

Community Engagement Feedback Report

Committee Model Working Group

Overview

1. Bristol City Council will be moving a committee system model of governance from May 2024. A cross party Group of Councillors, the Committee Model Working Group (CMWG), have responsibility for making recommendations about how the new model will operate. As part of this Members of the Group have agreed that seeking the views of the public is key and they have set out how they will do this in their comprehensive Communications and Engagement Strategy.
2. As part of the first phase of public engagement, the Committee Model Working Group commissioned the Community Development Team at Bristol City Council to run a variety of focus groups with residents and community organisations. The intention of these sessions was to gather views in the very early stages of their discussions about the new model before any decisions have been made about the direction.
2. It was agreed that this engagement would take place via four sessions in the North, South, Central and East of the city. Additional details about the events can be found at Appendix A.
3. This report sets out the detailed feedback provided during the sessions, separated by theme.

Questions

4. The following questions were asked at each of the sessions.
 - Question 1: Have you been involved in decision-making and community participation and what have you learnt from it?
 - Question 2: What will success look like in the new committee model, and how do we achieve this?
 - Question 3: What are the key points to include when we are designing the committee structure?

Feedback

Communication, Accessibility and Transparency

1. Equality of access should be a guiding principle for all democratic engagement.
2. Residents would like to see improved communication from the Council about democratic decision making including how interested parties, both individuals and grass roots organisations, could become involved. This could include use of simplified language and/or the introduction of reports written in the most common languages spoken in Bristol.
3. It was important to keep residents fully informed about how they would be impacted by decisions but also how their feedback would be taken into consideration. The Council should be clear about when the public were able to shape outcomes and avoid asking people to contribute in 'box ticking' engagement activities.
4. There would always be differing opinions about the outcome of a decision, but more information should be provided to demonstrate why it was made and how the views of the public had been considered.
5. The need for increased transparency was a key point made throughout the engagement sessions. Information about decisions should be easy to locate online including how each one was made, the impact on local residents and who was responsible.

6. Some felt that formal meetings of the Council were inaccessible both due to the location (i.e., City Hall) but also the atmosphere, language, and politics.
7. The current option for residents to submit statements and questions to meetings at City Hall felt intimidating to some and could be replaced by a more relaxed and creative forum.
8. If meetings continued in the current formal setting, then more advice, training and guidance should be available to the public who wished to attend and contribute.
9. Council meetings should be held at various times/days as scheduling them in the same slot each time e.g., Cabinet and Full Council always being on Tuesdays, could exclude some groups.
10. Feedback was generally positive regarding virtual meetings and webcasting due to the increased ease of access for residents with other commitments but in person meetings were preferable for building trust and effective working relationships. It was suggested that childcare be provided for in person meetings.
11. Some residents would prefer formal Council meetings to take place in the community. It was acknowledged that this would be expensive and there might not be adequate funding to deliver this.
12. Many residents would like to see the introduction of more local/devolved decision making.
13. Engagement tools needed to vary depending on the target audience, for example some preferred social media or newsletters, whereas other groups liked face to face contact such as 'door knocking' or community meetings. Resources to promote democratic decision making should be directed at underrepresented groups in the first instance.
14. It was important for the Council to be very clear and open about the financial situation and what that meant in terms of service provision. This would provide residents with the opportunity to come forward with alternative suggestions where possible.

