

Review of Draft Design Principles - November 2021 Governance Committee Agenda item 7

Written Submission / Response from Nigel Slack, Active Citizen

This submission addresses only the Design Principles as drafted in Appendix2. The feedback from the engagement sessions in Appendix1. speak for themselves and whilst I may not agree with all of them they represent a fair reflection of the events I attended and the concerns and hopes of the residents of Sheffield with respect to the Transition to a Committee form of Governance.

My comments and observations in this submission have been drafted to fit the format of the SCC draft and are highlighted as follows;

Black text conforms to the original draft.

Red text are the changes by SCC in this latest draft.

Blue text are my comments or suggestions for further change or consideration.

Grey text are proposed deletions in the current draft.

Appendix 2

The 'critical aims', 'governance principles', 'how we do business' (ways of working) and 'engagement principles' have been numbered for convenient reference.

The first set of principles presented incorporate a range of potential changes in response to the public and stakeholder feedback received (see Appendix 1).

The principles are then reprinted in an unchanged state, to aid with comparison.

Design Principles – as amended, for consideration

Critical **governance** ambitions

Our critical governance ambitions are enabled by a set of governance principles. These principles were created to inform the design of the Council's new committee-led governance arrangements. These principles should be reflected in the Council's structures, processes and procedures (as set out in the constitution), and in the decision-making culture of the Council.

The following paragraphs express the 'ambitions' as if already achieved. Potentially change "Sheffield City Council is..." to "Sheffield City Council will be ..." and add something about how this will be measured elsewhere in the report?

A. Sheffield City Council is a trusted organisation where decisions are taken in an open and transparent way, and accountability is clear.

SCC has a long way to go on this issue. There is a basic problem that SCC in all parties need to address. **Relaxing control is not losing control**. Council need to learn the lessons of the Pandemic response from Sheffield's communities and grasp the experience and expertise of the people of Sheffield in making this transition work. Officers and CfGS have been delighted by the involvement and commitment of Sheffield people in engaging with this process. Trying to control, through funding or patronage, the way people challenge SCC needs to stop and stop now. The residents of Sheffield are not stupid, such antics are obvious and demeaning to the organisations involved. Come to the table openly and as 'good faith' actors, that will do more to build trust than any level of manipulation or dismissal.

- B. Sheffield City Council is a council where all councillors are involved in and able to influence decision making **and that citizens can see the contributions their local councillors make to decision-making processes.** This speaks to past issues over Majority votes passed on the nod. Recorded voting should be the normal approach and the way Councillors vote made a part of any decision notice or listing.
- C. Sheffield City Council engages, involves and listens to citizens, communities, **stakeholders and partners with the belief and expectation that this will be influential, and improve our decisions and decision-making.** Suggests the need for greater detail on results of consultation exercises in SCC reports.
- D. Sheffield City Council has a **forward-thinking** and responsive approach to governance which reflects the increasingly complex policy making environment.
- E. Sheffield City Council is a reflective council that is committed to continuously improving governance **in light of response to feedback and best practice**
- F. Sheffield City Council is committed to local democracy; good democratic principles and practices demonstrably underpin **all levels of our city governance.**

Design Principles

1. A commitment to openness and transparency **of formal decision-making** must run through our decision-making **arrangements and be embedded in codes of conduct etc.**
2. Our decision-making arrangements should minimise unnecessary bureaucracy, and implementation of the new committee-led governance model should as far as possible be cost-neutral
3. Comprehensive forward planning of decisions – being clear about what decisions we are planning to take, when they will be taken, who will be taking them.
This should be published in advance annually (after the AGM?) and decisions taken appended to the report as they happen.
4. Clear, **publicly available** reports from officers that set out the relevant information in an accessible way and which are clear about the **way a proposal has been developed and the** reasons for a decision being made. Reports coming forward should never claim that 'no other options' have been considered, unless there is a good and clearly explained reason.
5. Mechanisms for holding decision-makers and **Partner organisations** (*other parts of the partnership landscape - delete*) to account should be strengthened in any future decision-making **arrangements** – we must be held accountable for the decisions that we take, and embrace challenge to ensure we're getting the best outcomes for Sheffield.
Speaks to issues over service provider contracts and obscurity created by 'Commercial Confidentiality' issues.

