

# Bristol City Council Minutes of the Communities Scrutiny Commission

26 April 2022 at 4.30 pm



## Members Present:-

**Councillors:** Henry Michallat (Vice-Chair), Martin Fodor (Chair), Amirah Cole, Barry Parsons, James Scott, Emma Edwards and Gary Hopkins

## 1 Welcome, Introductions and Safety Information

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting including those attending for Public Forum and Adam Postans a Local Democracy Reporter. The Chair also advised attendees about the emergency evacuation procedure.

Officers in attendance:

- Stephen Peacock, Executive Director Growth and Regeneration
- Kate Cole, Strategic Intelligence & Performance Advisor
- Paul Sylvester, Head of Housing Options
- Joe Wheeler, Senior Benefits Policy Officer
- Richard Ennion - Horticultural Service Manager
- Alex Minshull, Sustainable City and Climate Change Manager
- Sarah Jackson, Ecological Emergency Project Manager
- John Bos, Property Partner
- Patricia Barry, Interim Director of Property
- Johanna Holmes, Scrutiny Coordinator

## 2 Apologies for Absence

There were none.

## 3 Declarations of Interest

In relation to agenda item 12, Councillor Hopkins declared there were currently some community asset transfers (CATs) currently being undertaken in Knowle.



#### 4 Minutes of the Previous Meeting

Councillor Hopkins queried the wording of the previous Waste Update Report minute which referred to Members comments about figures that showed recycling rates had slipped back. Councillor Hopkins stated that he had previously questioned officers' assertion that the reduction in recycling rates were actually down to 'more people staying at home'. He reiterated that he did not believe this was a satisfactory response even though it had been repeated several times. He suggested that more analysis was required to shed light on the situation.

#### 5 Action Tracker

All actions listed were reported as 'complete' and there were no further questions from Members.

#### 6 Chair's Business

The Chair commented that this was the Commission's third and final meeting for the 22/23 municipal year. He thanked the other Commission Members, officers and stakeholders for their contributions throughout the year. The reports for today's meeting he said were thorough and detailed reports and he anticipated a worth-while discussion.

#### 7 Public Forum

The following Public Forum was received:

Public Forum Questions		
Ref	Name	Topic
PFQ 1 & 2	Suzanne Audrey	Agenda item 11. Ecological Emergency Action Plan 2021-2025 - Progress Report & Agenda item 12. Community buildings, community asset transfers, community facilities
PFQ 3 - 9	Bristol Tree Forum	Agenda item 11. Ecological Emergency Action Plan 2021-2025 - Progress Report
Public Forum Statements		
Ref	Name	Topic



PFS1	Bristol Tree Forum	Agenda item 11. Ecological Emergency Action Plan 2021-2025 - Progress Report
PFS2	Bristol Tree Forum	Agenda item 11. Ecological Emergency Action Plan 2021-2025 - Progress Report  *Plus the appended 'request for further information' document which is for information purposes.

The full published Public Forum document can be located [here](#)

**PFQ 1** - Suzanne Audrey was in attendance and highlighted that the performance indicator for 'tree canopy' stated it was the 'number of trees planted' which in her view was not the correct method. The Chair responded that there were various methods for measuring tree canopies that could provide different answers. He said at some point the different ways to calculate this needed to be discussed because it was possible the loss of mature trees meant the canopy could actually be shrinking instead of increasing. The Chair asked that it be put on record that this point needed to be discussed by the Commission again in future.

A Commission Member asked officers when the agreed figures would be made available? Bristol City Council's (BCC) Horticultural Service Manager said the work to develop a strategy had begun i.e. measuring the baseline, however the work had not yet been signed-off as this was also a West of England (WoE) target and it needed to be agreed by neighbouring authorities.

Members asked about the timescales for this and officers said that the strategy would be complete in early 2023 but a draft would be completed at the end of 2022.

The Chair thanked Suzanne Audrey for her question and reiterated his view that this topic should be discussed again by the Commission in the next municipal year so that Members can support the work to help reach the necessary targets.

**PFQ 2** – Suzanne Audrey commented that the report for agenda item 12. was published late and that it was not made clear in advance that the deadline for public forum for that item would be extended. The Scrutiny Coordinator stated that if reports were published late that deadlines were always extended but agreed that it should be made explicitly clear the deadline would be extended when the papers were



first published. It was agreed in future that a note would be added at the time of publishing so that the deadline was clear for all.

