

This policy memo is written by the newly appointed leader of Southampton City Council, Rashmi Winter, to the Chief Executive of Southampton City Council, Mike Harris. Following the election of all seats on 4th May 2023, no political party had overall majority and an independent councillor was elected to position of leader. This and previous elections have been bitterly fought on issues of local transport. This fictitious new leader has made it their priority to address the democratic and cultural issues that limit understanding of the needs of the local community. Their initial focus is in respect to safe and healthy transport infrastructure.

All the evidence presented in this memo is real and based on recent events. I have witnessed first hand the division arising from local political debate, particularly regarding transport issues. The friction has spilled into local communities and, in the opinion of many local cyclists, has led to an increase in animosity on our streets, dangerous driving and verbal abuse of cyclists, including school children.

Whilst researching this paper, I learned that a Citizens Climate Assembly is being set up for Southampton. It is expected to be launched this year (2023). I had already discounted the idea of a citizens' assembly on climate change for this paper because I believe this is has too wide a subject. Further, as identified by Matt Ryan¹, holding a "Climate Assembly" may predetermine who may be willing to participate. For these reasons, I am not incorporating this real-world assembly into my recommendations.

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To: Mike Harris
From: Rashmi Winter
Subject: Evolving local democracy and governance
Date: 8th May 2023

Dear Mr Harris,

I firmly believe that people are experts in their own lives and I wish to focus this new administration on better incorporation of this expertise into our decision-making. I propose to evolve both local democracy and council governance by developing processes for public participation and deliberation (PPD) alongside a strong culture of experimentation, transparency and responsiveness to feedback.

Recent years have seen a rise in tension between elected Southampton City Council (SCC) members and with officers of the council. Such tensions reduce the capacity of the council to act on the pressing issues that our city faces. We have limited capability to gain deep understanding of the public's needs and wants, which undermines the possibility of arriving at a strong and lasting consensus on challenging decisions. The perception that local councillors are creating division to further their own careers undermines the council's legitimacy to make ambitious policy.

In the following, I will outline the issues and how I intend address these to evolve our council over the next 100 days.

Background

Local ambitions

SCC's Corporate Plan sets out ambitions that include becoming a UNICEF-recognised Child-Friendly-City by 2025² and a Zero Carbon City by 2035. A child-friendly Southampton will be a safe, healthy and happy place to grow up³, and Net Zero will deliver environmental, social, and economic benefits⁴.

Both ambitions will require addressing complex, interrelated health and transport problems. Nearly a third of the city's carbon emissions come from the transport sector⁴ and it is a major source of air pollution⁵. Poor air quality in Southampton is implicated in lung disease in hundreds of residents⁶ and contributes to more than 100 deaths each year⁷. Southampton's children and adults have a lower level of physical activity than comparable locations⁸, which is associated with diminished health for individuals and an economic burden on industry and society⁹.

Southampton also suffers road congestion, which costs the city more than £100M a year⁴. Southampton's population, currently a little over 260,000 is predicted to be 290,000 by 2040, which could generate another 74,000 journeys per day⁴. Despite being compact, the number of people cycling for travel is below the national average⁹. More than 20% of school journeys are by car and there is little evidence that current efforts to change behaviour are working⁵. Road safety is also a concern with cyclists involved in 16% of road collisions despite making up only 1.4% of traffic¹⁰.

Local democracy and governance

SCC's wards are often closely contested and the council has changed leadership as a result of the last three local elections¹¹. Whilst this is a sign of healthy democracy, these swings in priority have created an administrative burden¹². There is a tendency for transport issues to become party-political¹³. A recent new administration, "wishing to cut through bureaucracy to deliver their objectives", was frustrated that they were unable to deliver quickly on their election promises¹⁴. At the same time, council staff felt that their advice was not always being sought or accepted¹⁴. This has led to a breakdown in relations between members and officers of the council¹⁴. Such workplace frictions reduce the capacity of the organisation to respond to unexpected events and develop new routines. Acrimonious public exchanges both in council chambers¹³ and on social media, risk further undermining trust in politicians and legitimacy of the council to make decisions on behalf of the public¹⁵.

Further, the financial position of the authority has recently been reported to be at "major risk"¹⁶. Department for Transport funding may be withdrawn if schemes such as Portwood Corridor are cancelled and such a withdrawal risks other government funding¹⁷.

Evidence: Public participation and deliberation

PPD improves legitimacy of policy-making¹⁸ and can increase the cohesion of society¹⁹. PPD can be especially appropriate for complex challenges and controversial policy questions²⁰.

Public participation in Southampton

SCC invites public participation outside of electoral voting in five ways:

- Consultations
- Surveys and research
- E-Petitions
- Comments, compliments and complaints
- Have your say at meetings

These modes of participation can have ambiguous results, making it difficult to finalise decisions on their outcomes. For example, while the 2020 Southampton City Survey²¹ indicated that "the majority of people agree with changing how roads and streets are designed to reallocate space towards walking, buses and cycling", consultations on schemes such as Bedford Place²² and Portwood Corridor²³ demonstrate fluctuating support for specific schemes and it can be difficult to tease out the solutions that would address the concerns of respondents. Nor is it clear how representative of the wider population are consultation responses.

