

S.O.S. Sheffield Oversight and Scrutiny

Holding our council to account



S.O.S. Citizen Scrutiny Report: Public Questions and Petitions

Report Coverage and Structure

This is a report following a public event held online on Sunday 8th October 2023, organised by Sheffield Oversight and Scrutiny (S.O.S.) - a citizen-organised platform in the process of setting up. The report brings citizen experiences and perspectives to bear on arrangements and processes for public questions and petitions at Sheffield City Council (SCC) full council and committee meetings (including Local Area Committees – LACs).

Section A is overall S.O.S. recommendations on potential improvements to public questions (PQs) and petitions at SCC from the scrutiny work undertaken. These are driven by the synthesis of contributions at (and before) the public event and also integrate background knowledge and research.

Section B reports on the public event where discussion was organised in breakout groups framed by two suggested question areas - reflections and experiences of public questions and petitions, and suggestions for general and specific improvements.

The section provides an overall summary of points made at the event. It is followed by a thematic grouping following full transcription of the breakout groups with integration of pre-event contributions (from people who could not attend on the night).

Section C is the background thinking and preparation by the organiser identifying some key questions and contexts (including core numeric data) and the kinds of things that might be asked and learnt from this. Whilst not intended to be definitive or comprehensive, we would expect any council review to include some explicit consideration of at least the contexts and questions outlined here and for supporting (or as back up evidence for) improvement proposals. A short overview of key background points was presented at the start of the public event, before breakout discussions.

The appendix is a note on methodology.

The main audience for this write-up is attendees at the event, and other interested local campaigners and community groups. We also hope it may be of wider interest to citizens generally, and to researchers and community campaigners elsewhere contemplating similar issues or public events. The report will be available on the S.O.S. website and is also being shared with SCC Governance Committee who have committed to sharing it in their minutes and identifying any contribution it makes to proposals coming out of the council review.

Section A: Overall S.O.S. Summary and Recommendations

Understanding public questions and petitions

Public questions (PQs) and petitions are complex but...

- Noted as important citizen rights, and part of wider participatory mechanisms, in the SCC Constitution

In practice they are also:

- An instrument for scrutiny, transparency and accountability
- A much utilised point of contact between the council and citizens/stakeholders of Sheffield (much more than in many – or even almost all – other councils); at the same time, many people are unaware of their existence
- Asked for a whole range of reasons, and often signifying substantial work and expertise behind the scenes by questioners
- Conducted through a difficult, stressful, frustrating (and often adversarial) process
- Regarded as far too limited in disallowing follow-up questions/corrections
- Not accessible to most - and also inequitably accessible, with some hard exclusions
- Sometimes subject to inordinate delays for answers, and hidden from public view
- Mostly asked by people on behalf of diverse groups/organisations and networks across the city, and also by individuals
- Subject to councillor 'myths' e.g. people ask questions for 'political reasons' or questioners really 'want a conversation'
- Extensively utilised in some committee arenas, almost not at all in others
- Attract answers widely perceived as inadequate
- Often perceived as unwelcome and/or inconsistently treated, with little or no evidence of their use in decision-making or for other purposes
- A largely untapped or neglected source for learning and opportunities for the council, and for deepening participation and influence

Council culture and orientation to public questions/petitions

1. Celebrate (and publicise) the engagement of so many citizens/all kinds of groups and stakeholders in using public questions and petitions including the significant increase in numbers exercising these citizen rights.
2. Acknowledge improvements need to follow, including for:
 - Accessibility, equity, and information
 - The quality of answers, including for transparency, accountability, and deepening participation
 - Administration, learning and continual improvement.
1. Develop/embrace the importance of public questions and petitions, the fact they should demonstrably *make a difference*, and a more rounded complex understanding of them.
2. Produce a constitutional amendment or supplement to commit the council to learning and continual improvement for public questions and petitions in line with operationalising its stated governance principles, good and emerging practice elsewhere, and (deepening participation) via ongoing learning from practice.
3. Consider appropriate training for councillors and officers on PQs and petitions as citizen rights participatory mechanisms (potentially enhanced by citizen input/delivery).

Key changes/improvements

4. The requirement to attend in person to get a public question answered in council/committees/LACs (and recorded) should be dropped as profoundly inequitable/restrictive.
5. 'Reasonable adjustments' should be clear and available at all stages.
6. SCC website information needs attention for basic accessibility and clarity for all.
7. A follow up question/response to answers given should be available.
8. Consider as potentially standard the provision of written answers published as part of the council/committee papers before the meeting. Use the public question agenda item to allow - if wanted - a follow up question to the committee per question asked (and enable hybrid access for this, as practised by some councils). NB This would broadly treat public questions similarly to Members questions.

9. Introduce an option of a 'public statement' as an alternative to a public question (again to be published in advance in council/committee papers) and/or in-person 'public deputations' (as practised by many other councils).
10. Reconsider how PQs work in the LACs given variable practice/inconsistencies – is the formality and regulations (sometimes) applied consistent with what is wanted from the LACs and emerging 'public forum' and general discussion approaches? Is there a more rounded approach to public questions in LACs that could and should be embraced and developed?
11. Develop a protocol for committee chairs to reduce inconsistencies of approach and for guidance (oriented towards enabling access rather than Chair's discretion to refuse).
12. Focus on improving answer quality¹.

