

Bristol City Council

Minutes of the Communities Scrutiny Commission

20 November 2023 at 5.00 pm



Attendance:

Communities Scrutiny Commission members present:

Cllr Martin Fodor, Chair,
Cllr Kerry Bailes
Cllr Tessa Fitzjohn
Cllr Gary Hopkins
Cllr Henry Michallat
Cllr Barry Parsons

Cabinet member in attendance:

Councillor Ellie King, Cabinet Member for Public Health and Communities

Officers present:

Penny Germon, Head of Service: Communities
Robyn Taylor, Social Action and VCSE Investment Officer (Community Resilience Fund)
Kurt James, Neighbourhood Enforcement and Street Scene Manager
Patsy Mellor, Director: Management of Place
Kate Murray, Head of Libraries
Leon Flower, Library Service Development Manager
Ian Hird, Scrutiny Advisor

13 Welcome, introductions and safety information

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

14 Apologies for absence and substitutions

It was noted that apologies for absence had been received from Cllr Amal Ali, Cllr Amirah Cole and Christina Gray, Director: Communities and Public Health.



15 Declarations of Interest

None.

16 Minutes of previous meeting

The minutes of the meeting of the Communities Scrutiny Commission held on 14 September 2023 were confirmed as a correct record.

17 Chair's Business

None.

18 Public Forum

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

- A public statement from Suzanne Audrey on behalf of the Public Toilets Equalities Network.

19 Community Resilience Fund participatory decision making

The Commission considered a report setting out details of the impact of and learning from the Community Resilience Fund (CRF) process of participatory decision making and assessing opportunities to build on this.

Key points highlighted by officers in presenting the report:

1. Through the CRF, the Council had invested £4m of capital funding in 53 community and voluntary sector projects in the most deprived areas of Bristol (£3.2m, 40 projects), and in citywide equality groups (£0.8m, 13 projects). The decisions about how the funding was allocated were made by groups of citizens, community and voluntary sector groups and elected ward councillors. From the outset, it had been recognised that this was an action learning process.
2. In terms of the participatory process and lived experience from administering the CRF, five key learning points had been identified as follows:
 - The importance of co-design as a key principle and building capacity over time to enable and support participation.
 - Strong, confident facilitation at meetings was key.



- Importance of participants from diverse backgrounds.
- Building trust and confidence among participants.
- Ensuring access to information and expertise.

Summary of main points raised/noted in discussion:

1. In response to a question about costs, it was noted that the cost of support for co-production of the process and initial technical support had been £250,000; the grant management and programme management support cost £100,00 per annum. Overall, there was an estimated total spend of 14% (of the overall budget) on programme management over the 4 year course of the programme.
2. The vast majority of participants had given positive feedback about their involvement. 84% of participants had indicated they would take part again, 60% felt they had gained confidence through their involvement and 81% reported making new connections.
3. It was noted that a core objective of the CRF was to build city resilience by growing the power of and focusing the use of funding within communities experiencing the greatest inequality. It was suggested though that, in some cases, due to the area-based approach and criteria based on multiple levels of deprivation that had been applied, there were some deserving pockets of communities and groups that had not been reached through this funding opportunity in spite of being located within close proximity to areas of multiple deprivation, e.g. particular parts of Knowle which were geographically close to Filwood ward. It was suggested that an additional area of learning might be that in similar future exercises, it would be valuable to consult and capture views from local ward councillors at the outset, to tap into their local knowledge about groups who could be reached out to.
4. It was noted that a number of potential future opportunities had been identified for applying the participatory process in other areas, for example in relation to decision making around devolved Community Infrastructure Levy.
5. At the conclusion of the discussion, and in noting the key areas of learning as identified in the report, it was suggested that in the context of how area committees might operate after May 2024, it may be useful for the Committee Model Working Group to review the findings/learnings that would be set out within the final CRF evaluation report (which was awaited at this point).

20 Cost of Living - Welcoming Spaces

The Commission considered a report setting out details of 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, together with an assessment of the learning from this, and information on next steps.

Key points highlighted by officers in presenting the report:



1. The cost of living crisis response in Bristol had been 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 saw the development of and co-ordinated new ways of working between different sectors. It created new ways of sharing information and supplied funding opportunities to organisations best able to serve Bristol's citizens and communities.
2. By working with city partners, funding was secured through a private donor for the first 17 Welcoming Spaces. Two rounds of social action grants investing £445,000 were then made available through Quartet Community Foundation. By April 2023, there was a network of 105 Welcoming Spaces across the city. The network included community groups and centres, faith spaces, care homes and leisure centres.
3. An online map had provided people with up-to-date information about the availability of Welcoming Spaces and cost of living crisis support.
4. Key feedback and learning was summarised as follows:
 - a. It took time to build trust and become established as a Welcoming Space. Spaces already set up and trusted by their communities saw more people using them through the Welcoming Spaces initiative.
 - b. The survey analysis of Welcoming Spaces showed that the biggest impact of the One City response on citizens was improved wellbeing and health through social connection.
 - c. The Welcoming Spaces initiative gave encouragement and impetus to build community capacity, leading to new community spaces.

