

Public Forum

Committee Model Working Group

26 May 2023



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Martin Fodor

Q1. What evidence has the CMWG gathered from other authorities like core cities or local government bodies like the LGA gathered to advise on this issue of devolved decision making?

A1. Local decision making was one of the key design principles that was developed by the CMWG during their first phase of work, which involved discussions with the LGA, CfGS and other Local Authorities. Members gathered a good deal of information during this process, the most pertinent of which is captured in the report.

Q2. When can an inquiry be held to develop these ideas into practical proposals?

A2. The CMWG will be considering their first report regarding local decision making at their meeting on 26th May 23. Once Members have provided a steer on which model (s) they would like to explore further appropriate steps will then be taken to produce a more detailed report of options.



David Redgewell

Q3. What discussion have taken place with the chief executive of the west of England mayoral combined Authority about this committee functions and the mayor for the west of England Dan Norris and when time and dates please.

A3. Members of the CMWG will be considering partnership working at their meeting on 28th July 23 which will include further consideration about any discussions that may be required with WECA and other key external stakeholders.

Q4. In view of the west of England mayoral combined Authority being responsible for Transport Regional planning and Housing skills and Education Economy growth and Tourism. With the west of England mayoral combined Authority also being told to absorb the local Enterprise partnership and North Somerset council into the Authority and with the cabinet decision to Transfer the Transport and public transport staff to west of England mayoral combined transport Authority. What discussion have taken place about the working arrangements between the western gateway transport board city and county of Bristol council, Banes South Gloucestershire council and North Somerset council and the west of England mayoral combined transport Authority and Mayor Dan Norris over these committee and the Role of leader and Deputy leader of the council

If no meeting has taken place when does this committee intend to discuss these proposals with the west of England mayoral combined transport Authority and mayor Dan Norris.

A4. As above.

Suzanne Audrey

Q5. Although not perfect, I believe Neighbourhood Partnerships were important. The Neighbourhood Partnership meetings I attended enabled police officers, council officers and others to meet and discuss local issues and priorities. Although attempts have been made locally, nothing has really been able to replace the Neighbourhood Partnership meetings in the area where I live. To help me understand why they were abolished, please can members of the committee explain what the problems were with the Neighbourhood Partnership Model?

A5. Please see the Cabinet report of [2017](#) for more details about why the Neighbourhood Partnerships were replaced with Area Committees. Members of the CMWG may wish to comment.

Q6. I believe that one of the main reasons the elected mayor system was rejected was because people felt they were not being listened to at local level. People will be looking to the new committee system to be more willing to listen to concerns at ward level. Please will you ensure that your working group does come up with a model for local decision-making, rather than postpone this important aspect of the future governance model?

A6. Members will be considering the options around local decision making at their meeting on 26th May 23. Members of the CMWG may wish to comment.



PQ07-09 Dan Ackroyd

Q7. Although long term planning is usually a good idea, the "Bristol One City" appears to be hugely undemocratic, an attempt to give a façade of inclusion rather than actual inclusion. For example, for the "March City Gathering 2023" some people who live in Bristol had their tickets cancelled, as the event is "always invite-only". If "Bristol One City" is to continue, how would it be changed to support conversations started by the plebians, rather than only having conversations started by the people running it, and in general have a more open approach to discussions?

A7 – The One City presentation that the CMWG will receive today is designed to give Members a better understanding about how One City currently operates. The discussion may continue at the Committee Model Working Group meeting on 28th July 23.

One City is about bringing organisations and networks together to try and tackle city problems. This includes a large number of voluntary community organisations and equalities forums. Bristol City Council is just one of many partners involved and One City could continue without the support of the Local Authority.

Under the Mayoral model, democratically elected Cabinet Members and the directly elected Mayor have been represented within the One City structures. Other councillors have been invited to attend. Going forward, the Committee System may wish to review councillor engagement within One City.

Q8. There appears to be a bug or flaw in the planning process, when planned work becomes unfeasible, as was shown in the recent 22/05943/X planning application for Avon Crescent. For those who don't know, the original plan (as far as I understand it) was to make Avon Crescent be a shared space with traffic calming measures in place. When that became un-needed for the Metrobus, and against government guidelines, a proposal emerged from somewhere to just abandon the traffic calming scheme and return Avon Crescent to being open to cars travelling at speed, despite it now being used by far more pedestrians and cyclists. Dropping significant parts of an application, without consulting the people who would be affected seems undemocratic. Is the committee system planning changes to address this flaw in the process? Have other councils tackled this problem?