## 8 Work Programme

The Chair asked the other Commission Members if they had any recommendations for topics for the next municipal year. Items suggested were:

- Tree canopy and tree planting programme.
- Community Asset Transfers (CATs) and current list and details and lessons learned from process.
- Use of Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) and Area Committees (ACs) including boundaries.
- Quality of Life (QoL) Survey
- Waste, recycling, litter– deep dive to find some solutions.

It was agreed the above topics would be added to a list of potential items for Members to consider in June when setting the 2022-2023 scrutiny work programme.

## 9 Q3 Performance Report

The Chair asked Members if they had any comments or questions about the Quarter 3 Performance Report.

- Members said they would like to keep an eye on attendances at our leisure centres and swimming pools to see if they continue to improve as reported.
- Members commented on the performance of the Councils property re-letting times and the number of voids reported. Officers said as per the commentary in the report, that improvements were being made to the process of reletting property and that voids being filled as soon as was possible.

The Strategic Intelligence & Performance Advisor said that the Quarter 4 end of year report would provide a full up-date on the annual performance targets.

## 10 Homelessness, Temporary Housing Options and Initiatives

The report was introduced by Paul Sylvester, Head of Housing Options and Joe Wheeler, Senior Benefits Policy Officer and was said to be a technical paper.

The Council was said to provide accommodation pathways for those with support needs but today's report was focussed on how the Council was providing temporary accommodation for homeless people.



The Council's aim was to deliver more cost effective and high-quality emergency homelessness accommodation. However, the number of people in Bristol presenting themselves as homeless had significantly increased in recent years. The costs of providing accommodations had also increased significantly. Officers explained that the Spot purchase arrangements were high cost and were not working well and said BCC was trying to move to new Block contracts, which were also less expensive.

A Member said they were struck by the charts on pages 2 & 3 of the report (p44 & 45 of pack) which showed a significant increase in homelessness presentations since 2018 and the year-on-year reductions in social housing allocations. The increase was related to Government policy but why there were such reductions in social housing allocations. Officers said that people are now staying in their current social housing homes and not moving on because it was so expensive to rent privately. They said they were expecting a significant increase in new build homes but re-lets were likely to stay at low levels because of the above point.

A Member commented on the idea that BCC could potentially have 'arm's-length' regulated providers but the market was not interested and asked what was else being considered? Officers said there were many different ways to deliver temporary accommodation services and it was quite a specialised area. Some types of accommodation were said to be much harder to deliver and carried more risk for the Council. A proposal was being developed for a locally supported housing association. However, it was said the Council could fulfil the role of regulated provider because it would remove the need for profits to be made. It was said to be an interesting proposal and officers were developing a set of options to be considered by the administration.

A Member referred to the commissioned homeless pathways diagram on page 6 of the report (p48 of the pack) and suggested that the accommodation did not always meet the needs of some people and in some cases was not deemed as safe by those who stayed there. Officers said they always take client feed back into account and try to address such situations. They were currently looking at a large hostel model as one alternative. In 2 years there would be more options for single people in supported housing. The Member said this type of accommodation was very needed but was there not some way to speed that up as many of the people affected were very vulnerable.

A Member commented that the report focussed on costs but what input had there been from service users to developing plans? Officers said they were working with a national charity to help people have their voices heard. They always consulted and engaged clients to understand their lived experiences and ensure their voices were heard.

The published report stated the Council places people in accommodation 'within the City boundaries and also the sub-region'. Members asked how far away the sub-region could actually mean? Officers said they aim provided accommodation in Bristol where it was possible. But at times had to consider options outside of Bristol for example South Gloucestershire. Or at times they also help people to move to other parts of country where they already have friends or family. However, moving out of the area was always a voluntary decision.



A Member asked about resettlement & independent living pathways; where did people with high support needs go when leaving temporary accommodation when there was such a shortage of affordable accommodation? Officers said they tried to give people the best possible start when they left supported accommodation. But resettlement support was time limited and they did what they could to try and help stop people from having to go through the whole process again.

The Chair commented that he was encouraged by the plans officers had and hoped they would come to fruition.

## **11 Ecological Emergency Action Plan 2021-2025 - Progress Report**

The Chair introduced the item by stating that a Scrutiny Member's briefing had previously taken place on this subject and that he was very pleased to now have this as a formal meeting agenda item.