Summary of main points raised/noted in discussion:

1. The community benefits delivered through the Welcoming Spaces initiative were welcomed.
2. It was noted that community groups had 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 to build upon what had worked well during winter 2022/23. Up to date information about welcoming spaces and cost of living support was also available on the Council's website.
3. It was noted that the city's libraries had been involved in the warm spaces initiative; Friends of Libraries groups in Hillfields, Clifton and Shirehampton had successfully bid for Welcoming Spaces funding to provide activities, hot drinks, and support on days when these libraries were not usually open.
4. A suggestion was made by a member that in bringing forward new high-rise development proposals, greater consideration should be given by the Council to enabling community use of lower/ground floor space.
5. It was noted that a key challenge to be taken forward into the post-May 2024 committee model through the relevant policy committee was that of making funding and the availability of welcoming spaces sustainable into the future, noting that many people in the city continued to face very real difficulties due to the national economic situation.



21 Community toilet scheme update

The Commission considered a report setting out an update on the Community Toilet Scheme.

As per the public forum, the Commission noted that the following public forum item had been received in relation to this item:

- A public statement from Suzanne Audrey on behalf of the Public Toilets Equalities Network.

Key points highlighted by officers in presenting the report:

1. The Community Toilet Scheme had started in 2018; 90 facilities joined the scheme by March 2020, when the scheme was necessarily paused due to the Covid pandemic before re-opening in May 2021 with 63 venues.
2. An audit carried out in January 2022 by the community marshal team on the 90 Community Toilet Scheme facilities in place at that point had identified issues such as missing information stickers, incorrect accessibility information, and some closed venues. The audit's purpose had been to assess the scheme's robustness, partner satisfaction and to scout for new members. As a result of these efforts, the scheme was expanded to include 159 facilities, with 119 being accessible, and with a new booklet produced to assist residents without internet access.
3. In response to the issues raised in the public statement submitted to this meeting by the Public Toilets Equalities Network, it was noted that the Council aimed to continue working with the network to further grow the scheme. It was important to acknowledge, however, that maintaining, auditing, and publicising the scheme remained a challenge, given the limited staffing and other resources available to support the scheme.

Summary of main points raised/noted in discussion:

1. In response to a question, it was noted that as soon as possible following a notification, information about the scheme on the Council's website would be updated to reflect any changes in information about which toilets were accessible and the opening hours. The team did not have the resources to develop an App with fully 'live' information but Bristol's community toilets were listed on the Great British Public Toilet Map
2. It was noted that whilst resources were limited, the team was able to offer assistance in relation to matters such as signage for community toilets within premises; this included the availability of an example sign on-line.
3. The increased geographical spread of community toilets across the city was noted and welcomed.



22 Library services

The Commission considered a report setting out an update on library services, including an assessment of the improvement work undertaken through Bristol's Library Innovation Fund and details about the likely future approach to developing a new Library Strategy for the city.

a. Summary of main points raised/noted in discussion of section 1 of the report - Background and key data on library services:

1. Points highlighted by officers in presenting this section of the report included:

- Library budget and building details.
- Improvements carried out through grant funding, including Library Improvement Fund resources from Arts Council England and the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport which had enabled Reference Library refurbishment to take place, creating a flexible event space, restoration and upgrading of historic desks, accessible desks and new exhibition spaces.
- New library developments to be taken forward in Filwood and in Southmead.

2. A point was raised about the fact that a number of years ago, some customer services staff had been located in some libraries for a few hours each week. It was suggested that this could be put forward as an idea that could be reconsidered from a public service/contact perspective, and which could also perhaps enable certain libraries to remain open for longer hours. It was noted that this suggestion would be forwarded to the Head of Citizens Services although it was inevitable that the resource and staffing implications of any future proposal would need to be assessed carefully given the financial situation faced by the Council; it was also noted that this may be an issue that could be put forward for consideration by the relevant policy committee(s) under the new committee model that would take effect from May 2024.

3. Members noted and welcomed the refurbishment of Henleaze library and the proposals to develop new library facilities in Filwood, as part of a £14.5 million upgrade to Filwood Broadway, and in Southmead, as part of the Glencoyne Square development. In response to a question, officers agreed to circulate details of the initial design brief for a new Filwood library; it was noted that this brief would be subject to significant further design development as the proposals would be taken forward in close collaboration with stakeholders and local residents.

