



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: 27th March 2024
Subject: **Public Questions and Petitions Review: draft proposals**

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"The (report/appendix) is not for publication because it contains exempt information under Paragraph (insert relevant paragraph number) of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972 (as amended)."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:

The Governance Committee have been working with citizens, stakeholders, council officers and Members to review and improve our to approach to public questions and petitions.

At the Governance Committee in February 2024, Members considered a draft of the developing proposals and discussed with a small number of stakeholders how they could be improved and finalised. As part of this, officers committed to providing the underpinning detail to the headline proposals to make sure they are deliverable within existing officer and Member capacity while seeking to meet the ambitions that citizens set out.

The report below summarises the revised proposals for Governance Committee to consider. A revised report on the public questions review is attached in Appendix 1 and a prototype summary of a public-facing guide is included in Appendix 2.

Governance Committee are asked to discuss and agree the revised proposals and recommend them to Full Council for consideration at the AGM on 15th May 2024.

Recommendations

That Governance Committee:

1. Consider the revised proposals to reform our approach to public questions and petitions.
2. Agree (pending further comments and amendments) to recommend the proposals for consideration by Full Council at its AGM on the 15th May 2024.

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	<p>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.</p> <p>Finance: Matthew Ardern, Strategic Finance Manager</p> <p>Legal: David Hollis, General Counsel</p> <p>Equalities & Consultation: Ed Sexton, Senior Equalities and Engagement Officer</p> <p>Climate: N/A</p>
	<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	<p>SLB member who approved submission:</p> <p>James Henderson, Director of Policy and Democratic Engagement</p>
3	<p>Committee Chair consulted:</p> <p>Cllr. Fran Belbin, Chair of Governance Committee</p>
4	<p>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.</p> <p>Lead Officer Name: Laurie Brennan</p> <p>Job Title: Head of Policy and Partnerships</p> <p>Date: 19th March 2024</p>

Public Questions and Petitions Review

Revised proposals

1. Proposal

- 1.1 Following the discussion at Governance Committee with citizens on 28th February 2024, we have revised the proposed changes to public questions and petitions.
- 1.2 This has taken account of Member comments, feedback from citizens and stakeholders and with appropriate consideration of the practical implementation of the proposals with the capacity we have available.
- 1.3 Governance Committee are asked to consider the revised proposals and agree to recommend that Full Council consider the reforms as part of the AGM in May 2024.

2. Finalising the proposals for public questions, statements and petitions

- 2.1 The report attached in Appendix 1 sets out an updated overview of the review and updated versions of the proposals that Governance Committee considered at its last meeting on 28th February 2024. The initial proposals were built from the insights offered by citizens, Members and officers on how we could improve the overall experience and accessibility of PQs and petitions at Sheffield City Council.
- 2.2 Governance Committee have worked with citizens and stakeholders on proposals through online surveys and public workshops to create a more coherent package of ways in which citizens can engage in Sheffield's democratic meetings.
- 2.3 Ahead of the February Governance Committee meeting, the Chair wrote to all participants that have contributed to the review to date inviting them to attend the Committee's meeting on the 28th February and contribute to a conversation about the proposals. Those who could not attend but wanted to contribute further were invited to share their views via an online survey on the Have Your Say Sheffield consultation hub where respondents could say whether they agreed or disagreed with each draft recommendation and add wider comments¹.
- 2.4 The survey ran from the 28th February to the 6th March but only received 3 responses. Therefore, we will not focus heavily on the responses due to very limited statistical reliability. However, some of the key messages from those who contributed were:

¹ The survey is now closed but the landing page and supportive material is on Have Your Say Sheffield here: [Review of Council's approach to Public Questions | Have Your Say Sheffield](#)

- **Changes overall** - It appears from these changes that you want to limit what people can ask, the council should answer any and all relevant questions that members of the public want to ask.
- **For written answers** - If a written answer is given, there must be enough time for it to be read and understood and for the questioner to arrange to attend the meeting if they want to ask a supplementary
- **In reference to word or time limit on asking a question** - One minute is not very long.
- **Time allotted in agenda for public questions** – Public questions need one hour time allocated in meeting.

