Governance Committee
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Written Evidence From:

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Sheffield for Democracy

Campaigning for a more representative democracy

Submission to the SCC Governance Committee System Inquiry, November 2021

Thank you for inviting us to make further comments on governance in the City, following on from our document "Improvements we seek to local democracy in Sheffield City Council", dated 1st July 2019. **All the points we made then are still relevant**. Some we want to re-emphasis – 1 , 2, 5). Then there are additional points, reflecting the current situation (3,4)

1. The resources issue is as great now as it was then, if not greater: "With the huge reduction in the number of staff the council is able to employ, there has to be a careful balance between the resources for decision making and the resources for service delivery."

2. Also, the need for consensus building is even more appropriate now: "To rejuvenate local democracy, we need cross party consensus and support"

3. Community responses to COVID and especially during the early days of the pandemic, showed a great deal of resourcefulness, including in public health response. We understand that some councillors were surprised and impressed with how their communities responded.

   We think the City Council needs to consider how best to capitalise on, and incorporate within its structure, that kind of local knowledge, expertise and action.

4. The new development, of introducing Local Area Committees, raises the question of how this new structure and the new committee system will interact. It raises again the resources issue: how much resource do you put into decision making and how much into service delivery - when you are already dreadfully cash-strapped? Are on-going committees the only, and best, option?

   Is a system of Local Committees covering such wide areas, the best way of seeking and including community input? Are there other ways of engaging positively with communities, and supporting them? Would an annual meeting in a locality to

ascertain what has worked in SCC's interactions with community groups be a better use of resources?

Certainly, there must be built-in requirements to show active involvement of local groups and residents at a very local level: with opportunities for grassroots initiatives, sharing of aims and proposals at an initial stage, time for consideration and discussion, staff support for practicalities and costing, plus evidence of majority buy-in before adoption.

5. Whatever system is decided upon, reviews should be built in, to gauge whether the process is delivering what was intended.

Vicky Sedddon
Coordinator, Sheffield for Democracy   November 2021

Submission Part 2 to the SCC Governance Committee System Inquiry, Nov 2021

Responding to specific points on Item 8

1.   *Page 64 Background* We agree that it is useful to have a Framework "starting point" proposal

2.   *Page 83*   We notice that for the ***Themed Committees***, it is proposed that "make up is proportional to size of each party group on Full Council". Whilst this does mean that all the political parties that have council members will have committee places (though that leaves open how you then deal with a party that has only 1 councillor, or with independent councillors), it will not reflect the proportion of votes cast by the electors, which would be our preference.

3.   *Page 79   "Individual member decision making is not permitted under the Committee System"*   Does this mean that the Chair of a Committee will not be able to make decisions on issues that arise between meetings and need to be addressed urgently? We think that possibility should be there, with the proviso that it then needs to be reported to the Committee, and the Committee's retrospective agreement sought.

4.   *Page 75 Overarching Committee*   Given the assumption (5.1 page 70) that under the new Committee system, it is expected that Council will be busier, perhaps the Overarching Committee could have some role in dealing with some of the extra business, or at least prioritising what is sent to Council?

5.   *Pages 75, 76, 77, 78 Local Area Committees; Public Engagement & Communication* Clearly, with an intention to improve the involvement of neighbourhoods and communities, these two issues need to be addressed together. But there is no indication that has been recognised, or how that could be addressed. For us, this is one of the main points that we want to emphasise. There needs to be a discussion on the best use of resources – and whether the emphasis is on more committee meetings, or more practical engagement at grass roots level. Our priority would be that local engagement, but to do it effectively we recognise that it would also require some more staff support for both Councillors and local groups /residents

6. *Page 77. Other Committees* Need for a Governance Committee? Yes there is, to monitor and evaluate implementation (especially of LACs). Also for external groups to have access to the Committee, to raise questions about how well the new system is working. However, this could be done on an occasional, not regular, meeting basis.

7. *Appendix 6 Page 158* Over arching idea- referring to the comment: "Politics in Sheffield feels like it's always on a war footing. The language and tone used by councillors in public settings like Council meetings is inappropriately rude and aggressive, but they get away with it"

    We absolutely agree that in order to change the culture within the City Council, we need to move away from the "elect one councillor every year for 3 years and then have a fallow year" system, to an all-out election every 4 years. We have been arguing this for some time. Did anyone listen?

    Advantages are twofold: with an election no longer pending each year, councillors are more likely to work around the issues instead of the advantage to their party. And the voters have more choice: electing 3 councillors at the same time, they no longer have to vote for one party: they can choose to support an individual councillor they have a lot of time for, even if that person is not from the party they mainly support, as well as also voting for people from the party they mainly support.

    And with the prospect of a change overnight in the administration could motivate better turn-out. That would be a real bonus!

8. *Page 161/162. LACs.* There is an issue about who attends. Our understanding is that these are for the people who live in a specific area, with their councillors comprising the formal membership. So it is puzzling to hear people mention that they have attended several different ones.

    We think the breadth of points raised in this section demonstrates the significance of the City Committee/ LAC relationship and the potential tensions associated with it.

9. *Page163 Scrutiny* The Strong Leader / Cabinet system had substantial scrutiny arrangement built in as the balancing act. But surely the new Committee system itself will provide the necessary scrutiny function of policy decisions. And the Governance Committee would be responsible for how the new system is working

10. *Page 165 Public Engagement* Much of comment seems to refer to decision making. Seems to be very little commentary on service delivery and outcomes. We need to concentrate on getting the balance right

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