

Bristol City Council

Minutes of the Communities Scrutiny Commission

14 September 2023 at 5.00 pm



Attendance:

Communities Scrutiny Commission members present:

Cllr Martin Fodor, Chair, Cllr James Scott, Vice-Chair, Cllr Kerry Bailes, Cllr Tessa Fitzjohn, Cllr Gary Hopkins, Cllr Barry Parsons, Cllr Graham Morris (substituting for Cllr Henry Michallat)

Cabinet members in attendance:

Councillor Ellie King, Cabinet Member for Public Health and Communities

Officers present:

Patsy Mellor, Director: Management of Place
Jon James, Head of Natural and Marine Environment
Richard Ennion, Parks Development Manager
Richard Fletcher, Parks Services Manager
Kit Beaumont, Heritage and Estates Officer
Lerraine Smith, Allotments and Small Holdings Manager
Ian Hird, Scrutiny Advisor

1 Welcome, Introductions and Safety Information

The Chair welcomed all attendees to the meeting and explained the emergency evacuation procedure.

2 Apologies for absence and substitutions

It was noted that apologies for absence had been received from Cllr Amal Ali, Cllr Amirah Cole and Cllr Henry Michallat (Cllr Graham Morris was substituting for Cllr Michallat).

Apologies were also received from John Smith, Interim Executive Director - Growth and Regeneration.

3 Declarations of Interest

None.



4 Minutes of previous meeting

The Commission **RESOLVED:**

To confirm the minutes of the meeting of the Communities Scrutiny Commission held on 23 March 2023 as a correct record.

5 Chair's Business

None.

6 Public Forum

The Commission noted that the following public forum items had been received:

Public questions:

1. Mark Ashdown, Bristol Tree Forum: Draft Tree and Woodland Strategy
2. Len Wyatt, Bristol Parks Forum: Parks and Green Space funding; Parks and Green Space Strategy; Draft Tree and Woodland Strategy

Public statements:

1. Suzanne Audrey – Freedom of Information requests
2. Len Wyatt, Bristol Parks Forum: Parks and Green Space Strategy; Draft Tree and Woodland Strategy
3. Susan Carter, Bristol Walking Alliance: Parks and Green Space Strategy; Draft Tree and Woodland Strategy
4. Mark Ashdown, Bristol Tree Forum: Draft Tree and Woodland Strategy
5. Heloise Balme: Parks and Green Space Strategy

Statements were presented by those in attendance.

Note: Public forum items which related to specific agenda items were considered at the start of each relevant agenda item (see below).

7 Annual business report

The Commission considered the annual business report for 2023-24.

The Commission **RESOLVED:**

1. To note the Commission's terms of reference.
2. To note the appointment of Cllr Martin Fodor as Chair of the Commission and Cllr James Scott as Vice-Chair.



3. To note the membership of the Commission.
4. To note the Commission's meeting dates for 2023-24.
5. To appoint a Housing and Landlord Services Working Group as outlined in the report comprising 7 members (2 Green; 2 Labour; 1 Conservative; 1 Liberal Democrat; 1 Knowle Community Party).

8 Parks and Green Space - funding

The Commission considered a report setting out an overview on how the Parks and Green Spaces service was funded and the budget pressures being addressed to achieve a balanced budget now and in future years.

The Commission received the following public forum item in relation to this item:

- Questions from Len Wyatt, Bristol Parks Forum, together with written replies from officers.

Key points highlighted by officers in presenting the report:

1. The Parks and Green Spaces service had been working to a reducing budget since 2010.
2. In 2010, the parks service had received approximately £7.5m through the general fund. For the current 2023/24 financial year, the overall cost of operating the service was £14.3m; the cost for the management of the Council's parks and green spaces was £6.9m. The service had a 2023/24 allocation of £1.6m from the general fund. To help mitigate budget pressures, a series of income streams had been introduced which directly supported the service.
3. To address the parks budget pressures, officers had developed a programme of work identifying ways to continue to mitigate budget pressures over the next three years.
Examples of mitigations being explored/taken forward included:
 - Expanding cultural events and activities in parks.
 - Increasing income and profitability through existing business units, in particular at Blaise plant nursery.
 - Developing new income streams. i.e. commercial concessions.
 - Reviewing parks expenditure to ensure that value for money was being achieved.

