



City Participation: Principles and Framework

1. Introduction

The Bristol Urban Forum¹ is a volunteer-led organisation based in Sparks, which is dedicated to encouraging wide participation in conversations about the city of Bristol. The Forum has been leading a one-year experiment in citizen-led placemaking across 2023 and 2024, engaging with hundreds of local people about the challenges the city faces in a series of workshops, and the recommendations flowing from that exercise are to be published in the Forum's Place Manifesto for Bristol in summer 2024.

The Bristol Urban Forum is one of a number of groups in Bristol to develop participation in this space – others include ArtSpace LifeSpace, CoExist and Extinction Rebellion. CoExist have led the way in developing a cross-city, collaborative process around the commons, which will give rise to its own manifesto in summer 2024. It is intended that these pieces of work will inform and complement one another, and this document should also be widely consulted among community groups to ensure it reflects collective views about citizen participation.

Coproducers and contributors of this document include CoExist, Involve and Bridging Histories. We are also grateful to Nigel Shipley for providing research included in Appendix 1.

2. The benefits of citizen participation


One of the key recommendations of that manifesto is the embedding of ongoing citizen participation into city decision-making. This is good for the city in several ways:

- It creates informed citizen stakeholders and civic pride

¹ www.bristolurbanforum.org

- It provides a useful referral and engagement mechanism for the local authority and other institutional stakeholders
- It encourages greater transparency in local governance
- It provides space for positive, evidence-based discussion and deliberation about the city's challenges
- It reinforces the credentials of Bristol as a progressive city.

The IAP2 Spectrum used by national citizen participation charity Involve shows how the level of participation impacts on the degree to which participation leads to citizen-led change. In recent years it has regularly replaced Arnstein's 'Ladder of Participation'² as a way to visualise the benefits of engaging at an appropriate level.

INCREASING IMPACT ON THE DECISION 					
	INFORM	CONSULT	INVOLVE	COLLABORATE	EMPOWER
PUBLIC PARTICIPATION GOAL	To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives, opportunities and/or solutions.	To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions.	To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered.	To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution.	To place final decision making in the hands of the public.
PROMISE TO THE PUBLIC	We will keep you informed.	We will keep you informed, listen to and acknowledge concerns and aspirations, and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will work with you to ensure that your concerns and aspirations are directly reflected in the alternatives developed and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will look to you for advice and innovation in formulating solutions and incorporate your advice and recommendations into the decisions to the maximum extent possible.	We will implement what you decide.

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3. What are other places doing?

The use of deliberative democracy and citizens assemblies is commonplace in cities and countries across the world. **Appendix 1** includes a range of case studies that demonstrate the possibilities of these approaches in city decision-making and underscores how it is being successfully used in places across the globe.

² <https://organizingengagement.org/models/ladder-of-citizen-participation/>

4. Why now for Bristol?

Local Council elections in May 2024 and the election of the Green Party as controlling party in Bristol City Council has provided a timely opportunity to put citizen participation back on the agenda. The Green Party committed in their manifesto to citizens assemblies, but the form these will take is yet to be decided.

Furthermore, following the vote to abolish the position of Mayor, an opportunity is presented in the design of Bristol's new committee system to embed a layer of citizen participation at the outset of this new era.

As Bristol gains its first ever Green Party MP, and a significant presence at local government level, there is more interest in deliberative democratic techniques. The Labour Party, now the party of government, has also indicated that such techniques are likely to be adopted centrally and supported in the regions. Bristol is in a good position to lead the way as a progressive demonstration city for citizen empowerment.

Finally, at the community level, considerable capacity is being expended to develop new systems and processes which support participation and problem solve the city's challenges from the ground up. Knowle West Media Centre's Bristol Approach³ and CoExist's Bristol Commons are good examples of this.

5. What might citizen participation look like?

In a panel event in April 2024, entitled '*Is it time for a permanent citizens assembly for Bristol?*', the Forum heard from six speakers that have been or are currently involved in citizen participation processes across the city:

- Labour's Cllr Ellie King, who led a participatory budgeting exercise in 2022
- Green Councillor Paula O'Rourke who co-led a citizens assembly in Bristol looking at climate change, transport and health in the wake of Covid⁴
- LaToyah McAllister, who is leading a citizens assembly for culture at Trinity
- Lachlan Ayles from the national Humanity Project which aims to embed citizen participation at the neighbourhood level
- Teresa Dillon, who runs Urban Hosts and aims to launch a city-wide conversation about the repair economy
- Kathy Fawcett who was representing XR, which includes citizens assemblies among its demands.

