



# Participatory democracy in practice:

evaluation of  
the Bristol City  
Council Community  
Resilience Fund

Final Report, June 2024

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# 1. Introduction

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This evaluation of the Bristol City Council's Community Resilience Fund (CRF)<sup>1</sup> examines the decision-making process which led to the awarding of grants to understand the value, impact and potential of the collaborative decision-making process. The evaluation is not focused on the outcome of the grant process, i.e. the expenditure of the £4 million in capital grants that were made available to 53 community organisations in June 2023 as the grant-making outcome of the CRF.

The CRF was set up to support the recovery of the community and voluntary sector in the wake of the COVID pandemic and build future resilience. Bristol City Council (BCC) was committed to involving communities in the decision-making process and to 'learn through doing' developing relevant skills which could be useful for conducting similar participatory decision-making processes in the future. This evaluation report aims to capture this learning. The Council view the CRF as a continuation of the recent exploration of applied deliberative (participatory) democracy. The primary aim of these explorations has been to explore where and how decisions could be made or informed by non-council decision-makers, in particular to enable residents and Voluntary, Community, Social Enterprise (VCSE) organisations to make decisions alongside elected Councillors.

The CRF decision-making process was split into **two stages**:

**Stage one** (July – October 2022) involved 24 organisations across the 30% most deprived neighbourhoods in Bristol and organisations led by equalities communities, having conversations with their communities to identify opportunities for investing funding in community infrastructure and assets, and ultimately, support the development of strong project ideas and proposals.

From April – October 2022, was a design and planning process. This involved 32 Bristol City elected Councillors from across political parties and 28 VCSE organisations from across the city's geographic and equalities communities. Its aim was to inform and share the approach to designing and developing the participatory decision making process.

**Stage two** is where decisions were made on which projects would receive funding. The decision-making meetings ran from January – May 2023 and are referred to in this report as the 'deliberative workshops' or 'deliberative meetings'. The deliberative workshops involved residents, VCSE staff and BCC ward Councillors. Overall, 22 Bristol City Councillors and 100 residents were involved in stage two. The 100 resident participants were recruited by the CRF team at the Council, with the aim of broadly representing Bristol's diverse population within each decision-making group.

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<sup>1</sup> The evaluation was carried out by researchers based at the University of Bristol and Vivid Regeneration.

# January

# 2023

**Meeting 1: Context setting and introductory session**

# February

**Meeting 2: First deliberations**

# March

**Meeting 3: Deliberations continued**  
*(BCC feeds back answers to the group)*

# April

**Meeting 4: Final Decisions**  
*(BCC feeds back and expert input)*

# April

**Meeting 5: (Optional)**

# May

**Meeting 6: (Optional) Final decisions**

BCC responds to questions from the group

BCC responds to requests for expert input

BCC inform applicants of outcome

The aims of the CRF were informed by previous participatory grant making processes and other research conducted in Bristol. Learning from these past initiatives was integrated into the CRF planning by the BCC core team, along with earlier engagement finding through BCC's work with the VCSE as a direct response to Designing a New Social Reality report. Key references set out in the Cabinet Report included:

- Fundamental for setting the context of the CRF process is **Designing a New Social Reality** report (Lodi et al. 2021) produced by Black South West Network, Voscur and Locality. The CRF fund is a response to certain recommendations to support recovery and long-term resilience through the creation of more capital funding, and facilitating the re-establishment of revenue streams and enabling more effective management of assets by community organisations, social enterprises and community businesses. It also aims to respond to the strong need identified by the report for a cultural shift towards equity and inclusivity in decision-making.
- **Bristol Impact Fund 2 (BIF 2 Growing the Power of Community, Cabinet Report Appendix A, 8/2/2022)**. In response to the learning from the original **Bristol Impact Fund**, and in alignment with the ambitions of the Bristol Impact Fund 2, the CRF process aimed to assist in creating stronger connections with community organisations and facilitate community-led action via investment in the sustainability of community facilities and infrastructure. It also sought to grow

the power of the local communities that experience the greatest inequality.

- **Port Community Resilience Fund (Port Community Resilience Fund Project Summary 2020)** and the devolved Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL). The approach to spending by these two funds informed CRF's approach to the allocation of funding to local areas.
- **Bristol's Citizen's Assembly (Report from Bristol's Citizen Assembly 2021)**. This is the clearest example of deliberative democratic decision-making in the city to date. Key aims of the CRF that relate to this initiative include empowering local communities in decision-making, utilising local expertise and resource, and the devolution of power from the Council to the community.

Overall, the CRF represented an ambitious attempt to devolve decision-making while responding to entrenched inequalities across the city. The CRF was city-wide, across 6 Areas and a city-wide equalities group. The process included a co-design element with 28 VCSE organisations and a deliberative decision-making process with 100 residents and 22 Councillors. The scale of this undertaking was in equal measure inspiring and challenging, and the BCC core team who ran the CRF should be commended for their highly skilful and effective stewardship which was underpinned by a positive working ethic of open and genuine collaboration. The level of ambition, scale and complexity of the process was recognised by many of those involved.

Drawing out the learning from a complex process like the CRF, which included multiple overlapping elements, is testing, especially as there was not just one single deliberative decision-making forum. Instead, the CRF process involved a series of deliberative workshops taking place simultaneously within each of the Areas and the city-wide equalities group (7 series of meetings in total). Any process that is made up of multiple and concurrent forums includes a huge variety of actions and decisions and therefore numerous examples of the process working well and less well. In view of this it was challenging for the evaluation team to come to simple overarching evaluative statements. Instead, the points raised in this report, and the quotes and cases that have been included, highlight this variability and the, at times, opposing or seemingly contradictory points of view. Evaluation findings are structured by the two main stages of the CRF and arranged by themes.

Themes were derived from a qualitative analysis process which was conducted after stage two had completed. It is the evaluation team's aim to highlight both areas of success and those challenging areas which would benefit from revision, in order to constructively learn from this process for the future.

Participatory democracy is not quick - it requires significant intent and commitment to make it happen. Any process of democratic decision-making that attempts to devolve power to citizens should be treated with respect and goodwill. There is a lot to celebrate and much to learn from the CRF process. We hope this evaluation will help inform and enhance further deliberative democratic decision-making processes to effectively respond to matters of public interest in the future.



# 2. Methodology

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## 2.1 Evaluation scope

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The scope of the evaluation was established by BCC and the evaluation team at the start of the CRF process. The evaluation team engaged with BCC to refine its Theory of Change (ToC - see Appendix A), which had been designed to inform the CRF. The assumptions driving the ToC were reviewed by the evaluation team and, together with BCC, a collection of evaluation aims was agreed that would set the scope of the evaluation and guide the assessment (see Appendix B).

<b>Evaluation aims</b>	
1.	To understand the successes and challenges of the participatory and deliberative decision-making process used.
2.	To understand the effectiveness of the decision-making process on strengthening community power; and addressing community identified priorities and wider, unintended impacts.
3.	To understand the shared learning between VCSE organisations involved, the Council and the wider sector, and understand how it can contribute to Bristol's One City Plan objective.
4.	To recognise the successful aspects of the decision-making process which are scalable and replicable, for future use within participatory and deliberative decision-making.
5.	To understand how the decision-making process fulfilled the anticipated interim outcomes listed in the revised theory of change.
6.	To make clear recommendations which can grow the use of participatory decision-making in the city.

Evaluation questions were then devised to meet the evaluation aims. Answers to the evaluation questions are integrated throughout the report and are included as full responses in the conclusion:

<b>Evaluation questions</b>	
<b>1.</b>	<p>What successes were identified as part of the overall process?</p> <p>a. What factors/enablers created a successful deliberative decision-making process?</p>
<b>2.</b>	<p>What challenges were identified by different stakeholders in the overall process?</p> <p>a. What obstacles were associated with the deliberative decision-making process?</p>
<b>3.</b>	<p>How effective was the process for:</p> <p>a. reaching collective decisions?</p> <p>b. increasing participation by VCSE organisations in shaping and influencing the design of grant making processes?</p> <p>c. addressing community priorities?</p> <p>d. increasing engagement and participation from diverse communities (residents and VCSE organisations)?</p> <p>e. strengthening VCSE connections at a local level?</p> <p>f. strengthening community power?</p> <p>g. incorporating expert advice/evidence to support deliberative decision-making?</p> <p>h. building trust and confidence in the relationships between the Council and communities?</p> <p>i. improving overall equality?</p>
<b>4.</b>	<p>Were there any unintended impacts?</p>
<b>5.</b>	<p>What was the key learning for different stakeholders?</p> <p>a. VCSE organisations</p> <p>b. BCC Councillors</p> <p>c. Residents</p> <p>d. Council employees</p>

## 2.2 Research approach and methods

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As the evaluation aims are largely open, a qualitative mixed-methods approach was deemed most appropriate (Bryman, 2008). This approach was also chosen as it allows for an exploratory evaluation that includes greater flexibility and was judged to be most in keeping with the CRF's ethos of learning by doing (Yin, 2014).

The primary data collection methods used were interviews, focus groups, surveys and observation. Drawing on several social science research methods enables findings to be confirmed through a process of 'triangulation', where research insights are gathered from different methods and compared against one another to assess their validity. The evaluation team was made up of 6 researchers, 4 from the University of Bristol (including 2 student research assistants) and 2 consultants from Vivid Regeneration.

The evaluation team followed the CRF process from start to finish. The CRF process was made up of two main stages. The first stage involved a design and planning process and community conversations, while the second stage involved funding decision-making meetings that were arranged by council areas using the Area Committee boundaries set up to administer Community Infrastructure (CIL) and Section 106 money. The evaluation team observed the design and planning meetings that took place in stage one and attended the majority of the Design Team and Oversight Group (see Appendix E

and F) meetings that took place during stage one. They also attended ad hoc meetings with TPX Impact and BCC. TPX was commissioned by BCC to provide expertise, knowledge and training in Deliberative Democracy in support of the CRF process (see appendix H). The purpose was to lead the transfer and building of knowledge and to ensure that there would be a legacy of skills left in the City at the end of this process to support future approaches.

Members of the evaluation team also interviewed some of the VCSE leads who had run a stage one community conversation. For stage two, the evaluation team carried out observations of a sample of the deliberative meetings that took place across the 6 Areas and the city-wide equalities group. The majority sample consisted of 5 of the 7 deliberative meetings (4 of the 6 areas and the equalities group).

The particular methods employed include:

- Interviews with VCSE organisations involved in running community conversations as part of stage one. There were 6 interviews held in July and August 2022.
- A focus group with VCSE organisation leads who ran the stage one community conversations, held on 14 October 2022.
- A survey was sent out in November 2022 to all VCSE organisations involved in stage one.
- Interviews with Bristol City Ward Councillors either involved in co-designing the CRF or who took part in stage two

meetings. There were interviews with 11 Councillors held between April – June 2023.

- Observations of the majority of the sample of deliberative meetings across stage two, between January and May 2023.
- A survey was sent to all Ward Councillors and residents involved in stage two deliberative meetings between April – May 2023.

## 2.3 Theoretical frame

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The Evaluation Team decided to employ a robust theoretical framework to apply to the CRF process, to support the understanding of the data collected to inform learning and to complement the Council's approach, which was focussed on an open exploration of participatory and deliberative approaches. Social science research is often informed by social/political theory to help make sense of what is being studied. As the CRF has explicit aims<sup>2</sup> to develop participatory and, specifically, deliberative democratic decision-making approaches, the evaluation team employed Fishkin's (2009) deliberative democratic theory.

Fishkin's theoretical frame was used as it was judged to be of suitable depth and of relative ease to work with for future use. The linchpin to Fishkin's work is the goal of restructuring democracy to empower "We the people"<sup>3</sup> and theorises that a robust democracy can be characterised by being

simultaneously representative, deliberative, and inclusive. Fishkin (2009) has developed five characteristics that he considers crucial for effective deliberation.

In summary these characteristics include:

### **1. Information:**

To have a good discussion, it's crucial to have accurate and clear information about the topic. People need to know the relevant facts and points so they can confidently talk about them, argue the case and ask questions.

### **2. Substantive balance (balanced arguments):**

In a productive conversation, it is important to bring up different sides of the topic. This means that when someone makes a point, others should respond with relevant counterpoints. The idea is to consider all angles of an argument in order to work towards an agreement. Balanced arguments ensure that everyone's ideas get a fair look.

### **3. Diversity of participants:**

Having a diverse group of people in a discussion is essential. It means not everyone should have the same viewpoint. For example, if you are talking about community issues, you should include people with a wide range of backgrounds, experience and knowledge from within that community. Diversity helps discussions be more meaningful and avoids getting stuck with only one perspective.

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<sup>2</sup> CRF's aims I, II, IV and VI all relate to understanding the 'successful aspects' of applied deliberative democracy and draw out learning for future use.

<sup>3</sup> Fishkin is an American political scientist. "We the people" refers to the opening lines of the United States Constitution.



#### 4. Conscientiousness (being fair):

Being fair means accepting the outcome of the discussion and trying to agree on things without trying to get your way or using tricks. People should use honest and fair arguments, not try to use their power or influence to win. They should also be aware of their own biases and try not to let them sway the discussion.

#### 5. Equal consideration:

In a discussion, all points should be looked at based on how good the arguments are, not who is saying them. This is about treating

everyone's ideas equally, regardless of their social status or how good or confident they seem at debating. It is important to limit power differences as much as possible in discussions.

Fishkin's theory is considered a good way to evaluate discussions because it is straightforward and can be turned into a clear set of conditions that can be compared against. Examples of how questions can be used to assess how well a discussion is going is in Appendix C.

Further information on data analysis and data ethics can be found in Appendix D.



# 3. Stage one findings

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Stage one was made up of two key components. The first was a design process, referred to by BCC as the ‘co-design process’ that predominately included lead VCSE organisations and local community groups and organisations. The second aspect was a community conversation process, that was run by lead VCSE organisations and ran over July – October 2022. These community conversations were attended by BCC Ward Councillors and community organisations who intended to submit funding proposals. These workshops were held in different community spaces across the city. It was decided after some debate during the design process that these conversations would not be seeking to include residents as primary participants.

As set out in the Cabinet Report (February 2022), this stage of the CRF process had several key aims. The first aim was to increase participation and continue to develop more collaborative ways of making decisions, building on ‘Designing a New Social Reality’ and Bristol’s Citizen’s Assembly, held in 2021. The second aim was to identify and address the priorities of communities, both communities of interest and geographical communities, experiencing the highest levels of deprivation. This aim was set, in part, in response to learning from the Port Community Resilience Fund (**Port Community Resilience Fund Project**

**Summary 2020**), the Bristol Impact Fund (**BIF 2 Growing the Power of Community, Cabinet Report Appendix A**, undated), and the Area Committee process (2023). The third aim, during stage one of the process, was to build stronger connections between people who hold different roles within, and across, communities. These aims can be separated into three categories: 1) designing the overall CRF process, 2) identifying community priorities, and 3) building connections both within and across neighbourhoods. The findings on the successes of the process as well as wider evaluative reflections are structured by these three aims.

## 3.1 Designing the process

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One of the questions this evaluation aims to address is the extent to which this process was effective for increasing participation by VCSE organisations<sup>4</sup> in shaping and influencing the design of grant-making processes. This is considered through the commitment of the CRF to using a co-design approach. According to the Cabinet Report (2022) the CRF process would be co-designed. This report written prior to the start of the process set out a number of assumptions and parameters. Such assumptions informed Cabinet CRF decision-making and helped guide the process, while many of the practicalities and details of

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<sup>4</sup> Lead VCSE organisations refers to several VCSE organisational representatives or employees who were invited to run community conversations, and were part of the Design or Oversight Groups or acted as lead facilitators with the deliberative meetings in stage two. Lead VCSE representatives were paid for their time.



the process evolved over time, responsive to emerging and changing needs. This collaborative approach was identified as a central commitment of the CRF in the Cabinet Report: “designing the process with community and voluntary sector partners and communities”, and reflected learning from the ‘Designing a New Social Reality’ report which endorses more collaborative ways of learning. This aim is also included as an aspiration with BCC’s Theory of Change (see Appendix A) to maximise participation in the process and ensure inclusion of diverse voices in the initial planning of the CRF.

The co-design process consisted of several elements including: workshops run by TPX Impact, providing their expertise and training on deliberative democracy to help the Bristol team to develop their practice, held in different community venues across Bristol; and ongoing meetings of the Design Group (see Appendix F). The TPX Impact workshops were seen as the core driver of the co-design process, and detailed information and materials from the workshops can be accessed via the core BCC CRF team. It is important to note here that BCC had been running a series of conversations with the VCSE sector, prior to the Cabinet Report, which set some of the early thinking for CRF. For example, using a very straightforward proposal process, and the need for community conversations at the beginning of the process. These conversations contributed to the initial co-design of the CRF process. However, the Cabinet Report did set some early parameters which inevitably provided certain boundaries to the scope of influence and co-design. For example, VCSE leads reported being informed that the process was open to influence but felt that

they had limited opportunity to implement any change or contribute ideas, in part due to the large numbers attending and the amount of material to work through.