Learning, reporting and administration

1. Jointly (with citizen/stakeholders) develop an approach to reporting at least annually on public questions and petitions, and for improvement planning, in line with the council orientation to public questions (see above)
2. Develop a new record-keeping protocol which is consistent, accurate and accessible (including tracking/'troubleshooting' where answers are delayed)
3. Provide a feedback mechanism for questioners to report issues with meeting minutes
4. Uphold committee report deadlines and develop a protocol for exceptional late reports

Section B

Public Questions and Petitions: How's it going Sheffield? The public event

All contributors had some sort of experience of presenting petitions and/or asking public questions (or attempting to ask) - some quite extensively. This covered Full Council meetings, Policy Committees and Local Area Committees (LACs). At least a couple of attendees also had experience in asking public questions of other statutory bodies e.g. South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority (SYMCA). All attendees except one were from a wider group/network/organisation in Sheffield (and some were associated with several groups/networks).

The public meeting was recorded and initially summarised in relation to breakout group discussions on experiences of asking public questions and presenting petitions, and specific and general improvements that might be made. This is the overview section (1).

Following this, the breakout groups were fully transcribed, collated with pre-event contributions from people who could not attend on the night, and key themes identified and analysed. This is the themes and discussions section (2).

Very few specific comments were made about petitions, comments focused on public questions (PQs).

¹ The issues that were identified in the public meeting in relation to improving answer quality were:

- providing high quality and relevant information (largely officers) to the question asked
- less 'waffle', not repeating previously corrected information
- providing effective scrutiny/political accountability and oversight of information provided (politicians) - not just "I've been told to read this out." Accountabilities should be clear.
- understand not all questions ask for or require officer input/information - some the opposite
- more use of referrals on to appropriate council/stakeholder forums (where these exist/are relevant)
- reduce delays where possible and e.g. promising meetings that don't then happen
- regularly re-examine whether and how 'commercial confidentiality' really applies (and its disadvantages to citizens)
- acknowledging any political differences if these are relevant in committee

(1) Overview

Attendee comments show they engaged with public questions and petitions for a variety of purposes, including...

- To inform the council of an issue needing response/action
- To pressure for more action and speed on a longstanding issue
- In order to enter an issue on the public record
- To seek more information and support on an issue of concern
- As a result of the loss of a regular forum in which (they and) the council had participated
- To inform a wider audience of an issue, hoping that local press might pick up on it
- To try and encourage better scrutiny within committees/council
- To offer/input information, specialist knowledge or expertise (including highlighting errors or alternative perspectives) in relation to an issue

Attendees found their experience...



They described some of their experiences...

"I've found that I've been promised a further written answer, but haven't received it, so the follow-up isn't great ... Sometimes you have to wait for the minutes – two months later – it's often irrelevant then."

"I got lies in response... but I have no recourse to correct that on the record as there's no chance for me to reply."

"On my way out I've been asked if I could ask a question for a group, as they've lost the confidence to go in there and do it."

"I wasn't told that my question was submitted [15 minutes] late, so I went to the meeting and sat in the public gallery, but I wasn't called. I started emailing officers from the gallery, and they replied ... I wasn't going to be called."

"Looking back through other minutes I discovered an answer to a question I didn't think I'd had answered... logged somewhere in the bowels of the website."

Attendees discussed the requirement to submit questions in advance...

They recognised the pragmatism of requiring questions in advance. This was mentioned as improving...

- In comparison with previous administrations
- Efficiency for administrators/officers
- The (potential) quality of information in answers

But... There was concern that time could then be taken to construct answers which avoided the question, rather than allowing the candidness of on-the-spot answers.

Attendees identified barriers to asking public questions or getting satisfactory answers, including...

Needing to be there on the day. They described this as difficult due to...

- Work schedules making the timing impossible
- Disabled access & partner's work schedules, ie. no transport to the Town Hall
- Health vulnerabilities and access to the town hall
- An officer suggesting they would have to ask Democratic Services if they could attend the meeting
- Feeling intimidated/not confident enough

Navigating the process of submitting a question. They described this as difficult due to...

- Information about the process being hard to find on the council's website
- Citizens not having information about their rights
- It being unclear which meeting or committee a question should be addressed to
- The difficulty of phrasing a question to fit council guidelines
- The short amount of time (and occasionally no time) between committee papers being published, and the deadline to ask questions.
 - This was also mentioned as reducing equity between citizens, due to the time requirements involved for some.

A lack of consistency in who is answering questions, particularly between officers and politicians...

- This caused problems when questions were regarding a specific party's local policy on an issue, rather than requiring a committee or officer response.
- When the question was for a committee: it was seen to be undermining the principles of the committee system, as not all members of the committee see the questions and contribute to an answer.
- It was noted particularly with regards to politicians reading out answers written by officers, of which they have no knowledge or conviction.
 - This was felt to limit citizens' and decision-makers' collaboration, where decision-makers might genuinely care about an issue, but the question isn't getting to them and/or they're not able to respond to citizens.
 - This was felt to contribute to a breakdown in trust between individuals: it is 'hard not to blame the messenger', even though those reading an answer out may not be responsible for it.

Attendees identified inconsistencies in the management and process surrounding PQs, including...

- Some people giving long speeches, others being told to hurry up
- Questions not being read out if people are unable to attend, but occasionally they are
- Delayed written answers being promised even when relatively simple questions have been submitted in advance
- Late committee reports – sometimes after the deadline for submitting public questions
- Whether a committee or a party (via chair) is answering a question
- If a question will lead to a substantive committee discussion or not
- In recording - both in minutes (and some are not on the website) and quality of the webcast

Attendees identified changes which would improve the process of asking public questions, including...

