



Reflections on community cohesion in Bristol

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'Community building, the missing blocks'

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1. Introduction

In August 2024, Bristol was one of 27 cities and towns across the UK where anti-immigration demonstrations led to clashes with counterdemonstrators and incidents of violent disorder. These events and related social media content were deeply threatening and disturbing, particularly for asylum seekers, refugees and other racially minoritised communities who were the target of racist and Islamophobic hatred and violence.

In the aftermath of these events, Bristol City Council engaged consultants Kamaljit Poonia and Ruth Pitter to conduct in-depth research to begin building a greater understanding of what lay behind the demonstrations and what people feel about community cohesion in Bristol.

This is a report of the findings. There are clear messages we all need to hear and consider our response. The messages are not new. They echo national reports, what we know about the pressures people are under, and how they feel about inequities and participation in the life of the city. Some of it is tough reading for politicians. We know from history that these are clear warning signs of the need for urgent action to reduce tensions and the risk of conflict.

There is a lot that is strong about Bristol. Every day, hundreds of Bristolians from all walks of life contribute to building strong communities by helping neighbours and organising community activities and events, which many of us freely enjoy. However, it is those communities who rely most on public services and are already experiencing poverty and inequity who are affected most. Many in those communities also feel overlooked and unheard. We have, therefore, prioritised listening to those communities.

The context of this report is the protests and violent disorder in August 2024. Much of the focus is, understandably, on the inequities of economic status, class, ethnicity and race. There are also clear gaps in cohesion within communities and between different parts of the city. There are other identities and inequities that also shape our experience of community and city life. These are complex, multi-dimensional issues which inform our experience of both inclusion and exclusion in Bristol. Over the coming months, we are committed to involving many more people in the conversation to deepen our collective understanding and agree what more we can do, through the One City, Many Communities approach, to build community cohesion.

I would like to thank everyone who has engaged so generously in the conversations so far and to everyone who I hope will join with us as we move forward together. Huge thanks also to Kamaljit and Ruth who brought sincerity, experience and wisdom to the work.

Finally, our deepest condolences to the families, friends and communities of Bebe King, six; Elsie Dot Stancombe, seven; and Alice Dasilva Aguiar, nine, who were murdered in Southport on 29th July 2024. Their deaths must not be in vain.



Councillor Stephen Williams

Chair Public Health and Communities Policy Committee

Foreword

Over recent years, as equity, diversity and inclusion experts, we have witnessed a shift in the social, economic and political landscape of the South West, which has increased polarisation in our communities. The Runnymede Race Disparities report ¹ and more recently The Sutton Trust 'The Opportunity Index' report ² both reinforce how Bristol is a city of extremes between those who can flourish and have greater access to resources and those who do not. We are keen that this work highlights a range of voices from excluded diverse communities, including economically excluded working-class communities. And to facilitate this, we feel it is essential to take an equity and intersectional lens to these conversations.

Many of the views and issues reflected in these interviews are not new. However, in the current climate, we need a more nuanced approach to addressing concerns and frustrations festering under the surface and to look at them with pragmatic urgency and clarity to discover what more we can do. Gaining a deeper understanding of what holds our communities together and what pulls us apart can help provide greater focus on how we navigate these issues in the future.

Despite the challenges, there is much for Bristol to be proud of and to build on for the future. Our conversations with the people we spoke to as part of this project revealed an enormous amount of energy, activity and goodwill to improve people's lives as well as to participate in finding solutions.

The conversations reflected in this report should mark the beginning of a process that enables communities to collaborate with city leaders and organisations, focusing their efforts and working across boundaries to build community and foster cohesion.

We want to express our gratitude to everyone who generously shared their time and insights with us, providing open and honest views on these complex issues. We value their ongoing dedication to creating more connected communities in Bristol.

Kamaljit Poonia and Ruth Pitter

Community Cohesion Consultants – Biographies in Appendix 1

¹ <https://hummedia.manchester.ac.uk/institutes/code/briefings/localethnicinequalities/CoDE-Briefing-Bristol.pdf>

² www.suttontrust.com/our-research/the-opportunity-index

2. Context of Community Cohesion

National Context: Community Cohesion in the UK

Community cohesion in the UK refers to the effort to create strong, integrated, and inclusive communities where people from different backgrounds feel a sense of belonging, mutual respect, and shared values. The UK is a diverse and multicultural society, and managing this diversity has been a key social and political priority, especially in light of:

- Past social unrest, such as the 2001 riots in Bradford, Oldham, and Burnley, which highlighted divisions between ethnic and religious groups.
- Terrorism and radicalisation concerns, particularly post-7 July 2005 London bombings, which sparked debates about integration and national identity.
- Increased immigration, particularly after EU expansion and the Syrian refugee crisis.
- Social and economic inequalities, which can undermine trust between communities and the state.
- And more recently, the Southport incident, where on 29 July 2024, a Taylor Swift-themed dance class was attacked, killing three girls. The attack sparked grief and national outrage. Followed by violent far-right unrest, which spread to over 27 towns and cities, including Bristol. Mobs targeted mosques, asylum seeker accommodation, and minority communities. Over 1,280 arrests were made, with hundreds sentenced.

Policy Overview: Community Cohesion in the UK

UK government policy on community cohesion has evolved over time.

Key developments include:

1. Early 2000s: Emergence of Policy

- The 2001 report by Ted Cantele (following the riots in the north of England) introduced the concept of community cohesion, recommending that all communities work towards a shared future vision.
- The Home Office and local authorities began developing strategies to promote interaction between communities, reduce segregation, and foster common values.

2. Mid-2000s to 2010: Mainstreaming Cohesion

- Policies integrated into education, housing, and local governance.
- The Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) supported initiatives through guidance, funding, and frameworks.
- Focus on shared values, active citizenship, and tackling hate crimes.

3. Post-2010: Austerity and Localism

- Change in government led to a shift towards localism, reducing centralised funding and encouraging local solutions.
- Emphasis moved to integration and British values, particularly in schools and civic life.
- Cohesion policy became more closely linked with counter-extremism strategies.

4. Recent Developments: Integration Strategy

- The 2018 Integrated Communities Strategy (Green Paper, then Action Plan) focused on:
 - Boosting English language skills
 - Promoting economic participation
 - Encouraging social mixing
 - Supporting recent migrants to integrate
- Policy language shifted from “cohesion” to “integration,” but core aims remain similar.

5. Current Challenges (2020s):

- The COVID-19 pandemic exposed and deepened economic and social inequalities.
- Rising concerns over online hate, cultural polarisation, and social trust.
- Government strategies continue to focus on building resilient communities, countering misinformation, and promoting unity in diversity.
- After the Southport incident, the Government created a National Violent Disorder Programme. Parliament praised the police but called for improved digital monitoring and proactive cohesion strategies.

Bristol is taking the time to reflect on its current state following the events of August 2024 and is investigating how the city can become more intentional in its focus on community cohesion.

Many people and organisations across the city have been engaged in activities to increase cohesion and build communities of mutual respect over the decades. However, given current challenges in the social, economic and political landscape, this presents a vital opportunity to assess our progress and identify what more can be achieved.

Community cohesion, or community building, is not straightforward or one-dimensional; the issues are often intersectional and can be complex.

In a world that’s changing fast, hearing voices from across the city about what matters to people is essential. Although the violent and concerning events of the summer in 2024 catalysed this work, many of the issues people spoke about in our interviews have been bubbling under the surface for a long time. Both nationally and locally, communities feel pressured due to systemic problems such as the cost-of-living crisis and the impact of global politics.