4. It was suggested that in the context of taking forward the new Filwood library proposals, consideration should also be given to liaising with partners with a view to seeking to extend the current opening hours beyond the current 22 hours per week.

5. There was a discussion around the incidence of anti-social behaviour which had unfortunately been experienced in and around some libraries in recent years. It was noted there had been issues in particular at Junction 3 (Easton) and in Filwood, Southmead and Hartcliffe, mainly associated with anti-social teenage behaviour. Some libraries had used security staff and others, following liaison with the local police and other services, had used a variety of measures aimed at deterring anti-social behaviour, which



had included closing some libraries at particular times or adjusting opening hours. It was noted that officers were determined to ensure that libraries, in offering a universal service, were safe spaces for all users.

b. Summary of main points raised/noted in discussion of section 2 of the report - Bristol's Library Innovation Fund - projects undertaken and lessons learned:

1. Points highlighted by officers in presenting this section of the report included:

- The Innovation Fund had offered a total fund of £108,000 across the 27 libraries in the city, divided into two separate streams:
 - * Stream 1: a 'Friends Fund' offering up to £1,000 to support Friends of libraries to establish a group and engage community support for their library.
 - * Stream 2: an allocation of up to £3,000 for open applications to support ideas which could impact in one or more of the following ways:
 - Bringing the library and communities together.
 - Improving the space within library buildings.
 - Improving how the library service is delivered.
- The evaluation of the use of the Innovation Fund had identified the following issues that could be considered in improving library services:
 - * Ensuring communication on an ongoing basis with communities and other council departments.
 - * Making use of library spaces outside of staffed hours.
 - * Issues around access to library buildings, room bookings and charges, and the inclusion of non-traditional events and activities in library spaces.
 - * Data collection, to further develop evidence of impact, for both communities and the libraries.
 - * Engaging young people is essential.
 - * Continuation of effective working with Friends Groups and community groups.
- The experience gained through three particular case studies was highlighted, in St Pauls library, Bishopston library and Horfield library.

2. In relation to the details about Friends of Libraries groups, a point was raised about the evident disparity whereby Friends groups were active in the relatively affluent parts of the city whilst they didn't exist at all in some areas of relative deprivation. It was agreed that as part of taking forward the new Library Strategy, it would be critical to continue the work with communities to encourage and develop a much more comprehensive coverage of Friends of Libraries groups and achieve greater equity in this respect across the whole city.

c. Summary of main points raised/noted in discussion of section 3 of the report - Library Strategy:

1. Points highlighted by officers in presenting this section of the report included:



- Consideration was being given to taking forward the development of a new library strategy; this work was likely to start under the remit of the relevant policy committee that would take effect under the committee governance model from May 2024.

- Key themes and priorities to consider as part of developing a new strategy included:

- * Digital services, given the rise in online membership, use of e-books and e-audio.
- * Assessing the condition of the Council's library buildings (linking with Corporate Landlord priorities).
- * How library technology could be refreshed and assessing what is needed in this respect.
- * Maintenance of advertised opening hours.
- * Capital requirements for funding bids, library refurbishments, and potential relocation of spaces.
- * Marketing of the service.
- * Working in partnership, within Bristol and with LibrariesWest and the South West region.
- * Continued community engagement.
- * Working with and extending the coverage across the city of Friends Groups.
- * Co-delivery of council services through appropriate library buildings.

2. Members generally agreed that, in their view, taking forward the development of a new library strategy should form an early priority for the relevant new policy committee, after May 2024.

3. In the context of the potential themes and priorities for a new strategy, it was suggested, in discussion, that the following issues should also be considered as part of developing a new strategy:

a. Finance and resource availability, and innovation in this context will be paramount considerations, given the ongoing financial situation faced by the Council.

b. The key learning points from the lived experience of utilising the Innovation Fund.

c. Collaboration with partners to ensure best use of space within library services; co-location of services may bring opportunities to extend opening hours. Innovative/new approaches to shared use of space should also be considered, noting that the Council would be willing to discuss options with any suitable group that was willing to pay to use library space. It was suggested that the approach/model used through Somerset Art Works/Weeks (where artists were willing to pay for exhibition space in libraries) could be explored.

d. Ensuring that libraries offer a consistent 'open and friendly door' to residents.

e. In reviewing the condition of library buildings, it will also be important to consider the geographical spread of libraries and review the extent to which libraries are in the 'right place', especially in terms of serving the more deprived areas of the city.



At the conclusion of the discussion, members agreed that it would be important to ensure that their comments as documented above were forwarded in due course to the relevant policy committee that would take effect in May 2024.

23 Quarterly performance report (quarter 1, 2023/24)

The Commission received and noted 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.

24 Work Programme

The Commission noted the latest update of the work programme.

Meeting ended at 8.00 pm

CHAIR _____