A8. Planning is covered by a separate regime and no changes are intended as part of the introduction of the Committee Model system of governance. However, if residents have concerns about planning matters in their area, we recommend that they raise them with their local Councillor.

Q9. The "Western Harbour consultation" was a farce. When the planning group refuses to call Cumberland Basin by that name, and substitutes a name more marketable to investors, it shows a clear lack of respect for the people who actually live in Bristol. The Masterplan document is apparently currently being developed, and as far as I'm aware, no-one outside of BCC has any idea what is going to be proposed, other than a strong suspicion Avon crescent is planned to be opened to cars. Under the committee system, will there be any changes to bring planning and redevelopment under better democratic control?



A9. As above, planning decisions are dealt with under a separate regime where no changes are intended. However, political oversight of strategic matters will be provided by the relevant Policy Committee. It will be for members of the Policy Committee to decide how to achieve democratic participation in strategic planning matters.

Statements

PS01 Martin Fodor

Ward councillors have a key community leadership role in their wards and wider neighbourhood.

They are meant to be informed and have an input into key local decisions – as reiterated and agreed in Full Council recently.

There's clearly a balance between strategic initiatives for the city and parochial issues affecting a local community – which can often be in tension – but the council has affirmed that ward councillors should be consulted and involved.

Since the demise of the 3-ward Neighbourhood Partnerships and the impacts of many years of austerity there's been no local highways budget or any grant funding as seedcorn for community initiatives, at a time when these are relied on more and more. This means there's sometimes no discretionary spending at all in the hands of councillors [some Area CIL funds are negative at the time of writing].

At the same time there's often no clear basis explained for allocation of things like road safety budgets, highway maintenance and renewal, investment of capital in new facilities etc. Currently proposals emerge almost fully formed. Officers have often been unavailable until a project already has funding, which is an obstacle to developing suitable projects. This led to the 'surgery' phase for Area CIL projects.

There's now an opportunity to change this with the advent of the committee model of governance as more representative committees are to be formed.

This can be put in place at the same time as the threshold for decisions is lowered to bring more budget spending into the open. And a delegation to ward or groups of wards would help ensure less congestion in policy committee agendas e.g. sub-£500,000 proposals.

Now is therefore the best time to put in place devolved decision making for various services to allow more transparent, more local priority setting for some service budgets which can be done in conjunction with community partners. This could involve highway safety, active travel, parks, potholes, signage, micro grants and so on – list to be agreed with each service director. Such devolved groups of wards could also be used to help deliver further local proposals to progress both liveable neighbourhoods and community climate action groups which are both policies supported by the current administration.



Area Committees has been a 'pending' item for scrutiny for two years now. Due to the timetable for the CMWG this could come too late to ensure a suitable inquiry and option assessment. Therefore, I urge the working group to schedule this now and invite for evidence and proposals as soon as possible. I'd be happy to see Communities Scrutiny allocate time to support this.

Martin Fodor, Redland Ward, Outgoing Chair of Communities Scrutiny.

PS02 Suzanne Audrey

It seems to make sense to gather people and organisations together from across the city to collaborate in addressing key issues. But I think it is important to acknowledge that, under the current administration, the Bristol One City process has been highly selective in deciding who is permitted to contribute.

The One City presentation in the papers today states that councillors and the public are allowed to attend if they wish to do so.

This isn't entirely true. I am sure we can remember the press coverage of when a Green councillor was 'uninvited' from the launch of the One City Plan in 2019. She was told "after careful consideration I believe that as an opposition party representative it wouldn't be suitable for you to attend."

This process seems to have continued. I booked and actually received a ticket for the most recent One City gathering. I assumed, therefore, that I would be able to attend. But I later received an email from the City Office stating:

"Thank you for signing up to attend the One City Gathering in March 2023. As part of our event process, for security purposes, we check the attendees list against our invitees, as the event is always invite-only and we are now operating a waiting list. Consequently, we are cancelling your order for the event as you are not on the original list of invitees. We apologise for any inconvenience."

I am aware that various organisations with local expertise have been excluded from contributing to One City gatherings and the various commissions because they may have criticised a policy of the current mayor.

I do not believe the mayor, cabinet members or any councillors should have to tolerate abuse. But criticism is, and should be, part of the democratic process.

