

## Written evidence submitted by It's Our City! (EDCEB11)

### Summary and recommendations

In a city-wide referendum in May 2021 Sheffield rejected, specifically, the Leader and Cabinet model the government now seeks to impose on English councils in Clause 57 of the Bill. Sheffield voted resoundingly for a more democratic committee system. Government should not be overturning the results of local governance referendums and this runs directly counter to government stated intentions for the Bill about devolving power to local areas.

*Sheffield must, minimally, be exempted from the provisions of Clause 57, and the democratic rights and promises won by Sheffield citizens and communities must remain.*

Beyond Sheffield, other local governance referendums have been held – some of these are apparently to be respected, but those mandating committee governance not so. *We suggest all local democratic mandates on local governance must at least be respected and treated equally.*

Further, Clause 57 is ill thought through. It appears evidence-free in relation to government claims about committee governance. *The Bill will be strengthened by the removal of Clause 57 in its entirety.*

However, this is only to think within the confines of the framework of the Bill as it exists. The government has missed an opportunity (not least to address a crisis in public trust). All councils (and mayoral strategic authorities) should be exploring deeper democratic reforms. Local governance issues are matters for local decision-making and there should be local constitutions setting out rights, responsibilities and processes which can be changed locally, and with suitable processes for reshaping constitutions. These should, of course, integrally involve local residents and local stakeholders, with some power. *The best outcome is that Clause 57 be removed in its entirety, and potentially replaced with this sort of general commitment, to be developed accordingly, thoughtfully and inclusively.*

### Focus of the submission and who we are

1. This evidence focuses on government plans to abolish the committee system in Clause 57 of the Bill, and to remove the right of local councils (and local people) to decide their own local governance arrangements. Clause 57 will impose Leader and Cabinet governance on councils in England, but exempts councils with directly elected Mayors from this forced change (until such time as they consent to Leader and Cabinet governance).
2. The largest and most significant mobilisation of local citizens anywhere in the country for local governance change to a modern committee system took place in Sheffield between 2018 and 2021. This citizen and community mobilisation culminated in a

legally binding city-wide referendum that resoundingly rejected Leader and Cabinet governance - the exact system that Clause 57 now seeks to force local councils to adopt.

3. This evidence is submitted by *It's Our City!* a community organisation and network of Sheffield residents (working in a voluntary capacity)<sup>1</sup>. As a constituted group *It's Our City!* coordinated the successful citizen and community effort exercising our rights as Sheffield residents to seek and require a city-wide referendum for local governance change.
4. *It's Our City!* has regrouped to respond to government proposals in Clause 57. Sheffield is uniquely affected by Clause 57. We present our evidence as citizens with some expertise in local governance systems. It is underpinned by 20,000 citizen to citizen conversations about local governance we had across our city, and the clearly expressed democratic will of the people of Sheffield. We know Parliament will be concerned to understand and to (re)consider where impact is clearly damaging.
5. Our evidence also addresses Clause 57 more generally, the issues at stake in local governance change, and the disturbingly weak case for government proposals (that have also not been open to any consultation). Clause 57 undermines the Bill as a whole and runs counter to government stated intentions. In line with others we argue local governance must be decided by local areas; and questions of local democracy are central to this.
6. Our evidence is organised into four sections:
  - Local governance referendums: the case of Sheffield and the impact of Clause 57
  - Government intentions for the Bill
  - Claims about the committee system – the lack of evidence
  - Summary and recommendations

#### **Local governance referendums: the case of Sheffield and the impact of Clause 57**

7. This section provides evidence about why and how Sheffield decided on a committee system of local governance, on the impact of the plan to ride roughshod over the results of Sheffield's local governance referendum, and the position of other councils who have held referendums in recent years.
8. Between 2018 and 2021<sup>2</sup> Sheffield citizens and communities organised and exercised community rights enshrined in the Localism Act (2011) to win a city-wide referendum

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<sup>1</sup> <https://itsoursheffield.co.uk/>