³ <https://www.bristolapproach.org/>

⁴ <https://www.ask.bristol.gov.uk/bristol-s-citizens-assembly-final-report>

The session was supported by Involve, a national organisation which helps cities and communities develop participatory processes. It concluded with a broader understanding of the wide array of models that can be used in different situations to include people in conversations about their city. A subsequent Bristol Urban Forum roundtable session with Paula O'Rourke, Lachlan Ayles and LaToyah McAllister also concluded that a single model approach would be inappropriate. Therefore, the Forum agreed to develop this draft civic participation framework and a set of principles that could serve as a discussion document with the community, council and the city's institutions. A glossary of terms is provided on Page x

6. Participation principles

The following principles provides a Terms of Reference for participatory processes in Bristol – an agreement between the organisers of participatory processes and the participants:

1. Opportunities to participate should be available to everyone in the city, even if not all processes (e.g. citizens assemblies) are available to all. Actions to ensure access could include remunerating participants for their time and expenses and providing childcare and transport services.
2. Participation should be creative, engaging and inclusive, designed for everyone to take fulfilment from the process
3. Although the recommendations that arise from participatory processes are advisory, where decision-makers deviate from recommendations, they must publish a response in explanation.
4. Participation should not be extractive – everyone who participates should be kept informed about what is being done with the views they have given and either see action as a result or justification for why action was not taken.
5. Opportunities to participate should be ongoing – anyone that has enjoyed contributing should be provided with ways to continue to do so.
6. Participation should be an end-to-end process, from agenda setting to decision-making.
7. Processes should recognise and mitigate for power differential where possible, not only between organisers and participants, but between participants. All that participate should have equal status and that status should be embedded in the design of all processes.
8. Processes should be neutral, apolitical and independent in design and execution
9. Processes should be regularly reviewed to ensure they continue to provide value to both participants and organisers.

Some of these principles are articulated in a real-world context overleaf, described by Dr Joanna Burch Brown, from Bristol Group Bridging Histories.

Trauma-informed approaches to participatory democracy

Bristol has signed up to become a “trauma-informed city”, as part of the One Bristol Plan. The Keeping Bristol Safe Partnership says that trauma-informed practice “[seeks to remove the barriers that those affected by trauma can experience when accessing care and services.](#)”

It is important that any forums for democratic participation reflect [principles of trauma-informed practice](#), which include 1) safety, 2) trust, 3) choice, 4) collaboration, 5) empowerment and 6) inclusivity. Traumatic experiences can lead to great insights from lived experience, which are important sources for growth for the whole community. We should design participatory contexts to be safe for people regardless of the trauma they are bringing to the room.

Certain traumatic life experiences can lead us to be more likely to opt out of the system; distrust authorities; distrust fellow community members; focus intensely on particular kinds of evidence; experience certain conversations as traumatic and triggering; be hypervigilant about exploitation or extraction; and experience changes in our communication, thinking, emotions and physical states if we get triggered. Often if we have been through traumatic experiences, we may have more need for grounding, initial trust-building before speaking, safety, control, freedom, individuality, and ability to define our own terms for participating.

We might imagine that democratic participation achieves values like empowerment and choice by definition, but this is not true. For instance, if we ask people to give up their time (sometimes arranging childcare and sacrificing paid work) in order to share their lived experience and ideas, but with no immediate benefit to the individual, this can feel extractive, re-traumatizing and disempowering. An important ongoing task for our city as we seek to create inclusive participation is to work with people of many backgrounds and social positions to co-design methods for participation that successfully embed the six principles for trauma-informed practice - safeguarding everybody and make sure trauma is never a barrier to democratic participation.