3. Scope of the work

Bristol City Council's approach, 'One City, Many Communities,' is underpinned by principles that provide a good foundation for building on and extending this work on community cohesion. These are:

- We are **One City with Many Communities** with different histories, cultures and experiences.
- We take an **asset-based** community development approach, building on community-driven initiatives recognising that communities themselves hold solutions, and make the best use of all the city's resources.
- We are intentional in driving **equity, social justice and inclusion**.
- We don't have all the answers; we will learn as we go.

As consultants, we were commissioned to do this work between January and July 2025. Interviews took place between February and May 2025. We aimed to:

- 'reflect on cohesion in Bristol – what is strong; what are our assets; what are the gaps and threats.'
- Explore a deeper understanding of the issues underlying the riots in Summer 2024 and broader community cohesion concerns.
- Use a 'One City, Many Communities' approach to community cohesion, helping towards developing a strategic framework, coordination, and oversight.
- Identify gaps and key objectives, such as to:
 - Challenge people's thinking beyond the current situation
 - Unpick complex issues that cannot be addressed through a single lens but require us to consider closer cross-collaborations
 - Give greater clarity on what social and community cohesion means to people.

To do this, we spoke to 43 people, individually or in groups, from different neighbourhoods and communities across Bristol. Some with an equity-focus, some place-based organisations and also residents. Respondents spoke about city-wide issues as well as their respective neighbourhoods.

We set out to listen and to gather insights, reflections, and ideas from a range of views and perspectives. We particularly wanted to hear from communities who feel overlooked or unheard. Crucially, we didn't set out to do a representative or systematic research project.

The key groups of people taking part in the interviews were:

- Residents from two community groups
- Young people 11 to 18 years-old

- Representatives of voluntary, community and faith organisations from a diverse range of backgrounds and perspectives
- Public sector senior managers and political representatives

Respondents focused their feedback on city-wide issues as well as their specific areas. We spoke to people in:

- Avonmouth
- Barton Hill
- Easton
- Hartcliffe
- Lawrence Hill
- Lawrence Weston
- Lockleaze

We wanted to highlight a range of perspectives, and also encourage people to reflect on others' experiences, including those who may not necessarily share similar viewpoints to their own. Throughout this report, we will illustrate issues by adding comments (in grey text within speech marks) that reflect feedback from those we spoke to. Please note these are not always direct quotes, but a summary or paraphrase of the perspectives from particular groups.

See Appendix 2 for interview and focus group participants.

4. Reflections on the riots and cohesion in Bristol

The Riots: No Surprise

Most of those we spoke to in these areas were not shocked by the riots in the summer of 2024. The reasons reflected by many respondents were related to the challenges of what people feel are fast-changing demographics in neighbourhoods concerning immigration, coupled with a lack of resources, and feeling that their concerns were not heard or taken seriously.

“The summer was not surprising. Only for people living in bubbles. It was less of a surprise for those living in deprived areas.”

(Community Representatives)

Conversely, other respondents felt that the increasing national discourse on race has become more harmful, especially online, and that this needs to be challenged more effectively.

The challenge will be understanding how both these things can be true. Currently, there is increasing polarisation in world views and growing fear between some communities, which is undermining cohesion.

Some respondents reported that it was good to see so many people, in the counter protests, visibly supporting refugees, asylum seekers and migrants: celebrating the diversity of Bristol. It was also noted that the police had been able to reassure communities and work closely with community leaders.

‘Elephant In the Room’ issues

From the conversations we had with people, we summarised nine key concerns we called ‘Elephant in the Room’ issues. These areas emerged as those that needed to be highlighted and explored in greater depth. We recognise that some of these issues are already known yet often have been left unaddressed for various reasons, including financial, too controversial and uncomfortable to approach, or not knowing where to start.

Issue 1: Perceptions on immigration, asylum and refugees

Immigration can be a contentious issue, and there is a spectrum of opinion about why people are concerned. Views, at one end of the scale, are driven by racist far-right ideologies. For others, views are informed by perceptions about dwindling resources, coupled with the pace of changing communities.

Feedback from our conversations showed that some people felt frustrated, shut down and labelled as racist and/or far right when sharing concerns about their perceptions of immigration and its impact on services.

“It is often very difficult to have conversations about immigration and its impact on people without being labelled as a racist.”

(Community Representatives)

“‘Woke’ agendas are driving people towards political leaders who they feel will listen.” (Community Representatives)

“Seeing ‘others’ getting better benefits, people feeling fragile within their own lifestyles, can’t put food on the table, feeling they are not being listened to. It’s easier to exploit people and get them to complain about another disenfranchised group.” (Public Sector Leaders)

“High levels of stress leads to people lashing out.” (Public Sector Leaders)

Some people reported a sense of resentment about wealthier parts of the city, which have greater resources. It was felt that in these areas, people are more able to deal with fast-paced change, and are more skilled at lobbying for their needs to be met, with economic prosperity providing a buffer when resources are stretched.

“Inclusion is for posh people.” (Residents)

“Any tensions related to community cohesion issues can be more easily diluted in areas where there are ample resources.”

(Community Leaders)

Some residents and community leaders interviewed expressed that people feel a sense of unfairness, for example, the perception of ‘queue jumping’ in the allocation of resources for asylum seekers, particularly where they perceive resources being given to single asylum-seeking men - much of this having been fuelled by the various media debates. The experience from an asylum seeker perspective, though, points to a different reality:

“People see a lot of young immigrant/refugee men, often in hotels, and see them as a threat. They think they are having a luxurious time, but it is actually a cage.” (Community Representatives)

There is a bridge to be built between these different realities, some spoke about a need to be able to sit down with those who hold these views about migrants, refugees and asylum seekers and have honest conversations. There was a deep desire to share lived experiences and understand each other better, including those things they had in common with each other, such as wanting the best for their children.

Additionally, community members want to challenge these negative perceptions but feel hindered by a lack of accessible and accurate information about resource allocation, such as the workings of housing allocation policy. They recognise the need for meaningful conversations, but without factual data, they feel unequipped and hindered from addressing these narratives.

“Community representatives and leaders on the ground feel like they don’t have all the facts to hand in order to give correct information and don’t know how to find the truthful facts that could enable them to challenge misinformation and fake news.”

(Community Representatives)

“Sometimes, there is mistrust about outsiders bringing people together, so there needs to be an element of trust-building before conversations can be facilitated.” (Community Representatives)

We found that concerns about immigration and changing demographics were not exclusive to white communities, but also present among individuals from other ethnicities, including those whose families had migrated to the UK over the past decades. Some reported that people were concerned about uncontrolled migration, as well as a genuine concern for people arriving by boat. One person spoke about how people on boats are being exploited financially, and fed unrealistic hopes that will not be fulfilled, and that this needs to be stopped. These conversations also highlighted that tensions existing between minority groups need to be understood and given greater attention than is currently the case.

Unresolved conflict between different groups in the city, regardless of whether it is between different racial groups or different ethnic groups, serves to undermine community cohesion. One such issue raised is conflict between some young African-Caribbean and Somali individuals; it was felt that crucial work is needed to address such tensions.

Issue 2: Systemic inequality and unequal allocation of resources

The cost-of-living crisis and the enduring impact of Covid have further embedded economic inequalities and were identified as key drivers underpinning frustrations and the disenfranchisement of communities. Central to this were the issues of access to housing, education, employment and transport.

