

# Bristol City Council

## Minutes of the Communities Scrutiny Commission

27 February 2024 at 5.00 pm



### **Attendance:**

#### **Communities Scrutiny Commission members present:**

CLlr Martin Fodor, Chair  
CLlr James Scott, Vice-Chair  
CLlr Amal Ali  
CLlr Kerry Bailes  
CLlr Amirah Cole  
CLlr Tessa Fitzjohn  
CLlr Gary Hopkins  
CLlr Henry Michallat  
CLlr Tony Dyer (substituting for CLlr Barry Parsons)

#### **Cabinet member in attendance:**

Councillor Ellie King, Cabinet Member for Public Health and Communities

#### **Officers present:**

Alex Minshull, Sustainable City and Climate Change Manager  
Kit Beaumont, Ecological Emergency Co-ordinator  
Richard Ennion, Parks Development Manager  
Christina Gray, Director: Communities and Public Health  
Clare Sims, Safer City Manager  
Supt Mark Runacres, Avon & Somerset Police  
Patsy Mellor, Director: Management of Place  
Jon James, Head of Natural and Marine Environment  
Pete Anderson, Director: Property, Assets and Infrastructure  
John Bos, Property Partner (Neighbourhoods and Communities)  
Ian Hird, Scrutiny Advisor

## **25 Welcome, Introductions and Safety Information**

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



## **26 Apologies for Absence and Substitutions**

It was noted that apologies for absence had been received from Cllr Amirah Cole, Cllr Barry Parsons and John Smith, Executive Director: Growth and Regeneration.

It was also noted that Cllr Tony Dyer was substituting for Cllr Parsons.

## **27 Declarations of Interest**

None.

## **28 Minutes of previous meeting**

The minutes of the meeting of the Communities Scrutiny Commission held on 20 November 2023 were confirmed as a correct record.

## **29 Chair's Business**

The Chair commented that, as had been the case with regard to the previous two meetings of the Commission held across the 2023/24 council year, the items of business to be discussed at this meeting presented members with an opportunity to flag issues and/or recommendations that could be forwarded to the relevant policy committee(s) for consideration in setting their work programmes under the committee governance system that would take effect from May 2024.

## **30 Public Forum**

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

### **Public Questions:**

1. Joanna Mellors re: Agenda item 9 - Communities Scrutiny comments on Cabinet report on allotment rents and water charges
2. Dan Ackroyd re: Agenda item 9 - Communities Scrutiny comments on Cabinet report on allotment rents and water charges
3. Katy Ladbrook re: Agenda item 9 - Communities Scrutiny comments on Cabinet report on allotment rents and water charges



**Public Statements:**

1. Suzanne Audrey: Update on Bristol City Council's Ecological Emergency Action Plan (agenda item 7)
2. Dan Ackroyd: Update on Bristol City Council's Ecological Emergency Action Plan (agenda item 7)
3. Christopher Faulkner Gibson: Allotment rents and water charges (agenda item 9)
4. Ruth Hecht: Allotment rents and water charges (agenda item 9)
5. Steve Sayers: Saving community spaces (agenda item 10)

Note: Public forum items were received at the start of each relevant agenda item (see below).

**31 Update on Ecological Emergency Action Plan**

The Commission considered a report setting out an update on progress on the delivery of the Council's Ecological Emergency Action Plan.

**Public Statements:**

The Commission noted that public statements had been submitted by:

1. Suzanne Audrey
2. Dan Ackroyd

Suzanne Audrey and Dan Ackroyd were in attendance at the meeting and presented their respective statements.

Key points highlighted by officers in presenting the report:

1. The Bristol City Council Ecological Emergency Action Plan was a council-wide programme of activities to deliver on the ambitions of the One City Ecological Emergency Strategy and relevant aspects of the One City Climate Strategy. The Council had adopted the key targets from these strategies and embedded them as key performance indicators that were reported on annually. The targets covered the following areas: land managed for nature; pesticides reduction; tree canopy; water quality.
2. Good progress was being made across the 77 specific actions included in the action plan: With one update awaited, in terms of RAG rating, 18 actions were completed fully, 51 were Green ranked (i.e. progressing well or embedded as business as usual), 5 were Amber ranked (requiring some specific action to get them on track) with 2 Red ranked and held up at this stage.
3. Key successes included:
  - a. Inclusion of new environmental policies in new key strategic work: Local Plan, Parks and Green Spaces Strategy and Local Flood Risk Management Strategy.
  - b. Production of the Sustainable Procurement Policy and guidance.
  - c. An established citywide approach to tree planting and ash dieback.



