

Approach to Public Questions at Sheffield City Council Meetings – interim findings from citizen engagement to date

3rd October 2023

What we've done to date

Survey

- Two surveys – one for public questions, one for petitions
- Promoted both on social media and through Council's email newsletters
- Contacted citizens who have asked public questions in the last 12 months and asked them for their views.

Workshop

- Public workshop in the town hall on 14th September
- Promoted along with the survey
- Table discussions with Members focused on listening to citizen experiences with people who have and people who haven't asked questions before.

Page 25

Findings from the surveys and workshop Public questions and petitions at Committees – Your Experience (Qualitative Data)

Public Questions at Committees – never asked a question, how could we encourage

Most respondents (over 70%) said they had never asked a question at a Council meeting

We asked if there is anything that would encourage you to ask questions?

People said to encourage them to ask questions they need more and clearer information, more about what each Committee is responsible for, what the process is, what they can expect if they do ask, and help in knowing what they could ask about and where to direct it, should it be a Council department, a Councillor, or to a meeting of the Council, if so which one.

Many respondents said they didn't know they could ask a question.

Public Questions at Committees – the process of asking

When people had asked a question they had strong views about the process, it was unclear, it was complicated, it wasn't accessible, not easy to find, it should be online, it should be available offline.

The interplay of publication of papers and timeline for submission in advance was mixed, for some at times it resulted in poor quality answers, not enough time for Councillors to get true depth answers, other times people felt they had missed an opportunity to ask because papers publication was too close to meeting day, others were pleased to have any opportunity.

People want the opportunity to be anonymous, to not attend but to still have questions read and answered, and publicly logged.

Public Questions at Committees– the process of response

When people did ask a question, many were angry with the quality of response, that often they didn't receive a response at all, that if they did it was shallow, meaningless, too politicised, that promises of a follow-up answer were not fulfilled.

Overwhelming was that **all** questions and answers should be published, for all Committees, they should be able to be tracked in the process, a log of submission, of response, what action, that can be seen publicly by all.

People wanted to see how what they asked had influenced change in the decision or the way we operate.

Public Questions at Committees – your experience

Of those who replied they have asked a question the experience felt predominantly negative, that members and officers could be rude and abrupt, the questioners had no confidence in the system, that they were not listened to, the power to influence change or a decision was negligible.

Not all experiences were negative, some welcome the opportunity and the support of Councillors.

People commented that being able to ask questions is democracy, and the process, response, influence should reflect this.

Public Questions at Committees– thoughts on improvement

People are asking for a clear protocol of what, when, how, that helps to manage expectations and guide through the process of asking a question.

A listening organisation where public can influence, take the politics out.

People commented that being able to ask questions is democracy, and the process, response, influence should reflect this.

The opportunity to ask, participate should be accessible to all.

Petitions to Council Committees – your experience

People generally thought the process was easy, with it split about 50/50 whether routed through our online form or a national online platform.

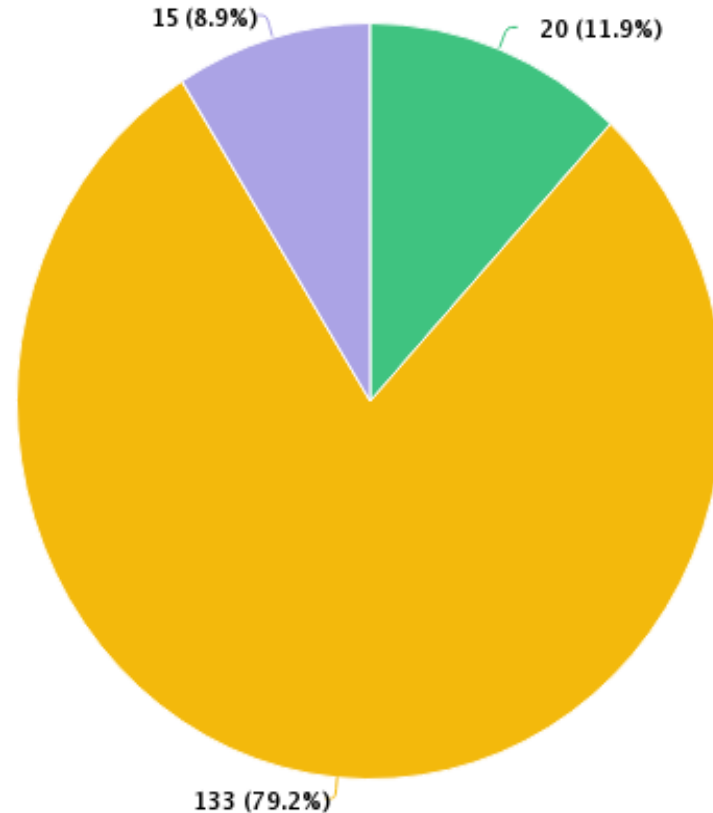
Information on how to submit a petition was readily available, occasionally people were confused by the number of signatures which trigger whether it is heard at Full Council or a Committee.