“Where we live, now, there is no pub, no restaurant, youth clubs, cinema, NHS dentist, or swimming pool.” (Residents, Hartcliffe)

In terms of housing, the legacy of ‘Right to Buy’ and the decreasing stock of social housing, combined with an increasing population, was viewed as having escalated competition for accommodation. This has fuelled resentment in communities where many live in inadequate, overpriced, or unaffordable housing.

“Housing, in particular, has been an issue.” (Community Representatives)

The mix of concerns about housing and the issues raised above has led to a particularly potent point of strain.

“New arrivals, such as refugees, are perceived to be taking priority, locking out local people and their children from the rental and housing market.” (Community Representatives, reflecting on community perceptions).

Further to this, people spoke about how austerity has compounded problems, leading to a decline in public services, including youth provision and transport, which has deepened the sense of neglect among socially and economically disadvantaged communities.

“The people who turned out (to riot) were frustrated and angry. People are genuinely angry by the lack of clubs, cost-of-living, and transport – transport is a very big issue for young people.” (Young People)

“Create more opportunities to mix with people from outside and raise aspirations.” (Residents and Community Representatives)

Young people and residents feel that Bristol’s universities focus their provision of resources on students who have come to the city, rather than providing for local young people and residents, which reinforces educational inequality. There was a request for the universities, particularly the University of Bristol, to build on the work they are doing and do more to work with, and in, neighbourhoods and local communities.

City leaders acknowledged economic and social disparities and that more leverage and collaborations to embed change with institutions are required, including with Bristol Universities and the business sector.

Respondents expressed concerns that some residents and young people are unable to travel effectively around the city due to inadequate transport links and high fares. This impacts their ability to apply for jobs and diminishes their access to education and cultural opportunities across neighbourhoods and the city.

There was a view that degree-educated young people are struggling to find jobs that match their qualifications, and that the city is overemphasising academic education, thereby not providing a balanced mix of quality vocational opportunities.

“Young people with degrees are not getting the jobs to match their skills, so are doing unskilled work in the city. Vocational courses do not have the same kudos as degrees, but that is where the skills gaps lie.” (Young People)

Meanwhile, experiences shared in South Bristol about vocational courses in the area were that they are mainly restricted to hairdressing and car mechanics; this does not meet modern challenges for our city and those faced by young people.

Further to this, we heard from many respondents in different parts of the city that they wanted a more positive light to be shone on them, rather than a focus just in times of crisis. More uplift and a sense of fairness for community cohesion activities, such as promoting and resourcing local community festivals, and recognition of the great work volunteers are doing every day to strengthen communities.

People asked why most city events were held in the centre of Bristol and why more could not be done in the outer areas. This would also promote movement between areas and give people reasons to travel across the city to experience and connect with different neighbourhoods.

Issue 3: Changing demographics, changing communities

“Hartcliffe and Avonmouth have diverse communities, but there is still racism.” (Residents)

Neighbourhoods like Lockleaze, Hartcliffe, Lawrence Weston, and Avonmouth have changed and are now more ethnically diverse than they initially appear. People involved in all aspects of service planning and delivery need to be making decisions based on sound data and insight so that services are nuanced and relevant for everyone living in that community.

For example, if there is a working assumption that an area is ‘white working class’ when in fact it is home for many racially minoritised families, then the way services are delivered is likely to deepen racial inequity and exclusion. Taking the time to know communities, their complexities, history, cultures and aspirations for the future is essential.

Issue 4: Social media - a rapidly changing landscape

Media and misinformation play a crucial role in shaping perceptions. Respondents were acutely concerned about the rise in followers of brash leaders and online influencers who claim to be listening and disparage 'woke' agendas. For example, some are drawn to 'influencers' because they feel:

“listened to and influencers are not afraid to speak out about issues that matter to people. They tell it as it is; they appear more approachable. People like their bravado.” (Young People)

“People want a more personal connection with leaders – they want them to come to their pubs, clubs, and community centres.” (Young People)

Some people no longer conceive 'community' as a physical space; for some, community is a virtual space that involves strangers connected through a shared online existence. Residents and young people interviewed feel more people are leaning into receiving information about current affairs online; they recognised a drift towards populism.

“Fake news plays its part. Young people use TikTok the most. Short one-minute videos give fast, easy access to information, but it means they don't get a nuanced or in-depth picture. This leads to attention deficit.” (Young People)

Preachy, lengthy and patronising information aimed at young people is ineffective. Online keyboard wars are on the increase, empowering those who have felt silenced with a haven to air their views, stoked up by instigators who exploit frustrations and instil a fear of 'outsiders.' This momentum has emboldened some voices. Conversely, others are rendered vulnerable, especially amid a growing spread of derogatory comments, hate, and misinformation related to refugees and asylum seekers. Community representatives were acutely concerned about this latter issue.

“Social media and some politicians are stoking up the fact that the lack of opportunity is down to immigration and that white people are now the minority, which speaks to those who are feeling the pinch. If people are still relying on food banks despite holding two jobs, then this issue will persist. Yet, it is also recognised that some people involved in the riots had good jobs.” (Community Representatives)

Issue 5: Stuck in echo chambers with silo working on all sides

Silo working, whether within just one community or in a single area, can lead to echo chambers where people are only exposed to, or hear, limited points of view. This can mean that different perspectives and experiences are excluded when services are planned and delivered. It also blinkers some from seeing the perspectives of those who do not form the demographic cohorts they are a part of, or who they work with, and are therefore less aware of the frustrations of others.

“We are looking at the issue as being very binary (it’s not black and white), but they are complex community diversity issues.”

(Community Representatives)

There is a huge realisation of the need to create spaces for conversations and interaction to understand the reality of other people’s lives, which underpins community cohesion. The opportunity to have difficult conversations in a facilitated way was a constant theme throughout our interviews.

Narratives about frustrations of immigration can be found in all communities, but in neighbourhoods where deprivation is high, these issues feel more acute. There is a need to cross geographical and social boundaries and to understand the realities of how we all live in Bristol.

Issue 6: ‘Working class’ - what does it mean?

In our conversations, many used the term white working class, which has both cultural and economic connotations. However, over time, the concept has become more complex, and it is not always clear what definition is being used in discourse.

“People are feeling long-term grievances in areas of socio-economic poverty, so-called areas of mainly ‘white working class people’.” (Community Representatives)

“Those termed white working class feel labelled as poor and uneducated; this adds to their resentment.” (Community Representatives)

This highlights the need for further work to contextualise this concept in the modern age and to establish a framework around it that provides a greater focus for traditionally white working-class communities and meets their needs. This should, respectfully, be developed by the communities themselves with the support of city organisations.

In some parts of traditionally ‘white working class’ neighbourhoods, areas of South Bristol, for example, some are facing generational unemployment and underinvestment. At the same time, some racially minoritised families have concerns about moving into these areas due to negative perceptions and safety concerns, exacerbating spatial divides.

People we spoke to wanted to do more to break down these barriers. In Avonmouth, for example, respondents were keen to seek ways to break down the segregation of longstanding, mainly white communities (although these areas have always been more diverse than generally recognised) and newer communities, but felt that this was not easy.

Further to this, many traditional 'white working class' areas are becoming more diverse. Local community groups are working to support people from diverse ethnic backgrounds. Community representatives shared some examples of effective community-building activities taking place in their neighbourhoods and were enthused by the increased sense of belonging these resulted in.