- Overall greater consistency in the execution of the process for public questions
- The opportunity to ask follow-up questions
 - This would reduce the rate of uninformative/non-answer answers, enable clarification if the question has been misunderstood or avoided, provide an opportunity to ask for more detail, and for correction to the record if information is considered wrong.
- Removal of the requirement to attend meetings in person (alongside publishing questions/answers in meeting papers)
 - This was seen as a sensible measure and to bring greater basic equity for all citizens in asking PQs (alongside other possible 'reasonable adjustments' as necessary) - with PQs then being used simply for a follow-up if needed.
 - Alternatively, it was suggested the ability to ask questions via webcast could be introduced
- Better and easier to access public records of questions and answers, to improve information about what has previously been asked, and accountability in satisfactory answers.
 - The website [Whatdotheyknow](#) was mentioned as having improved this in relation to FOI requests
- Improvements to the time taken to provide written answers when promised
- Training for officers on citizen's rights for PQs/petitions and the SCC process around them.

There was a positive response by attendees to aspects of the Bristol example (see Section C, Context 4):

- Removing the requirement for questioners to attend, highlighted as a discriminatory and unnecessary barrier affecting many
- Publication of questions/answers (and 'public statements') in the committee papers
- Ensuring a timely answer
- 'Public statements' reducing questioners time spent twisting a statement point into a question
- Providing the opportunity of a follow-up questions, for clarification or correction of misinformation
- Providing a more consistent and accessible public record

That is, aspects of the model were potential improvements for getting an answer, for answer quality, and for greater equity in treatment of public and member questions.

(2) Themes and discussions

Issues of access and equality

The requirement to attend to ask PQs was regarded as highly discriminatory towards some groups, and difficult for "probably the vast majority - work, caring, travel..." This may be reflected in some of the demographics of those who ask questions but this information is not known.

There is a hard barrier for anyone who is not independently mobile: "I just can't get to council meetings...I would like to ask them questions, yes, but unless [XXX] takes time off work to take me, it's impossible" and "...it's constantly said 'what about the disabled?' but disabled people can't even get there to speak". And, "I recently asked them at PQs to put basic 'reasonable adjustments' in place immediately. But I was quite shocked, they did nothing." (It is also notable that recently a questioner stated "I've brought the diversity with me" to name her experience of facing a committee.)

Remote access was also mentioned, which seems to be possible for some e.g. 'independent members' of certain committees, but not available to public questioners (beyond a trial in a LAC); but overall the requirement to attend was questioned in itself.

In addition, the timing of papers coming out in relation to questions having to be submitted is short and this was raised as creating additional barriers for those with particular disabilities. Late papers - which happens - prevents everyone submitting report-related questions by the deadlines.

But “The whole system is adversarial, sitting in a chair in front of a row of people staring back at you kind of thing, and obviously not knowing how it all works and it being in a big fancy room and all that, it’s very off-putting, many people just would not do it.” And even before this: “It’s almost impossible for the ‘ordinary person’. The very first link to get to information is almost impossible to find at the very bottom of the page - the first of many links - to get to the basic information.” The system appears to have little or no appreciation of these aspects. Someone suggested all this might be “purposeful” or simply practical in order to manage numbers (and “obviously everyone in Sheffield can’t ask a public question”).

Attendees had been in the position of mitigating impacts on occasion in light of some poor/inequitable council approaches e.g. being supportive of other questioners, explaining things to ‘new’ people, and asking questions on behalf of others.

The advance submission of public questions.....

Advance submission of public questions was compared to what existed previously - “It is interesting the council used covid as the mechanism to introduce advance submission - and previously it was all rather haphazard, scribbling down questions just before the meeting...the politicians grandstanding on the hoof....used to get quite leery sometimes, with [further] ‘questions’ to their so-called ‘answers’ being shouted over the balcony...”, and “the political knockabout, it’s horrible for many questioners”.

On one hand, “I can perceive that it’s being managed and I can only sympathise with the council as to why they might want to do that.” On the other hand, “Some questions do require officer information or briefing, some don’t, but in the change we have lost the opportunity to put politicians on the spot and that’s partly why we need a follow-up.” Overall, “some things need adding to it [advance submission]”.

Answers in general

A lot of the discussion was about answers to public questions - perceived as exclusions and not getting answers, bland, uninformative or avoidant answers, and ‘non-answer’ answers.

For example: “I submitted questions to the [XXX] LAC, requesting them to be minuted and read out - my disability prevents me attending. Instead the questions were not asked but were forwarded by the LAC chair to the meeting of the [XXX] Committee, where they again were not minuted, acknowledged or read out.”

And, “You never get a proper answer...either it’s answering a question you didn’t ask or they’ve extracted just a little, tiny bit and answered something from it that they’ve decided was the question, instead of the real question.”

And “...answers are very often distortions of reality...” or “The response I got was basically lies, I had no recourse so on the record the council’s response is untrue. I didn’t blame the person giving the answer because I knew she didn’t know, someone gave her that to read out.”

And, “At the LACs some councillors are very comfortable with certain questions especially if they provide potential photo-ops for them!” and similarly: “[XXX] has been known to shut down people asking about things they find awkward.” And (also at a LAC), “I wasn’t prepared to take any more bunkum, it got into an exchange, and the upshot was two councillors ran out promising to arrange a meeting, but of course that didn’t happen, nothing.”

