

The Power of Community

Learning from Bristol's response to the Covid-19 pandemic



QUOTES OF NOTE



We're more embedded in the community, people know what we're about, who we are, whereas they didn't necessarily before."

Wendy, Henbury and Brentry Community Council



The government's definition of homelessness completely disregards the experiences of a huge portion of people that we see."

Maria, Bristol MAPS



Areas like Central Bristol and East Bristol, where access to open space is not quite as good, they have really re-discovered their local parks."

Ella Hogg, volunteer park co-ordinator
at Bristol City Council



Digital exclusion was here before Covid, and it will be there after Covid. What Covid did was to shine a spotlight on it – very, very focused for a period of time. The danger is that the spotlight moved, and so people think it's gone away. The challenge for policy makers, large organisations and community leaders, is to keep the focus and activity on digital exclusion, alongside all the other challenges those communities face."

John Bradford, DigiLocal



I lost my job so I ended up in food banks ... don't get me wrong, I appreciated [them] - but generally, I have to decide who's going to eat from the food bank because there's not enough for [all] of us to eat"

Hartcliffe group

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Foreword

Within a couple of weeks in March 2020, we went from occasional conversations about something happening a long way away to life altering conditions, almost overnight. We went from seeing friends and family in person to only seeing them on screens. Working time with colleagues seemed to expand and contract at the same time, while those daily human interactions we take for granted seemed a world away.

The global Covid-19 pandemic has impacted our lives in a thousand ways and, as we approach the second anniversary of the outbreak, I'm sure none of you will need reminding of how challenging the past two years have been.

But while everyone was trying to get used to the 'new normal', at Voscur we were also wondering how the voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) sector in Bristol had managed to adapt. How had change been implemented to help citizens in every community face the huge and very complex challenges presented by the pandemic?

No longer able to deliver many vital services by established means, how did our colleagues across the sector continue to fulfil their roles? And for those used to seeing community workers, volunteers and friendly neighbours on a regular basis, how did they manage?

We wanted to find out what we did as a sector, what we learned and what needs to be different as a result.

With funding from Research England and the Office for Students, we have been able to collaborate with academics and students from the University of Bristol in order to research these questions. Where possible, our researchers went out into the VCSE community to record the lived experiences of staff members, volunteers and service users. Where this wasn't possible, they used online surveys, phone calls and Zoom.

What they found was remarkable. Communities coming together to fulfil the needs of those suddenly cut off from 'normal' life; people donating what they didn't need (or even what they did need) so that others could eat, learn and work; innovation that ensured people were able to use their skills and experience for the good of others; and a newfound desire to spend as much time as possible enjoying the benefits of our green and open spaces.

These findings are just the beginning of some very important conversations. The many small victories that so many of us were part of need to grow and develop into major changes, rather than simply becoming stories of "what happened during Covid". While we may yearn for the end of restrictions and lockdowns, we must also learn from the outstanding work of the VCSE sector and celebrate the good that came out of the pandemic.

The task now is to work as a sector and city to ensure we can move forward and rebuild our lives and communities in sustainable, equitable ways. What was is gone. Together, we all now have a part to play in ensuring our new social reality is one grounded in equity, collaborative efforts, shared learning and shared resources.

I hope you find this report enlightening and useful in your work.

My thanks to the University of Bristol for their partnership and guidance throughout, our Policy & Information Officer Tom Burnett, and the Voscur team for their outstanding work during the pandemic.



Sandra Meadows MBE
Chief Executive Officer, Voscur

Introduction

The Inclusive Economy Initiative at the University of Bristol co-produces research with city region partners aimed at producing a low carbon, high inclusion, high democracy economy. We were very happy to be working with Voscur and the University's Professional Liaison Network on this Bristol Model project, funded by Research England and the Office for Students.

The Bristol Model programme consists of co-produced research projects designed in collaboration with external partner organisations. The projects enable our students to gain experience of social sciences research as 'research assistants'. Participating students work with experienced academics, bridging the gap between teaching, learning and research.

One of the underlying themes is exploring the process of knowledge exchange. This particular project – The Power of Community – is based on a form of action research where the knowledge transmission is shaped to deliver personal and shared learning that has the potential to create social change.