<sup>2</sup> Sheffield's local governance referendum was originally set for May 2020; this was delayed to May 2021 by government covid regulations.

for local governance change to a modern committee system. An immediate backdrop to citizen organising was the Sheffield street trees dispute where Sheffield citizens had begun to understand that what was happening was symptomatic of much deeper problems in our council, including with its longstanding and damaging ‘strong leader’ governance in the Leader and Cabinet system<sup>3 4</sup>. As part of organising, *It’s Our City!* estimate that 20,000 citizen to citizen conversations were held about local governance arrangements across every ward of the city, out on the streets, and at local events, in what has been described as a ‘quiet revolution’<sup>5</sup>

9. Local citizens successfully mobilising for governance change is very rare. However, meeting the challenging threshold (of statutorily-validated petition signatures required) to force a local governance referendum is, arguably, already indicative of strength of feeling in a local electorate. But most local governance change does not happen via citizen action for a referendum. It is more often driven or decided by councils themselves and according to council-articulated concerns that often present more immediately as largely managerial and/or political (see para 21). But when local citizens (rather than councils) lead on governance change, it is inevitably more citizen-articulated concerns that come to the fore. Sheffield’s example was, and remains, the largest citizen-led mobilisation for governance change ever seen in England<sup>6</sup>. And the (demand and) concern was (and is) *basic democratic rights* to be represented in council decision-making.
10. The precise point of difference between Leader and Cabinet (and other executive-led) governance systems, and a committee system, is about the distribution of council decision-making power. In executive governance systems the power to make almost all council decisions is (formally and constitutionally) vested in the Leader - or the Leader plus their chosen few in the Cabinet. In committee systems the power and legal right to a say in council decision making is vested in *all elected councillors*.

*Leader and Cabinet governance, by definition, cannot replicate what the committee system delivers – the basic right (and legal power) of all elected councillors to play a meaningful role in council decision-making (on behalf of those they serve). For Sheffield citizens this involves basic questions of democratic rights – the democratic right to be represented in council decision-making (by their elected representatives).*

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<sup>3</sup> This understanding was essentially validated by the subsequent Independent Inquiry Report into the Sheffield Street Trees Dispute, 6<sup>th</sup> March 2023. <https://www.sheffield.gov.uk/your-city-council/independent-inquiry-into-street-trees-dispute>

<sup>4</sup> Whilst the street tree dispute was an initial trigger Sheffield citizens provided many more examples of the damage that Leader and Cabinet governance was perpetrating in Sheffield, see *It’s Our City! Commentary and Evidence to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee*, 28<sup>th</sup> Nov 2019. <https://itsoursheffield.co.uk/2215-2/>

<sup>5</sup> Axelby, R. (2021) *Sheffield’s Governance Referendum: a quiet revolution*. University of Leeds: Centre for Democratic Politics. <https://cdp.leeds.ac.uk/2021/05/12/sheffields-governance-referendum-leaves-the-city-in-limbo/>

<sup>6</sup> West Dorset DC (May 2015), Fylde BC (May 2014), Croydon MBC (October 2021) and Plymouth CC (July 2025) are the four other examples of successful citizen-led action leading to governance change referendums in England.