There are negative and compounding impacts of poor quality answers: “...an incredibly bland answer, it told me nothing but I’d given up my time to ask. You have to be a dog with a bone to follow-up outside the meeting, it’s a lot of work, time-consuming, and liaising back with the group...unanswered emails..thankless..and they never ask us to agree the minutes. I’ve sometimes discovered months on, digging through, what a dog’s dinner they are, misrepresentation...”

Slightly more positively (but with persistence and preparedness to embarrass required), “I got a positive response and follow up from the LAC that time but I had to shame them first about the five months they’d ignored my questions.”

And, “Often they don’t send a written answer when they say they will. You wait two months for the minutes, hunt through - often it’s too late then anyway.”

Entering an issue on the public record

This experienced group of public questioners touched on many reasons for asking questions but several emphasised the importance of entering something on the public record (as well as several who wanted to enable better scrutiny, see below).

In part, this reflected (this group’s) learning over time i.e. the unsatisfactory nature of most answers given. It was acknowledged that entering something on the public record was by no means likely to be the primary intention of those going to ask questions for the first time - nor had it necessarily been theirs. However, several attendees sought “getting things minuted for future reference”. And, “The purpose is to get it on public record, it formally alerts the council that the issue is (still) hot, that they haven’t put it to bed as they might wish, and I also hope that the Local Democracy Reporters pick up on it too to give it further airing”. However, it was noted: “They won’t read them out, you still have to attend; they sometimes say they may incorporate into the minutes if you’re not there, but that may or may not happen.”. It was suggested “If you want to get on public record then your question should be read out for the record regardless of whether you are there or not - the vast majority can’t attend, it’s a very strange restriction”.

Some explained further in relation to expectations: “The psychological frustration element of engaging with the council process - you really have to be ready for it. A couple of times the group I was involved with were less cynical than I was about the whole process so were more frustrated by it and more disillusioned by how difficult it was. I feel like I would be hesitant again about encouraging a group into it without people being really clear that it’s got certain strategic value but it’s going to be quite adversarial and quite disempowering. And that’s a risk of using these council processes.”

It is also notable that no attendees mentioned ‘political reasons’ for asking questions, and none said they wanted a conversation (rather than a PQ). Both of these have been mentioned recently by Governance Committee members apparently reflecting their understanding about why people ask questions). It is, indeed, quite easy to see the occasional party political ‘plant’ at PQs. However, overall, asserting ‘political reasons’ and thinking people want conversations at PQs may reflect more about councillor lenses and perspectives rather than a reality, at least for this group of experienced civil society and third sector questioners.

Questions for ‘scrutiny’ - information, accountability and follow-ups

Beyond getting on the public record, contributors here also emphasised public questions as having important purposes in relation to scrutiny and, in particular, to enable better scrutiny by councillors.

A contributor summarised: “It all seems a bit pointless somehow. The questions are answered by the council officers who have written the reports to the councillors in the first place. Most of the answers are cut and paste from their reports or deliberately avoid answering direct questions. We have provided specific critique of officers’ reports demonstrating particulars that are not correct - but still they are repeated. Petitions seem to be ignored. The point of our questions was to try and get councillors to properly scrutinise officers’ reports but I have only seen [XXX] do that. I have, on the other hand, seen councillors repeat officers “facts” that we have demonstrated to be misleading or, in the case of [XXX] heard how members of their family [feel about it].”

Someone reported, “I got a stumbling, defensive answer - some other councillor said ‘that’s not an answer’ and the Chair, exasperated, just said, “Look, I’ve been asked to read this out”, shut him down. So that was that. What’s the point?” And another explained - “Scrutiny is meant to happen within the committees now, and so often questions people are asking are enabling the councillors to scrutinise and it’s like the councillors don’t see it like that....it’s

really trying to enable them to make better decisions and to my mind they're not using that at all." Similarly, "I've been really disappointed in the lack of scrutiny from the councillors. The answers are written by officers...[they] come up with some kind of bureaucratic answer, it doesn't really answer the question and the councillors don't seem to scrutinise, they just read out what they've given, so that's really disappointing. At the LAC once I got a waffly answer, but another councillor (from the same party) came in and seemed to be questioning the given line and did seem to be thinking for himself a bit. But yes, it's the quality of the scrutiny of whatever they are told by officers...I felt that was a problem all through the street tree ridiculousness, the councillors would just take a scripted line given to them. So that's my concern."

There was an understanding that there were different kinds of questions - "some require officer briefing but some do not" but a focus on scrutiny was closely linked to both questions of political accountability and about the denial of follow-up questions not being permitted. On accountability, this was emphasised in, "I'm a little bit leery about politicians relying on officers to answer questions. How do you get both the information, and the political accountability?" In this vein, another stated: "I got an answer written by an officer who is being 'politically neutral' - but I'm not asking for political neutrality, I'm asking for political accountability." There was a sense of councillors sometimes hiding behind officer written answers or 'palming off' accountability. But a 'council-insider' contributor stated that anyway "...a lot is about covering yourself and being defensive, and trying not to commit to anything and avoid any kind of accountability, and that's the culture from top to bottom."

There was a strong view expressed about follow-up questions being necessary: "we should have a follow-up, to correct errors, to suggest it's not an answer, for more detail, whatever".

And "The issue about not being allowed to respond when you're told something that really doesn't sound right, it would be so much better if we got an answer first and then got an opportunity to respond/follow up. Thinking about [XXX's] example, when you're told a blatant lie and then you can't refute it and then that lie goes down in the minutes as the answer..."

