirements to preserve or enhance heritage assets.

3.4.2 <u>Heritage Advocates</u>: each committee to have one member who is responsible for ensuring proper representation and consideration of the benefits of heritage to the business of the committee and the potential impact of its decisions.

3.4.3 <u>Heritage Tribunes</u>: one or more elected members entitled to attend any committee, and pro-actively invited to advise on or advocate the role of or impact to heritage.

3.4.4 <u>Heritage Portfolio</u>: one major committee explicitly includes heritage in its portfolio, with responsibilities as proposed above for a Heritage Committee. Provision must be made for close co-operation with other committees, to avoid the potential for siloing.

3.5 The role of Heritage Champion has proved its worth. It should continue, and its existence be given greater recognition and prominence. The Heritage Champion might be part of any of the structures above, by chairing a Heritage Committee, being the Advocate on some committees, acting as one of the Tribunes, or sitting on the committee with heritage in its portfolio.

3.6 Research is needed to discover whether lessons can be learned from how other local authorities reflect heritage in their governance. However, an assessment of the 8 core cities is so far unpromising.

4. Case Studies

4.1 Case Study 1: <u>Heart of the City II</u>

4.1.1 For the committee system to be successful, it must harness the power of citizen engagement and community expertise. This project has provided a rare example of good consultation practice.

4.1.2 Some parts of the scheme were discussed with heritage organisations. By providing the opportunity for conversations about the scheme and listening to the outcome of historical research, it has been possible to work with and celebrate heritage, without compromising viability. This has been most notable in Block H3 (Cambridge Street, including the Collective).

4.1.3 Normally, the first opportunity to provide input is during the planning application process, when plans have been finalised and consultants brought in to ensure it is approved unchanged. Where adopted, this more open and inclusive approach will result in a more successful scheme, compared with the previous adversarial "take-it-or-leave-it" attitude, and should become the benchmark.

4.1.4 However, there has been a marked decline in engagement for latest phase of the scheme, Block H1 (Leah's Yard), and a return to delivering a "fait accompli". This has resulted in a significant loss of irreplaceable heritage and a poorer scheme. Changes have also been proposed to previously approved elements (Blocks A and C) which compromise their heritage. There has also been an entrenched reliance on façade retention over building re-use, despite the climate benefits of the latter.

4.1.5 On balance, Heart of the City II has often demonstrated a refreshing new approach, but there is scope to expand this further. The committee system is one potential vehicle for this.

4.2 Case Study 2: <u>The Late 19th Century</u>

4.2.1 Some misgivings have been expressed that a committee system may lack the capacity to be decisive or to make clear and effective decisions, compared with the cabinet system.

4.2.2 The development of Sheffield from town to city in the last quarter of the 19th century is a clear and compelling demonstration of what can be achieved under a committee system.

4.2.3 This period encompassed the Long Depression of 1873-1896 and changes in political control of the Council. Even so, the Council's achievements include:

- Management of a budget (in 1892-93) of £313,156, equivalent in labour cost terms to £147m in 2020 (the population was approximately 300,000 and the Council consisted of 48 councillors and 16 aldermen).
- Sheffield's receipt of city status in 1893.

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- The hugely ambitious "street improvements" which transformed the central layout and streetscape on a scale that significantly exceeds the current Heart of the City, Future High Streets and Castlegate schemes combined.
- Takeover of the tramways, which under municipal control became profitable. By the end of the century plans were under way to electrify the network and quadruple its size from 9 to 36 miles.
- Takeover of the water and electricity companies.
- Creation of the Blackburn Meadows sewage works and an incinerator for refuse from privy middens (a workforce of 500 was required to collect from these).
- 27 miles of new streets and 30 miles of new sewers built in the 10 years to 1899 alone.
- Two fever hospitals built, which were made free in 1893.
- Management of the police force and fire brigade.
- In 1899 there were plans for another "street improvement" scheme, a smallpox hospital, and the purchase of the markets. The School Board schools were taken over 1902-03.

4.2.4 The committee system was no impediment to these achievements. There does not appear to have been any special characteristic that made this possible.
- Overall political party representation on committees was in proportion to the number of seats held, with the governing party holding most (but not all) of the chairs.
- Individual committees were not always proportional, and might even be dominated by the opposition, including the Finance committee (in 1892).
- Committees had the option (as now) to appoint members who were not members of the Council, but in practice only did so on the Free Libraries and Museums committee.
- There were contested votes in committee, with individual votes on contentious issues sometimes minuted.
- Full Council occasionally disapproved individual items in committee reports, but usually approved reports as they stood.

4.2.5 Members of the Council were mostly business owners or professionals, in a position to delegate day to day affairs – there were no clerks or grinders on the Council. However, members often had wide interests outside of the Council, lacked the benefit of today's rapid communications. They had no less capacity for disagreement or obstruction than anyone today, and the minutes record some trenchant debates.

4.2.6 The lesson for us today is that there is no reason why a committee system cannot be decisive and effective, so long as:
- There is a willingness to work across party lines toward common objectives for the public good.
- Chairs of committees are skilled in achieving consensus, rather than wielding power.
- Committees are allowed sufficient autonomy to carry out their business with minimal intervention by Full Council.

4.3   Case Study 3: Castlegate

4.3.1 A major pitfall of the cabinet system is the power that it invests in individuals. Committee chairs, so long as they proceed by building consensus, will oversee better decisions.

4.3.2 The issue of the planned Castlegate Conservation Area illustrates how the committee system, properly used, could protect the interests of both the public and the Council.

4.3.3 In summary, a cabinet reshuffle gave responsibility for Planning to a member widely perceived as favouring unfettered development. A long-standing Council commitment to consult the public on a Conservation Area for the Castlegate was then broken without notice, and when this was challenged, a further statement implied an intention to cancel some existing designations.

4.3.4 Had either decision been subject to debate in committee and decided upon transparently under an expectation to consult stakeholders, there would have been much less potential for significant damage to the historic environment, public concern, or harm to the city's reputation nationally.

4.3.5 Proceeding within the discipline of the committee would also have allowed a more informed decision based on attracting inward investment using the distinctive character of the city and obtaining the

proven economic and well-being benefits of the historic environment. Sources of grants or loans targeted at historic areas would then have been reassured that Sheffield remained an appropriate recipient. The Council would also have avoided the risk of being challenged on whether it was acting in accordance with its statutory duties.

4.3.6   It is also important that committee chairs and membership are not subject to sudden change, and that both chair and members understand the importance of consistency and continuity.

4.4   Case Study 4: <u>Planning Committee</u>

4.4.1   As outlined above, committee members will need to be self-reliant, and have a high level of understanding across a wide range of topics.

4.4.2   The Planning Committee provides some lessons in this area. The existing structure relies largely on officer recommendations, which are usually defended robustly if challenged. Contrary views are heard for only a few minutes, and are usually rebutted but not given informed scrutiny. Where members disagree with a recommendation, they remain reliant on the same officers to provide policy reasons for doing so. The opportunity is usually missed for refining proposals (within what the statutory process allows), obtaining better information or taking advantage of outside expertise.

4.4.3   The Planning Committee cannot operate exactly as other committees, but does clearly illustrate the potential weakness of the committee system without a very high level of member knowledge and engagement.

J Robin Hughes

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