

# Communities Scrutiny Commission

## 20 November 2023



**Report of:** Hugh Evans

**Title:** Cost of Living Welcoming Spaces

**Ward:** Citywide

**Officer(s) Presenting Report:** Penny Germon, Head of Service - Communities

**Recommendation:**

To note the One City, Many Communities approach to the cost of living crisis over the winter of 2022/2023 which led to 105 Welcoming Spaces across the city. To note the learning from this, and the next steps.

**The significant issues in the report are:**

How the city came together to respond to the cost of living crisis, the impact of this on local people, communities and city resilience, and how we build on this approach going forward.



## 1. Summary

Communities mobilised 105 Welcoming Spaces across the city in response to the cost of living crisis over the winter of 22/23. This built on the way we worked together as a city in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. These responses have been possible because of the commitment of citizens all over Bristol, and the existing community infrastructure that allowed for fast mobilisation and support to be provided at the heart of communities. As we move away from a crisis response, the focus is on how we embed the emergent way of working, and on how we continue to invest in this community infrastructure and in nurturing strong communities.

## 2. Purpose

Welcoming Spaces were at the heart of the One City response to the cost of living crisis. This report is about what happened, our learning and how we go forward.

### 2.1 Context

The cost of living crisis response in Bristol was set up to enable the city to come together in support of communities and residents through the challenging winter months between October 2022 and March 2023. The response developed and co-ordinated new ways of working between different sectors. It created new ways of sharing information and supplied funding opportunities to the organisations best able to serve Bristol's citizens and communities. Consideration was given to making this funding more accessible to a wider network of organisations.

Bristol was able to respond quickly to the challenges posed by the cost of living crisis due to existing social foundations, including the One City approach and our collective experience and learning from COVID-19.

In the early summer of 2022, the Mayor met with community organisations and city partners to discuss the best approach to support communities most impacted by the rising cost of living. Together we knew that winter would be extremely difficult for many people, particularly those already on low incomes and experiencing poverty.

Drawing on local and national evidence and analyses carried out by Public Health officers, an assessment of the likely impact of the crisis on Bristol citizens and identified priority communities was produced. This, combined with a review of national policy and shared insights from a diverse group of partners, led to agreed working principles and a Framework for Action (see Appendix A: One City, Many Communities)

The approach is set out in full in [Bristol's One City approach to the cost of living crisis](#). A case study of the One City approach was also shared on the Local Government Association's website.

A network of Welcoming Spaces and community hubs supported the delivery of the Framework for Action.

The priority was to support and highlight community spaces that already existed. The shared message was that people were welcome to attend their community spaces, where there would be opportunities for social connection, free or affordable hot food and drink and something fun and engaging to take part in. People would also be able to access help and advice in these spaces if

needed. There were also communities and faith groups who were inspired to open ‘pop up’ welcoming spaces for the winter months.

Many of these spaces were operated entirely by hardworking volunteers and had running costs to cover. Community spaces needed support to keep the heating and the lights on, to cover the cost of hot drinks for visitors, and in some cases, to extend their opening hours.

By working with city partners we were able to secure funding through a private donor for the first 17 Welcoming Spaces. Two rounds of social action grants investing £445,000 were made available through Quartet Community Foundation. By April 2023, there was a network of 105 Welcoming Spaces across the city. This network included community groups, community centres, faith spaces, care homes and leisure centres.

An online map provided people with up-to-date information about what Welcoming Spaces and cost of living crisis support was available. Welcoming Spaces were invited to register to be on the map via the Bristol City Council cost of living website. To be part of the network they needed to confirm they met the [criteria](#).

This was an important innovation for Bristol, making information accessible to both citizens and colleagues wanting to support others.

Citywide organisations made offers of support to Welcoming Spaces, including:

- WECIL – provided advice about how to make spaces accessible to Disabled people
- Citizens Advice Bureau (check) provided financial awareness training to staff and volunteers
- CanDo Bristol provided a platform for volunteer asks and offers
- Community hubs coordinated activity and publicised opportunities
- We Are Bristol Helpline
- Department of Work and Pension (DWP) offered drop-ins
- Bristol University ran homework clubs in two areas

## **2.2 Impact & Learning**

Please see the infographic at Appendix A.

It takes time to build trust and become established as a Welcoming Space. Spaces already set up and trusted by their communities saw more people through the Welcoming Spaces initiative.

The survey of welcoming spaces showed the biggest impact of the One City response on citizens was improved wellbeing and health through social connection.

The connection between the cost of living and ‘warm spaces’, as they tended to be referred to nationally, meant that for some people, there was a stigma and a sense that Welcoming Spaces were for people who were struggling to stay warm. While they could be used for this purpose our aim was to promote existing community spaces which are open to all.

