Strengths and weaknesses in Sheffield City Council's approach to public participation in decision-making

Interim headline findings

Working draft for the Governance Committee

Introduction

Involve is in the process of reviewing what previous public and stakeholder engagement says about: the strengths and weaknesses in Sheffield City Council's (SCC) current approach to public participation in its decision-making.

This work is not an in depth study, but a short review of the following materials:

- Papers* recommended by attendees at the roundtables led by Involve for the Council in December 2021;
- Points made by attendees at the roundtables;
- Information gathered for drafting case studies of public participation regarded by the Council officers and/or roundtable attendees as examples of good practice in Sheffield;
- Informal conversations with a small number of stakeholders and Council officers who were unable to attend the roundtables.

The review is currently ongoing and the contents of this slide deck are therefore subject to change. However we wanted to provide Members of the Governance Committee with early access to some of the emerging key messages.

Public participation is a broad term, defined as "the engagement of individuals with the various structures and institutions of democracy, including voting, contacting a political representative, campaigning and lobbying, and taking part in consultations and demonstrations." The focus of Involve's work for SCC, and therefore this briefing, is more specific. It looks at public participation *in decision-making between elections* (including consultation and two way public engagement).

Work timeline

- Roundtables with stakeholders and community organisations to test plans for Involve's work with SCC (complete)

- Review of what previous public and stakeholder engagement has told SCC about the strengths and weaknesses of its approach to public participation (ongoing – some emerging messages included in this slide deck)

- Review of case studies seen as involving good practice in public participation in decision-making in the city (ongoing – some emerging messages included in this slide deck)

- Codesign workshops bringing together stakeholders, community organisations and Council officers to develop shared principles and a shared vision for public participation in SCC decision-making (forthcoming)

- Training and support for SCC around implementing its new approach (forthcoming)

Pockets of good practice in public participation (*more to add*)

This section highlights examples of public participation in Sheffield which have strong elements to them and provide lessons for future engagement work. It includes: projects led by the Council, projects led by the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS), and partnership projects.

★ **Clear Air Zone consultation (2019)** - A strong multi-channel communications campaign made it easy for Sheffielders to notice and respond to the Clean Air Zone consultation. The approach included targeted engagement with people who would be most affected by the proposed changes, such as taxi drivers.

★ **Community Champion Project (2021 - ongoing),** which is led by the VCS and funded by the Council, empowers communities to make informed choices on health and wellbeing. Trusted volunteers provide information and listen to people's concerns in informal settings. The current focus is Covid-19 and vaccines, though volunteers support a number of issues. This model avoids the mistrust many communities feel towards SCC. The concerns and needs raised by communities are fed back to decision-makers.

★ **Hate crime reporting (2017)**. A collaboration between a cross-party Hate Crime Task Group (set up by the Safety Community Scrutiny Committee) and the Equality Hub Network enabled targeted engagement with communities affected by hate crime. This informed recommendations to the Scrutiny Committee and subsequent steps taken by the Council and stakeholders to address hate crime.

★ **Local Area Committees (LAC) supporting the VCS to engage residents (2021)**. As part of setting LACs' priorities, the Council supported over 40 local organisations to have conversations with Sheffielders who are less likely to have their voices heard. This was part of a suite of engagement activities (e.g. an online survey, drop in meetings) and enabled a diversity of community voices to feed into the development of each LAC's local action plan.

★ **ShefFood (2009 - ongoing)** is a cross-sector partnership of local public agencies, businesses, academic and community organisations committed to working together to create a more sustainable and resilient food system for the Sheffield region. Although it is not an example of public participation, it shows what can be achieved through a long term strategic partnership.

★ **Young people's experiences of the Covid-19 pandemic (2021).** An online survey of secondary level children provided an insight into the lives of young people. Steps were taken to encourage honest feedback such as making the survey anonymous. The findings have fed into the development of various Council plans.

Emerging lessons learned from good practice examples

★ **Work collaboratively with others:** Public participation can be strengthened by working in partnership with local organisations and individuals who have existing knowledge and are already trusted by local people.

★ **Use approaches that suit your audience(s)**: Use engagement methods that work for the communities and Sheffielders you're trying to reach. Be flexible, don't stick rigidly to one method if you're not reaching your target audiences.

★ **Sufficiently resource and staff projects:** Dedicated and skilled people, working in the Council, the VCS and in communities, are at the heart of projects that work well. Make sure you sufficiently resource projects (£ and people), giving due consideration to how follow up will happen and, where needed, how projects will be sustained.

★ **Mechanism for impact:** Have a mechanism for feeding Sheffielders' views / the result of engagement to the Council and decision-makers, so that Sheffielders' views have been heard and responded to and impacts can be tracked.