11. In conversation (and other communications) people in Sheffield were astounded and outraged to discover that, under Leader and Cabinet governance, their local councillors had no say in almost all council decision-making, on behalf of their ward electorate. They were appalled that their vote did not give them - and all ward electorates in Sheffield - the basic democratic representation in decision-making that they (minimally) expected, and that almost all power was in the hands of the Leader and their chosen few in the Cabinet<sup>7</sup>. The case of Sheffield is a significant and valuable lesson in what ordinary people think and expect from a local democracy; this should be taken seriously.
12. At the time of the referendum *It's Our City!* data suggested that perhaps 30% of the electorate did not know that much about the referendum issues and that this was likely to favour the *status quo*. Nonetheless, Sheffield's referendum vote still resoundingly rejected (65%/35%) Leader and Cabinet governance that placed almost all decision-making power in only 10 out of 84 elected councillors. Sheffield insisted that *all elected representatives* must have the legal power to play a role in council decision-making, on behalf of their electorate. It is only the committee system that can deliver this. Sheffield's referendum vote for change reflected the damage that Leader and Cabinet governance wrought in Sheffield, and people voted for the more democratic alternative and the right of every resident to be represented in council decision-making<sup>8</sup>.
13. It goes without saying that we believe it is a real error to abolish the only existing system of local governance that, structurally, delivers basic democratic rights for people to be meaningfully represented in council decision-making. It is not at all clear (see paras 19-24) what the government rationale for this is, but it is very clear that the basic *democratic* issues at stake – and utterly central to Sheffield's citizen-led mobilisation and our democratic city-wide referendum decision - are not acknowledged or explored (and it appears perhaps not even understood). Others, too, have suggested questions of democracy are at the heart of Clause 57<sup>9</sup>. The government claims it is concerned about trust in politics, and about local democracy, yet it is not possible to square this with the abolition proposals in Clause 57 and the intention to overturn local democratic mandates. It is hard to avoid the conclusion

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<sup>7</sup> It is important to understand that in Sheffield (in May 2019 for example) the ruling group in Sheffield (from which the Leader and Cabinet was made up) received less than a 10% mandate from the Sheffield electorate – see graph and para 4.2 in *It's Our City! Commentary and Evidence to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee* *ibid*. Yet a Leader and appointed Cabinet from their midst held almost all council decision-making powers under this governance system. Whilst 9.7% is punishingly low in terms of electoral endorsement (or no real endorsement at all), it is possible to find examples elsewhere in England where ruling groups receive even less of an electoral mandate than this (yet hold almost all power in executive governance systems).

<sup>8</sup> What is more, in 20,000 citizen to citizen conversations, Sheffielders articulated and explored a whole range of ideas and insights about how Sheffield's local governance system and practices could (and should) be made more democratic.

<sup>9</sup> E.g. Hammond, E (2025) *What the committee system's end means for councils facing transition*. CfGS.  
<https://www.cfgs.org.uk/what-committee-system-end-means-councils-england/>

that little thought is evident – including a demonstrable lack of engagement at the local level with stakeholders and about the issues at stake.

14. In practical terms Clause 57 in Sheffield will:

- Overturn the democratic mandate delivered by the people of Sheffield that was clearly expressed in our city-wide, statutorily binding local governance referendum of May 2021;
- Force Sheffield City Council to adopt the exact model of local governance that we as local citizens resoundingly rejected in a democratic vote;
- Break the statutory promise that our democratic decision would stand for at least ten years from 2021 (and then further change would also have to be enacted by referendum);
- Remove the legal rights and power that was secured by Sheffield citizens and communities to decide how our council works.

15. Nowhere does government acknowledge that it intends to overturn the results of binding local referendums on local governance arrangements and the associated legal promises and rights they deliver for local people, as above. Overturning democratic decisions made at a local level, and removing democratic rights written into statute, must surely involve considerable consideration, especially in the light of government stated intentions to devolve power to local areas. We know nothing of this thinking (and there has been no consultation) and so for those areas directly affected, Clause 57 looks simply like an act of democratic vandalism. (See also paras 24-27 about the presented case by government.)

16. Sheffield is *uniquely* affected, of course, as we are the *only* city to have specifically rejected – in a democratic vote – the very system (Leader and Cabinet) that Clause 57 now seeks to force (back) on our city. The situation is heightened by the fact that Sheffield’s referendum was citizen-led and so Sheffield’s citizenry is arguably the best informed of any electorate anywhere about local governance models. (We acknowledge that, more generally, people often have a low level of understanding about the governance system that underpins the work of their local council – and we wonder if it is perhaps this that the government has relied upon.)