Alex Minshull, Sustainable City and Climate Change Manager then introduced the report to Members saying that it provided a summary of the progress made on delivery of the Bristol City Council (BCC) Ecological Emergency Action Plan (EEAP). The report identified actions within the plan that are currently being delivered and also priority actions which will need additional funding to ensure progress in a timely and effective manner. The priority projects were proposed to be funded through the use of earmarked reserves funds of £1m allocated by the administration. The report, he said, showed good progress was being made in many areas. Some actions were already complete and two thirds are on track. A quarter of the actions had been delayed slightly.

Officers were said to be planning for operational changes such as a reduction in the use of pesticides and improved land management techniques. The action plan was a combination of short-term wins such as planting trees and strategic enabling works such as Biodiversity Net Gain.

The Chair said he was very encouraged that there were no red ratings in the action plan and thanked officers for the level of detail in the report.

- A Member commented that some years ago the Council had planned to severely reduce the use of pesticides, what had happened since then and how much had usage been reduced by? Officers said they had trialled several different methods to see which was most effective. More trials were being planned and officers were said to now have the baselines to work out where to target further reductions. Members said there were now a range of alternative options to use and it was the Council's duty to try using them. The Chair said that he would like to know what locations the trials were being held if possible. Officers said a project officer was currently working on this and also researching what alternatives other local authorities were using instead. It was said this was a cultural change and there would need to be general acceptance of vegetation growing in places where it wasn't previously but it was important to bring people along on the journey. There would be trials during the summer and the sites would be identified. The Chair requested that the Members were kept informed about when and where the trials take place.



- A Member referred to a pesticides study carried out by BCC in 2017 using vinegar and asked if officers thought that public perceptions have changed since then about the vegetation not being cut or sprayed in the same way as it used to be. Officers said yes it was possible that some people's views had changed but they still needed more people on board with the changes. They were looking at carrying out some specific public communication on this.
- It was asked if officers were already working with community groups and were there areas that communities could take ownership of as that could potentially reduce costs? The response was yes and communities could adopt areas of land. It would however depend on the scale of land being adopted going forward as they were currently only small plots. There is a community support officer in the team that can help with this. Officers said they would share a link where people can register interest in areas or groups. **ACTION: Useful links where interested parties can sign-up to and find out about activities and local parks and green spaces groups, to be sent to Members.**
- A Member asked about the activity matrix and the 'Red Amber Green' (RAG) rating of 75% and asked if the work was progressing very well or could the targets have been more ambitious? Officers said there were some actions they were confident of delivering and some not so. The important thing was to focus on the corporate targets these actions are aiming to deliver. The action plan showed how they were supporting delivery of the One City targets. Without an action plan there wouldn't have been so much work taking place. It was added that there were now a number of teams working on this plan that crossed many services in the Council as well as those outside of the Council.
- Members again raised the issue the methodology for measuring the tree canopy and said that if a way of measuring it had not yet been agreed, would that not undermine confidence? Officers said they were currently looking into this i.e., either measure backwards what's grown or measure forwards what should have grown. It was confirmed that there was a loss in the number of mature trees. The Council had been very busy planting trees but it was the losses of mature ones that was said to be difficult to catch up with. Members agreed that there were many who thought there was a reduction in the number of mature trees.
- 'Living roofs' were discussed and it was suggested there was wider enthusiasm for more of them. Officers agreed and said they were looking at sites where they would make the most difference such as helping to link up areas. Bus stops were highlighted but it was said they may not be close enough to other habitat to be effective but there were some good examples to consider going forward.
- Members raised 'inequalities in accessing nature' and asked what activities were planned to start to address them? Officers said house prices in Bristol can be linked to the amount of green spaces in each area and they were looking to see how more green spaces could be provide in some areas, such as how to repurpose and transform empty sites. There were currently small grants available that could be applied for to transform spaces. There were also other programmes coming forward such as Liveable Neighbourhoods which could re-purpose land in areas.





The Chair positively commented on the amount progress was being made, however he also suggested there could be more ambition in the next stage to tackle the Ecological Emergency and not be complacent.

Members thanked officers for their time and the positive work that was being undertaken.