Summary of main points raised/noted in discussion:

1. It was noted that maintenance budgets were now being prioritised to deal with trees most significantly affected by ash dieback, which presented an emerging risk to the wider parks maintenance programme in terms of accommodating these works.
2. In response to a question, it was noted that income from cemeteries and crematoria formed part of the parks commercial income stream.
3. It was suggested that expanding and diversifying commercial activity in parks would inevitably have a degree of impact in terms of local residents' perceptions of the service, recognising also that while some residents would welcome changes, others would be less receptive. Members indicated they would wish



to be kept informed of the detail of new commercial activity and that it would be useful to seek local feedback from ward councillors as new activity was introduced.

4. In response to questions, it was noted that the objective was to achieve a balanced budget for the service, which could only be achieved through the mitigation measures; the service was continually alive to new commercial opportunities.

5. In terms of the work that was ongoing in seeking commercial opportunities and expanding cultural events and activities in parks, members stressed the need to ensure continued effective liaison with parks groups. It was noted that if a large event was held in a particular park, an element of the income generated would be re-invested in that park; however, the total income generated by a large event would not be ring-fenced solely for investment in the individual park that had hosted the event, mindful of the need for wider investment across the city's parks estate.

6. It was noted that the impact of the Covid pandemic, and then the ongoing cost of living crisis had in recent years impacted on the festivals/events sector and had in some cases seen the cancellation of planned events in parks. In terms of event planning, the events team and safety advisory group were always involved in assessing the suitability of a proposed park event. The events teams also proactively networked with other local authorities as part of the approach to identifying commercial opportunities. It was important to recognise that the development of some new commercial opportunities in parks required associated investment.

7. An issue was raised about the need to increase support to assist the development of local parks groups in some areas of the city, including deprived areas in the south of the city, and to try to secure increased investment in parks in these areas. It was noted that officers recognised the need to do more in these areas but were faced with resource constraints; the service was though alive to resourcing opportunities and had, for example, put forward a bid and secured £180k of UK Shared Prosperity Fund grant (received through the West of England Combined Authority) to support volunteering activity in parks in south and east Bristol over the next 2 years, to be delivered by the Your Park Bristol and Bath charity. It was noted that Bristol Parks Forum was an umbrella organisation for community park groups and presented opportunities to share ideas and experience; the Bristol and Bath Parks Foundation was a charitable organisation that may also be able to provide advice to groups and potentially tap in to future external funding opportunities.

The Commission **RESOLVED:**

- To note the report and the above information.

9 Parks and Green Space Strategy

The Commission considered a report setting out the progress in developing a new Parks and Green Space Strategy.



The Commission received the following public forum items in relation to this item:

1. Questions from Len Wyatt, Bristol Parks Forum, together with written replies from officers.
2. Statement from Len Wyatt, Bristol Parks Forum.
3. Statement from Susan Carter, Bristol Walking Alliance.
4. Statement from Heloise Balme, Bristol Good Food.

Key points highlighted by officers in presenting the report:

1. Work to develop a new Parks and Green Space Strategy (PGSS) had continued since the Commission had last been updated on 3 October 2022.
2. It was expected that public consultation on the new PGSS would take place from the end of October for 6 weeks and that the strategy would ultimately be submitted for Cabinet approval in March 2024.
3. The strategy included updated strategic principles and proposed the overarching vision that by 2038, all Bristol residents would feel able to access fun, safe, sustainable parks and green spaces and experience associated health and wellbeing benefits.
4. Seven priority themes were included within the new strategy (with specific commitments against each theme):
 - Priority theme 1 - Nature and climate
 - Priority theme 2 - Children and young people
 - Priority theme 3 - Community participation
 - Priority theme 4 - Health and wellbeing
 - Priority theme 5 - Culture
 - Priority theme 6 - Skills and Employment
 - Priority theme 7 - Food growing

Summary of main points raised/noted in discussion:

1. In terms of the citywide map, it was noted that more detailed maps were available which showed a greater degree of granularity in terms of identifying different categories of green space.
2. It was noted that the strategy, through its 'managing for nature' approach, aimed to encourage opportunities to develop wildlife corridors and help create resilience for nature.
3. It was noted that the Food Growing and Allotments Strategy was now being included as a theme within the PGSS rather than as a self-standing strategy. Some concerns were expressed about this component of the PGSS not therefore representing a fully comprehensive food growing strategy for the city as it was mainly focused on encouraging food growing on Council owned allotments. It was noted, however, that the Food Growing and Allotments Strategy/Theme also aimed to ensure that people and communities from every area of the city could access suitable food growing opportunities, for example through collective food growing plots. It was suggested that it would also be important to ensure that this theme aligned with the One City Food Equality Strategy. It was also noted that the intention was to further develop the narrative under this theme prior to the PGSS being launched for public consultation.



4. It was noted that the Food Growing and Allotments Strategy/Theme also aimed to maximise the most effective use of existing allotment space. By establishing a stronger tenancy agreement, engaging more proactively with the city's allotment associations and improving the information and guidance available to allotment tenants, the aim was to support a greater number of plots to be used to maximise food growing benefit.

5. It was suggested that in taking forward the consultation, ward councillors should be able to access detailed local maps, for example in relation to food growing and 'managing for nature' detail.

6. Also in relation to the food growing strategy, it was suggested that every effort must be maintained to engage as wide a public audience as possible; engagement with schools should also be encouraged where possible. It was noted that some schools had been engaged with tree planting initiatives.

7. In relation to Priority Theme 2 - Children and young people, it was noted that minimum standards were set (caveated depending on funding availability) including the aim of ensuring a good mix of accessible facilities for children and young people, including a children's play area within a 10-minute walk from home. It was noted that residents' needs in terms of parks and green spaces would inevitably vary by age group; many older people, for example, would likely tend to prioritise access to green space.

8. It was suggested that one issue that the authority should be open to was greener alternatives to cremation and burials; moving forwards, such alternatives could be considered as a more sustainable option than, for example, losing food growing land. It was noted that the Council aimed to provide fully inclusive options to families following a bereavement; therefore burials would be an ongoing option. However, officers were aware that the market in this area was evolving and did consider alternatives and were mindful of more sustainable options as well.

9. It was suggested that it would be important to ensure ongoing effective communication to residents about the changes that had taken place in the grass cutting regime in relation to parks and green spaces, including a clear explanation about the environmental and ecological considerations which underpinned the approach. It was also suggested that it may be useful to look to develop an online tool providing details to residents about when grass cuts would take place; it was noted that it may be possible to share mapping detail used by officers in managing parks and green space across the city.

The Commission **RESOLVED:**

- To note the report and the above information.

10 Draft Tree and Woodland Strategy

The Commission considered a report setting out the Draft Tree and Woodland Strategy for comment and review.



The Commission received the following public forum items in relation to this item:

1. Questions from Len Wyatt, Bristol Parks Forum, together with written replies from officers.
2. Statement from Len Wyatt, Bristol Parks Forum.
3. Questions from Mark Ashdown, Bristol Tree Forum, together with written replies from officers. It was noted that Mark Ashdown had also separately submitted some written supplementary questions and that officers would respond in writing to these further questions.
4. Statement from Mark Ashdown, Bristol Tree Forum.
5. Statement from Susan Carter, Bristol Walking Alliance.

Key points highlighted by officers in presenting the report:

1. The draft Tree and Woodland Strategy had been prepared following stakeholder workshops and a public-facing tree questionnaire survey carried out in March 2023.

2. It was not intended to undertake further public consultation on the draft strategy.

The draft strategy should essentially be seen as a dynamic, evolving and action-focused document; the aim now was to focus on taking forward the identified key actions across four themes: 'Plant, Protect, Manage and Participate'.

3. The draft strategy was designed to address the opportunity and need to increase tree cover in the city and bring existing trees and woodland into positive management. It also introduced the Tree Impact Criteria which was designed to target tree planting where this would deliver the most benefit. The strategy also advocated a partnership and One City approach with the aim of encouraging the widest possible involvement from landowners, organisations and citizens in participating in taking action for trees.