17. But Clause 57 also treats local governance referendums differentially, and unequally. There have been six local governance referendums in England in the last five years. These are shown in Table 1, below. From this, it appears that some democratic votes are to be taken seriously, but others not. Under Clause 57, the direct democratic mandates in Newham, Tower Hamlets and Croydon are to stand, those in Sheffield and Bristol will be overturned. In introducing the Bill the Minister talked about putting power in the hands of local people, where it belongs. However, it appears that the will of local people is only to be respected when it is convenient to the government.

	Date	Required by petition	Leader and Cabinet	Directly elected mayor	Committee system	Clause 57 effect
Newham	May 2021	N		45,960 (56%)	36,424 (44%)	Exempt
Tower Hamlets	May 2021	N	17,957 (22%)	63,046 (78%)		Exempt
<b>Sheffield</b>	<b>May 2021</b>	<b>Y</b>	<b>48,727 (35%)</b>		<b>89,670 (65%)</b>	<b>Not Exempt</b>
Croydon	Oct 2021	Y	11,519 (20%)	47,165 (80%)		Exempt
Bristol	May 2022	N		38,439 (31%)	56,113 (59%)	Not exempt
Plymouth*	July 2025	Y	19,840 (52%)	18,044 (48%)		Impact of referendum delayed*

\*Impact of referendum delayed by government regulation in light of the introduction of the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill into Parliament (but no change voted for anyway).

Table 1: Local governance referendums in England 2020-2025: the (differential) impact of Clause 57<sup>10</sup>

18. Sheffield's can be described as a success story – of locally driven and responsive governance change. Citizens and communities themselves have played a key role in Sheffield's move to a committee system, in response to the damage that Leader and Cabinet governance did in our city, and for a more democratic alternative meeting basic democratic expectations for all residents to be represented in council decision-making via their elected councillors. The change decision was given a resounding democratic mandate in a city-wide referendum. The change is supported by all political groupings in the council, wider stakeholders in the voluntary and business sector. Whilst *It's Our City!* has rightly continued to challenge and be critical of how our council has implemented its committee system – we believe that much more attention could and should be paid to citizen and community aspirations for deeper democratic reform in governance design, culture and processes – the basic legal change required has been undertaken with commitment. Sheffield's committee system is part of a new local 'settlement' and an improved platform for delivery and development. Clause 57 will not only undermine this, but also damage the basic democratic legitimacy of our council.

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<sup>10</sup> Results compiled and collated from relevant council websites.

## **Government intentions for the Bill**

19. Government states its general purpose in the Bill is the devolution of power out of Westminster to local areas and for empowered communities, and the Bill includes a range of significant (though disparate) measures it says will achieve this. The important contexts to this are (repeatedly) articulated in a number of government documents associated with the Bill<sup>11 12 13</sup>:

- England as one of the most centralised (and geographically unequal) countries in the world
- People not able to influence decisions or exercise control over things that matter to them, and
- A “long-term decline of trust in politics”<sup>14</sup>. The Bill, it says, will mean “politics being done with communities, not to them”<sup>15</sup>.
- A “politics that hoards power”<sup>16</sup>.

The government claims its devolution plan “gives communities a greater say in decisions that affect them” and that the Bill will “deliver better democratic and economic outcomes for people and places across England”<sup>17</sup>.

20. Clause 57 is demonstrably and directly *at odds* with these stated government intentions for the Bill. It does not devolve power but the opposite; it exercises power centrally to remove the right of local councils (including local people) to decide the way their council works, according to local circumstances - including for a more democratic committee model. Clause 57 cannot deliver better democratic outcomes, because it rides roughshod over locally based governance choices and, in some cases, seeks to overturn clear democratic mandates (the will of local people) expressed in local governance referendums.