The scale and ambition of the co-design process was significant and impressive. Inevitably it was therefore challenging for all involved.

At the beginning of the process TPX shared their intentions for the opportunity that co-design of the process provided for:

- building a shared approach to decision-making
- ensuring more equity and transparency in decision-making
- finding shared solutions using all our knowledge and insights.

In stage one, when set against the opportunities outlined by TPX the evaluation team found that the aim to carry out effective co-design was a success in the following main areas:

1. Elements of the design workshops run by TPX Impact, which challenged, engaged and informed participants.
2. The range and number of participants in the co-design workshops – largely VCSE but also some Councillors, who attended the workshops, working together, building relationships, learning and contributing to the process over several months.
3. Contributions from the Design Group meetings who being a much smaller group were able to look in more detail at specific issues arising from the process.

4. The process of designing and agreeing the decision-making process was more open, collective and transparent as a result of the co-design workshops and related activities.
5. The initial design of the decision-making process was developed as a result, albeit after extra time.
6. Many participants, despite the challenges, felt inspired by the concept of co-design, were enthused by the process and the potential to incorporate it in their future work.

However, overall, there was a feeling from participants that they were not involved in what they would identify as a co-design process and that some found the use of the term was somewhat misleading.

There were very positive dimensions of the co-design process, which included aspects of the TPX Impact workshops where people were given the opportunity to hone in on the decision-making process and, towards the end of the workshops, enabled to explore three specific options. The final workshop, in particular, was seen as useful for getting to grips with how decision-making would happen in practice, with participants actively trying out different approaches using dummy applications. This was an extra workshop that was added because VCSE leads felt they had insufficient information to support and encourage local applications as related to issues outlined below. This was an example of the BCC team learning as they went and responding to needs as they emerged. However, participants of the TPX Impact co-design workshops reported feeling frustration that the workshops tried to cover too much ground in a short space of time, and a feeling

that some of the decisions could have been made by BCC or TPX Impact ahead of the workshops; in their view, some decisions may not have needed to be co-designed and time could have been saved if the workshops had been more focused. However, any decision to do this would have compromised the agreed co-design spirit.

Nevertheless, the workshops were well attended and there was a feeling that knowledge sharing had been useful. It was also reported that the workshops had created opportunities for attendees from different organisations to share understanding, explore new approaches to decision-making and make new connections.

### 3.1.1 Use of the term 'co-design'

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VCSE organisations took part in the co-design workshops and some also took part in the Design Group. In the interviews and focus groups conducted with the lead VCSE organisations at the close of stage one, when considering their involvement in the TPX Impact workshops, the majority of participants expressed reservations about labelling the process a co-design, feeling it was more of an advisory board or consultation – both relevant and valued, but not their understanding of co-design. This concern was also expressed in the stage one VCSE focus group, where participants involved in the Design Group reported that they did not feel they had significant influence in the sense of co-design.

Due to the different roles of participants, there were varying degrees of input. This variation may, in part, explain why some

participants felt more or less involved than others. Participants also stated that there was a lack of consistent involvement; people were coming in and out at different stages, which also complicated and prolonged the process. In both the Design Group and Oversight Group (see Appendix E) meetings, a significant number of attendees missed several meetings. This inconsistency created difficulties in decision-making within the groups and slowed down the process. A related challenge was the sheer number of people involved. The co-design process included 28 VCSE organisations and most people felt this was too many for effective detailed co-design to take place. This comment was echoed by attendees of the VCSE focus group.

Most responses which related to the co-design process felt that trying to design and run the process concurrently was challenging and unlikely to work well. This had not been the original plan but came about because the additional time spent on workshops meant that they ran into the timeframe for the community conversations. Many participants commented that this timing of the co-design component meant that they felt they lacked sufficient information to engage effectively during the community conversations. Uncertainty regarding the next steps of the process (stage two) and the eligibility criteria for applications also inhibited the potential for effective co-design.

It was reported within the VCSE focus group that a lack of formal co-design decision-making (or a lack of communication about the co-design decisions that had been made) meant community conversations were inconsistent in format. It was always the

intention to empower VCSE leads in each area to design the format of their community conversations which would work best for their areas. This was made more challenging by not having clear co-designed decisions to build on, which created both challenges and flexible opportunities for the VCSE.

The evaluation team noted that a sense of being actively involved developed over time. Initially there were reported feelings of limited scope to engage, with participants expressing some concern over their level of influence. On the whole, when interviewed by the evaluation team, Councillors reported feeling more positive about the co-design process than participants from VCSE organisations.

Despite these issues, participants continued to express excitement about the idea of co-design and maintained overall belief in the process. One participant said:

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**“I’m excited about the prospect of co-design and getting professional development to incorporate into my own organisation.”**

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Similar comments were made in the VCSE focus groups, with one attendee mentioning feeling empowered by the possibility of shaping the process, feeling able to implement change as the “rules are not already there.” Attendees were observed engaging with interest at this new approach and being positive towards being given an opportunity to explore shared concerns and interests with others from their communities.

The term co-design carries with it some very specific understanding and weighting and is open to interpretation in terms of the depth and breadth of a process. There is evidence that during this initial stage in the CRF process, some participants in the Design Group and the TPX Impact workshops felt able to influence the way the process developed. However, it was also felt by many that they were only tinkering with the edges of a process already set out by TPX Impact and the BCC core team, rather than inputting or shaping the CRF process as a whole. The evaluation team felt it was important to be clear about how this stage worked and, on balance, using the term co-design as an absolute did not feel accurate. From the team's perspective it would be better described as collaboration.

### 3.1.2 Influencing factors on level of co-design

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The evaluation team observed two key factors that influenced the ability of participants to engage in co-design: time and capacity.

#### **Time for co-design**

Participants found that the short timespan for the co-design process was challenging and that it added pressure for those VCSE organisations involved in arranging and running the community conversations. This time pressure was compounded by other contextual factors: 1) the Covid pandemic meant that VCSE organisations were tired and trying to recuperate; 2) the cost-of-living crisis and other prominent social issues were adding pressure on the VCSE

sector; 3) starting the co-design process and community conversations in the summer meant it landed at an awkward time of year when many VCSE organisation employees were on holiday. This timing point was also relevant for the deliberative discussions that took place over January.

Lead VCSE interviewees noted that the short timescales made it hard to engage with local community organisations and effectively carry out in-depth community conversations. BCC extended the time period until early October to account for this. Some participants mentioned that the co-design workshops took up too much time. One participant commented:

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**“The slow process has only left five weeks to do an E.O.I, including the summer holidays, and we still haven’t decided how stage two will work.”**

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During the VCSE focus groups the same issues were raised. Similar concerns were shared in several responses to the end of the stage one survey, with most respondents mentioning difficulties with encouraging people to engage as they were too busy. Some respondents mentioned that the co-design element of the process would have functioned better if it had been distinctly separated to and prior to the start of the community conversations.

The evaluation team's findings on co-design highlight the importance of time (and the lack of time) as a recurring issue throughout the CRF process.

## Capacity for co-design

A further issue was access to necessary staffing and resources. Respondents to the end of stage one survey commented on the lack of capacity they had to carry out the process, including staffing. One respondent said:

**“I also work part-time and, if I’m honest, when I got involved at the start, I had no idea how much time it would take up.”**

Another said they would not be going into stage two due to their staff capacity. It is important to note that those organisations involved were funded for their time in recognition of their work on CRF, but this did not change their lack of capacity.



### Learning Points

- » Be explicit about what you mean by co-design in any context. Be clear about the parameters and expectations.
- » If possible, work with smaller groups for co-design, potentially bringing into largersettings later in the process.
- » Ensure any co-design work is undertaken well in advance of any delivery, to ensure clarity and agreement, and avoiding confusion or any need to rush decisions to meet delivery timeframes.

## 3.2 Community priorities

VCSE organisations involved in the co-design workshops were invited to lead conversations in their communities to identify priorities. BCC ran an expression of interest process in spring 2022. Organisations indicated the community or neighbourhood they would cover and how they would approach the conversations. Partnership agreements were drawn up based on their plans, the scope of which was broad in order to give organisations flexibility to deliver the work in a way that best suited their communities and organisation. Organisations were paid for this role.

The Cabinet Report suggested that the community conversations would be the primary conduit within the overall CRF process for identifying community priorities, through engaging with a “diverse network of people.” As stated previously, an early decision at the TPX run workshops agreed that the community conversation process would be focussed on talking with community organisations and groups, not on resident engagement. The evaluation found that the effectiveness of this process for identifying community priorities through the community conversations was limited, as they tended to have the alternative focus of supporting organisations with developing their proposals. This, while useful for the overall CRF process, was not aligned with the original aims set out in the Cabinet Report. There were discussions with the VCSE organisations regarding what they were comfortable with and the level of reputational risk for their own local work if they were seen as “gate-keepers” for access to the process, though not specifically about

how the community conversations would create a set of agreed area priorities against which to encourage and/or consider the proposals coming into the process. It was however noted by some VCSE organisations that through their work, they already had a strong, community informed view of local and community of interest priorities.

### 3.2.1 Identifying priorities

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Within stage one, evidence of the identification of community priorities was limited, with less success than BCC intended, as identified in their aim: “information gathering to understand priorities and opportunities for capital investment” (Cabinet Report). Community conversations focused more on discussing and supporting individual proposals, sketching out an idea for a fundable project and providing justification, rather than exploring the context of wider community needs and comparatively considering different community priorities. Deliberation on the potential of the idea was not observed in the majority of meetings. For example, one meeting saw the VCSE lead begin the meeting with a thorough explanation of the application process and form, before spending the remaining time consulting individual attendees separately regarding their potential proposals and providing specific guidance.

There were a small number of examples where some kind of prioritisation took place within the community conversations. In one area, for example, a more engaged discussion was observed that drew out attendees’ opinions on potential proposals. One attendee presented their idea for the installation of a new publicly accessible toilet

facility. This proposal stirred a discussion amongst attendees about the community’s need for such a facility and the evaluation team observed the formation of a general agreement on the validity of the proposal. This case demonstrated the potential for prioritisation (and deliberation) to take place within community conversations in the context of identified community needs. Nevertheless, this potential required intentional encouragement to be realised more commonly. Contextual factors could also be considered for encouraging deliberation on community priorities. For example, Fishkin (2009) discusses greater ease of deliberation within smaller groups. In the context of community conversations, this refers to the ‘scale of community’ that frames deliberation, rather than the number of people participating. The number of attendees was fairly consistent across the observed meetings, but in the case referred to in the example above, the area was one of the smaller geographically defined communities.

A community conversation that generated discussion on priorities was also observed in one area. One attendee raised a bid idea for improving facilities to support a young men’s mentoring programme. Shared interest from across the room indicated that there was general support for the idea and that it could have been prioritised. However, as there was no preset method or process for prioritisation, the community conversation appeared to lack the confidence to identify and catalogue priorities.

Within the VCSE focus groups there was discussion over the success of the community conversation approach for identifying and learning about the needs of the community. The feeling was that while the

community conversations opened a space for discussion on the needs and priorities of different organisations, in practice there was very little discussion that explicitly identified priorities. Similarly, the survey conducted at the close of stage one included a small number of comments that pointed to an increased understanding of community priorities, with one participant stating:

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**“The process was designed to encourage conversation which led to a greater understanding of each organisation’s priorities and concerns, and areas within which these could be addressed collectively.”**

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The examples given above are positive and demonstrate how opportunities for capital investment were identified, but do not indicate that the aims set out in the Cabinet Report were met in full in practice. However, when asked via the survey carried out at the end of stage one, all respondents (count: 10) were able to name community priorities identified within the community conversations. The evaluation team did not observe this in our sample and this may have happened in other groups.

The Design Team suggest that deciding to operate at an Area Committee level limited the potential for genuine local decision-making because the areas extended beyond the knowledge of those involved:

“Allocating the funding by pre-defined areas (ward clusters) had a profound effect on the process, and the deliberation stage. Community conversations and decision making

were sometimes challenging because the areas we were working within didn’t align with how communities and organisations identified their place (i.e. working at neighbourhood level may have offered different opportunities, rather than working with ward clusters).” Members of the Design Team

In summary, the evaluation team found that the main priority of community conversations was supporting attendees to apply for the CRF funding, which was a good contribution to the overall process. There wasn’t a consistent focus on generating new or highlighted wider community priorities and this felt like a gap in the process. It would have been helpful to have provided wider community priorities as a context for the community conversations, potentially bringing into play existing community plans and documents, which are resident informed. The evaluation team surmise that this was a result of (but not limited to): 1) incomplete planning and little direction for facilitators on how to surface and draw out wider community priorities; 2) the limited timeframe of the community conversation stage of CRF; 3) limited time for the individual community conversation meetings; and 4) Reluctance of the VCSE facilitators to be seen to be acting as “gate-keepers” to groups putting forward proposals.

### 3.2.2 Community conversation discussions

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The limited success in identifying community priorities within this stage of the CRF can be attributed to the design and planning of the community conversations. There was a lack of a clear definition of what community

conversations involved and a very short timeframe, leading VCSEs to have to be pragmatic. This section seeks to further probe these, and related, challenges via the investigation of three main areas: resident involvement, lack of focus within meetings and levels of knowledge.

Overall, resident involvement with the community conversations was limited, specifically as a result of the TPX Impact VCSE co-design workshop and Design group decision not to focus on them. This was due to a lack of clarity at that time regarding what they would be involved with and limited time (and summer timing) to build the right conditions for a successful resident engaged conversation. While this pragmatic decision was made based on the rationale to keep community conversations focused on participating VCSE organisations, it did differ from the Cabinet Report's intended participant makeup: "[community] organisations, asset owners and residents" (Cabinet Report). Two of the community conversations observed by the evaluation team had one resident in attendance and one of these residents had a strong community organisation link. This resident attendee made a limited contribution but commented at the end of the meeting that they found it interesting. The nature of the discussion may have also curtailed their involvement as it was focused on potential bids and their eligibility, rather than exploring the community's general strengths and challenges and/or working towards a prioritisation of these. The resident had heard about the meeting from a poster advertising the community conversation in a public place.

It is likely that the decision not to include residents in the community conversations limited discussions on community priorities. To encourage the greater involvement of residents, increased lead-in time, improved marketing and more time spent considering inclusive meeting planning may have helped. Those VCSE leads involved in running the meetings saw the main use of community conversations as providing guidance on the CRF process to other community organisations. However, as an engagement and consultation process on community priorities, there was a clear rationale for talking with residents – if only to avoid the agenda being set by organisational interests. Simply put, there was a need for both forms of engagement when only one form took place.

Another factor found to influence the nature and quality of discussion observed within the community conversations was levels of understanding of the process prior to the meetings. The evaluation identified that within meetings where VCSE leads had already conducted 1-1 information sharing with attendees, there appeared to be a tendency for there to be higher levels of collaborative discussions about bids. Where these 1-1 discussions had not taken place, more time within meetings was dedicated to information sharing; explanations of the fund and specific questions about the process. Attendees with a clearer understanding of the process were better able to contribute and engage in more productive discussions.

Within the observed community conversations, attendees were witnessed as displaying high levels of engagement overall. Most facilitators used methods of

turn-taking to promote equal opportunity for attendees to explain their bid, allowing most people in the room to have their voices heard. Due to the nature of the discussions, which focused primarily on logistical queries, there was limited back and forth between attendees. Rather, discussions tended to operate between each attendee and the facilitator, rather than exploring ideas of community issues between attendees. In one case, a passionate discussion was observed regarding the availability of food banks in the local area, during which almost all attendees contributed their perspectives. Discussions such as this were valuable. This evaluation suggests that the limited observation of priority identification was not a result of lack of engagement.

### 3.3 Building connections

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The CRF process was designed with the aim of building stronger connections between diverse participants within communities - including organisations, councillors and residents - as a primary aim (Cabinet Report). Subsequently, one of the questions this evaluation aims to answer is to what extent this process was effective in strengthening and building connections. The evaluation found that the extent to which stronger connections were built varied. Key findings on building connections and relationships are presented in this section followed by a discussion of associated challenges.

#### 3.3.1 Establishing connections and building relationships

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Overall, stage one appeared to have some success in building and improving community connections. This success was varied, but the development of new relationships and strengthening of existing relations was identified. Within several community conversation sessions, the evaluation team observed cases of organisations taking interest in the work of other organisations. Two organisations from the same area, for example, reported a closer working relationship as a result of attending a community conversation. Over half of respondents to the end of stage one survey reported increased connections and interest to work with other community organisations as a result of community conversations. However, some interviewees were more doubtful that there had been any change in relations. One interviewee, for instance, responded that they had utilised their existing community networks to organise the community conversations and as such had not established any new relationships.