The main complaint was that our response or action to a petition is not easy to find, and that sometimes felt petitions were simply ignored.

A sample of the data output from survey: Public Questions at Committees – Your Experience

Page 32

Survey question results: Have you asked a question at Full Council, a Policy Committee, a Local Area Committee or any other?

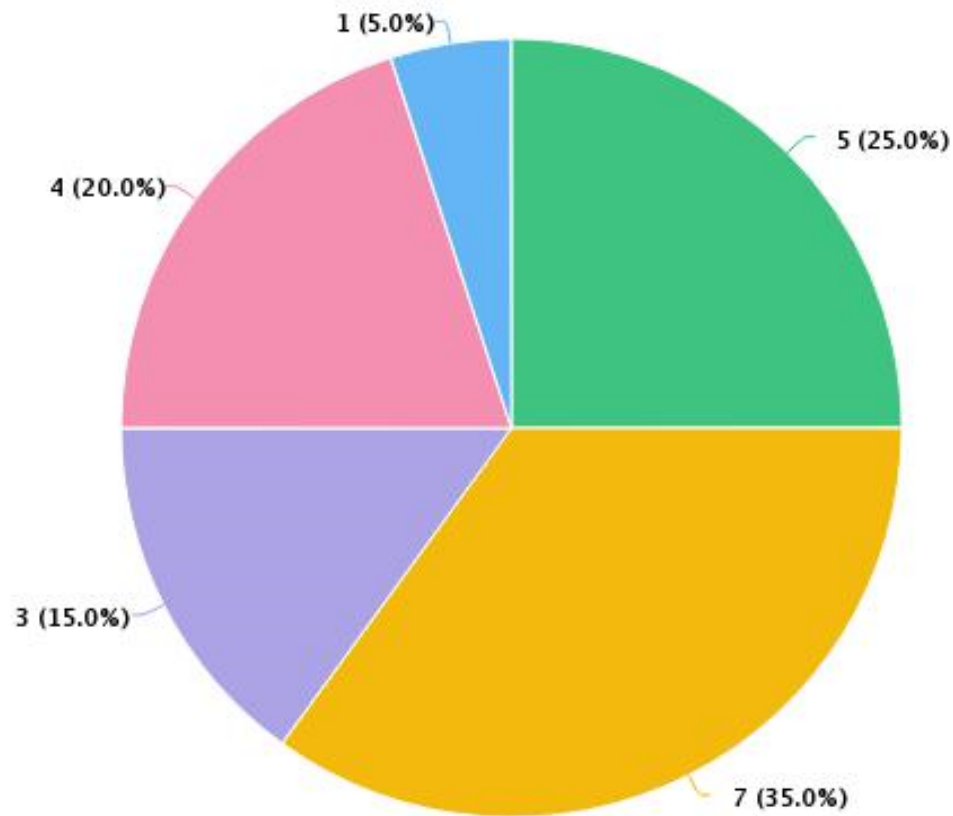


Question options

(Click items to hide)