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<sup>11</sup> ‘Power and Partnership: foundations for growth’ *English Devolution White Paper*, 16<sup>th</sup> December 2024.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/english-devolution-white-paper-power-and-partnership-foundations-for-growth/english-devolution-white-paper>

<sup>12</sup> *English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill: Explanatory Notes*. House of Commons, 10<sup>th</sup> July 2025. <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/bills/cbill/59-01/0283/en/240283en.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> *English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill: impact assessment* MHCLG, 10<sup>th</sup> July 2025. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/english-devolution-and-community-empowerment-bill-impact-assessment>

<sup>14</sup> Para 12, p.9 *English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill: Explanatory Notes*. House of Commons, 10<sup>th</sup> July 2025. <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/bills/cbill/59-01/0283/en/240283en.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, para 14, p.9.

<sup>16</sup> Foreword, ‘Power and Partnership: foundations for growth’ *English Devolution White Paper*, 16<sup>th</sup> December, 2024. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/english-devolution-white-paper-power-and-partnership-foundations-for-growth/english-devolution-white-paper>

<sup>17</sup> P.11, *English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill: impact assessment*. MHCLG, 10<sup>th</sup> July 2025. [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/686e780481dd8f70f5de3d29/English\\_Devolution\\_and\\_Community\\_Empowerment\\_Bill\\_Impact\\_assessment.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/686e780481dd8f70f5de3d29/English_Devolution_and_Community_Empowerment_Bill_Impact_assessment.pdf)

21. Local decisions about governance change (and design) are not made on a whim – whether by a referendum or by local councils themselves. They are part and parcel of careful and thought through responses to local circumstances and needs and to deliver improvements and better outcomes for council functioning and services. ‘Democratic’ issues are always at stake, and inherent to, local governance choices. This is because the choice between executive-led and committee governance involves a basic structural difference in the distribution of power, and for basic rights of representation in council decision making; this was a central and explicit consideration in the Sheffield case, as described. However, local managerial, legal, technical and political considerations are also in play for the basic choices involved, and for system design. It is possible to track councils’ governance change ‘journeys’ according to the circumstances, needs and aspirations of local areas. In the Isle of Wight, for example, a key driver was political and management factors in longstanding ‘no overall control’ that led to a pragmatic settlement under a committee system, and in order to overcome logjams to major decision-making.
22. In light of this, and stated government intentions about the devolution of power to local areas, Clause 57 proposals warrant *far greater* thought. They certainly needed more than an oblique one-line buried in the White Paper<sup>18</sup> given the significant relevance to some councils and the fundamental disruption (and costs) Clause 57 will impose on carefully thought through, locally responsive (and sometimes democratically mandated) committee governance councils. It appears that the primary focus has been on the ‘big ticket’ items in what is a wide-ranging Bill; Clause 57 appears almost an afterthought, as well as being at odds with government stated intentions. The obvious mismatch between ‘devolving power to local areas’ and the removal of local areas’ rights to deciding their own governance, is stark but unacknowledged.
23. Certainly Clause 57 has come as a shock – and with no consultation. Sheffield City Council highlighted this in their immediate statement<sup>19</sup> as did *It’s Our City*<sup>20</sup>. In light of Sheffield’s referendum it simply appears to us like an all too casual act of democratic vandalism. Likewise, local media highlighted that ‘It’s now government policy to ignore the people of Sheffield’<sup>21</sup>. In fact all main political groupings in Sheffield commented on government proposals as a backward step. The council leadership sought immediate discussion with the Minister of English Devolution given the

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<sup>18</sup> Para 4.2.3 *English Devolution White Paper*, 16<sup>th</sup> Dec 2024.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/english-devolution-white-paper-power-and-partnership-foundations-for-growth/english-devolution-white-paper>

<sup>19</sup> *Council Response to Statement by the Minister for Local Government and English Devolution*. 25<sup>th</sup> June, 2024.