They reflected on the need for more action as a solution to breaking down divides caused by suspicion, fear and negative assumptions. Examples were given of activities such as delivering welcoming packs to newcomers and family-related events, but these were ad hoc across the city.

“I want to be able to walk around the Co-op and have conversations with everyone, not just the friends and neighbours I've known for years. I think the local church is doing more to encourage cohesion because they get a range of communities attending services, but it should be the same in the working men's club and the knitting group.” (Residents)

For some who are identified as 'white working class,' particularly younger generations, the term for them has become a label for poor, uneducated, racist and intolerant. The term 'working class' appears to have lost its proud cultural and historical context.

“Symbols such as the George Cross flag have been hijacked by far-right ideologies, denying people cultural expression, such as being able to wave the George Cross flag during football matches.” (Community Representatives)

The decline in public services, youth provision, and transport thus deepens feelings of neglect. Whilst this decline is felt in so-called 'white working class' communities, neighbourhoods are gradually changing in many such areas, for example a quick walk around Morrisons in Hartcliffe shows the demographics of shoppers is more ethnically diverse than perhaps those who live outside the area might imagine.

It is also often forgotten that people across different ethnicities may identify as 'working class.'

Issue 7: Young People looking for solutions

Young people discussed how the state of the economy has led to a lack of jobs, both for those with traditional higher education degrees and those without. Those with degrees feel that there are not enough jobs to match their skills, leading them to take on unskilled jobs, and in some areas of the city, the vocational qualifications on offer were limited and did not align with the job market's needs, nor did they carry the same social currency as degrees. There was also frustration at the cost of private rented housing and a view that home ownership is unachievable.

Furthermore, the lack of spaces for young people to socialise without spending money leads to higher levels of disconnection. COVID-19 and the 2024 summer riots seem to have further exacerbated some young people's fear of travelling around the city. We heard that the message during the riots, about staying indoors and not travelling around the city, continues to resonate for some in terms of their sense of safety.

These factors can coalesce and contribute to an increasing number of young people spending significant time in online spaces, which can be positive but can also be detrimental, particularly where misinformation is present. Within this online existence, the mental health of young men was a key concern for some.

From the conversations we had with those working with young men, there was a concern that more needed to be done to engage them actively with positive role models. For some, this was a group that has been overlooked, and simultaneously, there has been a concerning rise in some being drawn to misogynistic influencers.

It was felt that local authorities have had to reduce statutory youth services. Outsourcing them to the voluntary and community sector, has resulted in a decline in resources that has impacted the provision. In Bristol, it was felt that greater coordination and collaboration across the city would be hugely beneficial in addressing the issue of disenfranchised young people.

However, despite the problems young people face, there was a clear message to us that they are looking for hope, for solutions, and to be a part of those solutions.

“We want a sense of opportunity and hope.” (Young People)

Also, there were many working with young people who are very skilled and knowledgeable but, feel that collaborative strategies and action among sectors in Bristol would be beneficial.

“Those of us working with young people to address issues of disenfranchisement are exceptionally skilled in our delivery, but we feel that youth work in Bristol is disjointed and that good practice in this field is not recognised, heralded, or utilised to great effect.”

(Community Representatives)

Issue 8: Leaders are not present and visible, which reduces democratic engagement

Many residents feel taken for granted by politicians, as they believe politicians are mainly interested in them only when elections are due.

“Those in power need to cease being in spaces just for photo opportunities. High-profile people are not fully committed to change; they are just turning up to show their presence.” (Residents)

“There is a lack of understanding about local and national government and where responsibilities lie. A lot of people don’t vote, they may not understand, or have the confidence or interest in voting – this shows a disconnect with democratic processes.” (Community Representatives)

“Residents in areas like Clifton have better means to lobby for their needs, and are taken more seriously.” (Community Representatives)

People desire more direct and consistent engagement with city leaders to foster trust and understanding in the democratic process. For example, the role of local government compared to the role of national government.

Leaders seem to be seen as ‘different from us.’ Some respondents said that people believed city leaders were all middle-class and privileged. This seems to belie the reality, we were informed that there is a substantial number of elected members who identify as coming from working-class backgrounds.

It has been challenging for leaders to find effective ways to engage with people when online influence has grown. Moving forward, more attention needs to be paid to this area; there is a need for leaders and agencies to be fully abreast of these shifts in communication and engagement and develop ways to be conversant with the online world as well as face to face engagement.

This, though, needs to be done with purpose so people can see the difference it makes, otherwise it can lead to cynicism about why residents are being asked to comment or give their view.

Similarly, residents in Hartcliffe and Avonmouth express a lack of trust in political leaders who seem unresponsive to their concerns. For example, they feel left out of the One City vision of Bristol.

“We don’t feel part of the One City Plan. It feels like it was created by a corporate committee, and not the right people were involved.” (Residents)

Agency (or the lack of it) is a recurring theme, especially among young people and socially and economically excluded residents. Many feel political decisions are imposed on them without meaningful engagement, reinforcing a sense of powerlessness.

“Young people feel ‘done to’, rather than having agency over resources targeted to them.” (Young People)

Feedback from some young people and those who work with them suggested that they felt excluded from decisions that affect their futures. They experience a disconnect between themselves and political institutions, which they perceive as elitist and out of touch with their lived realities, particularly on their experiences related to education, employment, and housing.

We were encouraged by numerous active volunteers across the city, including very dedicated individuals who wanted to enhance their communities and neighbourhoods, providing more dispersed levels of leadership. Yet, some who do step up to serve in their communities feel unappreciated and aggrieved at being taken for granted. Some also felt that their volunteering gave the council an excuse to withdraw services, an example given was litter picking, leading to the council stepping away from some street cleaning services.

Volunteers and local leaders need more appreciation and visibility for their dedicated work.

Issue 9: The right people are not in the room to “call out the Elephant.”

There was a sense among some that many high-powered individuals were meeting to discuss responses to the riots that had taken place. However, some people actively working more closely with communities (and not just at higher levels) felt they had not been invited into the conversations at the time.

It was felt that too often senior ‘middle class leaders, unrepresentative of the communities they serve’, are sitting around in rooms making decisions about communities on the ground. Whilst this view may or may not be accurate, the perception is that middle-class decision-makers are making policy decisions on things they have little lived experience of.

If the people most impacted by inequity, the riots, and the cost-of-living crisis are not in the room to ‘tell it like it is’, then decisions will not meet the required needs and achieve the necessary outcomes.

“When the riots happened, there were lots of high-powered people having high-powered meetings. Those who they should have been talking to, who could provide answers and solutions, were not deemed ‘important enough’.” (Community Representatives)

5. What came out in the workshops

Following the series of interviews and data collation from our interviews, described above, two workshops were held in April and May 2025 with some of the key stakeholders: first, to enable attendees to sense-check our findings; and secondly, to begin building a framework for future action.

Workshop One: Community Building – The Missing Blocks

In this workshop, we discussed key findings from the interviews and invited participants to discuss further and give their views about the key issues that had surfaced.

Below is the main feedback from attendees of Workshop One, which was loosely grouped into three topics.

Workshop One - Topic One: Representation and Voice

How can we ensure all communities in Bristol feel heard and seen in strategic and neighbourhood decision making – not just consulted but truly involved?

- First challenge is creating spaces where people can share their views. These should be familiar spaces where they have relationships.
- We need to build around what already exists.
- We need to address trauma in the community.
- We need to find more inclusive ways (not just digital) to engage residents.