The Welcoming Spaces initiative gave encouragement and impetus to build community capacity, leading to new community spaces.

The national and local publicity associated with the cost of living crisis raised the profile of many community projects who have no budget for publicity and marketing.

A key message from Welcoming Spaces and voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) partners was to move away from a crisis response, and to embed the way of working and focus on long term change.

[A report about the winter response, the impact and learning is available on the Bristol One City website.](#)

### **2.3 One City Many Communities approach**

Everyone involved in the response was invited, by the Mayor, to an in person event at City Hall on 19th April 2023 to say thank you, to reflect on our learning and next steps.

The event was attended by 120 people from a wide range of city and community-led organisations involved in the response, who agreed:

*Together we are building something unique and powerful which we want to strengthen and accelerate. We will take what we have developed and keep our focus on equity, social justice and wellbeing to:*

- *Find sustainable ways forward, supporting people most impacted by low income, poverty and inequity*
- *Continue to build community power and community wealth for the long term*

*We are in very difficult times. We will collaborate, share resources and align funding in ways that nurture and grow community power and the ‘one city, many communities’ approach.*

The One City, Many Communities approach recognises that strong communities are the foundation for city resilience and are at the forefront of reducing the impact of poverty and inequity. The focus going forward is to embed this approach and continue to find ways to invest in and nurture strong communities.

There are currently 63 Welcoming Spaces on the map. These are community centres and community projects, deeply rooted in their communities, doing what they do best in exceptionally difficult and challenging circumstances. We anticipate there will be more volunteer-run spaces open for the winter period. We will continue to support and encourage Welcoming Spaces as an important part of our social fabric.

Community groups have been able to apply to a social action small grants fund through Quartet to support Welcoming Spaces and social action over the coming year and build upon what worked for winter 2022/23.

Up to date information about Welcoming Spaces and cost of living support can be found on the [Bristol City Council website](#).

The monthly meeting with the Mayor, One City Coordination Group, Community Exchange and One Council groups continue to meet to ensure coordination across sectors and services.

[Watch a video to see our Welcoming Spaces in action.](#)

### 3. Policy

Welcoming Spaces are part of our city's community infrastructure, and the community life that supports the people of Bristol and makes communities strong. supports many of the building blocks of our corporate strategy including Development and Delivery, Equity and Inclusion, Resilience, Health, Care and Wellbeing. It realises corporate strategy priority HC5 - Community Participation.

### 4. Consultation

N/A

### 5. Public Sector Equality Duties

- 5a) Before making a decision, section 149 Equality Act 2010 requires that each decision-maker considers the need to promote equality for persons with the following "protected characteristics": age, disability, gender reassignment, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, sexual orientation. Each decision-maker must, therefore, have due regard to the need to:
- i) Eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct prohibited under the Equality Act 2010.
  - ii) Advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and those who do not share it. This involves having due regard, in particular, to the need to --
    - remove or minimise disadvantage suffered by persons who share a relevant protected characteristic;
    - take steps to meet the needs of persons who share a relevant protected characteristic that are different from the needs of people who do not share it (in relation to disabled people, this includes, in particular, steps to take account of disabled persons' disabilities);
    - encourage persons who share a protected characteristic to participate in public life or in any other activity in which participation by such persons is disproportionately low.
  - iii) Foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and those who do not share it. This involves having due regard, in particular, to the need to –
    - tackle prejudice; and
    - promote understanding.
- 5b) The greatest impact of the cost of living crisis is on people already experiencing poverty and other inequity. Equity and inclusion is a key principle guiding the cost of living work and approach.  
Positive action has been taken to invite citizens and organisers into the networks supporting the cost of living crisis response, to encourage them to take part in decision making and ensure

the network of Welcoming Spaces were widely accessible and led by equalities groups and different faiths (for example, some Welcoming Spaces were located in churches, mosques and other places of worship). This intentional approach is reflected in the grant awards, in the diversity of the network of Welcoming Spaces, and in the activities on offer.

A requirement of Welcoming Spaces was to be accessible to Disabled people. The West of England Centre for Independent Living provided advice about how to make Welcoming Spaces accessible to Disabled people. Bristol Centre for Deaf and Hard of Hearing People organised meet-ups across the city in Welcoming Spaces. Bristol Women’s Voice did the same. Refugee Women of Bristol provided a Welcoming Space and a range of activities. Eastside Community Centre put on a programme of events reflecting the ethnic and cultural diversity of the community they are part of.

**Appendices:**

Cost of Living Infographic

**LOCAL GOVERNMENT (ACCESS TO INFORMATION) ACT 1985**

**Background Papers:**

None