



Improvements we seek to local democracy in Sheffield City Council

Purpose: *Our preferred outcomes of democratic renewal*

- a. More people participating and engaged
- b. A greater cross-section of Sheffield's population doing so
- c. Considerably more people reporting confidence in the democratic and political process
- d. Greater political stability between elections
- e. Greater cross-party cooperation
- f. More decisions affecting particular localities taken locally
- g. Higher turn-out rates at local elections

Structure:

1. Election Schedule : All out local elections every 4 years

Purposes:

- a. Makes a clear decision about who the people of Sheffield empower to run the city, and to have a reasonable timescale to make necessary changes.
- b. Currently, with elections every year for three years and then a fallow year, parties are constantly in election mode, attacking each other instead of seeking to work together to deal with the huge issues that the government–enforced halving of the local budget has created
- c. Would make possible a culture of cooperation between the different political parties.

Advantage:

- a. Creates a multi-member election in each ward, which paves way for PR
- b. Means that the time currently spent every year re-appointing to committees and bodies is unnecessary/hugely reduced.
- c. Gives more time and space for decisions to be taken, implemented, reviewed, difficulties ironed out

2. *Committee structure: change from the strong leader/cabinet model to a committee system, to enable more involvement of more councillors, and also the public, in decision making.*

There is certainly a ground-swell of opinion (coming both from the public and from within the Administration's party and politicians) that the current system leaves many councillors feeling they have little say in decision making, other than through rather drastic scrutiny "calling-in" processes. This can (and sometimes has) led to decisions that don't have wide consensus. This does not mean Sheffield for Democracy supports going back to the original committee structure, which was seen as inefficient. 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. Certainly, improvements in City Governance is one of Sheffield for Democracy's current priorities. And not all committee structures are by definition inefficient. A new system needs to be designed, a different, efficient and effective system that gives more voice to more councillors. This could include committees that contribute to decision making. Our suggestion is that the parties find a way to work together, to come up with a proposal that is then put into operation for an agreed trial period, and is subject to review and amendment in light of the experience. Such a change in how to address concerns is likely to facilitate the other improvements we are suggesting.

Fairness in representation:

Proportionality in committee membership, chairs and vice-chairs.

1. We cannot move to a PR system for elections of our councillors until national government makes this possible. But we can respect the view of voters by using the proportions of votes cast to the different parties to allocate seats on committees and proportions of chairs and vice chairs
2. Proportional support from officers on policy Initiatives.

Input:

Better involvement in, and ownership of, decision-making by neighbourhoods

This is one of Sheffield for Democracy's campaign priorities. Both Labour and Lib Dem administrations have over a period of time set up forms of community engagement: area panels; community councils; local area partnerships. We currently do not have a functioning system. We would like to see a project established to engage across the city and across the parties and across

communities, to find a workable model that includes participation in decision making by neighbourhoods. This should include some local decision making on spending in the localities.

There should be involvement of non-councillors via neighbourhood engagement and also through involvement of specialist expertise, including from the voluntary and community sector.

Various new approaches to policy development could be employed to facilitate this: for example, citizens' assemblies or juries; local community assemblies; focus groups. If used, a review of their effectiveness should be undertaken, so that the circumstances in which they are likely to be effective can be judged.

Some functions would lend themselves to such local decision making; others would not. But judgements about economies of scale need to be balanced with consideration of social value. To underpin this, the City needs to make a commitment to consult with relevant social organisations, to take their concerns and perspectives seriously, and to cooperate with them in designing and delivering services.

Councillors' role/responsibilities:

1. Code of Conduct.

There is an established code of conduct, the appendix of which also mentions Sheffield City Council Electronic Communications Policy; Members' ICT Usage Policy; Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Policy Statement 2017

There is also a complaints procedure, and a form to use to make a complaint.

This is welcome, but access to it on the WebPages, and to those policy documents, needs to be improved: as far as we are able to ascertain, they are not posted all together on the SCC website.

2. Expectations of elected councillors

In addition, we would like to see some clarity on the expectation of how councillors communicate with their electorate, and how members of the public can make contact with them. Also, on how councillors are expected to report back to their voters on their activities as councillors, particularly in their role in neighbourhood communication and engagement. Preferably, this should be done annually and certainly before an election in which they are standing.

Transparency:

1. *Information*

There should be access to relevant and timely information available to all councillors; better access too for citizens. There would be significant advantage in improving the council WebPages, which are currently difficult to navigate.

Both advantages and disadvantages to policy proposals should be examined and discussed.

2. *Scrutiny:*

There should be a robust and effective system, to critically appraise decision making and the outcome of decisions. The expectation should be that when a decision is called in, the councillors should be judging the issue on its merits rather than on party loyalty.

There should be involvement of non-councillors via neighbourhood engagement and also through involvement of specialist expertise, including from the voluntary and community sector

Culture:

All the above structural items are needed to strengthen Sheffield's democracy. But an overarching necessity is to change the **culture** of how politics is done in the city.

To rejuvenate local democracy, we need cross party consensus and support. The structures provide a framework within which democracy and politics is enacted. But unless we behave towards each other with respect; unless there is improved esteem for our politicians and leaders (and they demonstrate their respect for the electorate); unless the nature of our political discourse becomes considered and thoughtful and rational instead of point scoring, changes to the structures will, of themselves, achieve little.

This is a serious challenge for the political parties and their leaders, and for us all, in our attitudes, responses and inputs.

But such culture change would have enormous advantages, including encouraging people from all walks of life, and of high calibre, to consider becoming councillors, ensuring that high quality and representative decision making is sustained.