Workshop One - Topic Two: Trust and Belonging

What builds (or breaks), trust between institutions and communities in this city? What role do we as leaders play in that dynamic?

- Running consultations with no tangible actions breaks trust.
- Lack of straightforwardness in decision-making also breaks trust.
- Only the loudest voices get heard, not representative of a whole community.
- Lack of engagement with city leaders - they need to be on the ground.
- Centralised resources and power mean people feel left out of decision-making.
- Lack of diverse communities, including those from lower economic backgrounds, in institutions.

Workshop One – Topic Three: Commonality

How do we balance Bristol’s rich diversity of identities with a sense of shared civic belonging? Is it possible to do both well?

- Improving access to citywide assets.
- Improving public transport - this was a central issue.
- Importance of sports clubs, social clubs or working locally to foster belonging.
- Creation of opportunities for people to leave their areas and meet others – cross-community/city working.

Workshop Two: Community Building - The Missing Blocks

Building on conversations and topics from Workshop One and the findings from the interviews, we drafted 13 powerful messages, which were discussed and further developed in the second workshop.

Five prioritised themes emerged within those 13 messages from this workshop.

Theme One: Voices and Spaces

1. Our voices are stifled

People don’t feel they can speak their truth. Engagement starts from where people are at, rather than where we think they should be.

2. We want to talk in safe spaces

Creating more active spaces for genuine listening, honest conversation and sharing real life experiences.

3. Where are the difficult conversations that find solutions?

Not shying away from complex issues, such as immigration. Acknowledging how people’s lives are impacted from all sides and working together to reach solutions.

4. The online landscape; now an alternative community

We need to find ways to actively face up to and connect with the increasing influence of the online landscape and its deluge of information.

Theme Two: Equity, Identity and Belonging

5. We don't count; we're struggling on the edge

People living on the outer edges of the city don't feel connected to the whole. Ignored and overlooked

6. Lost boys and men

Young people's confidence and empowerment. Active engagement needed with a greater focus on young men.

7. Working class communities - do you know who we really are?

A greater focus/clarity on working-class communities, which are more economically excluded, more diverse, feel unheard, and are more disengaged from democratic processes.

8. Continuing support for those affected by rising anti-immigration sentiments and actions

These sentiments are often exploding within online commentary and the violence demonstrated during the riots of 2024 are affecting all migrant communities, as well as refugees and asylum seekers.

9. Our volunteering - invisible and disregarded

Lack of recognition, heavy reliance on volunteers and the VCSE in a tough climate. Expectations for people to step up without being credited.

Theme Three: Equality of Access to Opportunity and Resources

10. Addressing unequal resources

Unequal access to educational, housing, employment and transport issues need to be addressed, as these underlie the systemic inequalities.

Theme Four: Engagement and Communication

11. The need for consistent and constant messaging

Communication with the public needs to reflect the modern-day media landscape and be accessible. Clear, concise and consistent communication is currently lacking - a coordinated communication strategy must be developed.

Theme Five: Trust, Participation and Leadership

12. Lacking present, bold and genuine leadership

Greater visibility, presence and engagement from all city leaders. More clarity for people on how democratic processes work, the roles and responsibilities of organisations.

13. Existing in your ivory towers are shrinking your perspectives

All organisations to look beyond their silos and echo chambers, unable to comprehend the existences of others.

The workshop concluded that these five priority themes form the basis for further discussion with key stakeholders and for developing city-wide action.

6. Good ideas and activities for future consideration

Some ideas that emerged from respondents during the interviews and workshops:

- A Festival of Bristol: a fully resourced citywide festival of sports and culture taking place annually in different neighbourhoods, encouraging young people and families to travel outside of their neighbourhoods to places they would not usually visit.
- City-wide awards for volunteers that recognise people who step up to support the city and public sector agencies in their services.
- Local building contractors contribute resources to the neighbourhoods where they have developments for community connections in those neighbourhoods (Lockleaze is a model for this).
- Systems in place to develop genuine welcome processes for new arrivals when they move into the neighbourhood.
- Community centres to create social activities for new and longstanding residents to meet together, for example, there is good practice where residents from different communities have come together to improve green spaces. Summer awaydays by coach for families in the neighbourhood, which allows different cohorts of people to spend time together.
- Friday night meals that allow neighbours to share food from different cultures.
- Creating spaces in community centres that enable young people to feel safe and comfortable, where they can drop in after school and do homework.
- Utilise situations where neighbourhoods experience common issues of adversity to encourage communities to coalesce.
- Conversations are highly desired: increasing facilitated spaces for listening, learning and having difficult conversations, that start with listening.

7. Conclusion

The conversations we conducted with people across the city, as well as specific groups such as young people, provide a wealth of insights into what can be done moving forward to promote community cohesion. Many cities and areas across the country are asking themselves the same question, and a recent national report, 'The State of Us'³, by British Future and the Belong Network, reflects the same themes we have identified in Bristol.

³ <https://www.britishfuture.org/publication/the-state-of-us-report/>

This means there is no room for complacency; the challenges we have identified underscore the need for organisations and individuals to assess what more needs to be done and what can be done differently.

Our conversations with a wide range of people have shown that there is a significant amount of energy and commitment at all levels of the city to address these issues actively, but that increased synergy and focus on the concerns of people at the sharp edge would greatly enhance how citizens and communities engage with and experience what the city has to offer, and feel a part of future change.

8. Recommendations

1. Build on the five priority themes from Workshop Two by having further conversations with key city partners, including universities and the business sector. Develop shared objectives and actions that inform the One City Plan⁴ and communicate this effectively to the public.
2. In the future, greater regard needs to be paid to the part of the general duty on public authorities, set out in the Equality Act 2010, to have due regard to ‘foster good relations between people who have a protected characteristic and those who do not.’ Fostering good relations means taking action to reduce prejudice and embed increased understanding between different groups of people. This could be strengthened in policy and project planning.
3. Creating spaces for difficult conversations was the most prominent requirement and request from all participants. This should be considered a priority that is sustained and developed over the long term, using facilitation led by trained, local and trusted people who can reach people deep into the communities, especially those not actively connected to organisations.
4. Understanding and engagement with social media platforms: the council together with police, NHS, universities and the community and voluntary sector needs to be more proactive and active in its methods to reach people online and address the prevalence of misinformation. Working with young people to develop this approach would be highly beneficial.
5. A framework for class needs to be developed around class and socioeconomic exclusion, similar to frameworks that address issues of race and racial equity, with people from those communities.
6. Enhance democratic engagement by leaders taking more direct action to engage with citizens and ensure genuine visibility, transparency and commitment.

⁴ <https://www.bristolonecity.com/about-the-one-city-plan/>

9. Appendices

Appendix 1: Consultant Biographies

Kamaljit Poonia BA (Hons) MSC Social Policy

Kamaljit has been a leader in Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (ED&I) for over 20 years across many sectors, including local authorities in Bristol and Camden, the Civil Service in the Department for International Development (DFID) and the Cabinet Office, as well as the University of Southampton.

She led programmes at DFID and the University of Southampton, which secured major recognition, including gaining a Silver Athena Swan Award and a public sector leadership award from Opportunity Now for Gender Equality. In 2018 Kamaljit received a 100 Top Global Diversity and Inclusion Leaders award by the World HR Congress in Mumbai.