Within the VCSE focus group, a positive attitude was recorded towards establishing connections. One VCSE lead representative commented that acting as an impartial source of information helped attendees trust them, which resulted in the community conversations acting as a “connection point” between them and smaller VCSE organisations. The face-to-face format of the community conversations was also

repeatedly reported as an important feature to facilitate the building of new community connections and rebuilding relations especially post Covid. One interviewee commented:

“The face-to-face workshops were excellent for making new contacts and rebuilding relationships.”

Survey responses showed that for several community organisations the community conversations had encouraged them to reach out more widely. For example, one VCSE organisation reported:

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**“We consulted with a wide range of groups that hadn’t been consulted before such as our Bulgarian and Hungarian communities as well as our disabilities groups and youth groups that regularly use our space.”**

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Four of the ten VCSE survey responses stated that they could not give any examples of resultant stronger connections being developed.

New connections and relationships were also developed between BCC and VCSE organisations. This was supported by responsive and excellent communications from the core BCC team. The fact that BCC contracted with the VCSEs to lead the community conversations and paid VCSEs for their involvement helped to develop a feeling mutual worth. By inviting VCSE

organisations to engage in co-design, BCC also helped strengthen connections across the sector. Looking ahead to stage two, BCC also built new connections with communities via inviting 100 residents to take part in the deliberative meetings. The BCC facilitators during stage two also helped to strengthen the BCC – resident relations through sustained face-to-face interactions. While the evidence is anecdotal, it is likely that some of these new relationships between BCC, VCSEs and residents are sustaining beyond the CRF process.

The evaluation team found that stage one was particularly effective for building connections for organisations with less established local networks. These organisations worked hard to reach new groups to bring them into the CRF process and thereby strengthened relationships in their neighbourhoods. Organisations with existing extensive contacts reported making fewer new connections as part of the process, but having different and useful conversations with their existing contacts. This was especially valuable in rebuilding face-to-face relationships post Covid.

The evaluation team found that the community conversations did not facilitate the building of stronger relationships with residents because of the decision made not to include residents in stage one.

## 3.3.2 Challenges for building connections and relationships

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### **Reputation concerns**

Several VCSE organisations were concerned about how being involved might impact on how they were seen by the community they serve. Most interviewees expressed concerns about their reputations being affected by their involvement in stage one. This was particularly so for lead VCSEs involved in the co-design process. Unease was identified that, while VCSE leads did not feel they had a significant enough role in co-designing the process, externally they may be seen to be very influential. A further concern was the risk of being perceived as being in control of the funding. One lead VCSE representative commented in an interview that they were worried about potential conflicts of interest and how they may appear as gatekeepers. Other concerns included fears about disappointing their communities, difficulties with managing expectations regarding funding, and issues arising due to lack of procedural clarity.

Within the community conversations there appeared to be a good level of trust between participants and limited evidence of feelings of competitiveness. Similarly, reputational concerns were not raised in the focus groups held with the VCSEs who led a community conversation. The general feeling was that the process had been positive for participants. Within the focus groups, an attendee raised that the experience had in fact “built up” their position in the community. Following, it was also mentioned

that building-up their connections in the community would only happen once interested organisations had a more detailed understanding of the CRF process, which, as discussed in section 3.2, formed the major part of the community conversations. Findings also highlight that the role of the BCC team in stage one was very positive in mitigating some reputational concerns.

### **Too many unknowns**

Various participants reported throughout the process that the communication between participants and the BCC team had enabled lead VCSEs to communicate clearly with other community organisations. However, a lack of clarity and detailed information regarding the next steps of the process throughout stage one made communication and connection building with local organisations (potential applicants) difficult for VCSEs. This had a negative impact on the confidence of lead VCSE organisations to market and promote the CRF within their communities. The main areas where there was a reported lack of clarity were: 1) the assessment methodology; 2) what would happen in stage two; and 3) the decision-making criteria (for stage two). All stakeholders recognised this challenge at the time and it was largely a result of developing the process while also running it. The core BCC team worked very effectively throughout this stage to respond to queries and provide relevant information. However, running a concurrent process of redesign and administration was highly demanding.

Lead VCSE organisation representatives expressed concerns in the interviews that having no defined assessment methodology or information for stage two made it challenging to advise groups or include residents in the process. One participant commented:

“The lack of information about the next steps made it difficult to communicate, I didn’t know what to tell people.”

In the VCSE focus group, many expressed feelings of confusion and uncertainty around how well developed the proposal ideas needed to be, saying that initially they didn’t need to be very well developed, but this appeared to change later. Participants also expressed the difficulty of not having a set of clear decision-making criteria confirmed at an early stage, with one saying:

“It’s a disservice to the people to not have a decision-making criteria.”

The individual felt that the criteria should have been defined at the start, and that without that, there was a risk that participants may be provided with misinformation. Such concerns were also recorded in the survey at the end of stage one, where a participant expressed that not knowing whether organisations would be eligible

made it challenging running their community conversation. A link can be drawn here to the co-design process that overlapped with the community conversations. Several of the difficulties associated with lack of clarity might have been mitigated had the co-design process been run separately and prior to the start of the community conversations.

Overall, it is important to state that the approach taken by the Council of working so closely with VCSEs in this part of the process, as both co-design partners and collaborators, and as leaders of the community conversation process was successful.

Throughout the evaluation there is evidence of improved relationships, increased mutual understanding and respect and a building of trust which is a very powerful outcome from this work. The collaboration was not without its challenges but most of those engaged would be happy to do so again with learning and the investment in the sharing of expertise and knowledge demonstrates the Council’s commitment to this way of working and will provide a strong legacy for future initiatives.

# 4. Stage two findings

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Stage two constituted the deliberative decision-making stage of the CRF process, where participants were recruited to come together and decide which proposals should be funded. The primary aim of stage two was to ensure that the spend decisions were informed by local people. The deliberative

meetings consisted of 22 Councillors and 100 residents, recruited to participate in a series of 4-6, 3-hour long meetings that took place over 5 months. Residents were offered money/vouchers to take part in the process, and this was both appreciated by them and seen as key to their continued and sustained



engagement with the process. During these meetings, participants were divided into small table discussion groups and the proposals for their area were distributed between the groups; introduced by different facilitators who rotated between the tables.

The time and resources committed to stage two deliberative meetings was very significant and demonstrated aspiration from both BCC and the participants to make the process a success. The hours committed by all participants also reflected a widely shared sense of good will to work through challenges and act with flexibility in response to the realisation of the scale and complexity of the process. There was also a key tension which played out in stage two between the complexity of the deliberative structure, volume of information to be considered, and tasks to be achieved, compared with the time available to make decisions and the capacity of participants and facilitators to engage in deliberation.

## 4.1 Information

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In stage two, information was identified as an important theme that had a significant impact on the process. Information-related factors, such as information shared with participants and participants' current knowledge and understanding, were found to have led to certain successes as well as introducing challenges to the process. Overall, the evaluation team assessed the quality of information presented as high, and this was reflected in consistently positive feedback from participants. However, a tension was

identified in stage two between 'too little' and 'too much' information, and not necessarily the right information at the right time. The significant volume of information shared with participants during deliberative meetings also regularly left limited space for participants to discuss and share their own knowledge and insights and reduced time for deliberation. This section focuses on three key aspects of the information provided during stage two: clarity of information and participant understanding; information provided on proposals; additional information and advice provided by experts.

### 4.1.1 Clarity and participant understanding

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The evaluation team found that the level of clarity of information was key for the ability of participants to make confident decisions. The methods used to share information with participants were varied, including films, emails, presentations, print outs and posters. This varied format was a positive feature and improved understanding in general through making the information accessible to diverse learning styles. In several deliberative meetings, positive comments were made by participants about the quality of the videos and how they had enhanced their understanding. In particular, the use of everyday language to explain jargon, such as 'capital' and 'resilience', was found to support participant understanding. This accessibility of information was effective in maintaining an equitable process as it enabled participants from different backgrounds to engage on an equal footing.



In several cases there was evidence of good participant understanding supported by clear information provision. This was observed in discussions around the meaning of 'equity' in the first deliberative meetings, and some participants reported a change in attitude in response to the video and discussion.

Although effort was made to explain the decision-making criteria or terminology using more accessible language, the evaluation team observed some cases where there was inconsistency in the level of understanding about the terms 'ability to deliver' and 'organisational resilience', and of the equity and inclusion criteria, despite the quality of the information provided. This complexity of certain criteria was also noted by the BCC core team, reporting that there was "constrained time for conversation" to grasp the meaning fully. This lack of clarity impacted communication in meetings and made it challenging for some participants to accurately assess proposals against criteria, and therefore became an obstacle for deliberation.

A further obstacle associated with clarity and understanding was the volume of information provided. The number of themes, priorities and criteria that participants were asked to consider (see section 4.2.1) meant that large amounts of complex information were being shared in condensed timeframes, and the time needed for participants to meaningfully absorb this information was underestimated. This impacted participants' levels of understanding and many struggled to fully utilise the information on the proposals and criteria that was made available on table printouts.

In stage two, participants were expected to consider the different needs within their local communities to weigh competing options for distributing the CRF. To do this effectively, participants required accurate and relevant information to assess these options. In certain cases, participants considered the information provided to be inaccurate as it differed from their lived experience. In one case, the statistics showed 0% use of food banks in an area, whereas participants were aware of active local food clubs and other voluntary food resources. These participants' experiences being in contrast to 'official statistics' led to some participants to view the information provided as misleading. This could negatively influence the quality of deliberation and decision-making because information that isn't clear can create confusion and risk distorting understanding and diminishing deliberation.

Where participants had good pre-existing knowledge of the local area, applying this in relation to the proposal they were discussing, helped check and validate information. A strength of the process was recruiting participants with local knowledge who were able to challenge and counter information that they deemed misrepresenting. Observations identified that local knowledge and experience was proactively included through information sharing. It was regularly observed during deliberation meetings that participants with greater levels of knowledge on a particular issue or organisations were able to have a more informed and wider ranging discussion than those who had less knowledge. It was also clear that some participants were able and willing to do their own research on those

organisations bidding. This enhanced their ability to contribute and engage but potentially widened the gap with others who did not have the facilities, time or skills for additional research. However, many of these residents did share their knowledge in support of other participants to enhance the decision-making and building stronger relationships.

Participants were able to access information about proposals and decision-making criteria in a number of ways. There was a website created for participants where all the resources were accessible in one place. Proposals and decision-making criteria were emailed or posted to all participants, and larger hard copy print-outs were made available on each table during deliberative meetings. Some participants also created their own summaries of the applications. Often, the amount of paperwork on each table (large copies of the applications to be considered and further information handouts) meant that it took time to locate information needed for discussions. Participants who brought their own copies with them, and those who had created their own summaries, were often able to access the information more quickly than those using the table printouts. This observation was echoed in the final survey, with one respondent who had received an individual printed pack, commenting:

“It was good to have the initial application pack printed out, as it was clearer for me to read and understand.”

For the future, it may be beneficial for all participants to have individual print-outs compared to the larger prints across the table, to aid access to and clarity of information.

A further positive finding was how facilitators shared summary information of the process. A good example of this was the introduction of heatmaps (see section 4.2.3) that captured outcomes of the traffic light (see section 4.2.2) tool from previous meetings. This, along with other summaries, provided by facilitators over the course of stage two aided participant understanding by giving them a quick way back in at the start of meetings or following table discussions, and allowed everyone to get up to speed. The final survey supported this observation, with one participant commenting:

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**“The visuals we used in the final meeting, that really helped me see a clear picture of each of the asks and the pros and cons of each request. It really helped me arrive at my decision.”**

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Nevertheless, the Design Team feel that the deliberative process would work better for a revenue model than a capital model where issues of sustainability needed to be considered. Members of the Design Team commented:

“The deliberations and decisions participants had to make were nuanced and complex. Decision making groups had to grapple with topics they were not (and weren’t expected to be) experts in, such as energy sustainability and construction. It might have been easier for people to make decisions about funding for services and activities (i.e. revenue as opposed to capital funding), which people might have accessed and experienced first-hand.”

Overall, the delivery of information in stage two was clear and useful, and subsequently supported successful deliberation. Quality presentations and varied formats of information enabled accessibility of understanding for individuals with different learning styles and varied levels of pre-existing understanding. The use of visual representations also increased the clarity of information being considered, improved understanding, and so supported participants' ability to deliberate effectively. However, the volume and complexity of the information that needed to be understood within a relatively short timeframe to ensure successful deliberation of the CRF proposals meant that it was not always possible for it to be shared and understood effectively. Additional time to consider different sources and types of information, and how to integrate this information as part of a dialogue, would have benefited deliberation.



## Learning Points

- » The provision of clear information in a variety of formats is vital to support deliberation, but can be overwhelming if there is too much at once. Keeping information as concise as possible, integrating it over time it as part of the dialogue, and ensuring the number of decisions to be made are in proportion with the timescales available supports good quality deliberation.

## 4.1.2 Proposals

In stage two, participants reviewed proposals from each organisation that applied. These included information on the capital fund proposal and how the funding would be used. The proposals were designed to be simple and accessible in order to aid decision-making for participants and to encourage and enable applications from organisations with fewer resources or less bid-writing experience, to meet one of the key aims of CRF: to enhance the diversity of organisations applying for funding (Cabinet Report 2022). To support this aim, facilitators also regularly reminded participants not to focus on the quality of the written proposal, as organisations would differ in their capacity for and experience of writing funding proposals.

Although proposals were designed to maintain a simple and accessible approach that streamlined information, participants commented that there was often insufficient detail for considering proposals against certain criteria. Through observations and the final participant survey, the evaluation found that proposals were often leaving participants with unanswered questions and were too simplistic to enable effective discussion and deliberation. Participants frequently expressed frustration over missing key pieces of information. Specific pieces of information that participants felt were missing included: information on the value and impact of the organisation's work in the community; information about the organisations' operations; the equalities groups organisations serve; local contextual information; photographs of the organisations

to help participants locate their buildings. In response to the final survey, one participant observed:

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**“We were not given enough information, or the right information, to make fully informed decisions... nothing about local context, e.g., how did each organisation fit with the other organisations in each area, and what their future are. This made it difficult to prioritise.”**

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In both the observations of deliberative meetings and feedback from the final survey, participants highlighted how this lack of information on proposals impacted their decision-making and significantly hindered their ability to feel confident about their decisions. It is important to note that the resident participants took the responsibility of their decision-making roles seriously and were at all times keen to know as much as possible to inform their thinking and decisions. There is a possibility that no level of information would have provided absolute reassurance in this area. During observations, participants showed frustration when there were proposals they would have liked to fund, but due to the lack of detail in proposals they could not trust that they would be making the right decision. These issues left participants feeling that organisations were losing out due to this lack of detail.

In the final survey, one participant said:

“There was very limited information provided about the applications, so decisions were being taken without being properly informed, it was left to assessors to research the projects, this meant that some ill-informed comments were made. Too much reliance by officers on people having local knowledge to guide their deliberations.”

Throughout this period, the BCC team was taking on board the feedback and information requests from the participants, and sought to address all the queries between meetings to ensure they had more information at their next session. This is a good example of how everyone was learning throughout the process and seeking to respond to needs as they emerged.

The second CRF aim, to include local people and incorporate local knowledge and experience in decision-making, although observed to be positive in many ways, was somewhat challenging in practice; the process could have benefited from the inclusion of local contextual information from a range of sources. Despite this, 86% of participants reported in the final survey that they had sufficient information to make good decisions. This indicates that, despite some barriers presented by the lack of information in the proposals, participants were positive towards this element of process.



## Learning Points

- » Build on the straightforward, simplified proposal paperwork and develop a future approach which: a) sets the community context more clearly; and b) provides more information for those assessing the proposals based on the requests which emerged during stage two.
- » It would have helped if people had stronger evidence of community priorities early in the process to enable people to sift out the less suitable proposals earlier, leaving more space for discussion on the stronger proposals.
- » Recognise that taking on this shared decision-making role and responsibility for the first time is a significant undertaking and hard to do. Encourage a considerate and caring culture to work on grappling with decision-making responsibility.

### 4.1.3 Contribution of experts

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One important aspect of stage two was additional expert advice on the feasibility of proposed projects, which could be requested for some of the proposals by participants. Overall, participants viewed the expert advice as valuable and aided decision-making. One respondent to the final survey said:

“The resources were clear and concise, it was informative and helpful in making my decisions, especially the expert reports.”

Integrating expert advice into the deliberative meetings faced challenges. The advice was sometimes fragmented or presented hurriedly at the end of meetings, leaving little time for consideration. In one instance, participants were asked late in a meeting, which proposals they wanted advice on, leading to confusion in the following meeting. This inconsistent integration hindered effective decision-making. A systematic and earlier inclusion of expert advice could have better supported deliberations.