<https://www.sheffield.gov.uk/news/2025/council-response-statement-minister-state-local-government-and-english-devolution>

<sup>20</sup> *Public Statement on the Government announcement that they intend to overturn the results of Sheffield's referendum* 28<sup>th</sup> June, 2025. <https://itsoursheffield.co.uk/public-statement-on-the-government-announcement-that-they-intend-to-overturn-the-result-of-sheffields-referendum/>

<sup>21</sup> ‘It’s now government policy to ignore the people of Sheffield’ *Sheffield Tribune*, 30<sup>th</sup> June 2025. <https://www.sheffieldtribune.co.uk/its-now-government-policy-to-ignore-the-people-of-sheffield/>



proposal was ‘out of the blue’, and seeks to force Sheffield back to the very (damaging) governance system citizens rejected (and when their clear story is of improvements for Sheffield – and even some local pride in this - under its committee system).

Yet the government also peddles a particular narrative about governance by committee systems.

### **Claims about the committee system – the lack of evidence**

24. In two short but strong statements associated with Clause 57 proposals, government claims:

“The committee system can be unclear, duplicative and wasteful. Requiring all councils which operate the committee system to transition to the leader and cabinet model ...will simplify the governance system and ensure all councils operate an executive form of governance. This will provide clarity on responsibility and accountability and improve efficiency in decision making.”<sup>22</sup>

and

“The committee system is a poorer form of governance for local authorities, particularly the larger, unitary councils. It suffers from more opaque and potentially siloed decision making, a lack of clear leadership and accountability, with decisions taking longer to be arrived at.”<sup>23</sup>

25. These are extraordinary statements because they appear baldly, and with no evidence or discussion. We and others are, in fact, unaware of any evidence that would support these claims.

26. The Association of Democratic Services Officers (ADSO) immediately highlighted these claims in their letter to the Minister on 25<sup>th</sup> June. They ask about formal consultation and about the evidence base that “committee systems reduce efficiency or clarity in decision making”; they emphasise that many councils have “made a success of this model” and would like to “understand the metrics by which impact will be assessed”<sup>24</sup>. Ed Hammond at The Centre for Governance and Scrutiny (CfGS) notes that many in the sector would disagree with government assertions about the committee system and also highlights ADSO’s call for greater transparency<sup>25</sup>. In addition, the Local Government Association (LGA) and Centre for Governance and Scrutiny (CfGS) have

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<sup>22</sup> Section 1B, Local Government section, *English Devn and Community Empowerment Bill: guidance*. 10<sup>th</sup> July 2025. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/english-devolution-and-community-empowerment-bill-guidance/english-devolution-and-community-empowerment-bill-guidance#local-government>

<sup>23</sup> Para 95 (p.25) *English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill: explanatory notes*. House of Commons, 25<sup>th</sup> July 2025. <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/bills/cbill/59-01/0283/en/240283en.pdf>

<sup>24</sup> Letter to Jim McMahon MP from ADSO, 25<sup>th</sup> June 2025. <https://www.adso.co.uk/app/uploads/2025/06/Letter-to-Jim-McMahon-MP-from-ADSO-25-June-2025.pdf>

<sup>25</sup> Hammond, E. *What the committee system’s end means for councils facing transition*. CfGS. <https://www.cfgs.org.uk/what-committee-system-end-means-councils-england/>

always been clear that no governance system is better than another (but we note that from a Sheffield citizen perspective committee systems are better than executive systems).

27. In an article published in the *Local Government Chronicle*, Robin Hambleton (Emeritus Professor of City Leadership at University of West of England) goes further<sup>26</sup>. Citing national and international evidence, he argues the evidence points the other way – committee systems are better. He says “astonishingly” government assertions are “evidence-free” and “proposals to abolish the committee system...must be opposed by all those who care about local democracy”. He poses three questions to the Minister:

- “What detailed research has your department carried out on the performance of the committee system of local governance in England?
- What does this research reveal about the evidence both for and against the democratic performance of the committee system?
- What are the findings of the research your department carried out on the performance of the committee system in other countries before you made your announcement on 24 June?”

