

Cllr Julie Grocutt
Chair, Governance Committee
Sheffield City Council
Townhall
Pinstone Street
Sheffield S1 2TH

2 December 2021

Evidence to Committee System Inquiry

Dear Cllr Grocutt,

Sheffield Chamber of Commerce welcomes the work of the City Council's Governance Committee. There is change sweeping through our society and the way the city is run. Sheffield Chamber of Commerce too is undergoing a process of renewal as we consider the best way to lead the way in making Sheffield the best place to start, grow and run a successful and sustainable business.

We note that the Chamber of Commerce provided evidence to the Council's Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee in 2019. We also note the huge amount of work now being done by elected Members, officers and other stakeholders as the City Council considers how best to move to a committee structure from May 2022. We thank all for their efforts, dedication, and contribution to this important work. We do not seek to knowingly replicate or emulate that said that by others, but rather wish to make four specific points. In doing so we offer these in a personal capacity. We too are upgrading our governance systems and are not yet in a legitimate position to speak on behalf of the Chamber's 875 members.

1. The business community needs decisions to be made by the Council in a swift, timely and transparent manner. The new Committee structure must facilitate not impede prompt and robust-decision making, particularly when the city needs to recover from the worst of the Covid-19 pandemic.
2. Businesses small and large have a greater role to play in helping Sheffield to be a more successful and equitable place to live and work. Sheffield is not a city of big business. 88% of businesses in our city employ 9 or less people¹. Together businesses employ 100,000's of local people. We encourage the Governance Committee to explore ways to untap the potential of these businesses to play a greater role in improving decision-making in Sheffield. Business groups like Sheffield Chamber of Commerce are committed to playing a positive role in this process, through aligning our activities so that those in positions of authority can draw more on data and insight from our business community.
3. Consider and interrogate the ways of working pioneered by the Covid-19 Business Response Group (BRG) in the early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic. The BRG has seen representatives from the business community, our universities, the Council (officers and Members) and other stakeholders working together, sharing insights, sometimes disagreeing, but ultimately arriving at a focussed Business Recovery Plan. This plan has

¹ Official Labour Market Statistics

<https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/reports/lmp/la/1946157123/report.aspx?town=sheffield#tabidbr>

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already had positive impact in our city through the city's £2m Economic Recovery Fund to support the city centre, district centres and local centres to reopen and get back on their feet. The plan also inspired a success bid to attract £600,00 of government funding to support disadvantaged young people. Most importantly, the plan was built from the ground up. Priorities and recommendations were shaped by those outside of the Council but, importantly, the final Business Recovery Plan was also subject to scrutiny and final formal endorsement through the democratic process. The work of the Business Response Group provides real-world practical insights on how a new committee structure in the Council might work.

4. Be bold and ambitious during this inquiry. There is a clamour for democratic renewal that cannot be denied. Equally there are inherent risks involved in what the city is seeking to do. There will be those who dismiss the role of hierarchical political parties as relics of a rapidly bygone age, and that they should be swept away to be replaced by more participatory democracy that involves delegating decision-making to communities or, conversely, to allow those without the legitimacy of the ballot box to play a formal and material role in decision-making that impacts others. We are sure these issues will be considered carefully by members of your committee. To help inform your thinking, and as the traditional festive break approaches, you may wish to find time over the near year to read 'How Democracies Die' by Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt. The book explains powerfully how elected leaders can gradually subvert the democratic process to increase their power. The authors also argue, perhaps more importantly, that strengthening political parties can counter democratic decline and that political parties have a hugely important role to play in guarding against the excesses of fringe political views.

To conclude, this is an important and exciting time for the city. We face huge challenges but also huge opportunities. Through your work and that done by others we have an opportunity to come out of this pandemic with new ways of working that can serve our city well.

Despite the sense of positivity we should also acknowledge the risks. The genesis of the referendum and result that has given rise to your work are clear. Those involved in calling for and winning the referendum will rightly cite their positive and good intentions. We are sure they exist. Equally let us all make sure that we do not arrive at a governance model that always assumes positive intent. That intent cannot and should not be taken for granted. No one can predict what other forces that might drive further changes in our increasingly polarised society.

Yours sincerely



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