Some participants voiced concerns that the expert opinions were inconsistent, and the quality of advice varied. In the final survey one respondent said:

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**“The additional information and expert opinions varied massively as to their quality, and also made the playing field very unequal as they were available to some and not others.”**

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At the end of stage two, there was an opportunity for all the facilitators to come together and reflect on their experience of the process and to share their thinking. The evaluation team attended this session and facilitators noted that it would have been more beneficial to have experts available on hand in key areas. For example, equalities experts or sustainable energy experts. Some facilitators suggested it would have been beneficial to have the experts attend some of the meetings. This might have reduced the risk of confusion as participants would have been able to have their questions answered directly. It would also have allowed participants to develop a deeper understanding of the proposals and allow the flexibility to ask for expert advice across any of the proposals. This suggestion was also raised by the core BCC team:

“It may have been helpful to have the input earlier on in the process or have experts physically in the room for decision-makers to ask questions in the moment. This would have mitigated any confusion around recommendations made in reports etc.”

In summary, the provision of expert advice was a positive aspect of the stage two deliberation meetings and supported decision-making. However, the value it added to the process could be increased with some changes to the way it was used.



## Learning Points

- » Expert opinions could have been sought earlier in the process, which would have required earlier investment of time with participants to get a sense of what extra information they required to fully understand the proposals and to inform their deliberation. Specifically, around technical issues which could have been addressed earlier, e.g. building costs etc.
- » However, some of the questions that emerged were based on many discussions throughout the process so the timing of this input would always need to be flexible.
- » Having experts on hand would allow questions to be answered immediately, reducing frustration for participants



## 4.2 Structure and communication

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The overall structure of stage two was found to work well. The pragmatic and manageable approach that the BCC core team adopted allowed for variation and flexibility within the deliberative meetings, where necessary. There were some challenges within certain aspects of this structure. This section focuses on five key aspects of the CRF structure and communication that were identified: notable variations in meeting structure; the agendas of each meeting; the traffic light system; using heatmaps; the use of voting.

### 4.2.1 Agenda, decision criteria and limited time

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In stage two, agendas were used to structure each deliberation meeting. A tightly set agenda was presented at the beginning of each meeting that included time-blocking for each activity. Each meeting was split into two sections; information delivery and deliberation. The information shared was primarily related to that week's decision-making criteria. In the first deliberative meeting, participants were also introduced to four 'themes and priorities' that participants were asked to consider throughout the deliberations. These were:

1. Environmental sustainability
2. Financial security
3. Accessibility
4. Digital infrastructure

In their proposals, organisations were asked to identify which theme(s) their proposal related to, and it was highlighted to participants that not every project needed to fulfil all of these themes. It was important that the initiative went some way to addressing at least one. Guidance on how participants should consider these themes concurrently with the decision-making criteria (below) was limited, and the approach was more akin to keeping the themes in mind rather than systematically consider each of these against each application.

The decision-making criteria used were:

1. Organisational resilience
2. Elevating communities experiencing inequalities
3. Community context
4. Ability to deliver this project
5. Value for money

The decision-making criteria were used as the central reference for the decision-making process. In each meeting, two or three of the criteria were considered and deliberation consisted of rounds of application reviews, considering each proposal against the different decision-making criteria. It is important to note that Areas had varied numbers of proposals to consider – the highest being 39, the lowest being 5. This variation in numbers clearly impacted on what happened within the meetings.



This agenda setting appeared to reflect a pragmatic approach that was set by the core BCC team and the lead facilitators – two for each area. This prescribed approach to the deliberation meetings narrowed the scope of deliberation. The evaluation team found that this approach restricted the fluidity of discussion and the participant’s ability to establish and sustain deliberative dialogues, which is considered crucial to reaching collective decisions according to Fishkin (2009). Several participants were frustrated by the meeting agendas, especially the balance of time between deliberation and sharing information. Whilst some participants felt that the videos and information provided at the start of some of the meetings was useful and had enhanced their understanding (see section 4.1.1), some felt it was unnecessary.

A further concern was that the deliberative meetings already felt rushed and so using some of the meeting time to share guidance and information was unnecessary. As two respondents commented in the survey:

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**“Too much time spent on teaching us how to do the task and how our prejudices could influence us. It just seemed to waste time, so we had to rush the actual tasks. Things became repetitive.”**

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“The amount of time spent on telling us how we had to do the task (how to make decisions and not be influenced by prejudices etc)- this far outweighed the amount of time left for discussion and decisions about applications.”

Concern was also expressed over the breaks taken at the midpoint of the deliberative meetings, especially breaks that lasted half an hour. Several participants viewed these breaks as inconsistent with the time pressures they experienced in the deliberations. Such breaks were, however, used to enable slower groups to catch up and were therefore necessary.

The inclusion of a fixed agenda and its related effects was further compounded by the large quantity of information (see section 4.1.1) and time needed to introduce this information. The pressure to stay “on task” as there was “a lot to get through” were constants of stage two, consistently felt throughout the process and present to varying degrees across several of the deliberative area meetings. While the number of applications differed from one area meeting to another, in most of those observed there was, in practice, 5-7 minutes of deliberation for each proposal focussed on one criterion. Each small table had between 4-10 participants, which meant that each participant had on average one minute to contribute. There was a minimum of 4 meetings to discuss the same proposals; each focussed on different criteria. Therefore, people’s familiarity with the projects grew with each meeting, and as proposals were ruled out, there was more time for discussion.

The decision-making criteria also restricted the fluidity of discussion and the participants' ability to establish and sustain deliberative dialogues. The narrow focus of deliberations generated frustration in certain cases, with participants finding their points closed down if they drifted beyond the scope of the criteria under consideration. For example, the evaluation team observed several cases in one area meeting where the discussion on the decision criteria of organisational resilience was continually diverted by questions on the financial viability of the proposal. To maintain focus, such points and questions related to financial viability were closed down each time. The rationale for the limited scope was to keep to time. However, there is a potential case to be made to reduce the number of decision-making criteria in the future to allow more time for participants to bring in their own scope and concerns. This may help to mitigate the tension regularly observed between keeping conversations relevant and allowing for organic discussion. Feedback from the BCC team also reflected that having less to get through during the meetings would have allowed for more time to be spent on more meaningful conversations and better-quality deliberation.

The short pockets of time to deliberate each proposal put participants under pressure to come to decisions quickly and participants were frequently running out of time to finish their discussions. Discussions were often rushed, with participants having their points cut off to keep to time – especially towards the end of the deliberative meetings. This was clearly not intended, with BCC aiming

to support 'diverse voices', 'life stories' and have attendees 'shaping the future'. This is an example of the tension between the justifiably ambitious aspirations of the Council, and the practical reality; in this case, the scale of the process meant that meeting agendas became overwhelmed by the amount that needed to be covered in the given timeframe, putting pressure on participants and leaving too little time to fully deliberate.



## Learning Points

- » Re-shape the balance of information giving and deliberation, allowing more time for discussion.
- » Provide participants with a separate early deliberation training session, without proposals, but to build their familiarity with the way deliberation works.
- » Support participants to do an early sift using strong community priorities information so people can quickly see the proposals that do not fit those identified priorities.

## 4.2.2 Traffic lights

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A key component of the decision-making process was the use of a traffic light tool that functioned as a shorthand means to communicate agreement or disagreement. Red, amber and green choices were given to participants to quickly indicate their levels of support for an application with regards to the criteria being considered and then the facilitator would seek a majority colour to represent the table group's perspective. This was introduced in response to concerns about progressing decisions in time and to support participants to remember what they had indicated from meeting to meeting. The traffic light system was the most important procedural tool of stage two and had a significant impact on the functioning of the deliberative discussions, however, was introduced quickly and without time to consider the implications with the participants of the deliberative meetings.

The use of the traffic light system did provide a snapshot of where discussions had reached at the end of each session, and therefore provided an overview of where the group was in terms of proposals agreed and not agreed upon. However, it was found to limit deliberation. Employing symbols (the colours) instead of words to carry the decision shifted the deliberation towards building preferences, rather than allowing for the back-and-forth discussions. The traffic lights also limited the potential for balanced arguments to take place; participants were able to 'raise their hand for green' and not necessarily explain as to the reason for their perspective. Feedback from the core BCC

team also reflected these shortcomings of the tool, with mention of it acting as "guide rather than an accurate and consistent representation of people's deliberations", highlighting the reductive nature of this approach to deliberation.

The use of amber was found to be particularly challenging for the deliberative process. Amber represented a lack of decision being made or participants being unsure of their perspective on a particular proposal. Amber was repeatedly used as a way of moving on (or away) from deliberation where participants struggled to make a decision. The expression 'shall we leave that as amber' was repeatedly heard and was understood as opting out of deliberation. The use of amber was also found to be associated with proposals where information was limited or missing and, in some cases, was seemingly applied out of frustration with the level of information on a particular proposal, even when it was unlikely that any further information would be made available. The use of amber was removed in later meetings as the Council team recognised it was not working.



### Learning Points

- » Whatever the visual tool or aid to support decision-making that is introduced, it needs to be designed to enhance the deliberation process, to avoid restricting or replacing those discussions.

## 4.2.3 Heatmaps

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The use of 'heatmaps' was another tool within the deliberation meetings and was linked to the traffic light system. Heatmaps were produced using the traffic light colours given to proposals after the first two or three – depending on the area – deliberative meetings. These heatmaps represented the amount of traffic light colours attributed to each criterion.

Some participants reported that they found the visual heatmaps useful as a reminder of the decisions and prompted further discussions. There were also some challenges raised with this approach as the heatmaps did not display why the decisions had been made. Facilitators provided feedback and a summary of the central justifications associated with the heatmaps, but the visual aid often became the subject of discussion rather than acting as a visual depiction of support for a proposal. Comments along the lines of 'it's very red' or 'it's definitely green' were common, rather than stimulating probing of why an application was given one colour or another. It was largely found that this tool did not generate nuanced discussion as to why a certain aspect of the bid was stronger or weaker. This perspective was reflected in the retrospective sessions held with facilitators, where it was mentioned that the heatmaps simplified the process and created a feeling that participants were voting rather than deliberating.

A further issue was the updating of heatmaps to reflect the most up to date traffic light colour preference. It was noted that the maps reflected the traffic light judgements made in the first meeting and had remained unchanged, and therefore did not reflect more recent discussions. This point was raised in several area meetings and by participants in the participant surveys, with one respondent saying:

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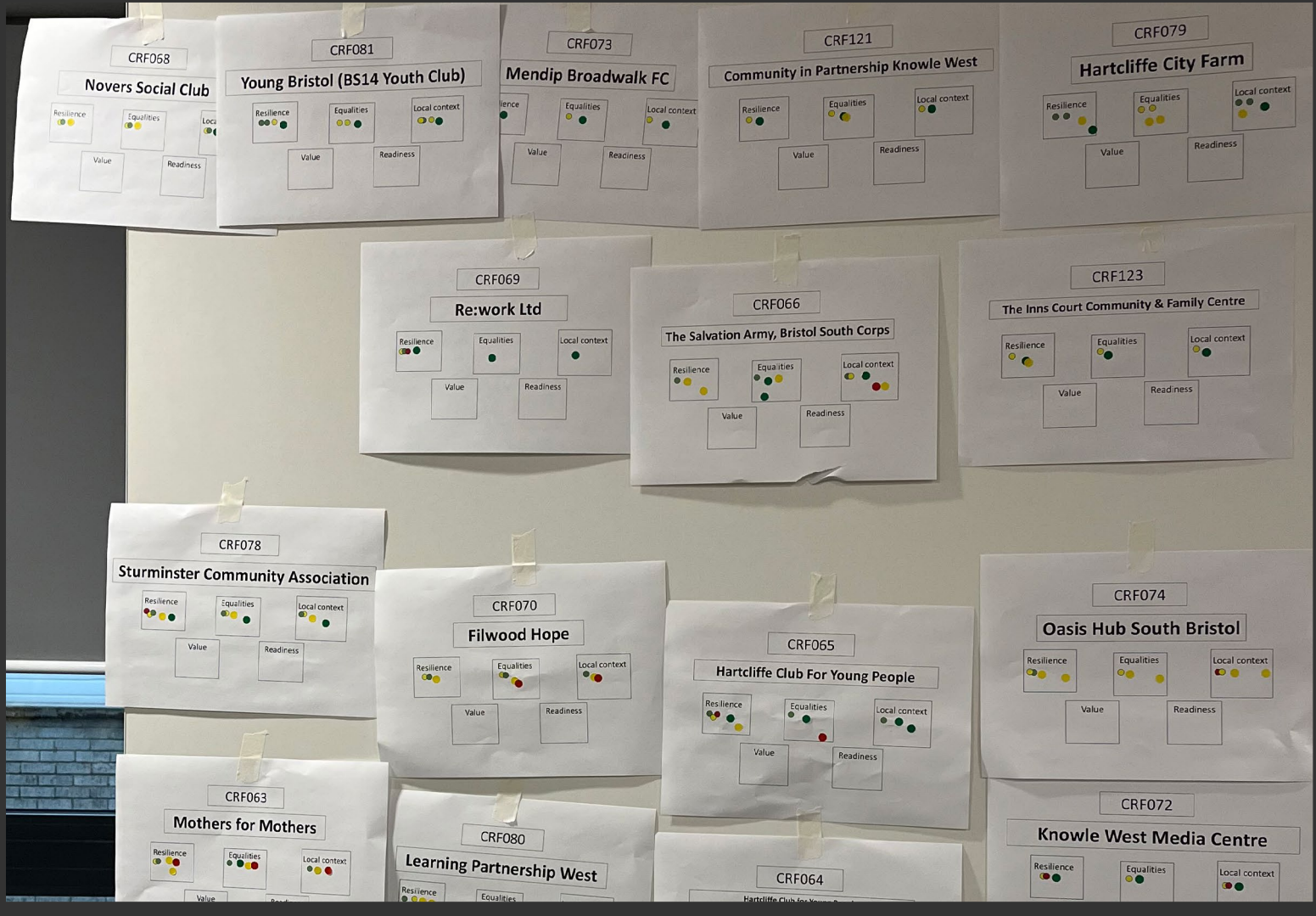
**“In the first round there were a lot of amber ratings, which changed to a green or red depending on the answers provided to the questions, but this was not reflected in the charts produced.”**

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### Learning Points

- » Heatmaps were a useful visual tool as an overview, but it would have been helpful to add new decisions created at each meeting and to develop a way of summarising why decisions were made alongside the visual.



## 4.2.4 Voting

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Some groups continued with deliberation until decisions were reached. In the final meeting for Area 3 a back-and-forth took place across the whole group until a consensus was reached on the entire portfolio of successful applications. This discussion took up a significant amount of time, with the meeting running over the allotted three hours. However, in some deliberative meetings voting was used to reach a decision. Voting was employed when decisions proved challenging, as a further tool to help the decision-making along and in the context of finite time available.

Lead facilitators asked for a show of hands - as opposed to a secret ballot. This use of voting can be viewed as a pragmatic tool to support coming to a decision, but which at the same time also curtailed deliberation. By including voting as an alternative decision-making process that avoided having to find agreement and come to consensus, participants were given 'an easy way out' – they did not have to justify their perspective, or even come to a perspective. An example of this happening in practice was observed in one area meeting when an individual voted yes to a proposal and was then asked to explain their vote. They responded that they did not know why but had wanted to go with the majority for ease, which is not an uncommon reaction in this situation. In another meeting voting was used, but each time participants were asked to explain their vote – so different approaches were used in different settings, which added to the learning. Councillors in the Councillor focus

groups reflected that voting had made the process feel closer to a traditional grant-making process than they had anticipated. It is important to note that voting was not used across all area meetings.



### Learning Points

- » It would be helpful to have built more consistency in the use of voting, to reflect the deliberative aims. For example, ensuring it was simply a vote, but adding an explanation, rationale for why people were voting as they were, which would have been more informative during this part of the process.

## 4.2.5 Variation in meeting structure

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The evaluation found that the overarching structure of stage two had a significant impact on deliberation in practice. The presentations, meeting itineraries and the information sharing was largely consistent across deliberative meetings in different areas. However, the application of this structure at the level of table discussions was more varied. Some differences can be attributed to different facilitators' style of management and proactive revisions in response to ongoing learning, which the evaluation team recognises as in-keeping

with the co-design ethos and should be treated as a positive. As an example, in response to participant feedback in one area meeting, the BCC core team chose to change the table layouts between meetings three and four to allow for two facilitators per table instead of one so that facilitator workload to be shared. Such proactive revisions were repeatedly identified as something that worked well and demonstrated the action learning approach. Reflecting generally, the more devolved the structure the more likely it is that variation will be found in its application. Accordingly, variation should not be treated as a weakness of the overall approach.

Meeting structures varied, reflecting the different stages of the decision-making (see section 4.2.1). On balance, this was positive for the CRF process as the adaptations to the structure were made to fulfil the purpose of the meeting. It also helped to keep the meetings stimulating and engaging for participants as meetings often took place in the evening and were three hours in length. This variation in the deliberation meeting structure can also be understood as a facet of the co-design ethos of the approach, promoting increased participation of diverse communities in the process.

## 4.3 Building assets for future devolved decision-making processes

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Building assets was a core aim of the CRF and the evaluation found several key assets were developed throughout stage two. The

assets identified have been categorised into four themes: developing the knowledge and confidence of participants; the asset of resident participation; facilitator skills and training; and the relationship between the Bristol City Council and participants.