Contributors also noted occasional different views within committees that it wasn't clear Chairs knew how to handle and "everyone is meant to be involved and to collectively own it a bit in committee but they don't all see the questions, nor answers" but that "sometimes, someone comes in and ploughs a different line" And "it's a step in the right direction I suppose, and it should be clear where there are significant differences".

Answer standards and exclusions

There was some debate as to whether information provided in answer to public questions should be in line with FOI principles/accuracy and it was thought this was the case even if presented as a public question rather than as an FOI request. Given some widespread dissatisfaction with information given in answers, the relationship between FOIRs and PQs might be worth considering further and a possible avenue for questioner follow-up (though this involves more time and effort).

The issue of 'commercial confidentiality' was also raised with restrictions on information noted as preventing private interests being brought into the public domain and accessible to public challenge, via public questions or otherwise. This was a particular concern in relation to potentially ineffective scrutiny, and underpinned by a lack of confidence in the overall management of commercial contracts.

Inconsistencies

There were many inconsistencies highlighted by contributors in terms of the processes for public questions. One Committee Chair consistently takes/reads/answers questioners from non-attendees. All the others, using Chair's discretion, generally do not, even where there is no apparent pressure of time - "it doesn't exactly suggest questions are important, or that they are keen to answer". In this way questions submitted as 'public questions' (and their answers) become hidden; they might, or might not, appear on a record somewhere at some point, but who would know this. Great delays to 'written answers' (or never receiving an answer) were also reported by contributors.

Examples were cited of conversations back and forth in public questions and why these might have happened, showing perhaps the limits of purely brief transactional exchanges when important issues are at stake. This

observation might also indicate that more conversations were needed prior to the issue, where councillors possibly might be nervous about a (controversial) issue or a particular group, or when someone is not used to, or ignores, the protocol; councillors also got into discussion on a few questions where there seemed to be some issues of political disagreement or emphasis placed (and presumably exacerbated under No Overall Control). Examples given of LAC questions more often seemed to go beyond the formalities of PQs elsewhere (even to group discussion with other members of the public 'chipping in'), but not always, suggesting it might be worth considering the function and operation of PQs in LACs, and how they align with LAC purposes.

Written answers were inconsistently received, sometimes involving many months of waiting.

PQs/Petitions in relation to a bigger picture

Attendees did want to raise 'bigger picture' issues notably how PQs/petitions sit alongside wider participatory mechanisms, perceived differential access, and council culture.

Two attendees talked about the loss of an important stakeholder/council forum with promises of a replacement but nothing forthcoming. They and others talked about some groups/stakeholders potentially appearing to have an inside track or preferential access to existing partnership groups/forums. Therefore, for some, public questions became something you did because you were blocked or excluded elsewhere - often despite evident expertise. That is, there was no other option than PQs/you had nowhere else to go: "Some groups already have the ear of councillors, they're on the inside, so they don't need to go to the LACs." and "We've wondered why we are excluded and blocked because we have much expertise - excluding people stops the council making progress, it's really slow, we could help if only they'd let people and partners get on with it."

Some issues were said to "require advanced stakeholder engagement arrangements" (rather than the limited and binary back and forth of public questions) but "these do not exist and the council is not learning from all these public questions and petitions that keep coming again and again".

On culture generally, a 'council-insider' contributor commented that: "It happens to employees, that is the culture within the council, if you ask a question or indicate something isn't going right you'll never get a proper response, it will just get sort of waylaid."

Section C: Contexts

Introduction

Public questions (PQs) and petitions can be seen as part and parcel of other participatory arrangements that might exist in a council. As such they are one expression, or reflection, of the relationships and culture between a council and citizens. They are a point of interaction – but only one. In this sense, they are quite hard to discuss in isolation. Whilst directing attention specifically to PQs and petitions it's worthwhile remembering that they sit as part of that bigger picture.

PQs and petitions are also 'citizen's rights' and described as such in [the council constitution](#). So, as well as being part of any broader participatory arrangements or mechanisms, they are also important in their own right, as 'rights' to be exercised. Indeed, they are currently the only formal mechanism for citizens to have *direct* input onto the public record and into decision-making committees.

In addition, organising for petitions in particular (but also, often, for PQs) has a wider contribution to active citizenship. The process can involve mobilisation around a specific issue, producing wider and general citizen and community participation not only in relation to SCC.

In both their *participatory* functions and in terms of *direct input* PQs and petitions are arguably of real significance for our local democratic and governance fabric. Practically, much time is devoted to PQs and petitions, by both questioners and council.

Therefore, it is worthwhile asking what we can learn from their current configuration. This includes in terms of organisation and administration, in the responses, in the influence they have, and their role as a point of interaction between citizen and council. Overall, does our council make the most of the opportunities PQs and petitions might offer?

Context 1 - PQs and petitions in recent years

1. Recent changes to PQs and petition processes

There have arguably been some significant observable changes to council PQ and petition practices in the last few years:

- Notably, pandemic arrangements saw the introduction of the requirement to submit PQs two working days in advance of meetings (previous practice was that a citizen could turn up to a relevant council meeting 15 minutes in advance, state intent to ask a question and scribble down a brief note). This requirement has been retained post-pandemic.
- In addition, successive changes of council leadership, as well as the change to a committee system, appears to have led to observable changes. Under the new system it is notable that Committee Chairs have quite a lot of discretion for their treatment of PQs and petitions.