Consider some of these ideas for creating a non-extractive environment and increasing feelings of safety and self-determination: 1) Can you directly empower people to make some of the changes they want to see, for instance by giving trust-based, unrestricted micro-grants? Most people in communities dedicate a lot of time to mutual aid, and £500 can make a big difference. 2) Can you build in safety by opening with grounding and trust-building exercises, and closing with aftercare activities? 3) Can you pay delegates for the time and expertise they bring to the forum, and also for a period of rest and recovery time afterwards? 4) Can you find creative ways to honour peoples' individuality within the space? 5) Can facilitators receive trauma-training, to help them understand how to hold space in a safe way for participants? These and other steps can help create a more inclusive democracy.

Dr Joanna Burch-Brown
Senior Lecturer in Philosophy at University of Bristol
Co-Director of Bridging Histories

7. City Participation Framework

There are several governance processes that would benefit from greater levels of citizen participation. And these are set out in the framework below, including recommendations for the most appropriate participation structure:

Process	Notes	Participation structure
One City Boards	City-wide, thematic boards involving city institutions, WECA, the city council and other representative bodies. Annual conference and strategy for each board	Citizens juries to participate in parallel process for each theme, plus paid citizen representative to attend every board as liaison. Conference should be open to all citizens
Council budgeting	Annual budget setting process	Participatory budgeting process to advise council on citizen priorities for budgeting
Policy making, planning, etc	Council-led processes to agree policies on planning, adult social care, environmental, transport etc	Ad hoc citizens assemblies to focus on developing medium to long term recommendations, or permanent layer of scrutiny, with full sortition every six months
Commons-Public Partnerships	A council interface with commons within Bristol, enabling commoners to legally be responsible for the commons they are a part of, yet enabling collaboration with and oversight by the council; Mitigates extractivism as participation is matched by power and responsibility	Pilot schemes (low-risk commons e.g. allotments) being given commons status and a commons framework for management and governance that legitimises, empowers and makes visible the contribution of common and commoners
Area Committees	Council created across 9 areas in Bristol to discuss local issues and defray community infrastructure levy	Participatory budgeting and deliberative democracy
Single issue planning	Short-term and simple decision making	Online, tech-based and neighbourhood level citizens juries

applications, local decisions		
University civic policy	Non-council policy making that impacts the city (e.g. student accommodation expansion, civic university policy, reparative justice programmes etc)	Citizen juries or tech-based solutions.

The table above shows the opportunity to embed citizen participation at all levels of local governance, to achieve a range of outcomes. It is not an ‘all or nothing’ model but rather a range of options that may work to complement each other. However, how these forms of participation are used alongside one another must be considered in the context of practicality, cost and the desire to avoid duplication.

Other examples of city policymaking that would benefit from a formal, well organised engagement mechanism include those organisations that may be involved in the One City structure, but outside the council, such as the Universities and West of England Combined Authority.

Where participation can be equally as effective at the neighbourhood level as at the city level, finding the right existing mechanism to allow effective participation to occur is key. At the neighbourhood level, this would be the new Neighbourhood Councils, which are designed at this point in time with the ward councillors in charge of all decisions, including the defrayal of important Community Infrastructure Levy. Where there is no formalised power for citizens to influence decisions at this level, the committees may face the same fate as the last iteration of neighbourhood councils, which were expensive to run and poorly attended. Instead, it should be possible to develop engaging meetings, with real power for locals to decide how to spend local budgets, the opportunity to participate with tech-based solutions if it is not possible to attend, etc.

At the city-scale, aligning participatory practices with the One City themes would enable Bristolians to engage in the same discussions as the institutional stakeholders across the city, at the same level. The One City Boards are to be retained in the new structure and are to be applauded for involving organisations beyond the council, where place resilience is only achieved through collaboration and joint vision. However, the lack of opportunity for citizens to engage on an ongoing basis with these themes represents a clear design flaw, which can be addressed by designing citizen participation into board meetings, the conference and the ongoing conversation.

The suggestions above represent some of the clear opportunities to embed participatory practices into city decision-making, but there will be others. This framework is intended to provoke discussion about where such practices will be of most mutual benefit.

CASE STUDY: The Bristol Commons

In March 2023 Coexist launched The Bristol Commons. It is a growing movement of individuals, groups and organisations to build community prosperity through commoning. So far, over 750 people and 80 organisations have been involved in shaping strategic aims, exploring areas of opportunity, running working groups, participating in community gatherings and strategising how a commoning approach will deliver land justice, build community power and enhance community health and wealth.

