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Public Questions Review summary of proposals

Sheffield
City Council
Plan 2024-28

**Together we get
things done**



Agenda Item 7

Public questions review - refresh

- A clear area for improvement as highlighted in the Six-Month Review of the Committee System.
- Huge opportunity to improve the approach and quality of questions and answers.
- New routes to have a say – such as statements
- Complements our wider ambitions on public engagement

Original scope for the PQs and Petitions Review

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.

With citizens, we've developed some major changes to our public questions approach



People will be able to speak on the issues they care about

New option to make statements which will be published

All statements published on the record and time to read them out in committee meetings

New approach to written questions

Written questions published before relevant committee meeting – submit 6 days before a committee

Opportunity to ask a supplementary question – just let us know and submit it in writing 24hrs before the meeting

Improved approach to verbal questions

Submit 3 days before a meeting and ask question verbally with a verbal answer from a politician in a meeting

Where we have lots a verbal questions, chairs will work hard to enable a range of people to have a say

More accessible and user-friendly approach

Ask verbal questions and make statements remotely, removing key barriers

Public question tracker to follow a question from start to finish and better advice and guidance



Citizens gave us some very clear messages about what we needed to change



People want to see better quality, timely responses, clear political accountability and an improved experience when asking questions – people who have asked a public question feel they have not been listened to and that the quality of response they received did not meet their expectations.

People want us to tackle the accessibility barriers to participating in public meetings – recognising that some people find it hard to come to the Town Hall for work-related reasons, because of caring responsibilities, or because of disability or mental or physical health concerns

Citizens want us to keep it simple – both in submitting questions and receiving or looking for a response / action.

Improve knowledge, awareness and participation – people feel that we need better, simpler information, guidance, and advice so that people have the tools they need to participate.

Our key proposals in more detail

Proposal 1:
Improving the quality and overall experience of public questions

Proposal 2:
Making public questions modern and accessible for all citizens

Proposal 3:
Creating a clear, open and transparent process so that citizens can track the journey of a question from submission to response and action

Proposal 4:
Improving advice and guidance for citizens to ask public questions and raise petitions

Proposal 5:
Purpose of public questions – a statement of principle, and ongoing review



Proposal 1: Improving the quality and overall experience of public questions





Simple approach to ask a written question enabling considered responses and supplementary questions

Questions within the remit of a committee

- Should relate to the remit of Full Council or of relevance to the city; or within the remit of a Policy Committee
- Submitted by 12 noon, 6 working days before a meeting – max 200 words
- The question and response will be published as a written answer by 12 noon, 2 days before the meeting
- ^{Page 7} Once a person has read their published written response, they can request to ask a **supplementary question** to their original question, which they can choose to ask verbally
 - 200-word limit; 1 supplementary question per person, per meeting
 - Must be submitted in writing by 12 noon on the day before the relevant meeting.
 - Asking supplementary questions will be at the Chair’s discretion

Mon	Tues	Wed	Thurs	Fri	Sat	Sun	Mon	Tues	Wed
Deadline for written Qs 12pm	Qs to officers PAPERS PUBLISHED		Officer draft response by 5pm	Draft response to Chairs			Written PQ responses published at 12pm	Deadline for supplementary Qs by 12pm	Committee meeting



Improved approach to asking verbal questions at committees



Questions relating to the agenda of a Committee

- Should relate to the published agenda of a Committee / Full Council or on an issue that couldn't be known at the time of the written PQ deadline
- Submitted by 12 noon, 3 working days before a meeting – max 200 words
- 12 noon on the day before the meeting - officers provide draft responses to Chair
- A verbal response will be provided at the meeting by Chair **or** will be provided in writing within 10 working days if not possible at the time of the meeting

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Mon	Tues	Wed	Thurs	Fri	Sat	Sun	Mon	Tues	Wed
	PAPERS PUBLISHED			12pm Deadline for agenda-related PQs				12pm Draft responses to Chair	Committee meeting