I hope, if something similar to the One City gatherings and the Commissions continues under the new committee system, there will be room for constructive criticism and a willingness to draw on the expertise of people and organisations that are currently excluded.

PS03 Anita Bennett

I write on behalf of the SEND Alliance for St. Christopher's School. We are asking for this committee to open up this very closed and unaccountable process, to become more in line with many other councils in the UK. We are frustrated by the lack of elected councillors on the Community Right to Bid Team (CRTB).



This closed process, with no right of appeal, meant that the Council has rejected twice our application for this historic site to be declared an Asset of Community Value. Everyone in every political party supports St. Christopher's, so the sooner that democratic processes can be applied the sooner we can work together for the greater good of our special citizens.

Unelected officers of the CRTB claim that we hadn't shown enough "local value." There is no appeal, no clear guidelines and huge silences when we ask questions. Why are there no elected councillors sitting on this unelected, effective shadow planning committee?

Why are families of the learning disabled barred? By turning down our application they are overstepping their remit and effectively supporting the developers. Because with that ACV status we are confident that we have found investors who can provide both housing and SEN provision.

We in the SEND Alliance for St. Christopher's worked tirelessly to produce a second 48-page application proving conclusively, with numerous testimonies, just how much the site served the local Bristol community. It saved families from complete collapse and trained hundreds of SEN teachers, who still serve Bristol. Yet these employees deem it didn't prove that it served the local community. What exactly are their criteria?

The Bristol Zoo won its status with only one page. We lost with 47 pages. Are animals worth more than seventy years and tens of thousands of families with learning disabled children? According to the Community Right to Bid Team, animals certainly are more important than human beings.

There are already many empty elderly retirement homes. There are no homes, no respite care, for adults with learning disabilities, whose elderly parents sink, and even die, under the weight of caring lifelong. And after the closure of St. Christopher's there are no residential schools left inside Bristol, so we pay millions to send children out of county. Why? When it would be such a win-win situation for elected councillors to step in and declare the site clearly and proudly as an Asset of Community Value. It is probably the most valuable ACV in this city.

Rescare members tell us that there is a three-year waiting list for adult respite care, when there is a purpose-built 10-bed respite home on site ready to be used tomorrow if only the whole Council will get creative and come behind our reasonable plan for this to become an economically viable mixed site.

Hundreds of children excluded from school could overnight be helped up on Bristol's flagship SEN school site if only this process were working in the interests of the real local community.

We in the SEN Alliance for St. Christopher's are calling for the full Council to override the unaccountable Community Right to Bid Team, place elected councillors onto it and make clear criteria for what exactly defines "local community value." This will help ensure that the built-in discrimination against the learning disabled is halted and we can begin to turn around our Council's biggest financial headache, the special needs budget.

Thank you for your consideration.



PS04 Roger Gimson

I am former chair of the Bishopston, Cotham and Redland (BCR) Neighbourhood Partnership, and currently chair of the BCR Community Partnership which holds public forum meetings on issues such as engagement with the CIL process. However this statement is a personal one.

To many Bristol citizens, the workings of the Council are opaque. Some Councillors are excellent at keeping their ward constituents informed, but many are not for whatever reason. Austerity has forced council spending to be highly focused, to the detriment of local initiatives. However, the need to keep citizens informed and engaged is still important.

Apart from the formal (and heavyweight) process of producing a Neighbourhood Plan to guide local development (as current in Hengrove and Whitchurch Park, Lawrence Weston, Redcliffe and Old Market), there are other reasons for consulting local communities outside the development and planning regime. Recent examples include the desire for Resident Parking Schemes, the design of Liveable Neighbourhoods and the commercial use of parks.

Alternative Structures

There are positives and negatives to each of the suggested means of local decision making set out in the report to the Committee Model Working Group.

Area Committees

Councillors in Area Committees manage the current arrangements for distributing funding (primarily the 15% Community Infrastructure Levy allocated for local use). While combining wards of different levels of need, these areas are dependent on development to provide the funding. In Area Committee 2, for example (which covers Bishopston, Cotham and Redland as well as Horfield, Henbury and Brentry and Southmead), the low level of development means there are no CIL funds at all available for distribution in 2023/24. Despite this there is still the need for local road schemes, and for supporting local parks, play areas and community organisations and other local initiatives.