4. The draft strategy was designed as a strategy for the city, taking account of the West of England Tree and Woodland Strategy, and responded to the climate and ecological emergencies.

Summary of main points raised/noted in discussion:

1. A question was raised about why further formal public consultation would not be carried out on the draft strategy. It was noted that feedback received through the stakeholder workshops held earlier in the year had been taken into account. The draft strategy would be presented to the One City Environment Board at the end of September for input and endorsement; following that, it was anticipated that the strategy would be submitted to the Cabinet for endorsement.

2. In relation to the Tree Impact Criteria, it was noted that these were designed to target new tree planting in locations that would deliver greatest benefit for citizens and wildlife, also taking account of the needs of deprived/disadvantaged communities. The four criteria used for assessment purposes were:

- a. Deprivation: indices of multiple deprivation.
- b. Heat risk stress: urban heat stress vulnerability.
- c. Nature recovery considerations.
- d. Tree deficit: degree of 'below average' tree cover.



3. In terms of the explanatory narrative, it was suggested that further detail could be usefully included to explain the positive impact that the careful planting of new trees could have in terms of how people feel about the quality of their local environment, i.e. to stress the local benefits of tree planting.

4. An issue was raised about the degree to which the planting of street trees was or could be taken forward, mindful of the fact that some pavements across the city were too narrow to accommodate tree planting. It was noted that a grant proposal for a pilot street tree planting scheme through the Urban Tree Challenge Fund was being progressed; very careful assessment would though need to be undertaken in terms of the appropriateness of planting trees at particular street locations and in assessing cost considerations. It was noted that the planting of street trees could potentially be explored also in the context of developing future liveable neighbourhoods.

5. In response to a question, it was noted that the Council had partnered with the Trees for Streets charity in an initiative designed to make it easier for organisations, businesses and residents to sponsor tree planting in streets and parks across the city.

The Commission **RESOLVED**:

- To note the report and the above information.

11 Quarterly performance report (Quarter 4 2022-23)

The Commission received a report setting out the progress to date made against delivering the Business Plan performance metrics and actions relevant to the Communities Scrutiny Commission remit.

It was noted that in advance of this meeting, the Chair had asked that an update be provided on the latest position on particular Housing and Landlord Services targets.

The responses/update provided by officers are set out below:

BPPM374a: Reduce average relet times (all properties) and BPPM375: Reduce the number of empty council properties

- A comprehensive action plan has been created and is being implemented to tackle macro and micro conditions affecting performance.
- Targets have increased for the 2023-24 reporting year but are now realistic stretch targets which are under constant review as performance changes.

BPPM377c: Reduce the number of Council homes with an EPC rating of D or lower

- The percentage of homes at EPC D or below has remained static across the last 2-3 years.
- The majority of homes still below the required standard are 'harder to treat' properties which require more time and investment:
 - * older homes with solid walls.
 - * homes with non-standard methods of construction.



- The service is developing an approach to address the remaining ~7500 homes in line with the commitment for all homes to reach at least EPC C by 2030. This will be delivered in partnership with Bristol City Leap.
- Further detail in the Energy Efficiency Strategy will be shared in the report due for submission to the Cabinet in February 2024.

BPPM357: Reduce the number of households in temporary accommodation

- Since the pandemic, there has been a 25% increase in households coming to the Council who are homeless. Other factors are lack of available affordable housing, expensive private rental accommodation and home ownership, cost of living crisis etc. Nationally, in March 2023, there were 105,000 households in temporary accommodation, including 131,000 children, the highest since 2010; a 74% increase in 10 years according to Shelter - two thirds of those had been living in temporary accommodation for more than a year.
- The council has a legal obligation to prevent homelessness and where this is not possible to house people who are homeless and vulnerable/have children.
- The Temporary Accommodation project is focused on reducing the cost of emergency temporary accommodation.
- The new build programme will bring on line more affordable housing.

The Commission **RESOLVED:**

- To note the report and the above update information.

12 Work Programme

The Commission noted the latest update of the work programme.

Meeting ended at 7.29 pm

CHAIR _____