- d. Habitat creation and enhancement opportunities on Parks land had been identified; the Council had also successfully passed the 'Expression of Interest' stage for securing Green Recovery Fund resources from the Combined Authority to potentially support delivery of phase 1 of the plans.
- e. An 18% reduction in the use of pesticides across the Council.

4. A challenge to delivery had been faced in relation to staff recruitment, with the Ecological Emergency Co-ordinator post having been held vacant for 13 months, although these issues were now being resolved. A further key challenge was around continuing to explore all opportunities for external funding given the general pressure on council budgets.

Summary of main points raised/noted in discussion:

1. It was noted that the public statements submitted to the meeting had highlighted concerns about the trimming of an ancient hedge at Yew Tree Farm. It was suggested that in terms of public perception, actions such as this did not sit well in the context of the overall good progress being reported on the Ecological Emergency Action Plan and could potentially lead to a degree of public scepticism about the Council's ongoing commitment to delivering on the ecological agenda. In response to questions, it was clarified by officers that the land in question at Yew Tree Farm was privately owned land and the work carried out had accordingly not been authorised by the Council. The Cabinet member for Public Health and Communities commented that in her view, there had been a certain degree of misinformation spread about the situation; it was important to note that although the hedgerow fell within a designated Site of Nature Conservation Interest (SNCI), it was understood that certain work had been necessary in terms of scrub management ahead of the bird nesting season as the scrub had been allowed to encroach upon the grassland.
2. In terms of the powers available to the Council in overseeing the protection of SNCIs on privately owned land and ensuring that sites with this designation were managed appropriately, it was clarified that the authority only had limited scope to act if sites were neglected; there was no requirement on landowners in terms of active and positive site management. In certain cases, where there was clear evidence of wilful damage to an SNCI (rather than passive neglect), there may be scope for some intervention with the landowner but, in overall terms, the ability of the authority to actively pursue enforcement-related activity was restricted.
3. In response to questions, it was clarified that:
  - a. the designation of an SNCI would be a material consideration in relation to the planning process.
  - b. under legislation (Environment Act 2021), all planning permissions granted (with a few exemptions) now had to deliver at least 10% biodiversity net gain.
4. In response to a point raised by the Chair, and noting that the Ecological Emergency Action Plan was a council-wide programme of activities to deliver on the ambitions of the One City Ecological Emergency Strategy and relevant aspects of the One City Climate Strategy, it was also noted that the One City Environment Board, as the city partnership body, was beginning discussions about refreshing the two wider strategies.



5. An issue was raised about the training provided and available to parks officers in relation to supporting ecological work and initiatives across parks. It was noted that parks staff were required to undertake mandatory training; the service was also keen to continue developing/enabling appropriate training opportunities for staff around, for example, managing land for nature.

6. It was suggested that all possible action should be taken to encourage pond habitats across the city's parks. Reference was also made to a recent cultural art project aimed at creating artworks with Bristol's residents close to rivers, designed to find out what was important to them; it was suggested that this type of project should also be encouraged in relation to the city's parks.

7. It was noted that future progress against the action plan would be reported to the relevant policy committee under the committee governance system.

### **32 Bristol Community Safety Partnership report 2022/23**

The Commission considered the Bristol Community Safety Partnership report 2022/23.

Key points highlighted by officers in presenting the report:

1. An update/overview was provided on the structure of the Keeping Bristol Safe Partnership (KBSP) arrangements and on the respective duties of partners under the Crime and Disorder Act 1998. It was noted that two of the partnership sub-groups in particular remained very strong in their delivery against the partnership's priorities, those being the Strategic Partnership Against Hate Crime and the Combatting Drugs Partnership.

2. A summary was also outlined in terms of crime and disorder data for 2022/23. It was noted that in future, it was expected that in-year data summaries would be available.

3. The key priorities for KBSP moving forwards included:

- a. Taking forward the Bristol Serious Violence Framework.
- b. Continuing to strengthen data analytics.
- c. Co-creating and taking forward a local Reducing Reoffending Strategy.
- d. Strengthening the Keeping Communities Safety Group's oversight and reporting schedule.
- e. Community engagement and tackling disproportionality.

Summary of main points raised/noted in discussion:

1. It was noted that the report provided assurance for the Commission on the effectiveness of the partnership working in place around community safety.



2. There was a discussion about the impacts from recent very serious knife crime incidents in Bristol, noting that this had raised significant concerns and anxiety around safety in those communities affected. It was noted that a range of actions had been/were being taken in response to the recent incidents, in line with the Bristol Safer Options approach to serious youth violence. Work was also taking place to support schools across the city. It was also recognised that the problem of knife crime was not one that the police could solve alone; a city response and effective multi-agency approach was required involving the police, the Council and other partners working with and for young people and with the communities affected.