6. Our governance should be underpinned by a commitment to the highest ethical standards as set out in the Nolan Standards on Public Life. Audit & Standards protocols should reflect this directly and have independence & real teeth

7. Our decision-making arrangements should be designed in a way that *(creates channels for - delete)* ensures all 84 Councillors can be involved in, and influence decision making.

8. Council officers play an important role in decision-making via delegated authority and, more generally in our local democracy, as public servants. Accountability, however, lies with elected councillors so, in a new governance system, our decision-making arrangements need to reflect this and not inappropriately increase delegations to officers.

9. Our decision-making arrangements need to strike *(reflect the practical demands on councillors' time. Need to find - delete)* a balance between time spent in formal decision-making meetings in the Town Hall against working with and in communities ensuring personal circumstances do not prevent anyone from becoming a Councillor. *(Time demands shouldn't prohibit people with working/caring commitments from being a Councillor. - delete)*

10. Our decision-making arrangements should increase the connections and safeguard positive relationships with local people, communities and partners, *(underpinned by effective ways of working in localities (such as Local Area Committees) and by recognition of the role of the VCS, partners and stakeholders in representing key groups, networks and communities, all of whose voices are equally valued. We need to strengthen locality arrangements based on the findings of the Big City Conversation and ensure that tThese arrangements should work effectively alongside, and feed into, citywide decision-making processes. -delete from principles and pick up in fine detail later)*

11. Our decision-making arrangements must avoid silo working both within and outside of the City Council, and enable a joined up approach to tackling issues which need the involvement of a number of organisations in the city

This can be tackled through liaison members, cross committee reporting and where issues arise over responsibilities ad-hoc cross committees can be considered.

12. Our decision-making arrangements need to have a mechanism for making urgent decisions openly, transparently and effectively engaging elected councillors.

This is a matter for how legislation impacts technological solutions, otherwise a simple issue.

13. Our governance arrangements need to strengthen our ability to work with our partners in a complex local, sub-regional and national policy environment, and enable us to take a lead on key issues facing the city and the citizens of Sheffield.

Potentially a role for the Council Leader – steered by Full Council delegation?

14. We need to be clear about what we are trying to achieve through our governance arrangements, and measure **against these design principles** to assess whether it is working

15 We need to identify a forum that enables us to reflect, on an ongoing basis, whether our governance systems are working as anticipated, and if changes need to be made. Could be a role for the LACs and other partner/community organisations to provide regular feedback and to engage with the public?

16 **Appropriate democratic checks and balances are in place in the exercise of power**, Changing the culture of working within SCC should foster partnership working, cross party consensus decision-making and support the best possible outcomes for the people of the city. *(and working together is valued in our partnership working, decisionmaking and constitutional arrangements (and consensus sought where possible) - to support the best possible democratic decision-making in a diverse city. - delete.)*

How we do Business (Ways of Working)

Overall the role of political parties and particularly 'the whip' is a potential concern for consensus decision-making.

17. We need to take a more **innovative** *(creative - delete)* approach to communication between residents and the Council, including about what decisions are being made and why, what they mean to residents and what they mean for the city. This needs to be supported by effective communication and information about how decision-making works.

Comms should never be expected to tell lies on behalf of an administration or to succumb to political spin under pressure from political masters (officers or politicians)

18. Role of Full Council – should be reviewed in the light of changes following the referendum – consider how we could make it a more meaningful forum. Potential oversight role in respect of Committees (once or twice a year?) Many other changes may be beneficial but too many to detail at this juncture.