All assets developed through the CRF should be viewed as a positive outcome of the process that has the potential to benefit future grant-making and deliberative decision-making initiatives, as well as wider community led activities. These findings also demonstrate how effective this process was for building trust and confidence in the relationship between the Council and communities.

### 4.3.1 Developing knowledge and confidence of attendees

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The evaluation team observed that the confidence of participants increased over the deliberative meetings. In most cases, conversations began tentatively but by the third meetings there was good evidence of increased confidence and forthrightness from participants. This increased confidence appeared to have a positive impact on the quality of discussion and enhanced the engagement of participants. This was seen in one particular participant over the course of stage two, who was shy at the start of the process and rarely engaged in discussion or made eye-contact with others, but by the end of the process the participant presented the small group's final decisions to the wider group. There were similar experiences

recorded in the final survey, with responses like the following from two participants:

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**“I think the process has given me more confidence to speak up in groups and value my own input.”**

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“I’ve gained a newfound confidence in speaking to new groups of people.”

The evaluation team observed that as individuals engaged in dialogue they found their voice, which in turn improved deliberation. Alongside this, it was also noted that, generally speaking, participants’ confidence was often linked to how well they felt they understood a proposal. Familiarity with proposals was important. It may have helped participants to have a session on the nature of deliberation itself at the beginning of the process, to build their understanding of how it would all work moving forward. Also, it may have helped for the participants to have access to the proposals even earlier in the process, along with the wider community context as previously discussed, to provide them with the clearest possible picture. It is however a challenge to get the balance right when dealing with such a diverse group of participants within a process with so many moving parts.

The evaluation team observed evidence of increased understanding of effective deliberation during the process. The way participants discussed proposals within their groups improved over the course of stage two, which was evidenced in the developing

nature of questions that participants posed from the beginning of the process and to the end. Interesting observations of participant conversations that took place in the meeting breaks occurred, and in several cases these conversations generated increased complexity and nuance on a subject which was then introduced into the deliberative meetings. However, increased participant confidence was also observed to create some issues. In some cases, participants who became more confident began to dominate discussions. Learning to engage but not dominate in this type of deliberation is a skill that requires careful and tactful consideration in these types of decision-making forums and there was evidence of participants starting to see this balance, often with some support from the facilitators. Over-confidence can lead to a domination of discussion, which in turn distorts the ability of participants to weigh-up competing arguments based on the substance of their point, as opposed to the dominance of the individual.

An unintended and positive impact of this process was that participants reported developing new skills from the process. In the final survey one participant commented, “I learnt transferable skills that I can take away for my career.” It was reported that the confidence they have gained from this process was something they valued. Alongside this, there was evidence of residents having a stronger connection to VCSE organisations through increased knowledge of different organisations around Bristol. There was also increased understanding of the impact of VCSE work

with communities. This was supported through feedback from residents in the final survey expressing that they had enjoyed, “learning about the different organisations, and their services to the community.” This demonstrates that this process was effective at strengthening VCSE connections at a local level in stage two, through familiarising local people with organisations they may not have been aware of. This was a significant impact and has potential to influence how participants engage with their and other communities in the future, which emerged clearly through the final celebration and thank you event in July 2023.

Councillors also reported learning from the process. One Councillor, for example, spoke of the process being useful for making new connections and learning about what was happening in other communities around Bristol. Another Councillor said it was a positive learning experience to sit with both residents and Councillors to make decisions, and that it was not something that usually happens.

In the final survey, 72% of participants showed interest in becoming more involved in the community having taken part in this process, which is an overall success of the process and a positive asset in building the power of communities and supporting future initiatives.

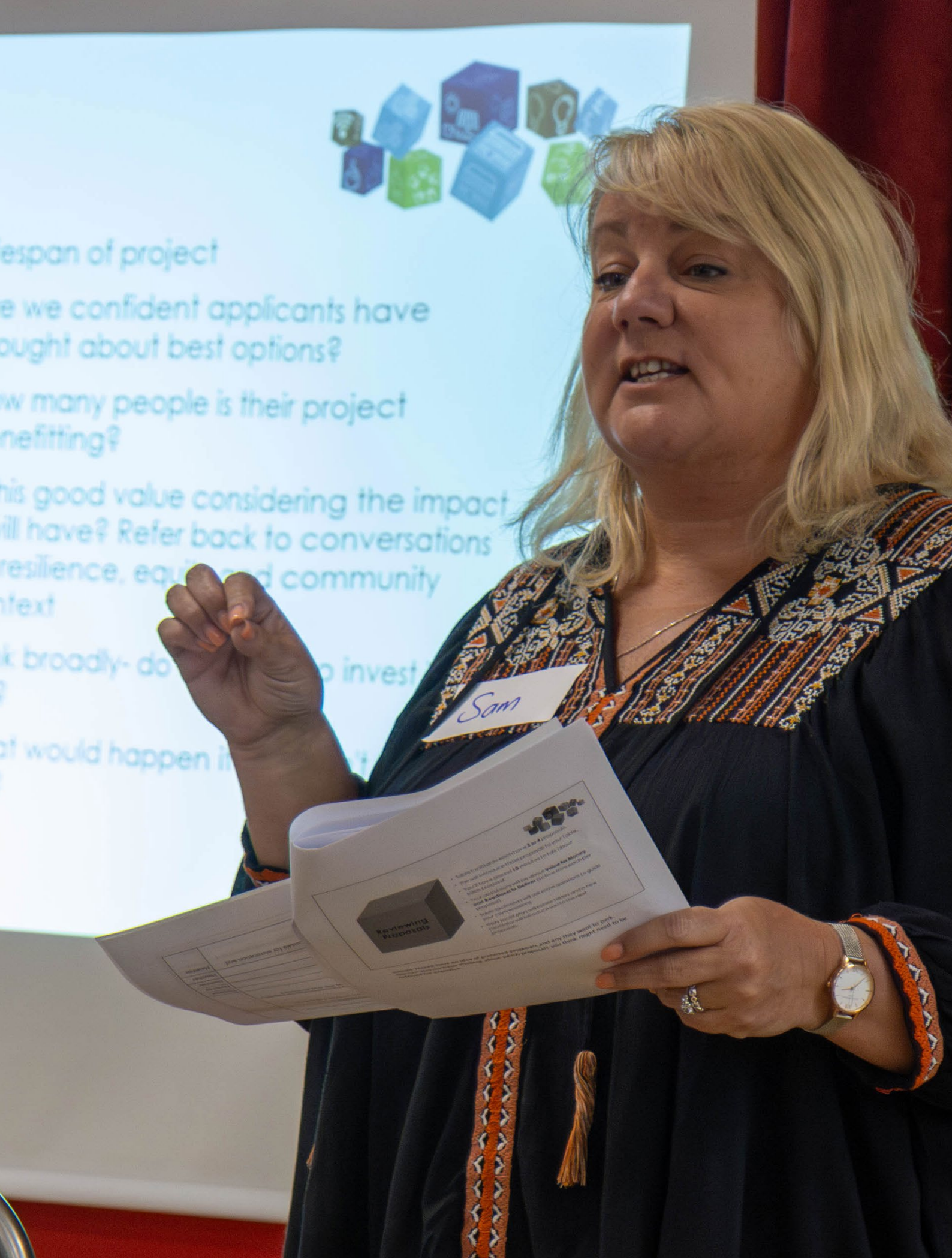


## Learning Points

- » It would have been helpful for the process to have included an initial meeting for participants, without proposals or criteria, which focussed specifically on how to deliberate, what it feels and looks like, to build their skills and confidence around the deliberative process, before introducing the proposals. This initial meeting could also include information of community priorities for each area and equalities communities.

### 4.3.2 The asset of resident participation

The participation of residents with knowledge and experience of the local area was found as an asset that enabled successful deliberation. This was reflected in the retrospective session for facilitators, where feedback was received that resident involvement was highly valuable to the process. Where participants had knowledge of an organisation and its plans, the quality of discussion was noticeably higher than where they did not. During observations, where participants had knowledge, they were able to fill the gaps in information and have more detailed and nuanced discussions. Such insight enabled participants to take



span of project

we confident applicants have thought about best options?

w many people is their project benefiting?

his good value considering the impact will have? Refer back to conversations resilience, equity and community context

k broadly- do to invest

at would happen if

Sam

**Developmental Disruptors**

- Submit to the assessment tool 2 or 4 months before the start of the project
- The assessment tool will be used to inform the assessment process for your application
- You will receive feedback on the assessment tool results
- Your application will be assessed against the assessment tool results
- Your application will be assessed against the assessment tool results
- Your application will be assessed against the assessment tool results
- Your application will be assessed against the assessment tool results

into consideration local context and the organisation's unique location and services it provided. The evaluation team suggest that the knowledge gained by residents, in particular the knowledge of which VCSE organisations are operating in their local area and what those VCSE organisations are doing, would have general community benefits as this knowledge was shared via community networks.

Although local knowledge of an organisation was valuable, it also occasionally created tensions where personal associations and potential biases were unable to be divorced from the deliberations. To help avoid tensions between personal associations and deliberation, it may have helped to have had greater procedural clarity on how knowledge and experience would be integrated. Nevertheless, overall, resident participation can be understood as a success of the deliberative meetings and an indication of residents being willing to be engaged and fully participate.

The recruitment and payment of participants was also seen as a success and recognised as asset of the process: the manner in which participants were recruited was identified as a strength for maintaining the attendance of participants; and the payment system established which could be used again was an unintended positive outcome of the CRF process.

Bristol City Council stressed the steps that they made to incorporate principles of equity and inclusion:

“Equity was a key principle of the CRF process. It was important to us to ensure that people involved in decision-making were as diverse as possible and reflective of our city. We know that involving people from different backgrounds with different lived experience brings richness and varied perspectives to decision-making. Our proactive approach to recruitment of residents meant that new people got involved. On top of that, we put things in place to enable anyone to take part, such as paying childcare expenses and providing a Personal Assistant for a Disabled participant. We are really pleased to have achieved what we set out to do and bring together a diverse group of people. We are grateful to everyone who gave their time and expertise so generously to work with others to carefully consider all the information and reach decisions together.” BCC CRF core team

### 4.3.3 Facilitator's skillset and training

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The training of facilitators to enhance their facilitation skills should be recognised as developing a significant asset and positive outcome of this process that will benefit similar future initiatives. The evaluation team found that the training and experience of facilitators improved the quality of deliberation. BCC committed to training both their own staff and other VCSE facilitators who were involved in the process right from the start, with a view to embedding new skills in the city. It is highly likely that the training provided improved facilitation and enhanced the skillset of many of those in receipt of it, though it was reflected by the facilitators in their session that the training could be further developed to cover other areas in the future. It was consistently noted that facilitators were able to manage and promote respectful exchanges between participants, while supporting the engagement of those less confident. Some Councillors commented that the facilitators were useful in highlighting what was relevant while keeping the discussion focused. This was further supported by responses in the final survey, for example:

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**“All facilitators knew what they needed to achieve in each session and encouraged/ensured that the group arrived at a consensus by the end.”**

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Participants generally felt the facilitators were an asset to the discussions and decision-making and in several of the final deliberative meetings the participants applauded the facilitators at the end of the meeting.

The evaluation team observations support the insight that facilitators were generally highly skilled in supporting participants engage in the stage two process and helping the small groups to come to decisions. However, in many cases these skills were utilised for making decisions quickly rather than supporting in-depth deliberation. Furthermore, it was reflected by BCC that facilitators had various levels of confidence and skills in knowing how to manage more challenging situations, such as when participants were more dominant. It was noted that, where there were two facilitators at a small table discussion, this helped to manage more challenging exchanges. In certain cases, the time pressure and feelings of being flustered by dominant participants meant some facilitators found it challenging to maintain effective group exchanges. The BCC team and TPX held a joint retrospective session in April 2023 to reflect on the whole process, what went well, what the challenges were from their perspective and also to highlight the quality of their joint working relationship. In this session, it was also noted that further training would likely have given facilitators more confidence in managing difficult discussions. Feedback from the BCC core team recognised the facilitation training had limitations, suggesting that time restrictions prevented more in-depth training from taking place. The limits of facilitation training withstanding, as discussed in section

4.2.1, the push for quick decisions and curtailment of deliberative exchange was likely more to do with the structure and strict agenda of the deliberative meetings than to do with a significant lack of facilitator training.

Diverse facilitation styles were apparent throughout stage two. This diversity should be seen as a positive feature of the deliberative meetings as it demonstrated authenticity and helped build trust between facilitators and participants. While a positive, this diversity created some inconsistencies in the way proposals were discussed and managed. Such inconsistency may have diminished the equal consideration and deliberation of each application. In practice, multiple deliberations were taking place simultaneously across each of the small groups. The evaluation team found that the diversity inherent in these concurrent deliberations was inevitable and an integral part of the structure – facilitation styles may have added to this diversity, but it was not the main factor. The difference in facilitation styles was raised at the facilitator retrospective session. Many facilitators noted that they were carrying out facilitation for the first time and many were experimenting with different styles and developing their own approach over the duration of the deliberative meetings.

The formation and training of a group of facilitators able to support deliberative decision-making was discussed in the TPX Impact retrospective, highlighting that because of this process, “there’s an emerging network of skilled people and

organisations able to engage and build” similar processes, and that the facilitation training has contributed to “building capacity of facilitators across the city.” It should also be noted that this growth in skilled facilitators is an important positive impact of this process; it means that replicating or adapting this process for similar initiatives may prove easier, less costly and more efficient in the future. Although, for future projects further training and experience building would help to enhance this asset.



## Learning Points

- » Recognition that the facilitator training could have been more in depth, both around general facilitation skills and the specifics of managing a deliberative process. Earlier investment in this area would have been helpful.
- » The skills and input of the facilitators are key to supporting interested residents to build on their existing skills, confidence and knowledge to participate strongly and effectively in deliberative decision-making.

### 4.3.4 Improved relationships between Councillors, the Council and resident participants

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In stage two, the evaluation team findings demonstrated that the CRF process was effective in building relationships between BCC and Councillors and residents. By enabling residents to work with the Council via the CRF, this created an environment where Councillors and residents worked together in a transparent and more equitable way.

A key asset was developed through Councillors engaging in the process, meeting residents from different communities and building rapport. In the Councillor interviews, it was reflected that the process helped break down some barriers and build connections with the wider community. One Councillor mentioned that sitting with a mix of residents and other Councillors to make decisions was an unusual but positive experience. Residents also responded with enthusiasm about connecting with Councillors:

“Good to have local Councillors involved as well as local people.”

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**“It was useful having local Councillors involved and this exposed some of their own prejudices about funding issues which could then be appropriately challenged in a safe environment.”**

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In most cases it appeared that residents felt that the process had enabled them to communicate and express their views to local Councillors in a way they were generally unable to, which seemed to create a feeling of connection.

There was some scepticism around the participation of Councillors, based on a concern that they may be taking part to further their own agenda. This could be a reflection of a historic distrust with the Council and the Councillor role, which was one of the drivers to bring Councillors and residents together working on this process. For example, in the final survey, one response said:

“I did not like the input from Councillors at the assessment meetings, as they have their own agenda and I felt it was a conflict of interest with the possibility of the decisions being guided.”

However, despite these concerns, the evaluation team found that stage two created opportunities for residents to build or strengthen connections to local Councillors which is judged an asset that supports greater community cohesion.

The evaluation team also observed what appeared to be a general improvement in Council and resident relations. At the start of stage two, a general sense of discontent towards ‘the Council’ was noted. These resident pre-conceived opinions appeared to shift quickly and by the end of the process attitudes were much more positive towards BCC. The evaluation team understands that this thawing was largely due to the quality and efficiency of work carried out by the

core BCC CRF team. This shifting opinion is captured by a resident response in the final survey:

“It was good to meet the team from the council involved in the process to see how this has been managed and come about as the council can seem quite distant and not connected.”

This positivity was also identified across the TPX Impact and facilitator retrospective sessions. It was often mentioned that the organisation and co-ordination by the CRF team was a highly positive part of the process. The TPX Impact session noted that the prompt and clear responses by the core BCC team throughout the process helped build confidence in the process. The evaluation team suggest that this increased positivity and increase in trust towards the Council should be considered an asset, for it may encourage VCSE organisations and residents to engage with future council initiatives.



## Learning Points

- » Having an early session in stage two focussed on community priorities and the wider local or equalities communities' issues would have enabled Councillors and residents to build a shared perspective before considering the proposals. This might also have managed any concerns about hidden agendas.