Overall, and tentatively and broadly, one might typify shifts in council PQ and petition practice as having moved from more of an *adversarial approach*, to one that is more *bureaucratized* (e.g. with more hoops to jump through to ask a question). If so, is this a direction of travel we want to see? And, if not, how would we rather like to be able to

describe our local PQ and petition arrangements? It is also worth asking whether a change in tone or style is necessarily a change in content (i.e substantive or meaningful).

1. Reviews of public questions and petitions

We are not aware of any previous review or examination of PQs and petitions in Sheffield, and any learning or changes implemented from this. Nor were PQs and petitions addressed as part of the initial governance transition year (2022), despite their henceforth discussed status as a significant contribution to our democratic fabric. When PQs and petitions appeared somewhat at the eleventh hour in Governance Committee deliberations on transition, it initially appeared that these rights might be somewhat ‘watered down’ in new arrangements. As it turned out, they appeared essentially unchanged in the new constitution.

The Governance Committee (GC) has recently appointed a Task and Finish Group to review PQs and petitions. So far this has resulted in a council survey ([interim report here](#)) where the majority of respondents seem not to have had experience of asking PQs or presenting petitions. There has also been a face-to-face workshop with citizens, councillors and officers. The Chair of the GC contacted S.O.S. organisers to request, if possible, feedback from this citizen-led event into the council review.

Context 2 - Data on Public Questions

1. Numbers of PQs and petitions

Table 1 collates - as far as was possible - the number of PQs and petitions asked at Full Council meetings, Policy Committees and LACs in the year September 2022-August 2023.

The monthly totals do not matter so much - reflecting, largely, the pattern of committee meetings over the year, as well as when some key issues arose at committees. The overall totals, though, are of interest:

- A total of 472 PQs were minuted in some form at Full Council and Policy Committees and 43 petitions were presented. A further 141 PQs were asked at LACs.

Month	Council/Cttee PQs	Council/Cttee Petitions	LAC PQs	LAC petitions
September 2022	44	7		
October	15	0	45	0
November	90	8		
December	24	1		
January 2023	2	1	35	0
February	35	12		
March	75	5	27	0
April	9	0		
May	29	2		
June	53	3	34	0
July	71	3		
August	25	1		
Total	472	43	141	0

Table 1. SCC Public Questions and Petitions September 2022-August 2023

(data extracted from SCC meeting agendas, minutes, recent webcasts and additional material available on democracy.sheffield.gov.uk)

This data comes with some caveats, as it was difficult and time-consuming to extract even basic quantitative data:

- Cross-referencing was required, sometimes across multiple source points
- There was some misreporting of numbers in minutes themselves
- There were some missing minutes, especially for LACs
- Discretionary/inconsistent chairing and minuting/recording practices were evident
- Some PQs were excluded/not heard (for whatever reason)
- Some questions were in parts, others were grouped together but arguably separate questions

Given these, and other, difficulties the numbers recorded in Table 1 should be treated as 'ball-park figures'. They are almost certainly an under-count of actual PQs. The task is especially difficult for LACs, as some have developed a greater informality. As a result, on occasion, 'formal' PQs merge with general discussion and public input.

Despite this, we think most people will be surprised at the high number of PQs and petitions. Though 472 PQs are not from 472 different people, neither are they from a small number of people. Additionally, it is evident that approximately 80% of questioners (and, by definition, all petitioners) are not asking questions as individuals – they are linked into groups, organisations, campaigns and networks of one sort or another. Therefore, a single PQ is sometimes being asked on behalf of large numbers of people. The number of 'questioners' is, in this sense, much higher than 472.

1. Additional Analysis

The difficulty and time necessary to achieve this basic quantitative overview for PQs and petitions precluded additional analysis. However, it was possible to gain further impressions:

- An estimation that 65% of questioners/petitioners are male
- There is a striking variation in the minuting of PQs between LACs
- Some Policy Committees get virtually no PQs. Conversely, the Committees receiving the most PQs are:
 - Waste and Street Scene
 - Transport, Regeneration and Climate Policy
 - Communities, Parks and Leisure
 - Charity Trustees Sub-Committee

We think the consistent variation between committees is particularly interesting, with multiple potential interpretations.

Thematically, PQs deliver a rich snapshot of a whole range of issues about which citizens are concerned enough to come and ask PQs or collect petition signatures about (and, in part, reflecting SCC timetables for bringing certain items to council/committees). This includes

- All things climate (multiple different strands)
- Parks (generally and specifically)
- Racism, disability and other equality issues (including cost of living)
- CAZ implementation
- The Street Trees Inquiry
- The Local Plan

LAC questions overall (but in no way exclusively) focus on slightly different issues, specific to locality, notably:

- Highways
- Anti-social behaviour
- Littering
- Local developments

In addition, very many questions contain important governance aspects i.e. about how an issue is being considered or decisions being taken. Governance continues to be a key citizen concern.

These impressions are in no way a systematic analysis, only impressions throughout the basic counting exercise undertaken. SCC does not appear to collate or report on numbers or any learning from them.

Subsequent to the public event, a further count of PQs was taken for a previous year - this was done for September 2018 - August 2019 (deliberately pre-covid disruptions). The figure was 262 public questions (compared to 472 in 2022/23). Therefore there has been a 70% increase in the numbers of PQs between 2018/19 and 2022/23. (This increase would be significantly above a 100% increase if one individual - at that time consistently very active - questioner was removed from the figures.) There is actually a 'good news' story here in terms of some increasing citizen/stakeholder engagement (perhaps with an opening up of opportunities to ask questions and some greater awareness following the campaign for, and transition to, a committee system) - as well as resource/manageability considerations. Now, arguably, there needs to be further follow through on this in a number of different ways to make the experience more positive and for more equitability.

