



Report to Governance 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: 20th July 2023

Subject: Reviewing Sheffield City Council's approach to public questions

Has an Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) been undertaken?	Yes	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	No	<input type="checkbox"/>
If YES, what EIA reference number has it been given? EIA 1153				
Has appropriate consultation taken place?	Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>	No	<input checked="" 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"/>

Purpose of Report:

This paper sets out a short proposal for Governance Committee to undertake a review of Council's approach to Public Questions, in response to Recommendation 16 of the Six-Month Review of Governance.

The proposal suggests establishing a Task and Finish Group of Governance Committee Members to work with citizens, stakeholders and officers over the summer with proposals presented to Governance Committee in October 2023.

The proposed purpose of the review is to:

1. Ensure the process for citizens to ask public questions is clear, that public questions are triaged in a way that directs them to the most appropriate forum and that those forums are easy to access.
2. Consider processes for responding to public questions and the interplay between timescales and quality of responses so that we can best achieve a consistent approach that is fit for purpose in the Committee System.

3. To undertake the review creatively with citizens and stakeholders, developing proposals which learn from the experiences of those involved within resource and capacity constraints.

Recommendations:

That Governance Committee:

1. Consider and agree the proposed scope of the Public Questions review, in line with the Six-Month Review's recommendations.
2. Discuss and agree the proposed terms of reference for the Public Questions review.
3. Nominate at least three Governance Committee Members from across the three political groups to lead the Task and Finish Group.

Background Papers:

Six Month Review of New Governance Arrangements,

<https://democracy.sheffield.gov.uk/documents/b27181/Item%207%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, where required.	Finance: <i>Matthew Ardem, Senior Finance Manager</i> Legal: <i>David Hollis, Interim General Counsel, Corporate Governance Lawyer</i> Equalities & Consultation: <i>Ed Sexton, Senior Equalities and Engagement Officer</i> 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: 11 th July 2023	

Reviewing Sheffield City Council's approach to public questions

1. PURPOSE

1.1 This paper sets out a proposal to reviewing and improving how the Council engages and is held to account by the people of Sheffield through the Public Questions that are asked at Council meetings. This responds directly to the insight from citizens, stakeholders, Members and officer who contributed to the Six-Month Review of Governance Arrangements in 2022/23.

1.2 The paper proposes that the Governance Committee establishes a dedicated task and finish group of Members to work with citizens, stakeholders and officers to develop proposals for how the Council's Public Questions model could be improved to maximise their effectiveness for citizens in holding SCC to account and raising vital issues.

2. PROPOSAL – REVIEWING OUR APPROACH TO PUBLIC QUESTIONS

2.1 As part of the Transition to Committees, we worked with citizens and stakeholders to agree a short set of Design Principles which captured how Members and citizens wanted to see decision making happen in Sheffield through the Committee System. These Principles said in making decisions, SCC would aim to be:

...**be democratic**. Sheffield City Council is committed to local democracy.

...**be open and trustworthy**. Make decisions publicly, so people can tell who is responsible for what.

...**include all Councillors**. Show what decisions everyone's local councillors are involved in.

...**listen to everyone**. Have the voice of residents at the heart of our decisions.

...**be cutting edge and keep improving**. Respond to the fast-changing world by trying new things and checking often whether it's working.

2.2 We are committed to continuing to develop and improve the Committee System model in Sheffield, including further embedding the principles above and establishing firmer assessments and metrics based on the Design Principles to drive continuous improvement. The Six Month Review was an important initial opportunity to identify issues and areas to improve, recognising that not everything was going to immediately work as the city wants it to.

2.3 As part of the Review, Governance Committee heard a clear message from stakeholders, Members and officers that the current approach to public questions is not meeting expectations and needs to be reviewed if it is to be an effective route for citizen voice and democratic accountability. In particular, the Committee heard:

- **Citizens are dissatisfied with the speed and manner of responses received to public questions** – albeit with relatively small numbers, 44% of citizens who have asked questions and responded to the Review survey said that they were either dissatisfied, or very dissatisfied with *speed* of their response to a public question; and 56% were either dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with the *manner* of the response received.
- **Confusion and duplication** – there is a sense that public questions are not always directed to the most appropriate forum, there is duplication of questions at Policy Committees, Full Council and LACs, and sometimes questions are ‘bounced’ between committees – causing confusion and delays to responses. There is also a potential issue of duplication and inconsistency with answers to questions on the same issue asked at LAC and city-level committee level.
- **Who responds** – some Members feel that the current approach, whereby responses are formulated by officers and the Chair of a committee, is not appropriate in the new system, where the question is addressed to the whole Committee.
- **Time and value** – some citizens felt that 30 minutes is inadequate for dealing with public questions when significant decisions are being made; some felt the process is too formal and rigid with no scope for asking supplementary questions; and some argued that it isn’t a meaningful tool for engagement and influencing decision making.
- **Accessibility and visibility** – some citizens would like to be able to submit questions anonymously or attend the meeting virtually to ask a question. Some citizens were concerned that where written responses are provided, they are not published with the minutes, so they are not on the public record.