## 4.4 Deliberation

The aims of the CRF project were to deliver a deliberative and participatory decision-making process to utilise the knowledge and expertise of local people and empower local communities to make decisions on communities' priorities (see section 1). The central component of stage two was to employ deliberation to reach decisions. Fishkin's (2009) overarching theory is that good deliberation involves a sustained back and forth discussion that includes clear position statements and the opportunity for participants to probe and question each other's claims in turn. Within this theory, Fishkin proposes five conditions: information; substantive balance; equal consideration; diversity; and conscientiousness. This section focuses on the deliberation that took place in stage two meetings. There were many examples of deliberation that helped participants make decisions. Overall, the evaluation team found that the deliberative meetings did not consistently create the conditions for the sustained back and forth and in-depth dialogue that is required for effective deliberation, as conceptualised by Fishkin. Various factors influenced the level and depth of deliberation, including meeting structures and boundaries, the numbers of proposals some meetings had to process, the number of participants in each group, the application of expertise, and participants' understanding of deliberation.

## 4.4.1 Sustaining confidence in deliberation to achieve the decisions

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Participants did feel empowered and involved in the deliberation process. 88% of respondents felt their views were reflected throughout the process. Participants also commonly indicated that they felt included and influential in decision-making and had made a positive difference to their community. For example, one respondent said:

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**“It felt like the community was actually being consulted about the community we live in and that felt like a first to be part of decisions” and “my voice and my opinions were heard. The decisions were made by residents. Loved the whole process.”**

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Similarly, many participants felt they were able to fully engage in decision-making and had associated feelings of empowerment, despite the inflexible use of criteria.

In response to the overarching evaluation questions, the evaluation considered the lack of autonomy given to participants as an obstacle that restricted deliberation but which did not appear to prevent participants reaching collective decisions. However, the evaluation team observed what appeared to be a tension between BCC’s aim of empowering participants whilst, simultaneously, being able to carry out stage

two in a timely manner. While participants recorded a sense of empowerment, the evaluation team found that the stage two meetings could have allowed more space for participants to find their own way through the deliberations.

There appeared to be an inevitable tension at play for BCC to manage a complex process across the entire city with significant funding decisions while also attempting to hand over decision-making autonomy to participants. As a ‘learning by doing’ process that was led by the Council this is understandable, especially with so many moving parts and limited flexibility in the timeframe available to complete the process. It was viewed by the evaluation team that this tension became evident at times as a hesitancy to step back and allow deliberations to act as the primary decision-making tool. Instead, the deliberative meetings were highly managed throughout stage two. Overall, the evaluation team suggests that a controlled agenda detrimentally impacted on the quality of deliberation. An important part of this agenda was the criteria used to guide each of the deliberative workshops. As discussed above in section 4.2.1, the structure and format for these meetings – to cycle through the applications with each meeting considering a different criterion – placed significant restrictions on the flow of deliberations, preventing discussions from exploring and considering other dimensions and limiting the input of fresh ideas.

The evaluation team reflected on how the deliberations might have been had there been a more relaxed scope, and found that there



could have been a greater emphasis on the role, agency and power of participants within these meetings to steer the agenda and make arguments related to their concerns. The use of empowerment language was evident throughout the stage two and participants responded positively to the idea of them as decision-makers, but the structure of the deliberative meetings and the tightly facilitated structure held this potential back. However, overall, the responses to the final survey suggest that participants did develop a sense of community power from this process and did feel part of decisions made about changes in their community. This highlights that though the process may not have met some of the deliberative aims, the experience of those taking part was still very positive and that the process as it was conferred a sense of empowerment and genuine power in their role as decision makers.



## Learning Points

- » Explore how to allow more time and space for the deliberative process to emerge, without the need for introducing extra tools to move decision-making along.

## 4.4.2 Understanding deliberation and putting it into practice

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The process of reaching a final decision involved two principal parts: deliberation on the proposals, and reaching a consensus. This evaluation found that, generally speaking, there was good understanding of consensus amongst participants and the term was widely referred to by both participants and facilitators. This good understanding was supported by effective participant briefings as part of the introduction, where the idea of consensus was unpacked and considered in terms of what it means in practice. Contrastingly, the idea of deliberation and how to carry out effective deliberation was found to have been underexplored. This lack of applied understanding appeared to feed through into the way meetings were conducted. There may also have been greater expectation of participants' understanding of deliberation than was evident in practice.

The style of deliberation across stage two varied – sometimes in-depth and detailed, and other times light, associated mostly with the number of proposals that groups were working through. To try and summarise the overall style of deliberation was challenging. However, generally speaking, the deliberation that took place can be seen as a form of sequential justification, with points of view building on from previous points. This contrasts with deliberation as a sustained back and forth with participants responding to and/or probing previously made points

to test embedded assumptions and validity claims. In this manner, consensus was reached more through participants expanding on previous points (and through what was not said) than through contrasting justification. That is not to say that challenges and counterpoints were not made, rather that

these were less frequent than anticipated. When consensus appeared near or was reached, it was consolidated using the traffic light system (see section 4.2.2). Such observations support the finding that the act of deliberation was less well understood by participants and facilitators than consensus.

### **An example of this was observed during a deliberation meeting and recorded in the observation notes:**

**Jane** – Introduced the proposal: They are looking for an electric van so they can continue with their outreach work. And they spend a lot on repairs.

**Jenny** – She felt it was a brilliant idea and would make a big difference. The van is needed. Diesel van breaks down. This would be more reliable. [No time to consider the written reports]. **“It’s a green for me.”**

**Jane** – **“How does it support organisational resilience?”**

**Jenny** – **“They are doing a fantastic job.”**  
[Jenny has got warmed up and is saying a lot.]

**Spenser** – **“As they are mobile they can reach people.”**

**John** – **“A modern enough van wouldn’t get caught by the clean air zone, but an electric van would have lower fuel costs, be more reliable and better for the environment.”**

**Interjection** – **“They could get a cheaper van.”**

**Jane** – **“Thinking long-term – these rules could change. Save time.”**

**Sam** – [Looking at the application in a bit more detail]. **“I question the repair claims.”**

**John** – **“In terms of organisational resilience, if the van isn’t there they can’t work.”**

**Sam** – Not so sure due to costs.

**Jane** – Points out that this not about cost at this stage.

This example demonstrates deliberation as an assortment of ideas that helped to build collective understanding. A mild back and forth can be seen on the question of costs, but, in the most part, participants simply raised their perspectives.

The participant responses from the final survey also suggested that back and forth deliberation was limited. Across all survey responses the terms 'deliberative' and 'deliberation' were only mentioned three times, and some responses suggested that reaching consensus was considered more important than deliberating. For example, one respondent said, "Pressure to reach consensus sometimes seemed more important than exploring concerns."

While much of the deliberation followed this sequential justification form, there were examples of pockets of what the evaluation team recognise as good back and forth deliberation. An example of such effective deliberation was observed where one participant suggested that an organisation that had capacity to fund raise should be considered resilient enough and therefore would not need funding. Other participants in the group argued the case that this should not be a reason to decline funding for this organisation. During this deliberation participants raised relevant points in response to the previous points and there was a clear back and forth of claim checking between participants. Such cases demonstrate the development of balanced arguments (substantive balance) within these conversations. Furthermore, there did not appear to be any strong power inequalities

identified, and each point appeared considered and balanced against other points, thereby demonstrating equal consideration.

Within the deliberative meetings, deliberation was introduced during the initial meeting, but only very briefly. The meaning of 'deliberate' was discussed and there was some focus on certain issues of deliberation, which the evaluation team recognised as being related to conscientiousness and equal consideration. Issues raised included being aware of personal bias when taking part in discussions and responding respectfully to other people's points of view. There was, however, no discussion or guidance on the purpose and characteristics of deliberation, and the introduction to deliberation appeared to be orientated towards how to work together as a group. This was reinforced by the creation of a 'group contract' where participants decided collectively how they should interact as a group during discussion.

In the TPX Impact training given to facilitators there was a session about deliberation and what this looked like in practice, including how to describe participatory and deliberative democracy and how participatory democracy can work in practice. Involving participants in this training would have likely enhanced deliberation. Although the lack of time for engagement and the sheer number of proposals was a limiting factor, with further training on deliberation the stage two meetings may have been conducted differently.



## Learning Points

- » More training for participants and facilitators before the decision-making process begins in deliberative techniques, how it looks and feels. The aim would be to increase confidence in deliberative discussions as being the way to get to consensus and the ability for participants to recognise when this is happening.
- » Use the experience of the residents who participated to build on a more robust deliberative approach for future decision-making.

### 4.4.3 Interaction between participants

A more subtle dimension of the stage two meetings was how the dynamic between participants impacted deliberation. Fishkin (2009) suggests that democratic processes should be inclusive and representative of people from different areas of society, and, at the same time, those participating should deliberate on an equal footing.

The CRF process of deliberation recruited a mix of participants from different social and economic backgrounds. There was a risk of dominance by Councillors within the

deliberations due to their position of power, however there were only certain occasions where imbalance of power or domination of voice appeared to negatively influence. In most cases, all participants were offered the space to share their views and there was clear evidence of equal consideration between participants.

Where imbalance was identified it was generally well mitigated by facilitators. Facilitators were often capable of directing discussions to ensure involvement of less forthcoming participants. It was common to observe facilitators reminding the small table deliberation groups to be mindful about how much they spoke and to allow others to raise their views. This facilitation appeared to work to achieve a balance of perspective, although, like with any similar process, some attendees remained more reserved while others were more vocal.

Despite the evaluation team's observation of effective management of more dominant voices, facilitators themselves felt that some participants had occasionally been disruptive and impacted group dynamics. In the facilitator retrospective, there was a general feeling that it would have been beneficial to have more guidance on how to manage dominant participants. In any deliberative group individuals will assess each person and lean towards those who are perceived to have the most competence and expertise. While this could be construed as an imbalance of power, Fishkin suggests this is "a rational economy of time and attention," to take cues from those deemed more knowledgeable (Fishkin 2009). This



was mostly seen between residents and Councillors, where Councillors were given slightly more respect and participants appeared to demonstrate greater trust in Councillors' knowledge, which often swayed the group's decision.

Throughout stage two, the evaluation team recorded a developing sense of 'group collective' between participants, which appeared to maintain power balance between participants. Participants were often observed listening to each other and building on each other's confidence and being respectful of everyone's needs while engaged in deliberation. A clear example of this was the group respecting that some participants needed to go over areas that were previously discussed to increase their understanding. Furthermore, a participant was observed saying:

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**“It feels like we have built really strong and respectful relationships with each other in our groups. We may not always agree but we can all speak up and share our view.”**

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This sense of relationship building meant participants gained confidence in voicing their opinions, but also respected fellow participants' opposing viewpoints, which developed the right conditions for equal consideration, even if active back and forth deliberation was limited.

#### 4.4.4 How facilitation styles and consistency influenced deliberation

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Stage two included two types of facilitators: lead facilitators and table facilitators. Lead facilitators were largely from VCSE organisations, addressed the wider group and managed the overall deliberative meetings, while the table facilitators were a mix of BCC and VCSE organisation employees and chaired and managed the smaller group table discussions.

Facilitation is considered important in deliberation as it provides a guide and structure for participants to engage. Facilitators can also help manage the 'back and forth' of arguments raised in deliberation through ensuring that relevant counterpoints are raised, bias and power dynamics do not corrupt the deliberation, and each group member is heard equally and respectfully.

It is important to recognise that a good facilitator needs to bring their own style into their work to be authentic and trusted by participants. There was a lot of evidence of individual styles of facilitation at work throughout the process, which the evaluation team considers a positive. However, more significant inconsistencies in the general structure of discussions created difficulties, and these inconsistencies appeared to impact the way participants came to final decisions. Some facilitators, for example, spent less time on the discussion phase and adopted a more inflexible and systemised approach, strictly sticking to the criterion and focussing on decision-making. Others

adopted a more relaxed approach and allowed discussions and subsequent decisions to come about more organically. This was in part a result of the number of proposals some groups were working through, though both approaches were observed in the same meeting, where the numbers of proposal were very high, which would suggest it was more about style than circumstance.

Both styles of facilitation had benefits. It was observed in some cases that in groups where facilitators had a more relaxed style there was a positive impact on the group dynamic and participants appeared more confident in discussions and happier with their decisions. However, in some cases these groups ran out of time and were unable to discuss all the allocated proposals. Whereas, with more structured styles of facilitation, there were often moments where participants expressed that they did not feel they had discussed enough before making decisions. Facilitators were, in some cases, observed interrupting discussions to move participants on to the next criterion or to keep the discussion on a criterion. This structured approach was, however, beneficial in keeping participants on track so that all proposals were considered, especially when participants became more argumentative and overly fixated on one point.

The deliberative meetings were overseen by the lead facilitators who would often walk around listening into table discussions and would often provide answers to questions or some clarifications to discussions. These interventions, though often helpful regarding

detail, tended to limit the level of balance of argument (substantive balance) found within the deliberations, inhibiting the flow of discussion required to allow participants to respond to each other's points. Lead facilitators would also time-keep, reminding table facilitators of the amount of time left and checking how many proposals had been considered. Such interruptions created an atmosphere of pressure to conclude quickly. Feeling the pressure to move quickly through the deliberation, table facilitators were then observed talking over participants or asking what traffic light colour the participants wanted to assign to a proposal. Frequent mentions of "we are running out of time" increased this sense of time pressure. Some table facilitators became less active in making sure everyone was involved in the discussion, instead asking participants "do you agree?"

Time was observed to play a significant role in the way different styles of facilitation presented, and the evaluation found that the time pressure placed on facilitators influenced their different styles of facilitation. Some facilitators appeared to avoid time pressure influencing their style of facilitation, whereas others were more reactive to such pressures. The evaluation team found that the former style of facilitation was more effective for deliberation, however, the implication being even more time would have been needed to conduct the decision-making if the same decision criteria were still employed.



# 5. Conclusion and recommendations

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The conclusions are structured into three sections: 1) key findings; 2) answers to the Evaluation Questions; and 3) recommendations.

## 5.1 Key findings

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The BCC core CRF team worked effectively both internally and with external partners to manage a complex and multifaceted process. Their commitment and work ethos created an energy and positivity that built and sustained momentum throughout what was a lengthy and sometimes challenging process. Overall, the CRF represented an impressive decision-making initiative and represents a significant step-forward for designing and managing devolved participatory decision-making for grant funding in the city. There is great potential to build on this strong approach for future decision-making processes.

- Feedback from the participants in the process was largely positive, and demonstrates a willingness and enthusiasm, particularly from the residents involved, to take part in further participatory decision-making processes and activities.
- The CRF has contributed to the building of closer relationships between the Council and the VCSE organisations

by enabling a process where VCSE organisations worked together with the Council on a more equal footing. This is also true for the relationships between the Council and members of the local community by devolving decision-making powers to participants. In most cases, there was a clear building of trust and communication.

- The CRF built a shared approach to decision-making, which ensured more equity and transparency in decision-making.
- The CRF process has developed significant assets that will support future devolved decision-making processes.

Challenges were also identified where revisions would help strengthen and enhance the CRF or similar grant making decision-making processes. The CRF demonstrated a tension between the ambitions and aims of the process, and the practical realities of what can be achieved within the given structure and timeframe at such a scale. These tensions created a degree of disconnect between expectations and delivery. This was especially true when trying to achieve key aims, such as co-designing the process and employing deliberation. These tensions manifested in various ways over the course of the decision-making process:

- The size of the process was immense in both stages as it included areas from all across Bristol, instead of initially focusing on a single or small number of areas. In stage one, the number of participants involved was too many for co-design to be fully effective and this did create levels of inconsistency and confusion.
- Designing the deliberative decision-making process at the same time as running the community conversations created delays that meant that there were gaps in information provision. This was particularly challenging for VCSE organisations who were trying to reach out to other organisations and run the community conversations.
- Designing the process while concurrently running it limited the potential for stage one to identify and learn about communities' needs and priorities. Such knowledge and priorities would have benefited stage two.
- The scale of the process created a significant time burden across stage two. This was particularly felt in deliberative meetings where there were high numbers of proposals.
- The structure of stage two and the multiple criteria employed created a sense of pressure and rigidity that impacted on the quality of deliberation.
- The use of decision-making criteria with complex terminology meant that participants required significant time to fully grasp the terms. Training participants on deliberation would have helped enhance deliberative exchange

and productive claim checking through back and forth discussions.

These findings and the inherent learning from them can be taken and utilised to inform potential new participatory and deliberative initiatives.

## 5.2 Answers to Evaluation Questions

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### 1: What successes were identified as part of the overall process?

- The relationship between the Council and the community was strengthened because of this process. The ethos of working in person alongside the community, in a transparent and more equitable way, developed a sense of collaboration and connection between the Council and residents. It increased understanding by residents of the significant challenges inherent in decision-making.
- The development of a group of skilled facilitators was a key success from this process. The training of new facilitators outside of the Council has developed a pool of individuals who are now skilled in facilitation and are potential assets to future deliberative and participatory projects.
- Overall, participants expressed positivity about their involvement in this process. Specifically reported were the skills, knowledge and confidence developed during the process, which will be beneficial to them going forward. The

positive experience and learning for participants were identified as a success of this process and the majority of the participants expressed that this had encouraged them to take part in more community projects and decision-making processes in future.