Neighbourhood Partnerships

When these existed, each NP was allocated approximately £30k funding per annum for road schemes and another £30k per annum for other community activities. This prompted much greater community engagement because they were more local (covering around 3 wards each) and because people could see that there was some funding directly from their council tax to get local issues addressed. It brought together ward councillors with representatives from local community organisations to set local priorities for funding. However, the system was over-bureaucratic and costly, in both time and administrative overheads.

Parish Councils

Though Bristol does not have a tier of Parish Councils, they embody the approach of giving locally elected, directly-funded local bodies scope to manage local amenities. They also provide a statutory consultative role on planning and potentially other local matters.



Principles

Within the bounds of the relevant legislative frameworks, I believe there are some principles which the Committee Model Working Group should aspire in relation to local decision making:

1. Locally elected representatives should be in charge of local decision making.
2. A proportion of funds to be spent should derive directly from local taxes.
3. Public engagement with local community groups and individuals (with public reports on the levels of support for each alternative outcome) should be a required part of the process.

Suggestions

I have three suggestions based on my experience with the BCR Neighbourhood Partnership and our follow-up Community Partnership.

1. Local Councillors must drive local engagement

Any decisions about Council funding have to be accountable. Both Area Committees and the former Neighbourhood Committees rightly required Councillors to approve any funding proposals.

But there should be an obligation (and Council support) for Councillors to engage with local community organisations, to solicit proposals and to discuss them and set priorities in local public forum meetings (not in centralised Council committee meetings as at present). It may not be necessary to go as far as separately elected Parish Councils, but the level of engagement with city Councillors needs to be similar.

2. Funding should be better allocated

Currently 15% of CIL is allocated for local initiatives (this is increased to 25% for the few areas that have created a Neighbourhood Plan). But this funding varies widely across areas according to the value of the development sites they contain.

The Community Resilience Fund rightly targets capital funding towards areas and communities experiencing the greatest inequality. Strategic CIL funding (the remaining up to 85%) can also be directed towards areas of greatest need.

But a minimal level of funding should still be provided from council taxes to every ward to allow issues to be addressed that are not necessarily related to development sites or deprivation. This is to ensure that all council tax payers feel that the Council is prepared to engage with them and support their local issues.

3. Decision making should truly be local

The current Area Committee model has produced areas which span communities that have little understanding of each other. For effective engagement on decision making it is important that local forum meetings can discuss local issues. The most local level would imply ward-level decision making. However, there may be issues on which ward Councillors may find it effective to pool resources and engagement across adjacent wards, so this should be allowed within any framework.



PS05 Tim Kent and Guy Poultney

The majority of Local Authorities in England operate an Area Committee system. Bristol has operated versions of Area Committees since 2009. Area Committees have been found to increase public engagement with their councils, ensure all areas of an authority feel engaged and improve local decision making.

The principle we should adopt?

We believe the principle that Bristol should adopt is to devolve decisions that affect communities to councillors making those decisions within those communities. It engages communities with decision makers, sees decisions being made and acts as a conduit for local people to engage with the wider authority. It brings the council to the people rather than demanding the people come to the council.

What powers?

Each Local Authority runs their own scheme with a range of powers for area committees. The areas they normally hold some powers over are:

- Highway repairs and local highway safety budgets
- Parks and Play, and major events held within those parks
- Some hold limited planning and licensing powers
- Creating Community plans to guide departments work
- Community buildings, community workers and community investment funds
- Libraries, Youth Provision, Allotments
- Social housing and delegated environmental and community action budgets
- Local sustainability and environmental initiatives
- A general power of action within their community
- CIL and Section 106 monies and agreements, Community art programmes
- Street cleaning and provision of waste bins, Enhanced street recycling facilities
- Holding the delivery of services within the community to account
- Disposal of local authority land, Agreement of Community Asset Transfers
- Footpaths and rights of way maintenance and approval

How many?

There used to be 14 Neighbourhood Partnerships that met within their communities 4 times a year but also had extensive officer support on engagement which was outside of the area committee structure. They were replaced with 6 Area Committees that only meet in City Hall twice a year with streamlined support.

A representative, effective and financially efficient Area Committee system could be run with 8-12 area committees meeting around 4 times a year to make devolved decisions. Many local authorities devolve decision making to Area Committees in phases to ease in the system.

Cost?

The council already operates 6 Area Committees. An enhanced system requiring democratic officer support could be operated at a cost that is substantially less than the one city costs to the council agreed at our previous meeting.