2.4 To address the above, Full Council approved the Review’s recommended (Recommendation 16) that Governance Committee sets up a task and finish group to look at Public Questions, specifically:

- ensuring the **process for citizens to ask public questions** is clear, that public questions are triaged in a way that directs them to the most appropriate forum and that those forums are easy to access.
- considering **processes for responding to public questions**, ensuring a consistent approach that is fit for purpose in the Committee System.

2.5 This task and finish group is an important opportunity for Governance Committee to demonstrate the ways of working that we want to see across our Committee System by working alongside citizens and stakeholders and

working cross-party to develop collaborative and creative solutions which improve outcomes for the city. We will look to make use of our Engagement Toolkit and find appropriate routes for citizens to participate and contribute to the project.

2.6 As part of the public questions review, the task and finish group may wish to consider:

- **Comparators from elsewhere** – looking at approaches used by other councils, utilising good practice in how questions can be asked and how they are responded to which would enhance our existing approach;
- **Further insight from those who have asked public questions** – recognising that numbers involved in the Governance Review itself were relatively small, Members may want to ask participants for further perspectives;
- **The experience of all those involved in our current approach** – bringing together citizens, Members and the officers try and develop rounded solutions which consider the experiences of all those involved;
- **Balancing approach with resources and capacity** – public questions have a vital role in local accountability and therefore we need to look to maximise the impact and effectiveness of the approach we take within the constraints of the resources available.
- **Communicating and informing citizens** – there's an opportunity here to build awareness in communities about public questions and how to navigate the system.

3. **TASK AND FINISH GROUP DRAFT TERMS OF REFERENCE & APPROACH**

3.1 Draft Terms of Reference for Governance Committee to consider:

Purpose

1. Ensure the process for citizens to ask public questions is clear, that public questions are triaged in a way that directs them to the most appropriate forum and that those forums are easy to access.
2. Consider processes for responding to public questions and the interplay between timescales and quality of responses so that we can best achieve a consistent approach that is fit for purpose in the Committee System.
3. To undertake the review creatively with citizens and stakeholders, developing proposals which learn from the experiences of those involved within resource and capacity constraints.

Specific areas of focus

1. Actively seek feedback from, and test proposals with, citizens and stakeholders; and report into the Governance Committee,
2. That the work on public questions clarify the process for members of the public submitting a question to the Full Council that had not been adequately dealt with by a Policy Committee.

Membership

Recognising the pressure on Member and officer capacity, there should be a minimum of 3 Members of the Governance Committee involved in the Task and Finish Group with as a minimum 1 Member from each of the political groups.

The Task and Finish Group should also identify a Member lead who will help convene the work and support the reporting back to Governance Committee.

Members may wish to co-opt external and stakeholder expertise into the Task and Finish Group.

Approach

The approach to the Task & Finish work should be in the spirit of the Design Principles, make use of the public engagement toolkit, including working in the open, engaging citizens and stakeholders to gather insight and develop solutions.

Task & Finish Group will be informal meetings with citizens able to join and participate (online and in-person).

Outline timetable of activity

It is proposed the first meeting of the Task and Finish Group is a public input workshop on 30th August 2023, replacing the scheduled Governance Committee on that day.

It is expected the Task and Finish Group will meet around 3 times before bringing draft proposals back to Governance Committee for consideration at its meeting on 12th October 2023.

4. HOW DOES THIS DECISION CONTRIBUTE?

4.1 The proposal for a Task and Finish Group responds directly to the learning from the Six-Month Review of Governance, creating the opportunity for citizens, stakeholders, Members and officers to collaborate together to improve our governance and approach to democratic accountability.

4.2 This also creates an opportunity to demonstrate our commitments to more open ways of policy development.

5. HAS THERE BEEN ANY CONSULTATION?

- 5.1 There has been some initial consultation with citizens and stakeholders as part of the Six-Month Review of Governance but we recognise that the numbers of citizens involved were relatively small. However, this is an opportunity to collaborate with citizens in depth to design an approach that could improve the experience and response to public questions in Sheffield.

6. RISK ANALYSIS AND IMPLICATIONS OF THE DECISION

6.1 Equality Implications

- 6.1.1 There is a full and live EIA (EIA1153) for the implementation of the Committee System and there is an opportunity to deliver significant improvements in the inclusivity and accessibility of our approach to public questions. The EIA would be updated and refined to inform and respond to the work of the task and finish group. The current approach, particularly where people need to be able to physically attend a public meeting if they want to ask their question to Members directly, can be a significant barrier to people because of disability, caring responsibilities, or work patterns and commitments which prevent attendance during work hours. There is an opportunity to look at how to mitigate and open up our public questions approach as part of the review.

- 6.1.2 Further, we currently do not seek to collect equality monitoring data from citizens who ask public questions. This ensures that we cannot easily identify barriers and any equality implications of current practice but we should seek to better assess this as part of the review.

6.2 Financial and Commercial Implications

- 6.2.1 The recommendations in this report will be undertaken within existing resources. Activity to implement the recommendations will be prioritised factoring in organisational capacity.
- 6.2.2 As part of the work that is proposed here, Task and Finish Group will need to consider how proposals to reform SCC's approach can be met within existing capacity and resources.

6.3 Legal Implications

- 6.3.1 There are no direct legal implications arising from this report. Where the task and finish group finds changes are needed to the current process this will likely require changes to the Council's Constitution that should be considered by the Committee and approved by Full Council.

6.4 Climate Implications

N/A