



Report to Governance Committee

14th December 2023

Report of: Head of Policy and Partnerships

Subject: Update report on review of Council's approach to public questions

Author of Report: Alice Nicholson, Policy & Improvement Officer

Summary:

The Governance Committee in July this year agreed to undertake a review of the Council's approach to public questions.

The purpose of the review to 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; 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.

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

This update report sets out the progress of this review to date.

Recommendations:

1. That the Committee note the update on the progress of the Review of our Approach to Public Questions at Council Meetings.
2. That the Committee agree to the task and finish group continuing with their work on this review, to bring recommendations to the Committee early 2024.

Background Papers: None

Category of Report: Open

Reviewing Sheffield City Council's approach to public questions

1 Background and Introduction

- 1.1 This review of our approach to public questions at Council meetings is a response to a recommendation of the six-month Governance review.
- 1.2 In the six-month governance 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.

2 The Review Process

2.1 Scope

- 2.1.1 In July 2023 the Governance Committee set out its review of approach to public questions at Council meetings. The proposed purpose of the review was 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.

- 2.1.2 Specific areas of focus were to actively seek feedback from, and test proposals with, citizens and stakeholders; and report into the Governance Committee. Also 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.

- 2.1.3 The membership of the task and finish from the Governance Committee is Councillors Fran Belbin (task and finish group Chair), Sue Alston, Mike Levery, Sioned-Mair Richards.

2.2 Engagement Activity

- 2.2.1 An online survey open to all was available on our Have Your Say Sheffield site September 2023, it was publicised in our citizen newsletter, there were two separate surveys to gather information about people's experience of either asking a public question or presenting a petition at Council meetings, the Governance Committee particularly wanted to hear from people who had never asked a question or presented a petition to find out why they haven't and if we could do anything to encourage in the future.

- 2.2.2 Members of the Governance Committee held an in person public input workshop on 14th September 2023, at which the Committee found out directly people's

experience of asking or not asking a public question or presenting a petition, like the surveys.

2.2.3 The Governance Committee received a submission from a Citizen Network known as S.O.S (Sheffield Oversight and Scrutiny), who held a workshop.

2.2.3 In November 2023 officers were asked to share their views on how it feels to be part of the public question response process, this included officers who manage the receipt of public questions, and those who assist with responding.

2.2.4 Also in November the task and finish group held a solutions workshop with citizens who had responded to the survey and asked to be kept involved, the workshop was a hybrid inviting people to attend in person or online.

2.3 Findings and solution development

2.3.1 All of the responses to our surveys, the output from workshops, submission from S.O.S, and engagement with officers has informed solutions development, the current tranche of solutions in response to findings fall into five themes: public awareness and information; triage and track; how question is asked; quality of response; and influence and impact of asking. The task and finish group tested and explored these in principle at the solutions workshop with citizens. We have started to gather input on solutions from Members and officers involved in the public question process.

2.3.2 The changes that people, both citizens and officers, have asked for or support include ones that are quicker to implement as they are about improving our process or action within existing ways of operating, but also there are suggested actions that likely require a constitution change, and some that will have a resource impact. We want to ensure we give all this our full attention; we therefore are not at a point of concluding the review yet.

2.4 Continuing the review

2.4.1 As noted the review has become bigger than we thought, which is good, but it needs more quality assessment and technical input to be a valuable product and deliverable system. Members have listened and want to do the right thing by what has been said, including why we might not implement a suggestion.

2.4.2 The Governance Committee will continue its work on this review with the aim of reporting recommendations for improvement early 2024.

3. Recommendations

3.1 That the Committee note the update on the progress of the Review of our Approach to Public Questions at Council Meetings.

- 3.2 That the Committee agree to the task and finish group continuing with their work on this review, and to bring recommendations to the Committee early 2024.