### **1, a: What factors/enablers created a successful deliberative decision-making process?**

- The high-quality work and support of the BCC team throughout influenced various successes of the process. The efficiency, communication and responsiveness of the team mitigated concerns and issues that were raised throughout, building goodwill, trust and confidence in the process. The team's efficient problem-solving and adaptations to the process produced more suitable and successful approaches.
- The information provided to participants was presented in a variety of formats, increasing accessibility for different learning styles. This ensured participants were able to engage more effectively with the information that was provided and, therefore, enabled successful decision-making.
- The provision of expert advice was a positive factor in enabling successful deliberative decision-making. This was useful information that participants used to inform their discussions.
- There were certain aspects of facilitation that helped enable deliberation and decision-making throughout stage two of the process.

- » Facilitators brought their own style to the process. This authenticity helped to build trust with participants.
- » In cases where facilitators allowed a more relaxed flow of conversation, participants tended to be more confident in and satisfied with their decision-making.
- » Facilitators managed discussions and generally maintained a balance of contribution from different participants.
- In cases where participants had a good understanding of proposals and had developed confidence in the group discussions there was observed to be more successful deliberative decision-making.

### **2: What challenges were identified by different stakeholders in the overall process?**

- The timeframes and timing of the process created significant challenges to the overall process.
- During stage one, the co-design process and community conversations overlapped to ensure both were complete before the planned start of stage two. This presented challenges when some decisions about the process had not been made so not all information was immediately available for the community conversations.
- Community conversations were due to start over the summer, a time when VCSE organisations tend to have lower staffing levels. As a result, most community conversations took place in September,

leaving less time before the application deadline.

- The tight timeframes for community conversations made it challenging to engage with residents. Longer timeframes may have allowed VCSE organisations to include residents in the community conversations.
- Stage two started just before the Christmas period, a busy time for both VCSE organisations and participants, which impacted engagement.
- During the deliberative meetings, the need to make decisions created time pressures that limiting engagement in deliberation. This also restricted the engagement of participants who needed more time to develop their confidence.

## **2, a: What obstacles were associated with the deliberative decision-making process?**

- The information given to participants impacted deliberation.
  - » Proposal templates were kept deliberately simple to encourage and enable proposals from a wide range of organisations, but this limited the information participants were given, which made deliberation harder.
  - » Information provision was often focused on the criteria for deliberation and there was not enough information about the organisations who had submitted the proposal, the local context, or how to carry out effective deliberations.
  - » The terminology used in the deliberation criteria was sometimes

complex, so there was not a uniform understanding of the terms by participants. Participants were sometimes deliberating without a solid understanding of what they were considering, which created obstacles for deliberative decision-making.

- » The amount of information that participants were required to take on board and understand was a lot, given the timeframe.
- The structure of the deliberative workshops created obstacles for deliberative decision-making. The meetings were focussed on considering each application against the decision-making criteria for each deliberative meeting, which impacted the flow of discussions and the ability of participants to direct deliberation to issues they were concerned with.
- The traffic light system inhibited deliberation. Participants were able to avoid justifying points they raised or making counterpoints by raising their hand to choose a colour. The use of amber was a significant challenge for deliberation as it gave participants a way out of making a decision or having to continue with deliberation.
- There was a lack of understanding and training around how to deliberate, which compromised the deliberative process and encouraged an approach more akin to voting.

## **3, a: How effective was the process for reaching collective decisions?**

- The process was effective for reaching

collective decisions. Nevertheless, such decisions were most commonly reached through consensus/voting, rather than deliberation.

### **3, b: How effective was the process for increasing participation by VCSE organisations in shaping and influencing the design of grant-making processes?**

- VCSE organisations involved in stage one were able to influence the CRF process through their engagement in the TPX Impact workshops and as part of the Design Team. It should be noted that, in both cases, their role was more akin to that of advisors, rather than co-designers.

### **3, c: How effective was the process for addressing community priorities?**

- Community conversations were intended to identify community priorities through engagement with residents and community organisations. The effectiveness of this process was limited due to the lack of time and resource VCSE organisations had to run those conversations. It is therefore difficult for this evaluation to assess the effectiveness of the process for addressing community priorities, as these were not identified during the process.
- It should be noted, however, that VCSE organisations did build on their existing understanding of the communities that they serve and their priorities, based on their previous work, and in some cases they connected with new organisations in their areas and other communities outside

of their area of operations/interest.

### **3, d: How effective was the process for increasing engagement and participation from diverse communities (residents and VCSE organisations)?**

- The scale of the co-design process, involving local VCSE organisations, increased levels of engagement from those organisations who work with the Council less often. The process also called for lead VCSE organisations to use their position to reach out to a number of smaller community organisations to engage with the CRF process. The aim of equality within the CRF process created a strong focus on engaging diverse community organisations.
- 100 residents participated in stage two, who were selected from a wider group of applicants. This demonstrated a significant amount of local interest and engagement in the process. It is more challenging, however, to evaluate whether this was an increase in engagement and participation, or if these residents already engaged with and took part in other community projects.
- The recruitment process required residents to apply voluntarily, so an unavoidable limitation of this process is that the participant demographics was restricted to those who put themselves forward and applied. However, where and how the roles were advertised and promoted was designed intentionally to achieve a balance of diverse communities taking part in the process.

### **3, e: How effective was the process for strengthening VCSE connections at a local level?**

- While VCSE organisations reported few new relationships with other community organisations, the process was effective at strengthening existing connections between VCSE organisations and other community organisations. The community conversations provided an opportunity for organisations to come together in their local area to share ideas and projects, facilitated by the local lead VCSE organisation for the CRF. These largely face to face meetings were especially valued post-Covid.
- The process was most effective at strengthening connections for VCSE organisations with less extensive local networks, who had to make new connections with other organisations during community conversations in order to bring them into the CRF process.
- The absence of resident participation in community conversations limited how effective the CRF process was for strengthening connections between VCSE organisations and residents. However, residents did become more familiar with local VCSE organisations during stage two, learning about them through their CRF proposals.
- Stage two also enabled local Councillors to gain more knowledge and understanding of VCSE organisations, sometimes in own their wards as well as in the other wards within the Area Committee.

### **3, f: How effective was the process for strengthening community power?**

- The evaluation identified a number of contributors to building community power throughout the process. The role of resident participants in the decision-making and the development of their skills and confidence; the building of stronger relationships between them and the Council; the increased knowledge for residents of the community activity and organisations in their area and the potential for future connections and work. There were also examples of how the VCSEs built their relationships with each other, both locally and as part of the co-design process; and built their reputations as convenors/supporters of other organisations in their area by facilitating the community conversations.
- The evaluation is unable to fully answer this question at this point in time, as there will be more evidence emerging once the funding has been distributed and projects realised.

### **3, g: How effective was the process for incorporating expert advice/evidence to support deliberative decision-making?**

- The expert advice incorporated into the process during stage two was found to be useful in supporting participants in deliberations and decision-making.
- However, the delivery of the information reduced its effectiveness. Expert advice was provided around half-way through, or later, in stage two and could have been more useful to participants if it had

been available earlier. Some information was incomplete, due to tight timescales, and some information was difficult for participants to understand, with no opportunity for follow-up questions or clarification.

### **3, h: How effective was the process for building trust and confidence in the relationships between the Council and communities?**

- A key finding of this evaluation was how effective this process has been in building trust and confidence in the relationships between the Council and community, both from the perspective of the VCSE organisations involved throughout the process and the participants in stage two.
- The choice of the core BCC team to work alongside local VCSE organisations throughout the process, rather than taking a more hierarchical approach, created a sense of equal ground and mutual worth between the Council and VCSE organisations that appeared to strengthen relationships.
- A sense of equality between the Council and residents building trust and confidence was also evident in stage two. The unusual situation of working on an equal footing with the Council, and the face-to-face interactions with the BCC facilitators, created a sense of teamwork and familiarity with BCC team members.
- Participants expressed an increasingly positive perception of the Council throughout stage two, in part due to the

efficiency, encouragement and work of the core BCC team, which stemmed from their enthusiasm and ethos of devolving power to participants.

### **3, i: How effective was the process for improving overall equality?**

- The CRF was centred around increasing equality and equity, and, as such, the process was developed with this in mind. Key examples of this within the process are:
  - » The designation of the equalities group for proposals that were not linked to geographical areas but aimed at equalities organisations working across the city.
  - » Participant training focused on equity and diversity to ensure this was considered throughout stage two.
  - » Council committed to an extensive recruitment process to ensure that the deliberative meetings were representative of the wider population.
- However, it is challenging to evaluate whether this process has been effective for improving overall equality in Bristol communities as it will take time for any impact to become evident resulting from the allocated funding.

### **4: Were there any unintended impacts?**

- A payment system was set up for participants of stage two, which worked well. This learning will be shared with colleagues so that the new system can be used across the Council in other projects.

- The participants involved in stage two reported that they had learnt new skills that they can transfer into their workplace, community or in future community projects.
- In the final survey, the majority of stage two participants showed interest in taking part in future community projects.
- The process has developed trained facilitators outside of the BCC, who could use their skills and experience in future projects.

#### **5, a: What was the key learning for VCSE organisations?**

- VCSE organisations increased their knowledge and understanding of the funding needs and the aspirations of local organisations in their area through holding strategic community conversations with them.
- Individuals from VCSE organisations who took part in the co-design workshops reported that they appreciated the opportunity to learn new and useful skills, concepts and approaches in relation to deliberative democracy and participatory decision-making.

#### **5, b: What was the key learning for BCC Councillors?**

- Gaining the experience of a new way of decision-making, which several Councillors saw as a development opportunity.
- Seeing how a process of engaging with residents on an equal footing to make decisions can work in practice – and the importance of good facilitation for this to work well.
- Increased understanding and knowledge around residents’ priorities and concerns.
- Greater knowledge of what else is going on in the city, and in nearby wards, and of the varying levels of resident participation across areas.
- Identifying that there are opportunities to rethink local provision and learn across areas.
- Seeing more clearly where there are gaps in provision in communities.

#### **5, c: What was the key learning for residents?**

- Knowledge about the different organisations in their communities and the ability to signpost people to them.
- The depth of knowledge and skill in the local community.
- Skills including: negotiation and compromise; listening skills including how to listen to alternative/conflicting views; communication; teamwork.

- Confidence in speaking up and articulating a view they hold.
- A greater understanding of the difficulties of making funding decisions, and empathy towards those who do this.
- Increased understanding of how Bristol City Council works.

#### **5, d: What was the key learning for council employees?**

- A certain amount of pre-sifting of applications to limit the numbers would make a similar participatory process more manageable.
- More time than planned was necessary to deliver a devolved and participatory decision-making process.
- The training of facilitators proved to be an asset, but further training on deliberation would have been beneficial.
- Working alongside local VCSE organisations helped build and strengthen relationships.
- Greater understanding of Bristol citizen's interests to participate in devolved decision-making for their communities.

## **5.3 Recommendations**

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Reflecting on the findings in this report, the evaluation team felt it would be useful to offer recommendations that could inform any future similar initiatives or programmes.

### **Co-design**

- Be clear what you mean by co-design and allocate sufficient time to ensure that co-design can be delivered. Consider when the beginning of a such a process comes within the overall programme. Be clear that the co-design element would need to be completed before starting the next steps of the process.
- Be aware that the language of co-design is weighted and can be interpreted in different ways. Do not be afraid of focussing on collaboration if that better fits the available scope and timing.

### **Scale of the process**

- If seeking to undertake a similar process of grant making, incorporating the aspiration of resident deliberative decision-making, reduce the scale of the grant making process to fewer areas to reduce the complexity and volume of work for those running it and allow more focused attention of a smaller number of deliberative meetings. This could also be achieved by taking fewer applications into the process to reduce the scope.

### **Wider context and community priorities**

- Ensure that there is a wider community context available for any deliberative process. Utilise existing community needs and priorities information, such as local community plans, previous consultations etc, and where possible, build in time for a community (resident and VCSE organisations) conversation to set that local context.

- ii. Support participants to have access to and discussion about this information before seeking to decide on specific proposals. This is likely to be achieved by increasing the lead-in time to the process and spending more time on planning inclusive meeting logistics to encourage a greater involvement of residents in community conversations.

### **Distinction between consultation and community engagement**

- i. In delivering community conversations, be clear about the distinction between building a view of community priorities (including residents and VCSE organisations) and then running conversations with VCSE applicants to support the development of proposals for funding, in the context of the community identified priorities. Treat consultation and community engagement as two separate elements.

### **Deliberation**

In developing a future deliberative approach, consider the following:

- i. Build in clear time to develop the participants' understanding and skills around how to effectively deliberate by offering specific training at the front end of the process.
- ii. Simplify the decision-making by reducing the number of decision-making criteria and allowing participants' to consider the proposal in the round, rather than looking at proposals through only one lens, focussing on individual criteria.

- iii. Increase flexibility in the deliberative meetings' agenda to allow for more deliberation and discussion and limit the number of applications for each session to review.
- iv. Prioritise time for deliberation and re-structure the time-management within meetings to ensure each proposal receives an equal amount of time for consideration.
- v. Develop greater procedural clarity on how local knowledge and experience (including the context from community conversations) would be integrated into the deliberative meetings.
- vi. Ensure all participants have hard copies of all the relevant information.
- vii. Provide additional training and experience building for facilitators to engage in deliberation and utilise the structures and tools of decision-making included in the process.

NB: These recommendations would also be relevant for a participatory approach that isn't directly identified as "deliberative", though after such positive learning, building on this to create new opportunities for deliberative democracy in the future would be strongly advised.

### **Planning and time**

- i. Delivering high quality and meaningful engagement in this type of process is complex, nuanced and any good quality community engagement needs time to build trust and commitment, as well as the required skills to participate. The CRF

was designed to learn as it developed and its success has been in no small part due to the level of commitment and energy provided by the core BCC team and the wider Communities Team (as facilitators, participant and applicant supporters, community engagement experts and during resident recruitment), which enabled filling gaps, acting swiftly on learning and holding the process together for all the participants. This required a significant amount of these

teams' capacity, time and energy. This may not always be possible to replicate, therefore for future initiatives, a simplified process would potentially reduce the amount of capacity required from such a large number of resources. This would not necessarily be seeking to reduce the time over which the process takes place, but in planning it over a longer time period to enable each element to be delivered.





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# 7. Appendices

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## 7.1 Appendix A: Bristol City Council Theory of Change

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### Overall outcomes

- To build the resilience of those VCSE organisations located within and working with communities experiencing the greatest inequality.
- To build city resilience by growing the power of communities experiencing the greatest inequality.
- To catalyse and utilise the expertise and resources embedded in communities, individuals, community groups and city partners to help shape and deliver city priorities (NB: direct contribution to the corporate strategy goal).
- Taking forward the recommendation 13 from the Citizen's Assembly to empower local communities in the decision-making process, through increased control of resources and decision-making.

### Assumptions

Bristol City council currently holds power when it comes to allocating funding. The Council wants/intends to shift the power to communities.

Grant making processes can exclude organisations, through complex and time-consuming application forms and processes.

Improving these processes through co-design will increase access for all community organisations.

Working with the community and voluntary sector, residents, and Councillors to make decisions about funding will result in a more transparent, equitable and inclusive process.

Investing in community infrastructure could result in increased revenue in the Voluntary Community and Social Enterprise sectors, increased inclusivity, equity and long term resilience.

### Interim Outcomes – what will we see happening

- The decision-making for public spending is informed by communities and VCSE organisations and is more transparent (evidenced through evaluation of the CRF process).
- Stronger and more connected community organisations (evidenced by the evaluation of the CRF process).
- Increased sustainability, accessibility and diverse usage of community spaces and facilities.
- Evidence of increased participation from diverse communities in all stages of the process.
- Clear community priorities for investment in community infrastructure.

- Better relationships between diverse community members, VCSE organisations and the council.
- Opportunities in place for sharing learning, skills, knowledge and confidence around community decision.
- Recommendations for how to continue and develop the practice of deliberative and participatory decision-making in the city.
- Forming partnerships with VCSE organisations.
- Designing and delivering training on participatory decision-making process.
- Co-designing decision-making processes.
- Delivering community conversations.
- Recruiting residents as participants.
- Delivering a deliberative and participatory decision-making process.
- Sharing learning across neighbourhoods and with BCC/VCSE.
- Development phase and shaping and delivering capacity building support.
- Signing grant agreements with agree projects.
- Projects begin.

### **Outputs/Products**

- X number of plans in place for VCSE led CRF community conversation.
- Pilot of new community led decision-making practice.
- Training and co-design programme.
- Directory of capital project outline proposals (many unfunded).