At the centre of this movement is the desire for a culture of respect and reciprocity that enlivens and enhances all our lives, our city and our ecosystem. There is a shared recognition that the current system is broken, and a belief that now is a real opportunity for change. The Bristol Commons has been fostering an inclusive, accessible and collaborative movement with an unwavering dedication to commoning. Built into the principles and governance is a commitment to equality, diversity and creativity.

One of the key components in motion is creating a Commons–Public–Partnership. Coexist is working with a few organisations – including Praxis, Abundance and Slowmentum, as well as key commons thinkers such as David Bollier and Guy Standing – to explore what this would look like and in what areas we can work with the council to deliver genuine participatory democracy.

Within the framework of doughnut economics, Raworth highlights the contribution to provision made by the commons, but there is little work and exploration as to how this works, what best practices are, and how that economic contribution is articulated. Bristol has an opportunity to expand this understanding and develop the practice and principles of commons in local governance. This will significantly contribute to the decolonisation, decentralisation and democratisation of local governance.

Commons–Public–Partnerships offer visibility, oversight, opportunities for dialogue, collective decision-making, academic research and genuine community empowerment. Bristol is at the cusp of potentially quite radical change, and it is vital that commons and commoners are recognised and included within this evolution of our participatory democracy

8. Cost

Participatory practices require long-term investment to ensure they are delivered with a degree of quality. Following an exploratory process that seeks to establish the model of participation in the city, it will be possible to cost this with the help of Involve.

9. Conclusion

The Green Party is committed to developing participatory processes in Bristol. Designing those processes should be a participatory act in itself and the Bristol Urban Forum and others have the necessary reach to ensure that this model can be achieved appropriately.

This paper should be subject to internal discussion and external consultation with relevant community groups before a wider engagement process is designed.

Ben Stephenson
Bristol Urban Forum
July 2024

Glossary of terms

Citizen

There are many definitions of the term 'citizen'. Citizens in the context of this paper are residents of Bristol, but this does not preclude the participation of others, including business owners, workers and others that may spend a lot of time in the city.

Citizens Assembly

A citizens assembly is a body formed from citizens randomly selected to be representative of the population. It typically consists of 50–250 people who meet over multiple days or weeks. They learn about a complex policy issue from experts, deliberate together, and develop recommendations or decisions. Citizens assemblies are used to tackle major issues that impact the whole population.

'Institutionalised' Citizens Assemblies, according to the OECD are those which are embedded in the structures of governance.⁵

Citizens Jury

A citizens jury is similar to a citizens assembly but on a smaller scale, typically involving 12–24 randomly selected citizens. Like assemblies, they learn about an issue from experts, deliberate, and make recommendations. Citizens juries are often used for more localized issues.

Participatory Budgeting

Participatory budgeting is a process of democratic deliberation where community members directly decide how to allocate part of a public budget. It allows citizens to identify priorities and propose projects, which are then voted on to determine spending allocations.

Commons & Commoning

The commons is a living social system through which a community organise, manage and share together over time.

This includes physical resources, stewarded collectively over a prolonged period of time, such as land, water and buildings, and less tangible resources such as knowledge, wisdom and care.

[Living Definition for the Commons and Commoning](#)

⁵ <https://www.oecd.org/gov/open-government/eight-ways-to-institutionalise-deliberative-democracy.htm>

Deliberative Democracy

Deliberative democracy refers to an approach to decision-making that involves extensive reasoning, consultation, and citizen participation. It emphasizes informed public deliberation rather than simply voting, with the goal of producing legitimate and broadly accepted policies. Citizens assemblies, citizens juries, and participatory budgeting are all models of deliberative democracy.

The key principles of deliberative democracy include giving citizens adequate time to learn about issues from diverse sources, facilitated group discussions to consider different perspectives, and the ability for citizens to directly influence decisions through their deliberations and recommendations.

APPENDIX 1 – International Case Studies

vTaiwan

<https://info.vtaiwan.tw/>

vTaiwan is a decentralized open consultation process that combines online and offline interactions, bringing together Taiwan's citizens and government to deliberate on national issues. It serves as a model for People–Public–Private Partnerships (PPPP), involving government ministries, elected representatives, scholars, experts, business leaders, civil society organizations, and citizens in crafting digital legislation.