1. Learning from the data

With no collation and (public) reporting of data around PQs and petitions by SCC, there is little demonstration of an effort to learn from them. This runs contrary to the expressed importance of PQs and petitions by SCC. Even basic data appears to receive virtually no attention.

We think that the high numbers of PQs and petitions provide a rich source of information and learning that should not be ignored. This data can, for example, aid tracking outcomes, help to understand significant public concerns (at least those that motivate people to take the trouble and time to bring issues to council meetings), help identify where more collaborative action or discussion might need to take place, and improve responsiveness.

A thorough council review should systematically examine what council records can tell us about the arrangements, systems and procedures for PQs and petitions to support learning and improvement planning.

Context 3 - PQ and Petitions and SCC Governance Principles

SCC's governance principles include the aims to...

- Be democratic
- Be open and transparent
- Include all Councillors in decision-making
- Listen to everyone
- Be forward looking and keep improving

However, there is more to SCC's stated governance principles than these broad aims. For example:

- It "*should be easy for people to find information ... [and] how they can get something done through the council*"
- Arrangements should "*make sure people in each part of the system know what's happening in other parts, and that they all work together.*"

The governance principles also include standards surrounding engagement too – transparency, diversity, inclusive participation, equality, responsiveness ("*We will listen, and use what we hear to help us take decisions.*"). All of these stated claims and commitments are relevant to PQs and petitions.

Based on our attendee experiences in Section B, current systems for PQs and petitions does not appear to necessarily uphold SCC's governance principles (in full or part), nor have these moved beyond 'principle' into fuller description or understanding them as a basis for, perhaps, setting improvement aims or measuring progress. Any review of PQs and petitions should be carefully considering/assessing any disparities (including perceived disparities) between governance principles and practices, and for the purpose and direction of improvement proposals.

Context 4 - Other council arrangements and practices for PQs and petitions

The fourth key context we might look to is what other councils do with respect to PQs and petitions.

Of course, cross-council comparison is not necessarily straightforward. As PQs and petitions are one part of participatory systems, which vary tremendously, analysing one aspect of such can be trivial. Nor is it necessarily

desirable to look afar for 'solutions' rather than attain a depth of understanding of one's own context and then develop appropriate arrangements. However, insights from elsewhere and theoretical models can be illustrative and inspirational. Other councils' models for PQs and petitions may be advantageous to a review of public PQs and petitions in Sheffield.

Across councils there is a range of procedural arrangements for PQs and petitions, varying from what might be described as tightly regulated/prescribed (or technocratic/bureaucratic) through to open and flexible/accessible arrangements. Some councils have many alternative (and variously formalised/embedded) arrangements to PQs and petitions, including forms of early and meaningful stakeholder and community engagement so that PQs and petitions as somewhat 'rearguard actions' might be less necessary. In Scotland the statutory frameworks within which councils operate are different, resulting in a whole host of different participatory structures and processes.

A few examples of other councils arrangements and practices with regards PQs and public questions:

- We know of one council in England that has no PQ system, which has been a cause of considerable disquiet amongst local community groups and campaigners.
- Scotland has an entirely different (statutory) framework in place for 'participation' and Glasgow, for example, has no PQ system in place for its council committees,
- Brighton integrates stakeholders via co-option onto its committees.

Aspects of Bristol's arrangements for PQs and petitions are particularly interesting:

- Bristol practices 'public forum' arrangements for council meetings
- PQs are submitted in advance
- All PQs are published and receive a written answer (except for the most complex questions) in the meeting papers ahead of the meeting or on the day
- The public question session is an opportunity to ask a follow-up question *if wanted*
- There is also an option for citizens to submit a 'public statement' (within limits), rather than a question - again, these are all published in council/committee papers

This model treats PQs closer to the way Members' Questions are treated in SCC full council.

In addition, it is notable that many councils have rights of 'public deputations' by groups (perhaps in some ways not that dissimilar to 'public statements') to council/committees. 'Public deputations' are an integral element alongside council PQ and petition arrangements that apply. Certainly it appears all London boroughs have these arrangements in place, perhaps to reflect the multiplicitous civic society and community and interest groups and networks, and third sector organisations, that operate in diverse, urban contexts. But many other southern England councils also appear to have similar public deputation arrangements in place too. However, it appears many councils in the north of England do not have this mechanism in place (though may allow public statements), although Kirklees seems to be an exception - and there may be others too. ('Public deputation' may not be that understandable as a phrase for some people; however, it does add a slight sense of seriousness or importance. There may be a better phrase.)

In Summary

These contexts prompt some key questions for thinking about and learning through PQ and petition arrangements:

- What is the importance of PQs and petitions in Sheffield and SCC?
- What can we learn from the current levels and themes of PQs and petitions, including from core data?
- How well do arrangements for PQs and petitions align with SCC's governance principles?
- What can we learn from what other councils do for PQs and petitions (and similar)?

Although in no way definitive, these questions are useful for supporting citizen reflection on our own experiences of PQs and petitions, and for identifying potential improvements.

Additionally, we think these are the kinds of questions that we, as citizens, should expect our council to be asking itself.

Appendix: Methodological Note

This note is for transparency and we hope also helpful to others potentially considering holding similar public events for citizen scrutiny purposes.

