

# Transforming Sheffield City Council Governance

Nigel Slack - Active Citizen

*“... to build a city at the forefront of innovation ...”*

*“To undertake a wide-ranging governance review ...”*

*“To build a 'best practice' process of change ...”*

# The Vision

Our vision is **to build a city at the forefront of innovation**, leading thinking and practice around local democracy and governance. As part of this we want to ensure communities and stakeholders have real confidence in the way we work together to make decisions and there is greater clarity and opportunities about how they can influence policy and services.

**To undertake a wide-ranging governance review** that develops a shared vision of design principles and that has the confidence of all stakeholders, Councillors (cross party), Communit-

ies, Business and Council Officers. Developing, co-operatively, a way of governing and ways of working that are ***transparent, accountable, clear*** and ***honest***, fit for the 21st Century and a model solution for our radical and innovative City.

**To build a 'best practice' process of change** and a clear timeline for the implementation of a modernised committee system, seen as such by all stakeholders and that has a focus on good policy, procedures and processes rather than personalities and party politics.



# Introduction

**This is an important and pivotal time for Sheffield.**

Austerity has bitten hard, seriously impacting on traditional ways of working and the way the city makes decisions. Local Government has borne the brunt of this austerity and the city is at a point where it is struggling to provide public services in a sustainable way and we are coming to terms with Government funding no longer being available to solve our issues and address our problems.

**The city economy is changing** as advanced & innovative new manufacturing is

impacting on the type of jobs we see increasing in number and those we see reducing. Much of the response to the loss of funding in the city's public purse has, until now, been about managing expectations, salami slicing budgets & reducing many services in real terms, whilst trying to protect the city's most vulnerable. We have also placed great emphasis on the potential of inward investment to bolster city finances and this has, at times, been to the detriment of our built landscape and our sense of Sheffield as a unique place to live, work, learn & play.

**The demographics of the city** (the variety of people) is also changing, bringing new challenges and opportunities as new business brings a new diversity of people to the city. Sometimes this seems to create greater levels of division between old and new or wealth and poverty. Different areas of our city have different (greater or lesser) opportunities to help themselves and to support their community economies. This needs to be addressed by creating new ways of decision making and distribution of resources that deliver equitably for those different areas and the neighbourhoods and communities within the city.

**The way the City Council makes decisions** is also at a pivotal point. Over the last few years the system

of governance known as 'Strong Leader & Cabinet' has come in for criticism as being undemocratic and for concentrating power in a small group of Elected Councillors, leaving many of our elected representatives, of all political parties, feeling ineffective and powerless. This current system can lead to decisions being made without proper scrutiny by either administration or opposition parties and an over reliance on the reports and opinions of the unelected Council staff that support the decision makers work.

**The city's current 'Strong Leader' model** of governance was effectively imposed on Sheffield as the least worst option when new systems of running Councils were introduced

by government in 2000. The aim was to make decision making quicker, and more effective for a dynamic economy. The limitations have only become apparent in the current period of austerity as more and more people have questioned the executive making decisions without what is seen as sufficient consultation with the people of the city and particularly those most affected by many of these decisions. The Localism Act of 2011 gave Councils the option of changing the 'Strong Leader' model for a new approach to 'Committee' form of governance. Many Councils have made this change, others have been forced to do so through community action or changes in their political party balance, and in nearly every case the reason for making the

change has been to improve the democracy of decision making.

**Sheffield is now choosing to make that change** to a modernised committee structure and to do so as part of a wider radical 'best practice' review of the way the entire Council operates. The changes that have affected and continue to affect Councils since 2008 do not look likely to change in the immediate future but to do nothing in these circumstances would be to fail the people, businesses and communities of the city. This document sets out our initial plans for how to make this happen.

# Key Goals

- 1.** Residents, businesses and decision makers become part of a comprehensive '**New Deal**' **governance model** that they have been a part of designing and that delivers good governance for all.
- 2.** A way of working that delivers for the diverse neighbourhoods and communities of the city and is responsive to the needs they identify.
- 3.** A way of governing that is **transparent, accountable, clear** and **honest**.
- 4.** Governance that is fit for the 21st Century and a model solution for the radical and innovative City of Sheffield, based on best practice and co-designed by a broad range of stakeholders.