3. Ensuring deliverability – setting out the detail of how we will implement the proposed changes

3.1 At the 28th February meeting, Governance Committee also heard that there was a need to refine the proposals and also develop the technical and constitutional specifics of how the proposals will work in practice². This includes clarifying deadlines for the submission of questions and statements, detailing timescales for publishing responses and setting word limits for questions and statements.

3.2 Key to the practical application of the new approach is ensuring that we strike a balance between:

- enabling and improving the involvement and accessibility of our democratic meetings
- improving the quality, consistency and speed of responses within defined timescales
- operating within the capacity and resource limits of the council (ie. Officer time to both manage the process and develop responses).

3.3 Working with the General Counsel, Director of Policy and Democratic Engagement and the Head of Democratic Services, the paper in Appendix 1 details the updated proposals following citizen, Member and officer feedback.

3.4 To summarise:

Overall approach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clearer approach to public questions aligned to committee remits and specific agendas • Introduce new ability to make statements which will be published on the public record.
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² See paragraph 3.2 here:

<https://democracy.sheffield.gov.uk/documents/s66247/7.%20PQs%20cover%20paper%2028.02.24.pdf>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The 200-word limit for written questions, supplementary and verbal questions. Can include sub-questions/multiple parts • Maximum of two participations per person in any council meeting (ie. Full Council or Policy Committees). <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Eg. 1 written (max 200 words) question (plus any supplementary) & 1 agenda-related question (max 200 words) • Role for the Chair to manage and order questions in an appropriate way to bring balance, fairness and parity to the issues and voices heard at our meetings. • Petitions will continue to be treated as now - separate to public questions, but within the same time allocation on the agenda.
Questions within the remit of the Committee	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Written questions submitted 6 working days before the date of a committee meeting with 200-word limit (inc. sub-parts) • Written questions and responses will be published online by 12 noon, 2 days before relevant Committee meeting. • Questioner can request a supplementary question (200 words) and must submit their supplementary by 12 noon on the day before the meeting. One supplementary question per person, asked at discretion of the Chair and within 30min (Policy Committee) or 60min (Full Council) allocated time. • Written questions will not read out in the meeting as they will be available with responses online before the meeting.
Questions relating to the agenda of the Committee	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Submitted by 12 noon, 3 working days before the date of a committee meeting to enable citizens to ask questions based on the published papers • Questions will be asked verbally (including via weblink or read on behalf of the questioner) at discretion of the Chair and within 30min time allocation (Policy Committees) or 60min (Full Council). • 200-word limit • Verbal responses provided by Chair or to be provided in writing and published within 10 working days if not possible by the meeting.
Statements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Must be submitted in writing in advance: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ 12 noon, 6 days for statements relevant to the remit of the PC or Full Council ○ 12 noon, 3 days for statements relating to the published agenda of a PC or Full Council

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maximum of 200 words / 60-90 seconds of speaking time - presented at the discretion of the Chair who will seek to ensure a fair representation of voices and issues within the allocated 30mins. • Maximum of one statement per meeting, per person • All statements will be published for the public record • No commitment to responding to a statement however, Policy Committee Chair will reserve the right of reply in the meeting if deemed appropriate
Improving accessibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enabling ability to ask verbal questions (3 day and supplementary Qs) or make statements via weblink. • Enable verbal questions to be asked on your behalf
Improving customer experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improved online process for submitting questions. • Online tracker for citizens to check on the status of a question and find the published outcomes
Improved support and guidance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop new, simple information, advice, and guidance to make it easier for more people to know how to engage in democratic meetings.

3.5 Timetable for the next steps

27th March	Governance Committee discuss final proposals
April	Write-up of papers for Full Council
7th May	Publication of papers for AGM
15th May	Council 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 therefore 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 a revised draft of the proposals to reform public questions and petitions. The recommendations set out an opportunity for Members to reflect on the revised proposals and before consider recommending the reforms to Full Council as part of its AGM in May 2024.

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