As a consultant and coach for the last five years, Kamaljit has worked with a broad range of organisations, supporting them to move through their ED&I journeys. Kamaljit has a human-centred approach and believes in creating the space for difficult conversations, gaining clarity and focusing on the way forward. Be this by coaching individuals or by facilitating learning and action planning. The extensive experience she has of implementing change in organisations, and her interest in personal development, help her to understand the challenges faced by leaders and organisations in creating sustained change programmes.

Ruth Pitter MBE

Ruth is a consultant in Equity, Diversity and Inclusion, supporting a range of charitable, public and business sector organisations in Race Equity and organisational development. As the previous Head of Equalities at Voscur, she managed projects to support the governance and sustainability of the voluntary and community sector; consultation in Bristol that fed into the Equality Act 2010; and co-founded the Bristol Commission on Race Equality.

She is a co-founder and director of two theatre companies, Breathing Fire and Black Women Let Loose providing performances and workshops for communities, schools, universities, prisons, local authorities and the health sector.

She was previously a co-chair of the Memorialisation Task group for the Bristol Legacy Foundation; and an alumni of Women Leaders South West, leading to her co-founding and now chairing Grace The Space, which brings marginalised women into rural spaces for creative enhancement. She is a Trustee of Soul Trail Wellbeing; the Anchor Society; and Vital Beats.

Ruth was awarded an MBE for her services to Charity and the Community of Bristol in 2024.

Appendix 2: Contributors

Interview and workshop contributors

with thanks and appreciation to

- Six members of Bristol City Council's Youth Council
- Eight members of a community group from Avonmouth
- Six members from a community group in Hartcliffe

Representatives working in the field of:

- Refugees and Asylum Seekers
- Hate Crime
- Residents Associations
- Community Centres
- Community Umbrella Organisations
- Faith Institutions
- Young People's Organisations
- Creative Industries
- Inclusive Consultancy
- Academics
- Public Sector Leaders
- Political Leaders

For more information please contact: ocmc@bristol.gov.uk

Kamaljit Poonia and Ruth Pitter

October 2025

Appendix 3: Barriers to participation and community division in Bristol

Housing & Poverty

2022-24 Quality of Life Survey unless otherwise stated

- The percentage of households in Bristol’s most deprived areas who found it difficult to manage financially increased by 3% between 2022/23 (18%) and 2023/24 (21%), while the figure remained the same for the citywide average (10%).
- 2023/24 saw the biggest difference between the citywide average and the top 10% most deprived areas in Bristol in terms of percentage of households who find it difficult to manage financially (11%). This could be attributed to the impact of the cost of living crisis.
- While the percentage of households in the most deprived areas who found it difficult to manage financially reduced by 4% to 17% in 2024/25, this figure is consistently greater than that of the citywide average across all three years.

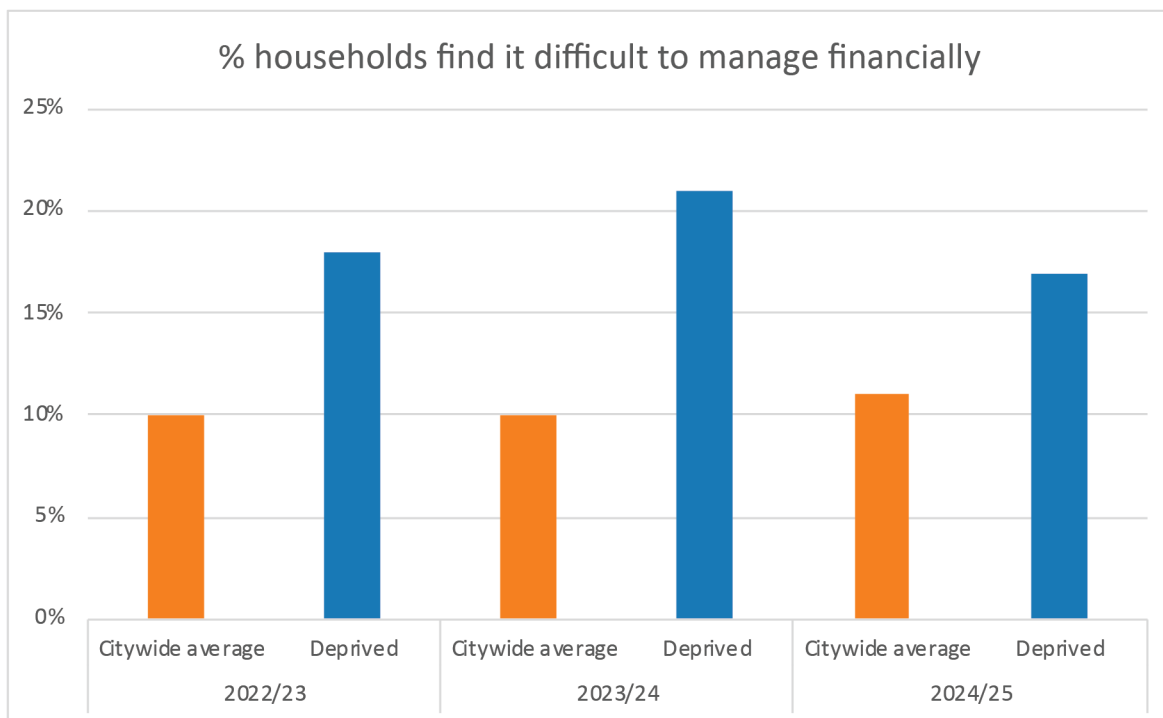


Figure 1: Data relating to difficulties of managing financially from 2022-2024.

Source: Quality of Life survey

- 2023/24 saw the biggest difference between the citywide average and the top 10% most deprived areas in Bristol in terms of percentage of households having experienced moderate to severe food insecurity (11%). This, again, could be attributed to the impact of the cost of living crisis.

- While the percentage of households living in the most deprived areas who experienced food insecurity dropped slightly in 2024/25, the rate remained significantly higher than that of the citywide average year on year from 2022/23 and 2024/25.

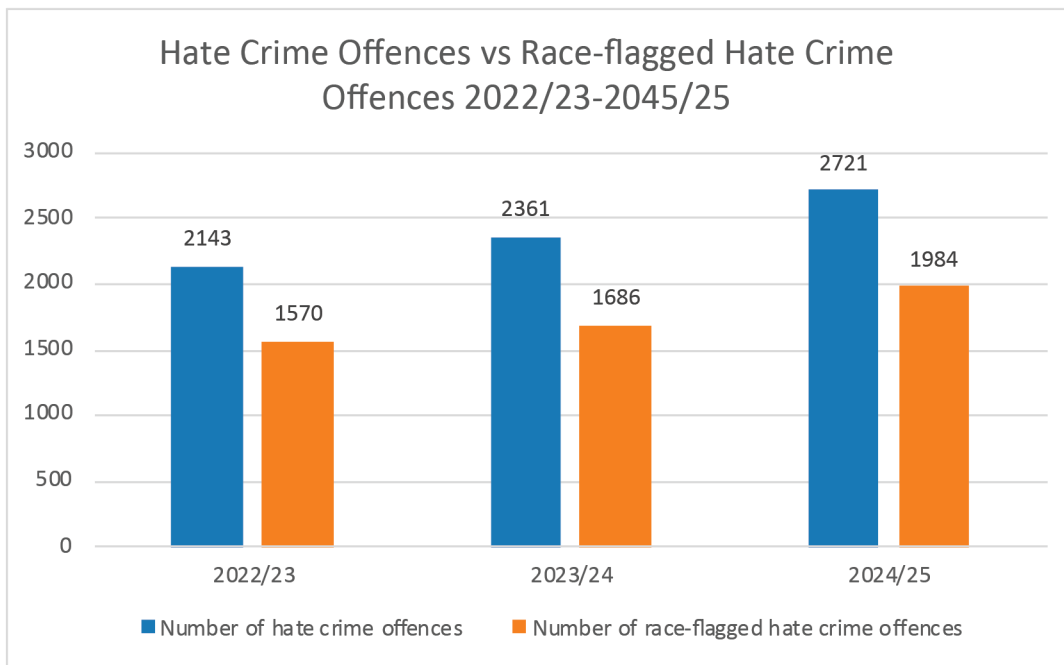


Figure 2: Data relating to households experiencing food insecurity from 2022-2024.