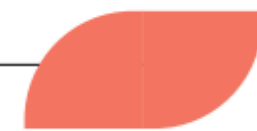


New ability to make statements

- Must be submitted in writing in advance:
 - 6 days for statements relevant to the remit of the PC or Full Council
 - 3 days for statements relating to the published agenda of a PC or Full Council
- Maximum of 200 words / 60-90 seconds of speaking time
- Maximum of 1 statement per meeting, per person
- No SCC commitment to responding to a statement
 - Chair or relevant PC Chair in FC will reserve the right of reply in the meeting if deemed appropriate.

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Mon	Tues	Wed	Thurs	Fri	Sat	Sun	Mon	Tues	Wed
Deadline for Statements linked to remit - 12pm	Statements to officers PAPERS PUBLISHED			12pm Deadline for agenda-related Statements				All statements published online	Committee meeting



Overall approach for asking questions, presenting statements and petitions

- Maximum of two participations per person in any council meeting (ie. Full Council or Policy Committees)
 - eg. 1 written (max 200 words) question (plus any supplementary) & 1 agenda-related question (max 200 words)
 - eg. 1 statement (max 200 words) and 1 agenda question (max 200 words)
- Consistent word limit of 200 words on all public questions, supplementary questions (including sub-questions/parts) and statements
- The time for public questions, petitions and statements at meetings will remain at 30 minutes in policy committees and 60 minutes at Full Council
- Chair will try and order questions in an appropriate way to bring balance and fairness and to provide 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.



Proposal 2: Making public questions modern and accessible for all citizens



Tackling barriers to participating in democratic meetings



- **Virtual questions** - enable public questions or petitions to be presented on-screen
 - If the tech fails, we will read contribution out.
- **Have questions read out for you** - a citizen can request that a verbal question is read out on their behalf
- **Written only questions** – citizens to simply submit a written question and request a written response without needing to attend a meeting, and the question and response go on the public record
- **Anonymity** - citizens can ask to remain anonymous in the public forum, *but not in submission* (i.e. submission must include name and contacts)

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Proposal 3:

Creating a clear, open and transparent process so that citizens can track the journey of a question from submission to response and action

A smarter, clearer, more transparent process

- **Develop a portal, to submit a public question** – simple online form to make it easy for anyone to submit a question and indicate where they would like to have their question heard
- **Introduce an online tracker** – simple system to track petitions and questions so that anyone can see the progress and status of a public question, find answer provided, and find what has changed as a result.
- **An open online system** – navigable and searchable.

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Proposal 4:

Improving advice and guidance for citizens to ask public questions and raise petitions

Better advice, guidance and support to enable more people to get involved



- **New online support** - a ‘get involved’ information and guidance source, that works as a webpage, and is printable.
 - include information on how to be involved, to ask a question, submit a petition, what can be expected if you do any of these things.

Page 16 Promote public questions and the new guidance to increase awareness and bring new voices into committees



Proposal 5:

Purpose of public questions – a statement of principle, and ongoing review

Clear statement of principle and commitment to learn and improve



- Adopt statement of principle around our approach to public questions
- To drive improvement, carry out regular experience surveys of those asking public questions.
- Ensure future opportunities for citizens to feedback and be involved in ongoing review of this trial approach to public questions

“The citizens of Sheffield have a right to participate in the meetings of Sheffield City Council, our Committees and other Council bodies.

Public Questions are one of the means of holding the Council to account, of getting items on public record, to raise public attention to an opportunity or issue.

We welcome and want to encourage and enable greater citizen involvement in our city’s democracy and are committed to ensuring that any citizen can raise a public question (or petition) and should expect an accurate and timely response that answers the question or issue raised.

Public questions are one way in which citizens can engage. They are a mechanism for respectfully engaging in the remit or agenda of a meeting, not a mechanism for engaging in detail or individual complaints or issues, they are not intended for engaging in debate or conversation.”