One of the many tools vTaiwan utilizes is Pol.is, a digital platform for opinion collection, to facilitate large-scale conversations and consensus building. This tool has been pivotal in achieving "rough consensus" on various policy issues at the national level, addressing scalability challenges in deliberative democracy. The vTaiwan process consists of four successive stages – proposal, opinion, reflection and legislation – supported by a selection of collaborative open source engagement tools.

Videos:

- What is vTaiwan <https://vimeo.com/259324525>
- BBC documentary – Can Taiwan Reboot Democracy?
<https://youtu.be/VbCZvU7i7VY>
- Digital Social Innovation to Empower Democracy | Audrey Tang |
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LscTx6DHh9I>

Decide Madrid

<https://decide.madrid.es/>

Citizen participation platform of the Madrid City Council

In Decide Madrid you can make proposals, vote in citizen consultations, propose, support or vote on projects with participatory budgets, decide municipal regulations and open debates to exchange opinions with other people.

The THIVIC Social Innovation Laboratory is the social innovation space of the Madrid City Council.

Seek to be a meeting point between experts, citizens and professionals to search for solutions to public problems and the development of new ideas.

THIVIC <https://decide.madrid.es/thivic> is oriented towards the following objectives:

- Act as a concentrator of social agents to be able to make proposals for the new social challenges of the Administration.

- Promote public innovation and intra-entrepreneurship, taking advantage of the knowledge and experience of City Council staff and promoting their creativity.
- Help prepare proposals that can serve as a basis for decision-making by the Madrid City Council from a plural and transparent perspective.

Decidim

<https://decidim.org/>

This is a digital platform for citizen participation used in Barcelona, New York, Helsinki, and Brazil. The Decidim Free Software Association is a democratic association for the governance of the Decidim community. We want to contribute to the democratisation of society through the construction of technology, methodologies, practices, standards, actions, narratives, and values, in a free, open, collaborative and reflective way.

You can use Decidim in a public or private organisation, with hundreds or thousands of potential participants, such as a city council, an association, a university, an NGO, a trade union, a neighbourhood association or a cooperative.

Lisboa Participa

<https://lisboaparticipa.pt/pt>

The Participation Portal of Lisbon City Council. It aims to:

- Remove obstacles and barriers to civic participation, testing and encouraging the adoption of innovative techniques and tools that facilitate the involvement of all audiences
- Promote the adoption of mechanisms for the participation of citizens and other entities active in the life of the city in the evaluation of the information made available, to collect suggestions for improvement and share good practices to promote transparency
- Establish a channel with the brand and communication area, which allows collecting ideas relevant to municipal management, expressed by citizens in the media
- Study, propose and support public consultation processes across the municipal structure.

G1000 – Belgium

<https://www.g1000.org/en>

G1000 is the Belgian platform for democratic innovation. The platform develops and supports new forms of citizen participation. It is active in municipalities, cities, regions and on national level and involved in various international networks.

'We aim to make Belgium the most credible, effective and inclusive democracy of Europe. How? By making democratic innovations such as sortition and deliberation the new norm in policymaking.

'Innovative methods, such as citizens' panels with random selection and deliberation, must be part of policymaking. We are working to ensure that municipalities and cities, regions and the federal state use them and that they are institutionalised.

'Participatory democracy needs the support of politicians, the media, civil society, businesses and of course the citizens themselves. We strive to strengthen this support.'

The International Observatory on Participatory Democracy (IOPD)

<https://www.oidp.net/en/>

is a space open to all cities in the world and all associations, organizations and research centres interested in learning about, exchanging impressions and applying experiences of participatory democracy on a local scale with the aim of deepening the roots of democracy in municipal government.

GOALS

- To be the worldwide centre of reference within the participatory democracy field.
- To create synergies between cities, organizations and research centres in order for them to think about the quality of democracy at the global level.
- To produce and improve the existing knowledge in the local participatory democracy field.
- To exchange experiences about democratic innovations in all regions of the world.
- To recommend policies to public administrations of the world, preferably local ones.

Iceland

Citizen participation in Iceland, a success?

<https://medium.com/the-hitchhikers-guide-to-digital-democracy/citizen-participation-in-iceland-a-success-86e27f425718>