

## Community Engagement Feedback Report Committee Model Working Group

### Overview

1. As part of their Communications and Engagement Strategy, the Committee Model Working Group (CMWG) commissioned the Community Development Team at Bristol City Council to run a variety of focus groups with residents and community organisations in November 2022, to gather their thoughts on the new Committee System of Governance. The intention of the CMWG is to repeat similar activities at various phases as more details about their proposals become clear.

2. It was agreed that four 2-hour sessions would be run across the city, covering: North, South, Central, and East. The Community Development team were the primary facilitators and organisers and were given a proposal brief from the CMWG outlining their requirements for the session and outcomes they wished to achieve. In the this first phase, the idea was to gather feedback before Members had made any decisions about the model for the future of direction of travel.

3. This report outlines the overall themes raised by residents and feedback arising from the three individual questions. Logistical details from each event can be found in appendix A.

4. Using an online generator, we can see that the most popular words mentioned across all events were:

- *Active Listening*
- *Collaborate*
- *Community*
- *Decisions*
- *Different*
- *Impact*
- *Informed*
- *Involved*
- *Language*
- *Local*
- *People*
- *Power*
- *Residents*
- *Transparency*

The report sets out the detailed feedback from the events, separated by theme.

### **Question 1: Have you been involved in decision-making and community participation and what have you learnt from it?**

Residents would like to see improved communication from the Council about decision making. This could include use of simplified language and/or the introduction of reports written in the most common languages spoken in Bristol. Information about the decision pathway should also be made easier to understand.

Transparency was a key thread across all conversations, with residents wanting to know what decisions are being made, and by whom.

Attendees agreed that it was important to keep residents fully informed about how they would be impacted by decisions but also how their feedback would be taken into consideration during decision making.

It was important for the Council to be honest about the influence of residents as many would prefer to focus their time on matters where they had the opportunity to shape the outcome.

The voice of the community needs to be heard, whether individually or through grass-root organisations. Additionally, many people said that they would prefer if the council would communicate clear expectations on what influence residents have when making decisions or shaping strategy and policy, so they can prioritise their time.

Consideration should be given to providing additional guidance and training to local residents to enable them to understand how to become involved in democratic decisions at the Council.

Residents wanted to ensure that the democratic system was accessible for all, including those with disabilities and language barriers, but also geographical factors.

Participation of young people was raised as a particular area of focus and using a variety of formats to engage with was suggested for example, social media and short surveys. For older people, it was thought that 'door knocking' was often their preferred option for receiving information.

There was not one tool that worked for everyone, and multiple approaches should be taken depending on a variety of factors including demographics and ward size. This could include surveys, social media, newsletters, door knocking etc., and should be targeted to unrepresented groups.

Some residents said they felt out of touch with the Council due to most activity taking place in City Hall and would prefer engagement to take place in the community. This could include moving formal Council meetings into the community and/or introducing more local decision making. Some residents acknowledged that this would be expensive and there might be adequate budget to deliver all of these things.

Residents also asked for more digital inclusion, which could include hybrid or virtual meetings, webcasting of Committee meetings, and more online information.

The role of local Councillors was considered vital in providing the link between residents and City Hall and many suggested that it would be helpful to find ways to enable Councillors to spend more time in their wards talking about decisions.

In the committee system, Councillors would be making decisions based on issues affecting areas across different parts of the city, so a briefing/training programme was recommended. Meetings should be held both in City Hall and locally, as well as online. Feedback was very positive regarding virtual meetings and increased ease of access for lots of residents who no longer need to travel or arrange childcare if they wish to attend a Council meeting, but in person meetings were better for building trust and effective working relationships. Childcare should be provided for in person meetings. It was felt that work done through grass-root organisations and buy in from local residents were more sustainable in the long term and had more impact as people could see the impact from the ground. But it was acknowledged that this can be expensive and there may not always be a budget to support this.

Some residents who have been involved in participatory decision making felt that it just slowed the decision, or that the decision had already been made and the engagement was a tick box exercise which doesn't bring value.

There was a perception amongst some that resources for decision making had not been shared equally across the city in the past. Many wards had community organisations with much more capacity and knowledge to support residents and give them a sense of ownership and support with the council, and some don't.

During Covid, a huge community response was seen across the city, with dedicated resource coming from a variety of places including the Council, charities, voluntary sectors, and community centres/organisations. It was important to take any learning from this experience and see how it could be applied to improving democracy.

