

Decision making structures in Sheffield: Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee call for evidence

As the voluntary and community sector infrastructure organisation in Sheffield, we are aware of the many ways that Council decisions impact on city communities, on VCS organisations, and on the people who make use of our services. We think that decision making has become somewhat opaque and defensive, and are keen to support the development of an approach which engages people effectively, and offers a route to increase agency across the city.

We are assuming that the focus of this review is the making of major, strategic decisions, and not the great many operational decisions the Council makes day in, day out. In fact, we think both matter considerably, as trust and engagement are often built by appropriate involvement in decisions which have greater impact at neighbourhood level. There are a number of good examples of Authorities where a clearer hierarchy of decision making is in place. We would welcome this review covering how decisions which affect people at all levels in the city are made, not just “top level” decisions which fall within a cabinet or committee structure.

We therefore welcome the Councils approach to review decision making, and particularly think it should take into account of the features of good decision, and look to create processes with an appropriate level of subsidiarity, which engage people in the city.

Principles to be applied

We think good decision making needs to be based on a robust set of principles. Those principles need to be developed in consultation with a wide audience. In broad terms we think that decisions made should:

- be based on agreed values and principles. The most important of these is that decisions are made with the interests of those affected as the prime consideration. The Nolan principles are an essential reference point;
- be informed by an overall plan or strategy, so that decisions contribute to achieving an overall vision and associated strategic objectives;
- be clear about why a decision is needed and what specific purpose the decision is aiming to fulfil;
- consider all the options for achieving the stated purpose;
- involve all relevant stakeholders in considering these options. This includes ensuring people in the city have agency on how the city is managed;
- draw upon the available evidence;
- consider the impact (positive and negative) that the decision may have;
- be open, transparent and timely;
- be followed by the provision of good quality information to those interested in the issue under consideration;
- be open to robust scrutiny and therefore challenge, and be followed by robust accountability to all those affected;
- be taken in a timely fashion, maximising opportunities available and avoiding delay.

Issues to be addressed

We see a number of pressing issues to be addressed, ideally through this review as they need to be taken into account in developing decision making structures.

Trust – we know trust is declining, across the country, and in both political system and politicians. Inevitably local politics and the Council are not immune from this. We think that the relationship between the Council and “the people” has become far too remote. People appear to have less confidence in the Council, with some who are suspicious of and hostile to it. There are many reasons for this, most of which are not the fault of the Council, but it results in a disengagement from politics (typified by low levels of voter registration and turn out) and disillusionment in politicians will to make things better. If the Council wants to work towards re-establishing a sense of the Council belonging to the people, so that people will talk of “our Council”, then it must take responsibility for a major programme of democratic renewal. Building trust must be a key component of this review of decision making – both how it is developed, and how the outcomes are implemented offer an opportunity build trust, to demonstrate to people in the city that their voice is heard and has impact.

Strategic plan - We think that the absence of a corporate plan for the Council, or better still a multi-agency partnership plan for the city, makes major decision making more difficult. In the absence of such a plan, decisions cannot be made against the background of a vision and set of priorities and objectives for the city. We think the development of such a plan would be helpful.

Partnership arrangements - We think the processes for including partner organisations, communities and the public in decision making are somewhat inconsistent and at times rather weak.

Openness - We are aware that many if not all major decisions are effectively made behind closed doors in political group meetings, and are then played out in the cabinet and full council. We think this militates against open and transparent decision making.

Short termism - We think that at least some decisions are motivated or influenced by short term political considerations. We think this is driven, at least in part, by the present election cycle of three thirds followed by a fallow year, supporting the case for four yearly “all out” elections to the whole council. We think there is a strong case for the major choices facing the city to be the subject of a multi-party process which seeks to arrive at a strong consensus that can command wide and longer term support. We think this has the potential to lead to much higher quality decisions being made in the interests of the city and its people. We realise that this would be a challenge to traditional party political decision making, but we think it could be a far better reflection of the breadth and balance of opinion across the city.

Propositions – what might the outcome look like?

Without wanting prejudice the wider set of evidence to be heard, we have considered some components of what revised structures might look like. In conversations with our members we have found many people struggle to engage with such an open questions as “how should the Council make decisions”, and find it easier to focus on or react against more specific issues and proposals. To that end we suggest a set of ideas about moving the debate on, and thinking about what might be different.

We are less concerned about the structure of cabinet or committee, and more with developing a culture which involves people and fosters the principles set out above. We are looking for clarity about what decisions are made, at what level, and by whom, with robust scrutiny and checks in place. We realise that the Council has a set of detailed standing orders and hence a scheme of delegation – but find this impenetrable.

We want to see far greater use of deliberative and participative democratic processes to complement the representative process. There have been some notable examples, albeit not from Sheffield, of, for example, citizens assemblies and “co-production” being used to very good effect.

If there is to be a new committee structure, then we think there is a strong case for only a small number of committees, and for these to have thematic roles. For example, economy; environment (including the climate crisis); inclusion and tackling poverty; supporting vulnerable people.

We also think that the City’s various partnership boards – the Sheffield City Partnership, the Health and Wellbeing Board, the Accountable Care Partnership and so on – should be seen as part of the decision making process and structure.

However, we are very concerned that the critical inter-relationships between the roles of different committees may become lost: for example, the relationship between the economy and the climate crisis. We do not think this risk can be mitigated by the meetings of the Full Council itself.

We therefore think that some form of Council wide committee should be a feature of the new structure, and that such a committee should have overall responsibility for the corporate or city plan.

As well as city-wide decision making, we see an urgent need to renew and strengthen neighbourhood and community level decision making. We think the purpose of devolving power and decision making to neighbourhoods and communities needs to be considered carefully. We suggest that devolved powers should be set alongside local processes for engagement and partnership.

We will need to consider what powers and resources can be devolved, to what size of neighbourhoods, with what decision making processes and structures. It will need to be supported by education to support people to take up the responsibility, as well as for children coming through to take their place as “active citizens”. We are keen for this to be more than tokenistic and that it therefore involves more than small budgets.

We need to consider how we will measure success, and know the impact these changes have had in our city over the medium term. That might be aligned to work around the vibrant city index, or another measure to look at the overall health of the city and people’s engagement with its structures.

Final thoughts – things to avoid

We have focussed on a positive, forward looking approach in this evidence. In doing so we would highlight a few things to avoid:

That decision making is focussed on processes, not structures. Decisions need to be taken at the right level by the right people, irrespective of structures in place.

We do not want to retreat to the silo-based decisions that were a hallmark of the previous committee structure.

Any new structure should prevent the loss of corporate, Council wide decisions where they are most appropriate.

Voluntary Action Sheffield
November 2019