28. We would echo the questioning of government bald assertion about the committee system of local governance, and also the specific questions Hambleton asks. There is no evidence cited by government for its extraordinary claims, and there is a lack of transparency about where the claims come from. We have tried to trace backwards to find and understand any possible evidence base, but this does not exist. The evidence was always thin (and acknowledged as such) prior to the last (partial) abolition of the committee system pre-2000, but surely government is not relying on thin evidence from the last century. However, we also note that during Sheffield’s citizen and community campaign for governance change, we too were subjected to what are essentially old myths and misinformation, and apparent imaginings of ‘smoke-filled rooms’ and five-hour long meetings into the night. *No council, and no modern committee council, operates like this.*

29. We have concluded that the government’s is simply a bias or prejudice for executive-led governance<sup>27</sup>. But a bias cannot equate to ‘better’. And the evidence does not stack up. Local evidence suggests, for example, that committee governance councils end up abolishing their ‘Urgency Committees’ because they are never used – Sheffield abolished its urgency committees for the 2025 municipal year for this very reason. Most councils also, for example, ensure that change to a committee system is cost-neutral. And, conversely, we could certainly point to benefits under a committee system – for the quality of decision-making, for openness and transparency, for

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<sup>26</sup> Hambleton, R. *Show evidence for committee system abolition*. Bristol Civil Leadership Project. 28<sup>th</sup> August, 2025. <https://bristolcivicleadership.net/2025/08/>

<sup>27</sup> Eisenhart, C. *Rethinking leadership post-committee system*. ADSO, 29<sup>th</sup> July 2025. <https://www.adso.co.uk/rethinking-leadership-post-committee-system-charlotte-eisenhart/>

scrutiny, and for accountability, and as other stakeholders would concur with. The *Municipal Journal* collates a selection of responses by committee councils that highlight the inadequacy of the government case, and the positive benefits of committee governance; in this, Kingston Council point out that no local authority using committee governance have issued Section 114 notices either<sup>28</sup>.

It is disturbing to see an extraordinary narrative and assertions about the committee system that neither equates with local experience nor that is backed up by secure evidence. Not only does Clause 57 sit very badly with government stated intentions, the specific case about the committee system is unmade and evidence-free; it appears misinformed and not thought through. It is contemptuous of local people and communities – especially to those of us who have delivered strong democratic mandates on our local governance systems – to proceed in this way.

### **Summary and recommendations**

30. In a city-wide referendum in May 2021 Sheffield rejected, specifically, the Leader and Cabinet model the government now seeks to impose on English councils in Clause 57 of the Bill. Sheffield voted resoundingly for a more democratic committee system. Government should not be overturning the results of local governance referendums and this runs directly counter to government stated intentions for the Bill about devolving power to local areas.

*Sheffield must, minimally, be exempted from the provisions of Clause 57, and the democratic rights and promises won by Sheffield citizens and communities must remain.*

Beyond Sheffield, other local governance referendums have been held – some of these are apparently to be respected, but those mandating committee governance not so. *We suggest all local democratic mandates on local governance must at least be respected and treated equally.*

Further, Clause 57 is ill thought through. It appears evidence-free in relation to government claims about committee governance. *The Bill will be strengthened by the removal of Clause 57 in its entirety.*

31. However, this is only to think within the confines of the framework of the Bill as it exists. The government has missed an opportunity (not least to address a crisis in public trust). All councils (and mayoral strategic authorities) should be exploring deeper democratic reforms. Local governance issues are matters for local decision-making and there should be local constitutions setting out rights, responsibilities and processes which can be changed locally, and with suitable processes for reshaping constitutions. These should, of course, integrally involve local residents and local

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<sup>28</sup> Peters, D 'Warning against forced return to 'autocratic' cabinet system' *The MJ*, 24<sup>th</sup> July 2025.  
<https://www.themj.co.uk/warning-autocratic-cabinet>

stakeholders, with some power. *The best outcome is that Clause 57 be removed in its entirety, and potentially replaced with this sort of general commitment, to be developed accordingly, thoughtfully and inclusively.*

***It's Our City!***

Sheffield, 12<sup>th</sup> September 2025

[www.itsoursheffield.co.uk](http://www.itsoursheffield.co.uk)