Councillors and Governance

15. The role of local Councillors was considered vital in providing the link between residents and City Hall and many suggested that it would be helpful to find ways to enable Councillors to spend more time in their wards talking about decisions.
16. Residents needed to know who their local Ward Councillors were and how they could contact them. Information could be delivered to residents' homes via newsletters or provided in posters in doctors' surgeries, libraries, community centres etc. Radio interviews were also recommended as a good way to communication with residents.
17. A recurring theme across all events was that Councillors should embrace cross party working and focus more on the needs of their communities rather than party politics.
18. Not all residents had the time to participate in democracy and trusted their elected representatives to deliver the best outcomes for local people.
19. In the committee system, Councillors would be making decisions based on issues affecting areas across different parts of the city, so a briefing/training programme on local context for all wards in the city was recommended.
20. Councillors should receive in-depth training on equalities principles and how to engage with all members of the community.
21. Attendees wanted to see increased diversity in the Councillor cohort and for this to lead to more equal representation on committees. Many were of the view that the allowances paid to Councillors were a barrier to standing for election.
22. Bristol had a reputation as a 'global city' and it was important that this not be diminished in the Committee system.
23. If Scrutiny was included in the Committee system, it should be used to facilitate better engagement with residents and community organisations. A system where Councillors scrutinised their own decisions could be ineffective.
24. Some residents who had been involved in participatory decision making felt that it slowed down the process unnecessarily or that the decision had already been made and the engagement wasn't meaningful.

Ensuring Success

25. All the learning from previous models of governance needed to be incorporated in the new ways of working.
26. Members needed to be clear about how they would define success from the outset and ensure they reviewed performance regularly and shared outcomes with the public. Residents would like to contribute to discussions about any changes to the system that may be required post implementation.
27. A successful committee system would show clear accountability regarding all decisions that were made. The benefit of the Mayoral system was having a single person who had clear ownership and it was important to retain elements of this in the new model.
28. It was vital to ensure that the committee system operated in a joined up way. Structure charts should be produced to show how all the committees (including Audit) linked to each other and the reporting lines.
29. Councillors' performance should be reviewed to ensure they were upholding the Council's values and standards of behaviour, as well as supporting meaningful community engagement.
30. The Council must find a way to ensure local residents had sight of activities, strategies and projects that directly affected them and their local areas.
31. During Covid, a significant response was seen across the city with resources coming from a variety of places including the Council, the voluntary sector, and community centres/organisations. It was important to take any learning from this experience and see how it could be applied to improving democracy.

Next steps

32. The CMWG will be considering the findings from this first phase of community engagement at a meeting in December 22 where it will be used to inform early discussions around the future design of the committee model.
33. This report and an initial response from the CMWG will be shared with all participants.
34. Future phases of engagement will be considered by the CMWG at a meeting in early 2023. The intention is to replicate the community events as more information about the emerging model becomes clearer. A comprehensive range of supplementary engagement activities will also take place, with details to be confirmed in due course.

APPENDIX A

Community Events – Further Information

Attendees

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

North - Blaise High School on Monday 14th November from 18:30 to 20:30.

The event was attended by 22 people and alongside residents the following organisations were represented: Ambition Lawrence Weston, Henbury and Brentry Community Council, Lockleaze Neighbourhood Trust, Shirehampton Community Action Forum and SusWot (Sustainable Westbury-on-Trym).

Councillor Geoff Gollop was also in attendance.

South - The Park, Knowle West on Wednesday 16th November from 18:30 to 20:30

The event was attended by 20 people and alongside residents the following organisations were represented: Diamonds Social Community Hub, Knowle West Media Centre, Vision BAME and representatives from Bristol Youth Council.

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

Central - The Trinity Centre, Trinity Road on Tuesday 21st November from 18:00 to 20:00

The event was attended by 27 people and alongside residents the following organisations were represented: ACE Service, Aspiration Creation Elevation, Bangladesh Association, Bristol Horn Youth Concern, Commission on Race Equality, Friendly Neighbours, OMCA, Polish Women's Group, Somali Centre, and representatives from the Bristol Youth Council.

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

East - The Rose Green Centre, Gordon Road on Wednesday 30th November from 18:00 to 20:00

The event was attended by 17 people and alongside residents the following organisations were represented: Centre for Deaf and Hard of Hearing and the Timorese Association-Bristol.

Councillor Lorraine Francis was also in attendance.

Equalities and Diversity

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

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