★ **Have a feedback loop:** Communicate the results of an engagement project to those who took part and to the wider public. Let people know what has - and, as importantly, has not - happened as a result of their involvement, and why.

Weaknesses in SCC's approach to participation raised during previous engagement *(interim only)*

★ **Lack of meaningful public participation in decision-making** - A number of interrelated factors – including tokenism, not feeling genuinely listened to, lack of feedback and scepticism about the impact on decisions - contribute to a scepticism that public engagement will have a genuine impact on Council decision-making. The majority of Sheffielders who responded to the Big City Conversation survey do not feel they can influence decisions affecting their local area.

★ **Issues relating to how Sheffield's diverse communities are engaged** – both the 2021 update from the Race Equality Commission and stakeholders raise issues relating to how the Council and service providers engage Sheffield's diverse communities. This includes under-representation of some communities in engagement activities, dominance of more proactive voices (and those with more resources); disconnections between service providers and BAME communities; and incorrectly grouping different ethnic minority groups together.

★ **Lack of awareness about services and how decisions are made** - For Sheffielders to be able to engage in the Council's decision-making, they need to know how to take part. Currently, Sheffielders do not feel adequately informed about how decisions are made in their local area or how local public services are performing, and they feeling poorly informed about the Council's work overall.

★ **Disconnect between Sheffielders and the Council** - stakeholders comment on a lack of trust in the Council and disconnect between citizens and the Council.

★ **Role of the VCF sector** - Sheffield's diversity of VCS organisations can play an important role in supporting public participation in decision-making, in addition to having a voice in Council decision-making in their own right but many feel that the Council is not listening or effectively engaging them.

★ **Local Area Committees** – a sense of frustration and missed opportunity around the introduction of LACs to date, particularly as a solution in themselves to engaging communities and concerns of how geographically based LACs connect to communities of interest.

★ **Limitations of traditional democratic systems** – particularly responsiveness and representativeness.

Ideas for improvement raised by stakeholders and/or the public *(interim only)*

Purpose of engagement
- ★ Have a clear purpose for engaging Sheffielders. Be honest about the rationale for engagement, and what influence Sheffielders can expect to have on the outcome.

Who engages
- ★ Ensure it isn't the "same old people / groups" taking part.
- ★ Actively support Sheffield's diverse communities to engage, particularly those who are underrepresented, underserved or who are facing disadvantages.
- ★ Engage with the VCS prior to commencing engagement activities to better understand the context, what is needed and to reach underrepresented groups.
- ★ Don't allow a lack of knowledge to hinder people's participation.
- ★ Acknowledge that not everyone will want to take part. They may be too busy or simply not interested.

How to engage Sheffielders
- ★ Match the approach(es) to your audiences. Vary the engagement approach / model depending on the communities and audiences.
- ★ Use a diversity of methods to reach as wide a range of people as possible.
- ★ Make engagement accessible to all. For example, digital exclusion is still a significant challenge and needs to be taken into account. Venues used to hold meetings need to be trusted and accessible.
- ★ Move up the ladder of participation. Public participation shouldn't just be about extracting information. Co-creation methods should be used as well.

Ideas for improvement (cont)

Integrating public engagement into decision-making
- ★ Develop principles for engagement. Host a discussion about principles and values and develop a shared understanding with communities.
- ★ Develop a framework for participation that is creative and responsive to innovations, particularly to counter the impact of inequalities.
- ★ Embed public and community engagement within all Council processes so that it is part of "business as usual." Directly involve Sheffielders in decision making at neighbourhood level up to city-wide level.
- ★ Actively take into account the views of marginalised / underserved communities when designing mechanisms which support community decision making.
- ★ Build on existing engagement infrastructure and learn from what has worked well (e.g. champions project) and what hasn't (e.g. trees). Host sharing sessions between members, officers and local community representatives.

Ensuring public participation has impact
- ★ Public participation needs to take place before decisions have been made. This means Council decision making needs to be more open and deliberative.
- ★ Public participation needs to make a difference. There needs to be a demonstrable impact that is evident in Council decision-making.
- ★ There needs to be an accountability mechanism, to ensure feedback is going to the right places and to track the impact it has had over time.

Ideas for improvement (cont)

Resources and training for engagement
- ★ Provide formalised support to (under resourced and marginalised) communities to take part and contribute to decisions
- ★ Invest in training around participatory models, for example second LAC staff into community organisations.

Greater connectivity and collaboration
- ★ Develop a culture where Sheffielders, public services and community organisations collaborate on local issues
- ★ People want to see more deliberation and consensus-building, more collaboration between political parties, and with communities and stakeholders
- ★ People want there to be better communications, with the Council being more open with Sheffielders, listening, talking and asking their views, providing feedback.

Page 65

9

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