3. It was noted that a review of the immediate actions taken in response to the recent serious knife crime incidents would be undertaken from a 'lessons learned' perspective; this would include a review of the protocol around ensuring that ward councillors were provided with all appropriate information.

4. It was noted that the BCSP was planning to produce an annual report covering the period April 2023 - March 2024 by the end of summer 2024. The intention was that this report would be presented to the relevant new policy committee in September 2024. Reports could also be provided over the next year to that committee on 'deep dives' into particular areas of interest.

### **33 Communities Scrutiny comments on Cabinet report on allotment rents and water charges**

The Commission considered the report on allotment rents and water charges that was being submitted to the Cabinet on 5 March 2024.

The following public forum items were noted in relation to this matter:

#### **Public Questions:**

The Commission noted that public questions had been submitted by:

1. Joanna Mellors
2. Dan Ackroyd
3. Katy Ladbrook

It was noted that written responses to these questions had been provided and published in advance of this meeting.

Dan Ackroyd was in attendance and raised supplementary questions about:

- the detail of the buildings and infrastructure costs in relation to allotments.
- the extent to which other statutory services were required to meet corporate income targets.

#### **Public Statements:**

The Commission noted that public statements had been submitted by:

1. Christopher Faulkner Gibson



## 2. Ruth Hecht

### Summary of main points raised/noted in discussion:

1. The Chair reminded members that on 15 February, they had received a briefing on the allotment rent and water charges proposals.

[Note: Members had raised the following points at that briefing:

a. Clarity had been sought on the scale of increased fees and the impact on council-managed allotments plus the situation on council sites managed by associations.

b. Clarification had been given at the briefing on the distribution of allotment sizes and tenancies and about how many people would be affected; the information given confirmed the most common sized plots, the standard reference size plot, and the larger plots used by some community groups.

c. Members had discussed benchmarking and rent levels in comparator urban authorities and others being used for comparison, and also comments on the disparity in rises being quoted by allotment tenant groups.

d. After discussion on the current service budget, members had requested better explanation of the allotment team's actual income and expenditure including a breakdown on the maintenance and infrastructure aspects; members had recommended better communication with tenants to ensure a fuller understanding plus budget transparency so the shortfall could be understood.

e. Members had queried the annual 'corporate income target' and asked for that to be explained; the service clearly didn't meet this from income.

f. Members had noted that if the increased rents and water charges were approved by the Cabinet, there would still be a significant shortfall from the team budget. This shortfall had been met from the departmental budget and would continue to be a burden on the wider department budget; this would need to be communicated effectively.

g. Members had expressed concern at the shortfall in actual rent payments received and the cost of issuing reminders; it was felt that easier, direct ways to pay and payment in stages such as via direct debit were now needed and it was noted that this had been acknowledged.]

2. The Chair commented that the Cabinet report had subsequently been published at 4pm on 27 February (i.e. one hour in advance of today's Communities Scrutiny Commission meeting). The report was now recommending that:

a. there should be no increase in allotment rents/water charges in 2024/25.

b. to reduce the financial impact on allotment holders, the rent increase would instead be phased in over a two-year period starting in the financial year 2025/26. It was proposed that the rent and water service charge would be raised by 50% of the full amount in 2025/26 and to the full amount in 2026/27.

3. It was noted that the proposal was subject to the approval of an amendment to the Council's budget (to be considered on 28 February) and to Cabinet approval on 5 March.

4. In response to questions from members (and taking account of the supplementary public questions asked by Dan Ackroyd), and with reference to the pre-circulated slide deck included in the agenda pack, officers clarified the following points:

a. The £301k annual cost of buildings and infrastructure included the cost of annual maintenance, cyclical replacement of water infrastructure and compliance checks across all the allotment sites over the next 15 years. The figure was a 'best estimate' at this point as further detailed work would take place on the





planned works and associated costs. With increased resource, the aim was to instigate a much more proactive approach to managing investment in and improvements to allotment sites; this would also involve addressing the backlog of maintenance issues, including repairs to water supply and fences.

b. Care needed to be taken in interpreting the use of the term 'corporate income target'; the £55k referred to as a 'corporate income target' was, in reality, an additional saving required as a result of the Full Council budget decision taken on 2 March 2022 to require an annual revenue budget saving of £55k for allotments.

c. The overall aim was to deliver long-term financial sustainability of the service and improve the quality of facilities provided, and to meet the aspirations and implement the actions contained within the Food Growing and Allotments Strategy.

d. Taking account of feedback, the proposals would enable tenants to pay rent by direct debit in quarterly or monthly instalments.