- Yes I have asked a question once
- No
- Yes I've asked more than one question

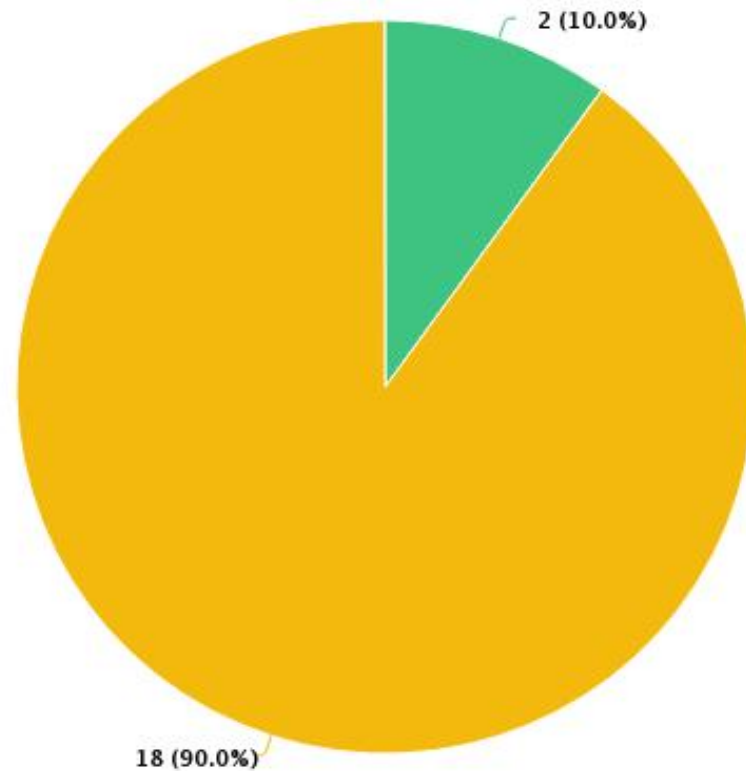
Survey question results: Which Committee did you ask your question at?



Question options *(Click items to hide)*

- Full Council
- A Policy Committee, includes Strategy & Resources, and Finance
- A Local Area Committee
- A Regulatory Committee, for example Highways, Licensing, Planning
- Other (please specify)

Survey question results: Were you satisfied with the answer?



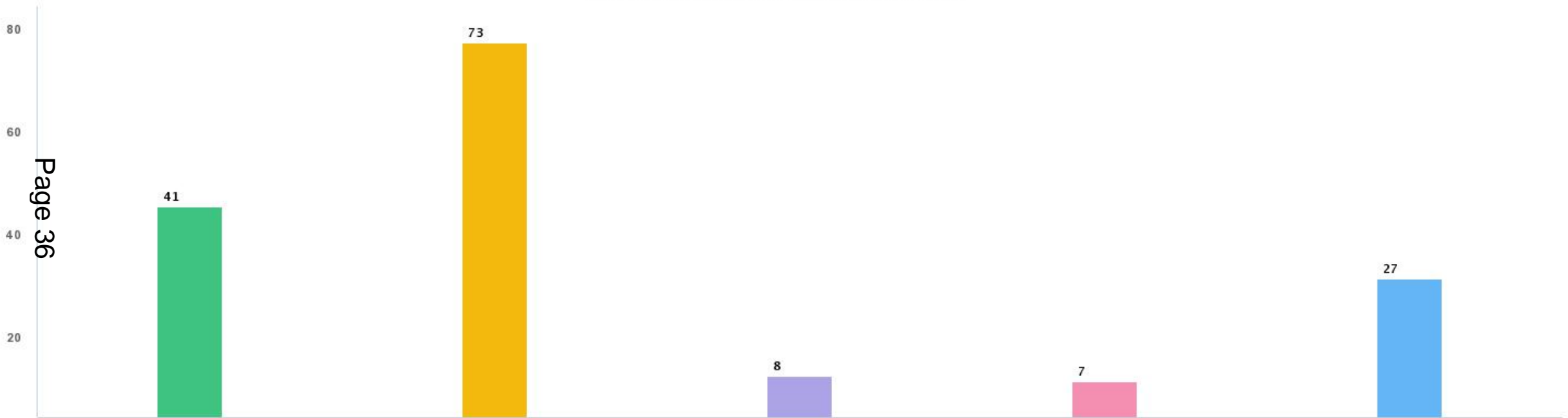
Question options

(Click items to hide)

- Yes
- No

Survey question results: Tell us why you haven't asked a question at Committee?

Please tell us why you haven't asked a question at Committee



Question options

(Click items to hide)

- Other (please specify)
- I tried to ask a question but found the process confusing
- I got the answer elsewhere
- I didn't know how or where to ask a question
- I didn't know I could ask

Next Steps for the task and finish group – over next months – to report at November Governance Committee (22.11.2023)

- Member feedback in Committee
- Continue evaluation of surveys and learning from the workshop – Process, Experience, and Solutions
- Insight from a citizen engagement session led by emerging community and citizen-led network
- Insight from staff who manage and are involved in public question process, both governance and responding, through survey and focus group
- Next meetings of Task and Finish Group
 - Proposals based on findings
 - Test / iterate solutions with staff – governance and responding
 - Test solutions with citizens
 - Draft report of recommendations for Governance Committee

This page is intentionally left blank