## **12 Community Buildings, Community Asset Transfers, Community Facilities (open session)**

John Bos (BCC Property Partner) and Patricia Barry (Interim BCC Property Service Manager) were in attendance to introduce the report and respond to the Commission's questions. The published report provided an overview of the use of Council-owned property assets to that support voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) organisations. The report also contained details of current policies, practices and types of community assets. John said there was still some room for improvement in areas but they were continually improving where they could. He said there was an un-ending demand for property and that new queries were received every day. In many cases, the property that's enquired about isn't BCC owned property. He highlighted that property is difficult to look after and groups didn't always know or understand the full demands. He said that people often incorrectly think the Council has lots of unused vacant property. He explained how the Council tried to strike a balance between maximising income from rents and positive social outcomes. In financial terms, the total concessionary value of community assets is just under £2M per year.

A Member commented they were very happy to see Redcatch Community Centre highlighted as a successful example of a CAT. The group of volunteers have improved it immensely as it had a rental value of nil when they took it over many years ago. But how had officers calculated the market value rent figure from in the (exempt) report? Officers said that was an estimate of a value that is based on what rent would be charged on the open market. The Member said it was a very popular and busy centre but the estimated rental value appeared to be low and didn't reflect how much it had improved.

The Executive Director Growth and Regeneration said many community organisations that run CATs grow and employ staff eventually and the Council would like to have more of them. But the CATs did go both ways and there wasn't always a positive outcome, stating that some groups or organisations hand back properties in a much worse condition than they previously were.

The Chair cited the social value gained from assets being available to the voluntary and community sector (VCS) and how this in turn was supporting communities in many ways. He added that if social value was measured it should be about the contributions not just the financial value because without those contributions the City would be much worse off. The Executive Director agreed and said the Council wished to be more proactive and was making the investment so the voluntary and community sector could continue providing essential services.

A Member said some areas of the City have low levels of community involvement and that these areas were often those where there are few community run property assets. Was there now an opportunity to





address this? The Director said yes this was part of the Councils aim of being more joined-up and not seeing property as something that was separate entity.

A Member asked why there wasn't a city-wide organisation for community assets in Bristol and if there ought to be? Officers said there had been one about 15 years ago that was part of 'VOSCUR' but it had petered out. It had apparently required huge amounts of effort and resources but still hadn't lasted. A Member said it was a shame because the City missed out on gaining experience from peers and knowledge of contractors a pool of expertise.

A Member asked about paragraph 2.18 of the report that referred to energy efficiency and the forthcoming minimum standards being introduced in April 2023. He said it was likely that some organisations with poorly maintained property would run into problems when required to obtain an Energy Performance Certificate (EPC) and that were in some cases unlikely to have the capacity to make the necessary changes. Officers concurred and said that most properties didn't currently have energy certificates. Up until now EPCs were usually triggered by a sale or transfer. However, they said they would work with tenants on this and it was likely community groups and/or organisations would be able to access funding BCC couldn't, which would help to make the necessary changes. The Chair said there was a lack of information available on this and suggested that some research should be carried out to analyse what the impacts would be on the community groups and organisations as well as the Council as the landlord. The Property Service Manager said they were working closely with the Sustainable City Team and gave assurances that everything was in scope. The Chair requested that the Commission receive an up-date on this at some point in the future.

A Member asked why The Park Local Opportunity Centre had not appeared on the list as it had been a very successful CAT. Officers said that it had not been listed as an asset transfer because the whole site had now been sold to the Department of Education (DFE).

Officers confirmed they intended to carry out a review the CAT policy by April 2023.

A Member suggested the Council should measure rents lost against the financial value of the social value gained so there was a proper record of how community organisations have benefited the City and Council. The Executive Director concurred that a value should be attributed the CATs. He added that the Council also had a target for property disposals and there were decisions about where to draw the line between selling for profit or to make social investment choices. But they would look at things more in the round because it wasn't just about commercial investments because communities were doing things and providing services that the Council couldn't.

A Member said that some organisations that currently held concessionary leases were for-profit companies and had thought they would all be non-profit. Officers said they were open minded about that and judged those organisations by what they delivered and what they did with asset. There were some really good examples of how a council asset can do positive things but also make profit.



### **13 Exclusion of Press and Public**

The public was excluded from the meeting under s.100A(4) of the Local Government Act 1972, for item 12, Community Buildings, Community Asset Transfers (CAT), Community Facilities – Exempt Session, on the grounds that it involved the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in paragraph 3 of Part 1 of schedule 12A of the Act.

### **14 Community Buildings, Community Asset Transfers, Community Facilities (closed session)**

As Above – Exempt Session.

Meeting ended at 7.30 pm

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

