



Citizens Making History in Sheffield on May 6th 2021

A council that has to do what we say, is that really possible?

Last year, due to COVID-19, the local elections were cancelled but the Government has now allowed local elections to be held again on Thursday May 6th 2021.

This time the elections here in Sheffield will historic one way or another; not because of Covid, but because alongside the usual Local Councillor and the Police & Crime Commissioner ballots there will be the Sheffield People's Referendum ballot asking you to choose how you would like Sheffield City Council to be run. The result of this is legally binding and could force the council to operate differently for the next 10 years, so it's rather important because the outcome will affect every Sheffield resident and shape the city for a long time to come.

How did the referendum come about?

That's quite historic too. This referendum is only happening in Sheffield and that's because local campaigners, coordinated by a non-political community group called *It's Our City!*, submitted a successful petition in 2019 with over 26,000 signatures on it calling for Sheffielders to be heard. It is the largest petition of its type submitted in the UK to date. Petitions are usually toothless in Sheffield, but this particular petition had clout under the 2011 Localism Act and that has forced the council to hold the referendum at the next local elections, like it or not.

So what is the Referendum question?

It is actually prescribed by the Localism Act and will be:

How would you like Sheffield City Council to be run?

By a leader who is an elected councillor chosen by a vote of the other elected councillors.

This is how the council is run now.

Or

By one or more committees made up of elected councillors, this would be a change from how the council is run now.

Simply put – WE have the choice of keeping everything as it is now or forcing a change to a modern committee system style of operating.

Choosing to stay the same will mean that decision-making power will continue to be invested in the 'executive' of 10, normally referred to as 'the Cabinet', and the 'Strong Leader' who has ultimate and overriding power.

We actually have 84 councillors in total, but, under the Strong Leader system, after the leader has picked 9 cabinet members, the other 74 elected councillors can easily be side-lined. What this means is that 74 do not have a meaningful role in decision-making and so cannot represent us like many believed they could when they voted for them. (Oh and by the way, the leader isn't really chosen by all elected councillors like the first part of the referendum question suggests; only the ruling group get to 'choose' then Full Council has to ratify that choice. Would it make any difference if opposition councillors disagreed? With the tribal politics we have in Sheffield...highly unlikely.)

In the alternative, the Modern Committee System that IOC! has been campaigning for, all 84 councillors can be involved in decision-making through smaller themed committees, fully enabling councillors to represent their voters in high level decisions. This, campaigners believe, and other councils have found, will be the first stepping-stone to better local democracy. Where cross-party collaboration can exist, thus enabling better scrutiny and transparency and an environment where citizens are listened to before council decisions are made and instead of being informed after the fact.

How can Sheffielders vote?

In advance of these elections the council will send details about the referendum to every household. There will also be an invitation to apply for a postal vote which may be your preferred method this year given Covid restrictions. You don't have to vote by post but you do have to be registered to vote! Please check that you are registered or register now if you have changed address, name or any other details at <https://www.gov.uk/register-to-vote>. Everyone will then get a referendum ballot paper with their postal vote or when they get to their polling station.

Sheffield voter turnout at local elections has been very low, 31.2% in 2019. But hopefully, this time, more of us will vote in the Sheffield People's Referendum because the outcome will have a binding and lasting impact on the future of our beloved city and those who inhabit it for a minimum of ten years and referred to for decades after.

More information can be found about the Sheffield People's Referendum online from the Council at <https://www.sheffield.gov.uk/home/campaigns/scc-governance-referendum> and from the non-political *Its Our City!* community group, who championed the original petition, at <https://www.itsoursheffield.co.uk/>.