19. Ensure that the appropriate support, training and skills development is continuously available for councillors so they can take full advantage of the opportunities under the new **arrangements**.

Minimum expectations for Cllr development should be set.

20. We need to build a culture in which political disagreement is handled constructively and where members are supported to develop the listening, debating, chairing and committee-membership skills needed for this to happen. As a minimum, recorded voting should be instituted, otherwise minutes can mislead the public. Consider the options for 'Minority Reporting' (used in select committees) where decisions are contentious or very close. This could also constitute a cause to send a decision to Full Council for deliberation/scrutiny. Hopefully pre-decision debate and consultation should make this a relatively rare occurrence.

Electoral cycles and the constant electioneering in the current voting system is detrimental to consensus, as party's vie for votes and working time is lost to Purdah each year and council business grinds slowly under electioneering conditions. (equivalent to 2 months per year)

21. We must ensure that a commitment to meaningful engagement, involvement and consultation runs through the organisation. We should renew a commitment to our Consultation Principles, and reflect on how the council's Engagement Standards which are currently in development can improve practice throughout our work.

The work with the Charity **Involve** should help with this.

22. We need to constantly demonstrate how engagement activity is shaping decision making, and be honest about the impact it is having, so communities and partners can understand how their views have been responded to. **The influence/impact of engagement with stakeholders, or consultation, will be made clear and documented for all significant decisions.**

This should happen for all decisions to a lesser or greater extent. Decisions made under pressure or as a result of direction from HMG or other organisations should be highlighted so people can understand the ability of SCC to counter these decisions. (notable issue in planning)

23. **Inequalities and discrimination can play a significant role in capacities and abilities to participate, to be heard, and to exercise influence. Our governance procedures and practices will actively seek to mitigate the impacts of inequality in support of inclusive governance and decision-making.**

Important role for LACs & Ward Cllrs in areas of deprivation where poverty and other issues prevent residents from active involvement in local & city decision-making, due to time, or understanding constraints.

24. We need to make it as easy as possible for people to **understand their rights with regard to the council and how** engage with us – the starting point for this should be clear, consistent, accessible communication about what the Council is doing, what decisions we are planning to take and how to get involved.

Locally accessible locations and support with technology is vital to this. A 'Bill of Rights' type document may also help.

25. We need to improve the information we provide about how decision making happens across the City as a whole and how partnerships and structures interconnect.

Particularly relevant in holding outside service providers to account.

26. We need to establish a process of continuous engagement so that Members, partners and citizens can give a view on how the system is working.

Very similar to Para.15? - Potentially combine

Engagement principles (as agreed Governance Committee 27.10.2021)

27. **Transparency** - we want to provide relevant information that demonstrates our intentions and decision-making to citizens in a way that is accessible and understandable

Take a lead from residents about transparency – what SCC and public think is 'relevant' may be very different.

28. **Diversity** – We recognise that the city of Sheffield is made up of a broad and diverse group of people encompassing different ethnicities, gender, age,

socio-economic backgrounds, values and physical and mental ability. We have a wide range of languages, cultures, digital, literacy and numeracy skills represented across the city and all backgrounds, interests and needs should be considered

Important role for LACs and whatever 'communities of interest' are to have to represent them.

29. Inclusive participation – Provide all citizens with clear routes and opportunities to contribute to and influence outcomes that will directly affect their lives. Schedule meetings at times and in places that are convenient for as many people as possible and provide parallel ways for people to take part in a way that suits them.

Particularly important currently where many disabled people have generally only felt safe to engage virtually and are avoiding face to face events.

30. Equality – Encourage open discussion so that no sections of the community are left out and all ideas are treated with respect. Decisions should not be controlled by one particular section of a community.

Unless the decision only affects that community?

31. Responsiveness – Listen to views, opinions, concerns, complaints and opportunities and be clear how we will use this insight gathered to inform our decision-making.