Source: Quality of Life survey

- 56,657 people in Bristol were on Universal Credit in 2024 – a 38% increase on the previous year (DWP, Stat-Xplore) ⁵.

⁵ It's worth noting that these figures will be impacted as Universal Credit migration, which is currently underway. It will naturally show higher numbers as claimants on legacy benefits move across to Universal Credit.

Hate Crime and Discrimination

Avon & Somerset Niche unless otherwise stated

- Race-flagged hate accounted for 73% of all hate crime in 2024/25 and increased by 18% from the previous year. This was partially driven by a significant increase in August 2024; race-flagged offences in this month were 67% higher than the same period in 2023.
- Between 2022/23 and 2024/25, there was a 27% increase of all hate crime, and 26% increase of race-flagged hate in the same period.
- The overall rate of hate crime in Bristol in 2024/25 was 5.7 crimes per 1,000 population, up from 4.9/1000 in 2023/24.
- There has been a year on year increase of overall hate and race-flagged hate crime between 2022/23 and 2024/25.
- Nationally, 140,561 hate crimes were recorded in England & Wales in the year ending March 2024 (The State of Us: Community strength and cohesion in the UK).

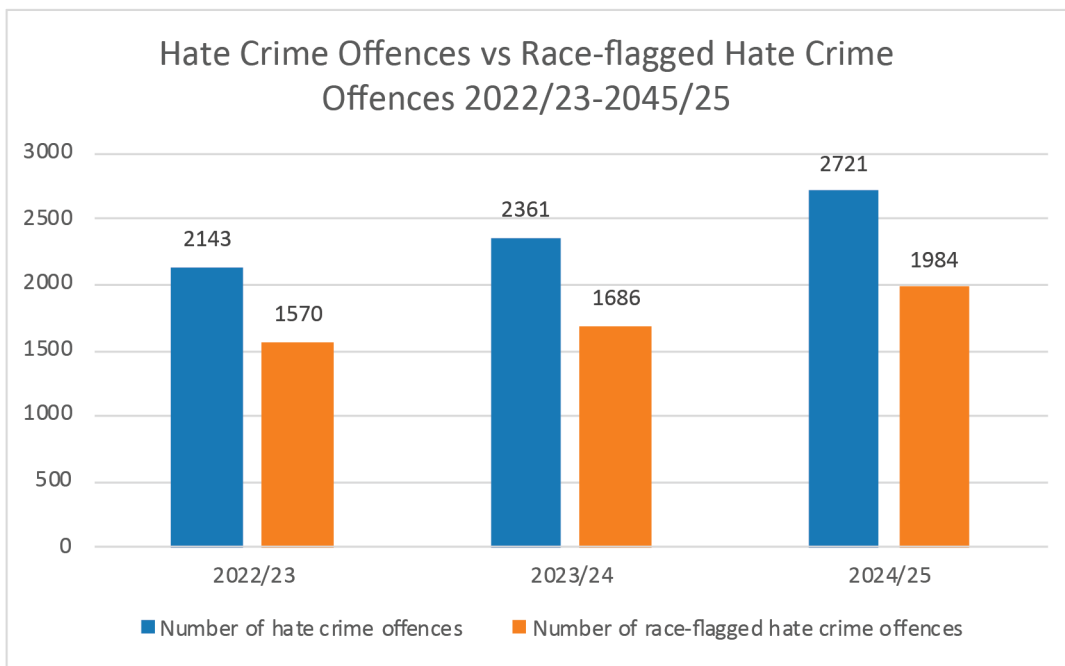


Figure 3: Clustered bar chart showing overall hate crime offences in Bristol from 2022/23 – 2024/25.

Source: Avon & Somerset Niche

- The proportion of people who reported being a victim of racial discrimination or harassment in the last year rose from 5% in 2022/23 to 8% in 2024/25. The figures for those living in the most deprived areas was higher; between 2022/23 and 2024/25 saw a 75% increase from 8% to 14%.
- The proportion of people who reported being a victim of racial discrimination or harassment in the last year has increased year on year, with households living in the most deprived areas being most affected.

- The citywide average of reports of religious discrimination remained low from 2022-2025, but reports rose sharply in the most deprived areas between 2023/24 and 2024/25 by 4% to 7% - almost 3 times higher than the citywide average.
- Reports of sex discrimination consistently shows the highest rates from 2022-2025, with households in the most deprived areas being most greatly affected.
- Reports of all types of discrimination and harassment by those in the most deprived areas in Bristol increased between 2022-2025.

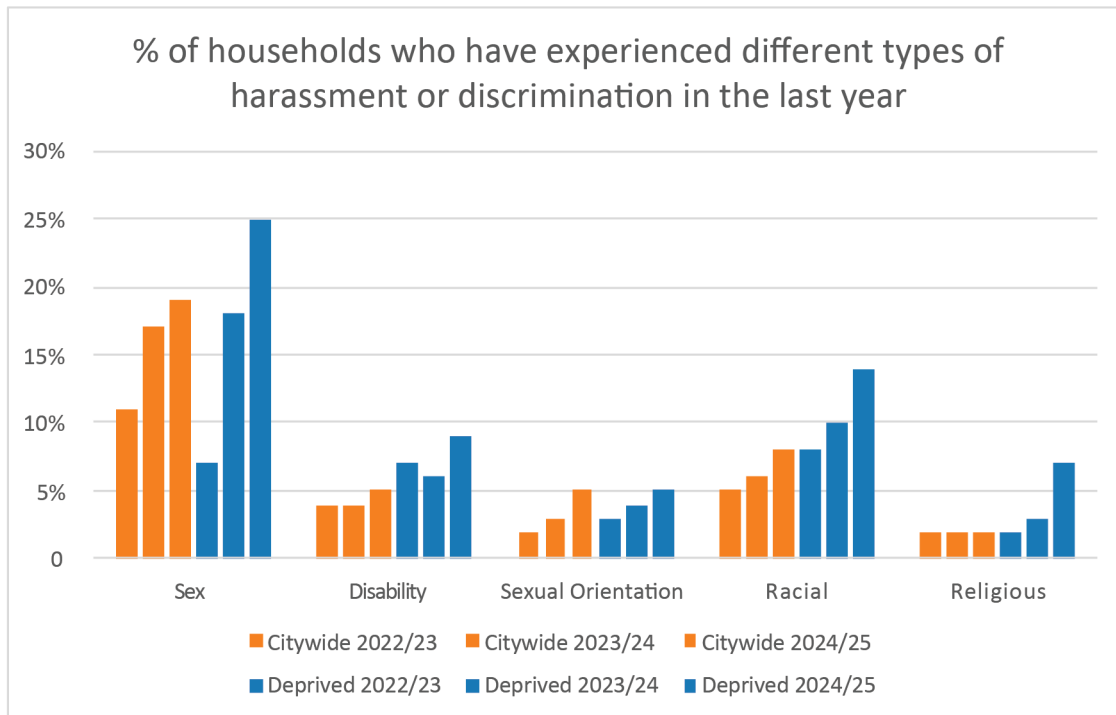


Figure 4: Comparison of the citywide percentage of households and those in the top 10% most deprived areas in Bristol who have been a victim of different types of discrimination or harassment from 2022/23-2024/25. Source: Quality of Life Survey