**Question 2: What will success look like in the new committee model, and how do we achieve this?**

A successful system will show clear accountability regarding decisions made. The benefit of the Mayoral system was having a single person who had a clear level of accountability and relationships with partners. It was important to retain elements of this in the committee system.

It was suggested that one page summary documents be produced to set out what decision was made, how much money was spent, how the decision will impact people, and who was responsible. A solution to this, was the Members should explain clearly who decided something, who is responsible for enacting the decision and monitoring outcomes, how much money was spent, and the impact it has for residents, organisations, and any environmental or social impact. This should be communicated in a clear and effective way though, not through detailed reports and schemes of delegation which residents find inaccessible.

Residents asked for information about the mechanisms for removing a Councillor from a Committee role if they felt they weren't supporting meaningful community engagement or doing their role effectively i.e., by making fully informed and carefully considered decisions.

Attendees wanted to see increased diversity in the Councillor cohort, and for this to lead to more equal representation on all committees. Many recognised that the allowances paid to Councillors were a barrier to standing for election.

Bristol had a reputation as a 'global city' and it was important that this not be diminished 'Bristol' had established nationally and globally must not be lost in the Committee system.

**Visibility**

Communication from the Council should be clear and consistent so that all residents know who their local Ward Councillors are and how they can contact them. Information could be delivered to residents' homes via newsletters, posters in doctors' surgeries, libraries, community centres etc. As well as better promotion of Councillor surgeries and increased door-knocking.

Decisions that are made should be easy to find online and should explain how a decision has come to be made, the impact it has, and who is responsible for it. This document could then lead to links for detailed reports if people wish to have additional information on a subject.

**Party Politics**

A recurring theme across all events, was that party politics was of limited interest to most residents and they felt Councillors should embrace cross party working and focus more on the needs of their communities.

Many comments followed a similar thread, that we should take the time to learn from past mistakes and continuously aim to make improvements to the system. This should also mean learning from successful activities from the current and previous administrations and continuing this legacy.

The Committee System should set define what success will look like and set out a clear process and timetable for future years to ensure that continuous learning was embraced, and mistakes could be undone. This could include both an internal review with Members and Officers, as well as continuous public engagement so residents can share their thoughts on what is working well, and what needs to be improved.

There will always be conflicts of interest and arguments for and against a decision, but as long as the Council can show clearly that it has listened to residents and learned lessons from previous activity, it's something residents would mostly be able to accept.

A system will be successful when communities feel like they have ownership of activities, strategies, projects etc. that directly affect them and their local areas. Where they have had an opportunity to directly feed into the creation and implementation in a meaningful way.

Less form filling and tick box exercises, and more meaningful engagement where residents feel the Council actually wants to hear from them.

There were points from both sides regarding the Mayoral model vs the Committee model, wherein some people felt the Mayoral model provided a clear sense of direction and accountability, whereas decentralising the decisions and giving them to more people could be slower but fairer. Is there a way of incorporating the best of both systems?

Success was a subjective measure, it may mean good 'stats' to the Council, but something else to residents. The Committee should outline what they deem as a successful system, with as much measurable activity as possible, and feed this back to the city. We should include data as well as real human stories about how activity has impacted people in a positive way.

### **Question 3: What are the key points to include when we are designing the committee structure?**

#### **Key Principles/Strategy**

Residents suggested a strategy, or list of key principles that underpin the system, in line with the Council's values. All Members should sign up to these principles, and there should be suitable recompense if they don't follow them.

Principles should include equality, diversity, inclusion, transparency, accountability, sustainability, racial equality etc. In depth training should be given to all Members on equalities practices, engaging with residents, and practical skills to help speak to and engage with communities.

The strategy should set out the structure clearly in a diagram, including where Committee's feed into each other, how audit and scrutiny are represented, and where decisions are taken. It should also include the Council's plans for reviewing the system, initially and long term, how the system will engage with residents and promote local democracy across the city, lessons learned from previous systems and local decision making, and more.

#### **Transparency**

This was a common theme across all events and questions, with people wanting to be kept informed on decisions that are made, especially ones that affect them. It also extends to the system in general, people want to see how the overall system works, and how each Committee will interact with each other and the Council as a whole.

Attendees across all events agreed that it was important for the Council and its Members to be transparent and open about the Council's budget, and what is manageable and what isn't. If residents are informed, in a clear and simple way, why something isn't possible, and the Council can show clear evidence of why it's not cost effective, they can offer alternative solutions. Residents felt it wasn't enough to just say 'this can't be done' - they want to know why.