# What Success Looks Like

A decision to change to a modern 'committee' governance model delivered through Council during August 2019.

To set up a cross party 'Constitution Review' body with a broad membership including stakeholders of the city, lead by an independent chair during October 2019.

A commitment to define the detail of the change to top level Governance during January 2020.

A commitment to develop the scope of the full review during January 2020.

A commitment to include community and 3rd sector organisations at the heart of the constitution review process, alongside Council Officers, Councillors, and external Professional Advisers versed in Local Government & change processes.

A proposed change to ways of working that has the support of all stakeholders.

A clear and comprehensive programme for change agreed and approved in Council by May 2020.

# Scope of Work

## **Challenge 1**

The majority of the residents of the city do not understand the way the city is governed and do not trust the governance system

## **Challenge 2**

Turnout at local elections continues to be very low and residents do not understand the need for elections almost every year

## **Commitment 1**

To design a way of governing the city that has the confidence of all stakeholders in the city's future and to invest in the people of the city to co-design a system that represents the interests of all residents in decision making

## **Commitment 2**

To review the way we choose our elected representatives and introduce an election scheme that better engages residents, increases voter turnout and better reflects the way voters actually vote

### **Challenge 3**

Many Councillors, of all parties, feel left out of the decision making in the city and the divisive, antagonistic party politics of Council meetings

### **Challenge 4**

Residents feel too much decision making is reserved to the highest levels of city representation and that neighbourhoods are treated as a problem to be managed

### **Challenge 5**

Residents do not understand the roles & responsibilities of elected Councillors and what they should expect of their representatives

### **Commitment 3**

Design a system, involving all parties, that reflects the political balance of the Council and puts this at the heart of how decision making bodies are apportioned

### **Commitment 4**

Develop, alongside local residents and community groups, a structure that devolves decision making to the most local possible designated level and that includes spending powers and, potentially, legal structures that support that power

### **Commitment 5**

Develop clear and objective understanding of the roles & responsibilities of Councillors, define expected performance measures and publish these

### **Challenge 6**

Residents are unhappy with the way some Councillors treat each other and the public and the seeming impunity with which bad behaviour is tolerated

### **Challenge 7**

Residents do not understand the system of scrutiny currently operated and feel it does not work in achieving accountability within Council

### **Challenge 8**

There is concern that many decisions within Council do not take sufficient note of expert or even external evidence or advice and rely too much on overworked staff to provide all the potential answers to an issue

### **Commitment 6**

Support Councillors with clear codes of conduct across all aspects of their public life and including clear and appropriate sanctions for breaches of such codes

### **Commitment 7**

Review the way decisions and policies are scrutinised to make it more front loaded, before decisions are made, and with stronger powers to recall or review decisions

### **Commitment 8**

Design a system that enables a broader consultation before decisions are made, includes experts in the field on decision making groups and allows evidence to be submitted, unedited, to decision making structures

### **Challenge 9**

Current management & officer structures are opaque to most of the public and there has developed, over recent years, a lack of trust that the structure supports the councillors or the public

### **Challenge 10**

Transparency is always vital and an issue that underpins all of the above and some current information provision is seen as skewed or difficult to access

### **Commitment 9**

Review the management structure of the Council and endeavour to design flatter more accountable organisational responsibilities and to ensure clear water between support staff and decision making

### **Commitment 10**

Integrate webcasting into all decision making bodies, publish information in an easily accessible way and devolve the sources of information to the most local level possible

# Proposed Outcomes

This Transforming Sheffield City Council Governance vision outlines the reasons change must happen, the goals we need to achieve and the challenges the city must work through to deliver our long term radical ambition of building a city at the forefront of innovation and leading thinking & practice around local democracy and governance.

This process will not be an 'easy fix' and carrying on as usual is no longer an option. It will be challenging and uncomfortable at times, but we must grab the opportunity for a better Sheffield, serving **all the people of the city**. We need to seize the opportunity to take the city of Sheffield a radical step forward by working together with everyone cooperatively, based on best practice and lead by National and International expertise.

**To do anything else would be to fail the people, businesses and communities of the city.**

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## **The Public Interest**

“What Is Going On?” - Questioning Politics At  
A Local Level Here In Sheffield And Beyond.