- Bank of community conversation data.
- Evaluation report.
- Expert information and key resources which support project development (e.g. access, energy).
- Pro bono support linking commercial sector with VCSE.
- Improved community infrastructure:
- VCSE relationships within and across areas
- Improved physical assets to contribute to community activity

### **Who?**

- VCSE sector organisations
- Residents
- Councillors
- Bristol City Council
- Bristol Funders Network
- VCSE strategy group
- Oversight Group
- Design group

### **Resources**

- Staff and volunteer time
- Revenue budget
- Capital budget
- Expertise of VCSE sector, communities, Councillors, technical experts, and council officers
- Evaluation

## 7.2 Appendix B: Evaluation aims and questions

Evaluation Aims	Evaluation Questions
<p><b>1. To understand the successes and challenges of the participatory and deliberative decision-making process used.</b></p>	<p><b>1. What successes were identified as part of the overall process?</b></p> <p>a) What factors/enablers created a successful deliberative decision-making process?</p> <p><b>2. What challenges were identified by different stakeholders in the overall process?</b></p> <p>b) What obstacles were associated with the deliberative decision-making process?</p>
<p><b>2. To understand the effectiveness of the decision-making process on strengthening community power; and addressing community identified priorities and wider, unintended impacts.</b></p>	<p><b>3. How effective was the process for:</b></p> <p>a) reaching collective decisions?</p> <p>b) increasing participation by VCSE organisations in shaping and influencing the design of grant making processes?</p> <p>c) addressing community priorities?</p> <p>d) increasing engagement and participations from diverse communities (residents and VCSE organisations)?</p> <p>e) strengthening VCSE connections at a local level?</p> <p>f) strengthening community power?</p> <p>g) incorporating expert advice/ evidence to support deliberative decision-making</p> <p>h) building trust and confidence in the relationships between the Council and communities</p> <p>i) improving overall equality?</p> <p><b>4. Were there any unintended impacts?</b></p>

Evaluation Aims	Evaluation Questions
<p><b>3. To understand the shared learning between VCSE organisations involved, the Council and the wider sector, and understand how it can contribute to Bristol's One City Plan objective</b></p>	<p>What was the key learning for different stakeholders;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) VCSE organisations;</li> <li>b) BCC Councillors;</li> <li>c) Residents;</li> <li>d) Council employees;</li> </ul> <p>[shared learning to be ascertained through a comparison of learning outcomes from the different stakeholders]</p>
<p><b>4. To recognise the successful aspects of the decision-making process which are scalable and replicable, for future use within participatory and deliberative decision-making</b></p>	<p>To be considered through reflecting on the findings from the previous evaluation questions.</p>
<p><b>5. To understand how the decision-making process fulfilled the anticipated interim outcomes listed in the revised theory of change</b></p>	<p>To be considered in sum the findings from answering the other questions.</p>
<p><b>6. To make clear recommendations which can grow the use of participatory decision-making in the city</b></p>	<p>To be made after answering the other questions.</p>

## 7.3 Appendix C: CRF Oversight Group's Terms of Reference

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### November 2022

This document is designed to outline the role, responsibilities and ways of working of the Community Resilience Fund (CRF) Oversight Group.

#### **Purpose / role of the group:**

- To ensure that CRF meets the overall goals of the programme
- To ensure the programme remains on track and reaches key milestones
- To provide a clear steer on key decisions within the programme
- To provide ad hoc sector specific expertise
- To maximise opportunities for alignment and support e.g. Match funding or revenue support, pro bono support, alignment with other Bristol City Council funding streams or projects
- To support us in developing the participative approach which enables communities to make strong connections and take action on the issues that matter most to them
- To provide guidance and advice when the programme faces difficulties
- To approve key documents and any changes in direction or budget amendments (e.g. Shifting funding from one neighbourhood to another or from neighbourhoods to equalities)
- To oversee the evaluation and ensure that learnings from the programme are carried forward and applied to any relevant future

funds/areas of work

- To communicate with your networks and ensure your contacts are informed of developments with the programme

In line with recommendations made in 'Designing a New Social Reality', the CRF aims to build community participation and a collaborative approach to funding with equity at the heart of the programme. Action learning and knowledge sharing is a key part of the CRF and we encourage members of the Oversight Group to contribute to this way of working. We aim for this to be space for open dialogue and shared endeavour.

#### **Membership:**

- Group established February 2022 by CRF project team at Bristol City Council (BCC) via invites to relevant stakeholders.
- The group is made up of:
  - » Representatives of the voluntary and community sector Infrastructure Organisations
  - » Representatives of the grant funding
  - » The Cabinet lead with responsibility for Public Health and Communities
  - » Internal stakeholders
  - » Head of Service, Neighbourhoods and Communities
  - » Equalities team representative
  - » Finance team representative
  - » Property team representative
  - » Colleagues from economic development working on aligned

funding programmes

- » Head of Democratic Engagement
- » Head of Consultation and Engagement Team
- Members have signed up to be part of the group for the period of the fund – February 2022 – March 2026
- BCC internal stakeholders will act as advisors to the process. This means we may contact them when relevant to provide guidance and advice. They are not required to attend the quarterly meetings. If they were willing and able however, they may be asked to do so with notice if a specifically relevant agenda item is to be discussed.
- A core group of 8 members will be responsible for making decisions/ signing off milestones. This group will be made up of representatives from Voscur, BSWN, Locality, City Funds and Quartet, and include Head of Service, Neighbourhoods and Communities, Finance team representative and Cabinet lead with responsibility for Public Health and Communities

### **Decision-making/ sign off**

- 5 key people from this core group of stakeholders are required to endorse or validate sign off
- All decisions/ sign off points will be logged in a record

### **Meetings**

- From February 2022, we will hold 1-1.5 hour meetings every 6-10 weeks (in line

with key milestones)

- The meetings will be co-ordinated by Ellie Stevens, CRF project manager, who will share any advanced papers, agenda and calendar invites
- We will agree the focus of meetings based on the upcoming milestones, or pressing challenges of the programme
- Any notes/ outputs will be circulated by email by the CRF project manager/ Development Officer
- We may ask group members to review key documentation and materials in between meetings and provide feedback via email or in a future meeting. We may need to ask for feedback at short notice but will aim to give at least a week
- We will meet online unless previously agreed to meet in person. Meetings will involve group discussions and updates from the project team.
- We will invite the training/ co-design consultant team, evaluation partners and members of the Council project team when relevant, providing prior notice of this
- Ellie Stevens, CRF project manager, will be the point of contact for the group
- The group will be chaired by Penny Germon, Head of Neighbourhoods and Communities Service

### **Sharing of information and resources (including confidential materials)**

- We will share documents by email. Please treat all materials as confidential and not for wider circulation, unless otherwise indicated

## 7.4 Appendix D: CRF Design Team's Terms of Reference

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### April 2022

This document is designed to outline the role, responsibilities and ways of working of the Community Resilience Fund (CRF) design team.

#### **Purpose / role of the group:**

- To provide focused, practical support with the development, co-design and delivery of the deliberative decision-making process, to supplement the broader co-design workshops.
- Contribute to:
  - developing content of the training and co-design sessions
  - shaping plans for evaluation and learning
  - developing communication materials and key paperwork
- Providing advice on issues that affect VCSE partners.
- Providing a forum for discussion of progress.
- To help guide the development of recommendations for further work.
- Members are expected to be interested in and supportive of developing a model of deliberative decision making which we can learn from and build on as a city.

#### **Membership:**

- Group established April 2022 by CRF project team at Bristol City Council (BCC), through process of self-nomination.
- The group is made up of representatives of the voluntary and community sector

from across different geographic and equalities communities.

- There are 8 members of the group- 3 members are from equalities communities and 5 members are from geographic communities
- Members have signed up to be part of the group for 12 months from April 2022- March 2023. At this stage we will review the need for a steering group/ delivery group during the next stage of the programme.
- Members' organisations will be given £800 in recognition of their contributions to the design team.

#### **Review:**

- We will review the value of this group and its work after 6 months, and at the end of the year will review the need for a steering/ delivery group during the next stage of the programme.

#### **Ways of working:**

- Members of the design team will be co-designing and collaborating to find solutions and answer questions together, sharing expertise. BCC, our training and evaluation partners and group members will all make suggestions, share opinions and reach collective decisions.
- Members will be transparent and honest, sharing any potential conflicts of interest openly.
- Members may be contacted between meetings for advice should the need arise.

- From time-to-time sub-groups may be formed to work on specific issues as appropriate.
- From time-to-time individuals may be asked to provide specific advice and expertise as required.

### **Meetings**

- We will hold up to 8 meetings of 2 hours throughout the year.
- The meetings will be co-ordinated by Ellie Stevens, CRF project manager.
- We will agree the focus of the next meeting based on the upcoming activities taking place in the programme. We will aim to agree this as a group at the end of the previous meeting.
- Any notes/ outputs will be circulated by email by the CRF project manager.
- We will meet online unless previously agreed to meet in person. Meetings will involve group discussions, updates from the project team and partners, team working on specific tasks.
- We will invite our training and evaluation

partners and members of the BCC project team when relevant, providing prior notice of this.

- Ellie Stevens, CRF project manager will be the point of contact for the group.

### **Sharing of information and resources (including confidential materials)**

We will share documents by email or using a Sharepoint folder with restricted access, hosted by BCC. Members will be expected to respect the privacy or sensitivity of documents which are not yet public.

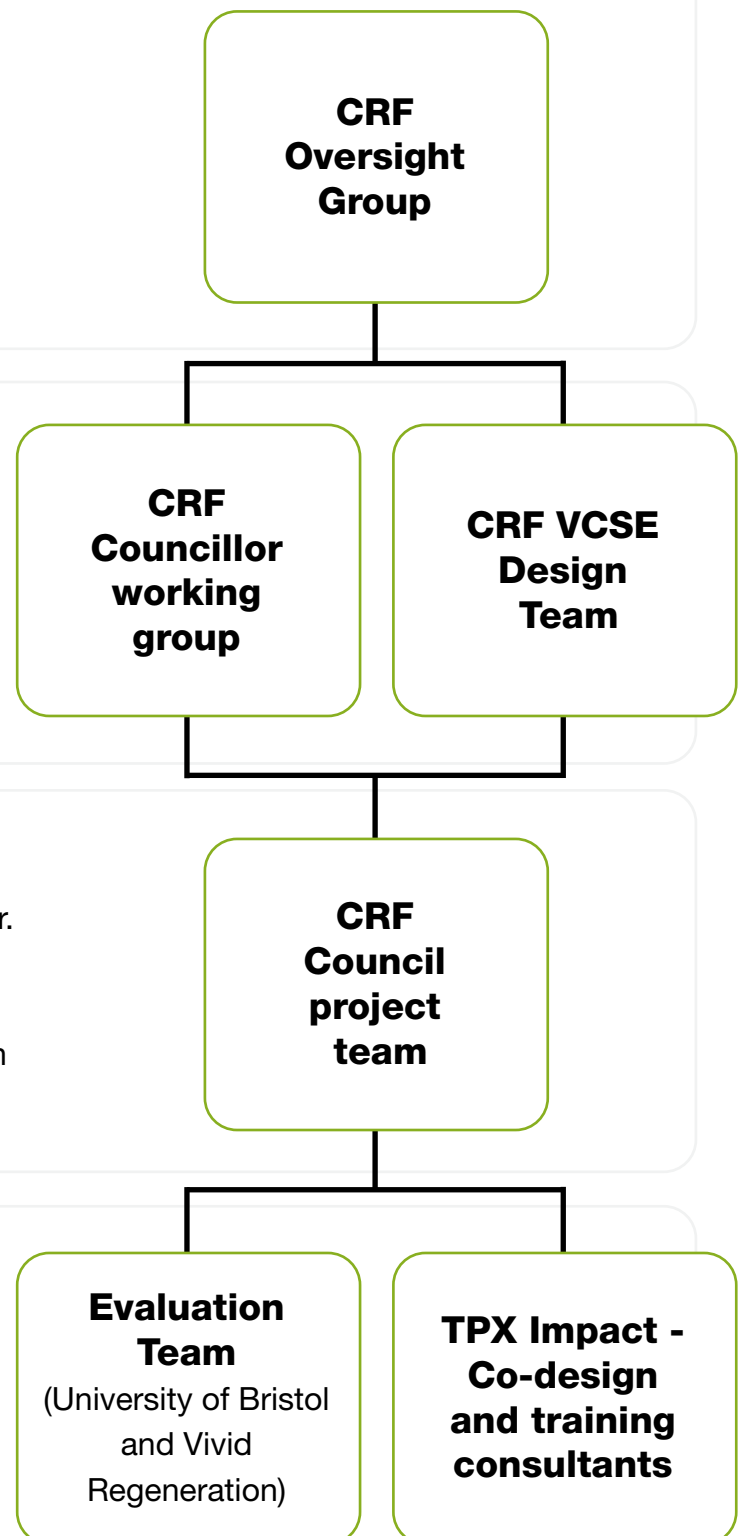
## 7.5 Appendix E: Governance and project team structure

The Oversight Group is made up of stakeholders with a strategic interest in the programme and participatory decision making. They make sure the programme stays on track, provide guidance and advice and steer the evaluation.

The Councillor working group and VCSE Design Team help shape the programme, providing steers on key decisions and supporting the development and design of the process and related materials.

The CRF Council project team is made up of the Project Manager and Development Officer. They co-ordinate the programme to make things happen on time and to budget. They are supported by colleagues and managers in Neighbourhoods and Communities.

The evaluation team will help us understand the successes and challenges of the decision making process, and make recommendations as to how we can grow the practice of shared decision making. TPX Impact are providing technical expertise and supporting us to co-design and deliver a participatory decision making process. Both these teams of consultants will work with us until April 2023.



## 7.6 Appendix F: Fishkin's five questions related to the CRF evaluation

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### The 'Fishkin 5' evidence and related questions for the CRF evaluation

#### Information

##### **Relevant information possessed by participants**

How much is known about the project?

Do attendees have a thorough understanding of what the community conversations are/for?

How is information being put across?

Is there diversity of information?

#### Substantive Balance

##### **Are reasons given met with equal discussions – back and forth?**

Does conversation flow back and forth?

Are counterpoints relevant to the topic of the arguments raised?

#### Diversity

##### **Representation of all significant positions within the public**

How proactive have community organisations been in engaging people to the discussion?  
(Marketing, timing, outreach, accessibility)

Has the organisation's capacity impacted the process (success, numbers etc.)?

#### Conscientiousness

##### **Participants honestly and respectfully assess arguments**

What can be observed about styles of discussion?

Are certain voices dominating the conversation?

How are people conducting themselves?

Can evidence of manipulation of ideas be seen?

Is everyone in the room being given opportunity to express themselves?

#### Equal Consideration

##### **Are ideas given being measured purely on merit?**

Are ideas being listened to and responded to equally?

Are ideas being considered purely on merit?

Are power inequities impacting the consideration of ideas within the discussion?

Is there an observable hierarchy of needs and criteria?

## 7.7 Appendix G: Data analysis and research ethics

The evaluation findings were developed using thematic analysis and a joint qualitative coding process conducted in Excel. High-level themes were drawn from groupings of codes that were identified within the various datasets that were generated by the different methods. These codes enabled the development of inductive (understanding from observations of multiple data points) qualitative insights to be gained. Such insights were then interpreted by the

evaluation team to reach overall findings. For example, in stage one 129 codes were drawn from across the different datasets. These codes led to 9 sub themes. This process of analysis was then repeated for stage two resulting in 11 sub themes. These sub themes were then grouped into 7 high-level themes. The high-level themes and sub themes were then interrogated by the evaluation team to generate findings.

**Figure 1 Example of coding analysis - stage one community conversations excel screenshot**

Code	Number	CC	Finding	Comments	Links...	Link 2	Link 3	Link 4	Link 5	Link 6
18	19		Very varied scale, clarity and development readiness of projects. Some able to present them very professionally, others less clear.	Shows despite 1-1 discussions, differences in levels of preparedness and development of ideas remained	Information					
19	26		There wasn't any overt competition or divisiveness, which I think had potentially been expected.	A feeling of trust for the lead and amongst the group was detectable	EQ 3e?					
20	29			Lack of interconnectivity between groups outside of areas within CC (even if in same fund ward)	EQ 3e					
21	19		Attendees seemed to have a basic knowledge of the existence of the fund. Not good understanding of criteria and application process. The VCSE host had a thorough understanding.	This led to a large portion of the CC being designated to explaining and informing. Cab Report- training VCSE orgs- suggests success?	Information	EQ 2b				

Ethical approval for this evaluation was gained from the University of Bristol School of Sociology, Politics and International Studies Ethics Committee. The evaluation team was informed by several ethical good practice and academic guidelines, including the Socio-Legal Studies Association Re-statement of Research Ethics (2009) and the ethical research governance guidance of the University of Bristol (UoB 2016).

The ethical procedures adopted for this research included: the granting of ethics

approval; gaining informed consent from all research participants; providing a Participant Information Sheet for all interviewees; and following a data management plan.

In line with the Data Protection Act 1998, data from the interviews was anonymised to remove personal information. All personal data was kept on password-protected laptops. Data management was carried out in line with University of Bristol Data Protection principles and Information Security Policies.

## 7.8 Appendix H: Process map