Trust, Belonging & Participation

2022-24 Quality of Life Survey unless otherwise stated

- Households in the 10% most deprived areas in Bristol reported a drop in a feeling of belonging in their neighbourhood between 2022/23 (50%) and 2024/25 (45%).
- The rate of households in the most deprived areas in Bristol who volunteer or help out in their community at least 3 times a year steadily increased between 2022/23 (38%) and 2024/25 (43%). However, this was lower than the citywide average – 47% and 46% in respective years.
- The most significant gap between the citywide average and households living in the most deprived areas between 2022/23 and 2024/25 was the percentage of those who agree people from different backgrounds get on well together in their neighbourhood – 13% and 17% in respective years.

- Between 2022/23-2024/25:
 - There was a 5% decrease of households living in the most deprived areas in Bristol ‘who feel like they belong to their neighbourhood’.
 - There is a 9% increase of households living in the most deprived areas in Bristol ‘who lack the information to get involved in their community’.
 - There has been a 5% decrease of households living in the most deprived areas in Bristol ‘who agree people from different backgrounds get on well together in their neighbourhood’.
 - Households living in the most deprived areas consistently feel like they belong to the neighbourhood than the city average from 2022/23 and 2024/25, with the greatest difference of 20% in 2023/24.
- Nationally, 69% of people agree that their local area is a place where people from different backgrounds get on well together. This is lower than the recorded city wide average in Bristol in 2024 (73%). (The State of Us: Community strength and cohesion in the UK)

Migration

ONS Mid-Year Population Estimates

- Net international migration was the largest component of population change in Bristol in the 12 months to mid-2024. For the third consecutive year since the Covid-19 pandemic, net international migration increased and is now more than 6 times higher than natural change (births minus deaths) and the highest levels of net international migration seen in more than two decades.
- As seen nationally, there has been a marked change in immigration in Bristol since 2021. Until 2019, EU nationals were the larger component of total immigration, whereas since 2021 the majority of immigration is now non-EU nationals. Non-EU migration include both international students and workers.

Fuel Poverty

- 10.3% (approximately 20,950 households) of all households in Bristol are living in fuel poverty, lower than the national average (11.4%). (JNSA Health and Wellbeing Profile)
- 40% in the 10% most deprived areas in Bristol were extremely to moderately worried about keeping their home warm in the winter in 2024/25 compared with 30% of the Bristol average. (Quality of Life survey 2024/25)

Housing

Bristol City Council statistics

- Council Tax Reduction is a means tested reduction to help citizens pay their Council Tax. The total number of cases decreased from 407,536 in 2022 to 391,418 in 2023, a drop of 4%.
- In 2024, the number of cases rose to 413,441, an increase of 10% from the previous year.
- Overall, there was a net increase of 6% between 2022 and 2024.

Employment and Education

Education

Gov.uk official statistics

- Attainment 8 is a school performance measure that calculates a pupil's average score across eight high-achieving GCSE subjects, giving a score that reflects their overall academic performance in key stage 4.
- The average attainment 8 score for pupils in Bristol schools for 2024 was 45.2. This is down slightly from 45.4 the previous year. This continues to be below the national average, but the gap has reduced slightly between 2023 and 2024 (-0.1).
- Year on year, there has been a decrease in both local and national attainment 8 scores.

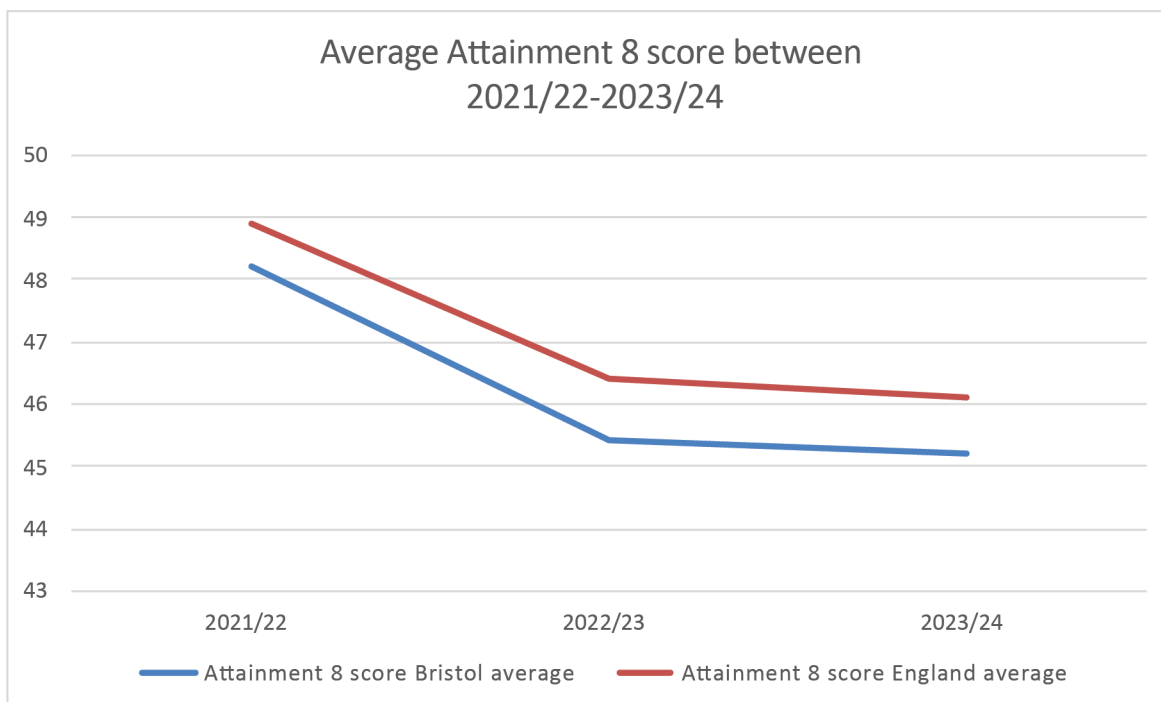


Figure 5: Data relating to Bristol and England average scores of Attainment 8.

Source: Gov.uk official statistics

- Data from Gov.uk official statistics shows that the proportion of pupils achieving grade 4 and above in English and maths GCSEs is significantly lower in areas of highest deprivation, year on year from 2022-2024.
- In 2024, 47% of pupils in the most deprived areas achieved a grade 4 and above, compared to 88% in the least deprived areas. This is a decrease of 4% from 2022.
- From 2022 and 2024, the gap between pupils in the most and least deprived areas achieving pass grades grew from 38% to 41%.

Employment

- According to NOMIS data (official labour market statistics), the rate of claims for out of work benefits generally remained the same between 2021 (11%) and 2023, with a slight decrease in 2023 (10%). This remains below the UK average (14%).