The citizen scrutiny event here was a collaborative and participatory exploration and examination of experiences of public questions and petitions at Sheffield City Council. So, the event was set up as a (free, online) 'public meeting'. (Eventbrite notice: https://www.eventbrite.com/e/public-questions-and-petitions-hows-it-going-sheffield-tickets-719354146617?fbclid=IwAR2SrusPhQymbE16VPbNvOt-zWQwPpa6PqsVjix5osFoVe3_g5j4A2lwZGI)

It is well-documented that citizen and community-led initiatives of this kind are well-placed to, and often more successful than public authorities and institutions, at bringing together and enabling positive citizen engagement on issues of concern, despite big disparities in resources and capacity. The event was planned and organised by two individuals, both of whom are engaged in different ways in city-wide networks, groups and activities relating to local democracy and governance. This includes observing and engaging with a variety of different council processes/structures; one of the organisers has regular experience over several years of asking public questions (and has previously presented a petition to council too).

We circulated [the eventbrite notice](#) of the meeting on Twitter, to a range of neighbourhood Facebook groups, and to some issue-based Facebook groups to which we had access (especially where we knew there had been recent PQ and petitioner activity). We also directly contacted a range of community and campaign group contacts, including contacting individuals and representatives of equality groups/campaigning on equality issues (anti-racism, disability etc.). In the notice we invited comments via email for people who were unable to attend. We did not request that the council circulate notice of the event, e.g. send to their comprehensive lists of all recent public questioners, as we thought it crucial to remain clear we were citizens organising and meeting independently from our council.

To prioritise (qualitative) depth we did not want to be overwhelmed with numbers, hoping for approximately 10 attendees in two breakout groups. 22 individuals booked a ticket at the online event and we had 12 attendees on the night (with two apologies). We held two breakout group discussions in the meeting. Event contributions were supplemented by a handful of substantive email contributions, and two pre-meeting conversations from people who were unable to attend. In all, this report collates the experiences/thinking of 18 contributors.

The public event was not constructed as a piece of research. However, we decided to apply some basic research approaches/techniques to analysing event contributions ('data') in line with organiser skills and experience (rather than simply compile 'minutes' for example). This process was iterative. Firstly, an initial compilation was captured in relation to the broad question areas in the breakout group discussions – this provides an overview of event discussions. Following this, the breakout groups were transcribed, pre-event contributions were included, and themes and discussion issues identified/grouped – this provides greater detail and a lot of contributor quotations where emphasis was placed. The overall S.O.S. recommendations are driven by contributor comments and also integrate aspects of the background research undertaken where this is pertinent or adds value. Finally, the draft report was sent out to all attendees inviting further comment on the report, to be produced as an addendum. We regard this as an important step for a collaborative and participatory approach, and additional comments also offered the opportunity to extend input beyond the event and on further reflection.

By definition (as a piece of *citizen scrutiny*), the work undertaken does not include other perspectives such as officers and councillors. There are some other limitations to note, most importantly the limited time of one event. There is also little about petitions here. Additionally, all bar one attendee were closely associated with (sometimes a range of) groups, organisations or networks, rather than being 'individual questioners'. Whilst this reflects what we understand to be the case in general for those asking PQs and petitions, there may be different or additional issues arising for individuals asking PQs and bringing petitions.

Sheffield Oversight and Scrutiny (S.O.S.), November 2023.

ADDENDUM

In sending out the draft to participants, there was just one request for addition to this report. It was an issue very briefly mentioned in the public event but not captured in initial notes, about exclusions to what it is permitted in public questions:

".....the apparent prohibition on asking questions that are directed to councillors as party members or to party representatives to answer on behalf of the party. Surely the public must be able to hold cllrs/parties to account by asking them such questions in the public forum to be documented formally by the council, but they appear to be prohibited.

Councillors shouldn't be allowed to hide behind the fiction that they are 'representing the council' when they answer questions, or to be allowed to read out answers written by officers if the questioner wants to get an answer from the councillor or party.

A question like 'Why did Cllr X vote in this way?' or 'Why did party X run a misleading campaign during the local election?' should be allowed to be asked and to get an answer, not prohibited because 'it's an internal party matter'. Questions are surely not just about holding the council to account but also individual councillors and parties."

Comment: Public questions are said to be to the council. The council – as well as political parties and individual councillors – should consider the mechanisms whereby members of the public are able to acquire information, scrutinise, and hold them to account. There are clear overlaps where parties or groups of councillors have to take action, but within an overall council framework e.g. as is clearly indicated by the Lowcock Report where the party in power at the time is clearly having to re-examine, and charged with changing, its culture etc. Arguably parties are accountable to the council overall for delivering against this. Given the council framework (Lowcock recommendations) it is certainly possible to argue that contempt for the public is shown if a party does not want to then answer questions about what it has done/its changing culture – *in light of Lowcock*. Where issues overlap like this (is it a question about the council or is it a question about a party) council rulings should err on the side of public interest and include the question; the council overall should be concerned if a party refuses to do so in this context (because how, then, can it show it is delivering against recommendations). All political parties with a role on the council should also consider what mechanisms they have that are accessible to the public to request information or challenge their actions (citing "the vote" which is retrospective anyway, is surely not enough), even when this is arguably entirely *beyond* council frameworks and overall oversight. This issue comes to prominence in Sheffield in light of the hidden interventions of outside players that were revealed after the local elections in relation to the largest political party in Sheffield council – secretive and arguably deceptive (and certainly not transparent) events like this have an impact on the public, and public trust.