Wider support for public participation

The UNICEF child-friendly-city initiative calls for "a system in place to facilitate public participation in decision-making"²⁴. UK Government's Civil Society Strategy²⁵ introduced the Innovation in Democracy programme which ran several citizens' assemblies and

made recommendations on their implementation²⁶. More widely, there is an increase in PPD worldwide²⁷ and people are largely in favour of having a greater say in political decision-making²⁸. There are several organisations building a knowledgebase into public participation, for instance [Involve](#), [International Association of Public Participation](#) and [Participedia](#), as well as governmental initiatives including OECD²⁹, Scottish Government²⁷ and UK Local Government Association³⁰.

Types of public participation

The International Association of Public Participation defines 5 levels of public participation³¹: *inform* → *consult* → *involve* → *collaborate* → *empower*. Currently, public participation in SCC's offer falls to the left of this spectrum – referred to as 'thin' democracy. In contrast, 'thick' democracy "enables people to learn, decide and act together"¹⁹ and usually involves the facilitation of deliberation over the evidence and issues.

There are a great many models³², methods³³ and practical examples³⁰ of PPD and each approach has merits given the context. For example, a consultation process was successfully employed by the Scottish Government to understand the views of Scottish citizens and generate national debate around gender recognition³⁴. Mini-publics, whereby participants are selected to be demographically representative of the population in terms of gender, age, locality or other characteristics, are increasingly common. The assumption is that the participants will respond to the PPD in a similar way to the wider population. It is even possible to engage the youngest generation in the process such as the Children's Parliament in the lead up to COP26³⁵.

Media coverage of the Irish Citizens' Assembly meant it was followed closely by the wider population facilitating education, not only of the public, but of politicians and the media³⁶. Such multi-way education is a compelling reason to increase PPD²⁰. The 2004-2005 Citizens' Assembly in British Columbia enabled the involvement of wider society by holding regional public hearings to exchange local knowledge and feed back to the assembly³⁷. It has been demonstrated that more deliberative approaches to democracy show longer term impacts on the engagement and understanding of specific issues of participants³⁸.

Successful public participation

The advocacy of a political leader is a key factor in the success of public participation³⁹. However, it is unlikely that my advocacy alone is sufficient. Indeed, simply mandating public participation is unlikely to produce successful outcomes⁴⁰. If strong financial backing is not available, it is necessary to have support from within the council alongside enhancing the autonomy of civil society³⁹.

There remain many uncertainties about which public participation processes have been successful⁴¹ and PPD should be designed on a case-by-case basis, with evaluation⁴² and adaptability³⁰ part of the process. In the example of Tuscany, PPD policy was itself developed using a PPD process leading to the passing of laws that made PPD explicitly a part of the democratic process⁴³.

Implementation: Public participation and deliberation

By bringing the public directly into our deliberation processes, we can draw on their real-world experience to achieve our ambitions and design a healthy, thriving city.

My objective for the next 100 days is to refocus the council on *empowering people* – the public, officers and members – to evolve more participatory and deliberative processes both within the council and as our wider democratic function. This will require a culture of experimentation, transparency and responsiveness:

- Experimentation – we will try out different approaches to learn what works best for our unique and changing city
- Transparency – we will report honestly and frequently on what we are doing and have done, inviting reflection and feedback
- Responsiveness – we will be open to feedback and use this to improve how we all participate in decision-making

Our first step will be to form a Participation Team with responsibility to develop participatory routines and policy. This team will comprise of you, me and a director in the Executive Management Team and will require the reassignment of two officer roles into the team. This naturally falls within the ambit of the Strategy and Performance Directorate. Crucially, the director must be a charismatic leader who is able to engage council members, officers and the wider community.

The new responsibilities of this team will be to develop:

- the capabilities to conduct and learn from PPD, starting with *our first PPD process*
- the capacity of the council to become more participatory by *creating greater consensus* within the council and *developing flexible policy* around participatory and deliberative democracy and governance
- *funding opportunities* for PPD and manage *communications* to the public

Our first PPD process

The Participation Team will set up our first PPD event within 100 days³⁶. This event should foster engagement from the wider community, especially people who are harder to reach, so that as many people as possible benefit from the learning opportunity, similar to the British Columbia example³⁷.

Given how the ongoing division over transport issues endangers our ability to meet our ambitions, the topic I suggest for this process is:

How can we ensure that every Southampton schoolchild arrives safely and independently at school?

This question is clear and will spur discussion throughout the city.

Creating consensus and developing policy

The Participation Team will begin immediately engaging with council members and officers. This is an excellent opportunity to take views on local democracy and council

governance and we should use this process to test how we perform as a leadership team in line with our culture of experimentation, transparency and responsiveness.

We will build a framework for PPD by developing policy and updating our constitution and statutory duties. The Participatory Team will be responsible for developing a transparent and responsive approach to developing policy, using the Tuscan example as a model⁴³.

Funding and communication

Funding will be sought from governmental and non-governmental organisations. For instance, with our first PPD process having a strong emphasis on multi-way education, Active Travel England funding for *behaviour change*⁴⁴ should become available.

A high media profile will generate engagement and debate across the city. There will be reservations about making mistakes in public. However, this risk is better mitigated with more, rather than fewer, releases to the media. In this way we will build our own narrative and garner understanding of what we aim to accomplish. This final point is a critical component to achieving our ambitions, transparently sharing our experimental and responsive culture for the whole city to participate in and deliberate over.

By undertaking the activities in this letter, we will transform our council and our city to the benefit of all citizens, now and in the future. I trust that you also see this potential and I look forward to getting started on this work with you, tomorrow.

Yours sincerely,

Rashmi Winter
Leader, Southampton City Council

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