### **Scrutiny**

This was only mentioned briefly, as many conversations were focussed on accessibility and transparency of decisions, but this included scrutiny and how this would work effectively in a committee system. Some residents thought a scrutiny commission made up of Councillors, community organisations, and residents would be the most effective solution, as they didn't feel a system in which Councillors scrutinise their own decisions was fair.

### **Accessibility**

As mentioned earlier in the report, accessibility was a main theme brought up in all four sessions and covers a wide area. The new system should be accessible in terms of residents having input in the design, increased public engagement once its launched, and an opportunity to review the system and make changes and improvements where needed. Members and officers should also be accessible to residents, for example the current Mayor regularly speaks on local radio, which reaches a wide audience.

It is not just about making the meeting physically accessible for someone to attend, it's also the atmosphere and the political language/nuances. For example, some residents found that the current style of Public Forum can sometimes feel too formal and rushed, and should be redesigned to be more creative, give voices to local people and organisations regularly, and feel more welcoming.

Attendees discussed how formal meetings, such as Full Council and Committee meetings can be quite intimidating, for both residents and organisations, and more information on what is to be expected would be helpful. This feeds into an earlier suggestion of increased political literacy, including changing some of the existing language to be more friendly and welcoming, as well as offer training or guidance to people who want to come and speak at meetings.

Meetings should be held at various times, not the same time every week. For example, Licensing is always on a Thursday, and Cabinet and Full Council are always on a Tuesday, how can people engage if those are always their working days, or they have childcare.

### **Consultation**

Regular and effective methods of consultation should be used not only when designing the system, but when its implemented. It should be a route to hear residents' thoughts on the strategic planning of the Councils services, the way the Committees function, as well as the local impact the Committees have.

Residents also wanted to note that not everyone cares about local democracy or has a particular interest in it. So, this shouldn't be about pressuring anyone to participate, but giving them the tools and access if they want to, and showing them it's not a scary process, but designed for them.

When the Council received petitions, they should share them on local ward Facebook Groups so people don't have to go out of their way to see if there is something happening at the Council that might impact them.

# APPENDIX A

## Details of each event

### Attendees

The Community Engagement team prepared lists of recommended attendees for the events with the intention of ensuring diverse and representative groups. These were then shared with elected Members who added additional participants based on their own local knowledge.

### North

This was held at Blaise High School on Monday 14<sup>th</sup> November from 18:30 to 20:30. It was attended by 22 people who were residents or representatives of community organisation such as Ambition Lawrence Weston, Henbury and Brentry Community Council, Lockleaze Neighbourhood Trust, Shirehampton Community Action Forum and SusWot (Sustainable Westbury-on-Trym).

Councillor Geoff Gollop was also in attendance.

### South

The second session was held on Wednesday 16<sup>th</sup> November from 18:30 to 20:30 at The Park, Knowle West. It was attended by 20 people and alongside residents the following organisations were represented Diamonds Social Community Hub, Knowle West Media Centre, Vision BAME and representatives from Bristol Youth Council.

Councillors in attendance were Councillor Gary Hopkins, Councillor Tim Kent and Councillor Helen Holland.

### Central

The third session was held on Tuesday 21<sup>st</sup> November from 18:00 to 20:00 at The Trinity Centre, Trinity Road. It was attended by 27 people and alongside residents the following organisations were represented ACE Service, Aspiration Creation Elevation, Bangladesh Association, Bristol Horn Youth Concern, Commission on Race Equality, Friendly Neighbours, OMCA, Polish Women's Group, Somali Centre, and representatives from the Bristol Youth Council.

Councillors in attendance were Councillor Nicola Beech, Councillor Guy Poultney and Councillor Jenny Bartle.

### East

The fourth session was held on Wednesday 30<sup>th</sup> November from 18:00 to 20:00 at the Rose Green Centre, Gordon Road. It was attended by 17 people and alongside residents the following organisations were represented Centre for Deaf and Hard of Hearing and the Timorese Association-Bristol.

Councillor Lorraine Francis was also in attendance.

## **Equalities and Diversity**

Each of the sessions above were diverse and inclusive. In order to promote attendance, the following measures were put in place:

- All of the venues were fully accessible and assistance with transport was available if required.
- Interpreters were available.
- The events were 'child friendly.'
- At each of the above sessions, participants were offered a £20 voucher to compensate them for their time.