4. In response to a question, it was clarified that the proposed allotment rent increase was not a case of bridging the gap between expenditure and income on the service. The allotments service was subsidised to a significant degree from the wider Parks budget. Although the Council was not required to subsidise the provision of allotments and allotment services, the proposed allotment rent and water service charges would not result in a service that was self-financing.

5. It was noted that allotment rents had not been increased since 2018, hence a larger rent increase was now required if service improvements were to be delivered. It was suggested that it may have been more appropriate for rent increases to have been gradually increased each year since 2018. It was also noted, however that the combination of the financial impact of the Covid pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis on allotment tenants had been important factors in decisions taken not to increase rents since 2018.

6. It was noted that a consequence of delaying the rent increase and then phasing the increase across 2025/26 and 2026/27 was that there would inevitably be a longer timescale for the full delivery of the expected service improvements.

7. It was noted that given the significant concerns raised through the public consultation, the proposals around tenancy rule changes, and administrative fees and charges were not being taken forward at this time. In light of the response to the public consultation, it was suggested that a careful and considered approach would need to be taken to ongoing engagement with stakeholders. In relation to this point, the Cabinet member for Public Health and Communities welcomed the growing organisation of allotment stakeholders and acknowledged that it would be crucial to ensure ongoing effective engagement. It was noted that this would be an important issue to be addressed, post-May by the relevant policy committee under the committee governance system.





## 34 Community assets update

The Commission considered a report setting out an update on the current approach to community asset transfers.

### **Public Statement:**

The Commission noted that a public statement had been submitted by Steve Sayers. Steve Sayers was in attendance at the meeting and presented his statement.

Key points highlighted by officers in presenting the report:

1. The report presented an overview of the existing process for Community Asset Transfer (CAT) and set out some areas where policy changes and improvements could potentially be made. These included:
  - a. Measuring Social Value - an easy-to-use social value tool was needed and should be incorporated into the application process for CAT; the value to the community should be captured so that it could be measured at periodic review meetings with the CAT tenant.
  - b. Including an option of freehold sales at full market value: these could be restricted to VCSE organisations that had funding to acquire a freehold asset, possibly linked to the Community Right to Bid.
  - c. Removing the 'first refusal' option (section 2.3 in the current Policy): this could be treated solely through the Community Right to Bid.
  - d. Ensuring more clarity from the outset on assets that were excluded from CAT, e.g. Housing Revenue Account assets or properties that formed part of the commercial estate.
2. The report highlighted good case-study examples (Hartcliffe City Farm; Jacob's Wells Baths; The Coach House, St Pauls) of recent CAT transactions that demonstrated good collaboration, effective partnership working and the achievement of good social value outcomes.
3. The report contained an exempt appendix; this appendix was not available for public inspection as it contained commercially sensitive information.

Summary of main points raised/noted in discussion:

1. It was noted that the public forum statement presented by Steve Sayers had indicated that community anchor organisations in Bristol had produced a manifesto under the 'Roots of Resilience: Saving Community Spaces' campaign calling for further, transformative action from the Council to protect and enhance shared spaces/assets for the benefit of local communities. It was noted that the suggestions for further action included requests for the Council to:
  - a. Review the CAT process, to enable more community organisations to consider this route.
  - b. Adopt a target and strategy for increasing the number of community owned assets, in line with the One City Plan.
  - c. Delegate leadership for community assets to a member of the Cabinet or to a committee, recognising the sector's role across Council departments.



The comments presented in the public forum statement were generally welcomed. It was agreed that it would be appropriate for the Commission to recommend that, post-May, the relevant new policy committee should give consideration to the authority entering into a dialogue around these proposals; it was noted that the community anchor organisations felt that the Council had generally made good progress on CAT but that there was also an opportunity for Bristol to become an exemplar authority in this regard.

2. It was noted that CAT was an integral part of the effective management and approach to property assets and that this was reflected in the current Council property strategy which covered the property portfolio of operational assets, investment and development. In terms of the proposed areas of potential policy improvement, it was suggested that under the new committee governance system, it would be appropriate to look to engage more fully with local ward councillors via area committees to identify, at an early stage in the process, those Council owned properties earmarked for disposal which may be suitable for a CAT. As part of this, careful consideration should be given to how best to use surplus property in the best interests of the city, also taking into account social value considerations. Through the policy review, it would also be important to ensure public clarity and transparency around the route and processes leading up to a CAT.

3. Members welcomed the clarity of information provided in relation to the case studies included within the report. It was suggested that it would be useful to review successful CAT examples with a view to capturing best practice and learning.

### **35 For information - Quarterly Performance report (quarter 2, 2023/24)**

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.

The Commission noted the report.

Meeting ended at 7.32 pm

**CHAIR** \_\_\_\_\_