As you can see in this report, our participants and student researchers have reflected on their experiences and their reactions to recent changes. These reflections might be in response to a survey questionnaire or to interview questions. A commonly used part of our interview process was for the researchers to share the questions with the participants before their discussion so they could think about them. This itself sets up two forms of learning – first person ('I') and second person ('we') – as participant and student think about their experiences and then come together to share them.

Next, depending on how the exchange material is presented and disseminated, we create the potential for collective and group-based reflection. This opens the opportunity for third person or organisational ('them') learning that can lead to meaningful social change. The power of a research report like this therefore lies in its capacity to evidence and support public and group-based reflection and debate.

Another feature of the Bristol Model is to explore new ways of doing research that has its own rigour and integrity but is different to standard academic research. We believe that research can be done at pace and conducted by non-academics and still retain the validity of more traditional approaches. This is research that can form the basis of shared initiatives between an academic institution and local voluntary, community and social enterprise organisations. Research that can provide meaningful outcomes while avoiding the slow pace of traditional academic work which can lack the urgency required for solution orientated organisations.

We worked with relatively inexperienced undergraduate students as the main researchers. Their course content has given them some training in social research methods, and the other main criterion was that they had a passion for researching the topic and listening to the voices of their research participants. Our team of five were simply excellent in putting their training into practice and in respecting the experiences and the ideas of organisations and individuals who stepped up to participate in this work. We hope that, after reading this report, you agree.

Dr John McGoldrick & Professor Martin Parker
University of Bristol



Executive summary

This report is the outcome of pointing our novice social researchers towards Bristol's voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) sector; of asking them to engage with staff, volunteers and service users to highlight the experiences of living and working through the Covid-19 pandemic. Drawing upon the narratives offered by this community, we seek to celebrate their successes but also to reflect on what can be done better in the future.

And there is a lot to celebrate, with each of our research streams bringing to life the victories – both large and small – that our community have achieved since March 2020. These make for a positive read and say a lot about Bristol as a city, and of its large, active VCSE sector. They also honour the voices of our participants, honestly reflecting their opinions and assessments on what might be learned to improve outcomes within the sector. It is hoped our report will reach out to those who lead these organisations, those who volunteer, and those who influence strategy and policy within local authorities.

Each of the five research themes highlight recommendations, many of which intersect and overlap. The following themes rise loud and clear from this report:

Harness the collaboration and innovation we have seen

VCSE and partner organisations must harness and continue to support the innovation that jumps out of our reports. The examples of unconditional support and collaboration we see across all our five reports needs to be 'bottled' and nurtured. We need to ensure the relationships and lines of communication that were

opened between organisations are sustained. That we seize the opportunity for diverse groups to become active stakeholders within local and regional decision making, establishing our VCSE colleagues as co-designers of sector solutions. This will require a shared culture of even more openness and the avoidance of silo mentality.

Empower and invest in our voluntary and community organisations

The commitment we have seen will be even further facilitated if our sector members feel they have a place at the table where strategy, policy, resource allocation and funding processes are shaped. We therefore seek a greater sense of democracy within the sector, such that our members and colleagues have meaningful opportunity to co-design processes and solutions, including those 'owned' by local authorities.

There is clearly a vital role here for VCSE organisations and grant funding sources, one that must be played alongside Bristol City Council's One City Plan. The city's Citizens' Assembly and food equality initiatives are good examples of how this can be developed.

Review and redesign VCSE sector funding processes

Many of our participants point to the complexities of third sector funding processes. The focus on project-specific funding can be unhelpful for organisations with multiple roles but inadequate resources. The specialist understanding and organisational capabilities that are often required for effective funding applications are often beyond the reach of small organisations. The mutual aid groups that have helped so many during the pandemic certainly had the good will and energy to pursue their goals, but often felt thwarted by a system that relies on time consuming applications and specialist knowledge.

Support the wellbeing of our service providers

The risk of burnout is highlighted on these pages, as those working and volunteering within the VCSE sector have taken on the pressures of providing services for their users during unprecedented times. As a sector, our own wellbeing needs to be explicitly factored in. Larger, more established organisations sometimes have the capacity and resources to support their staff in this way, however, smaller and newer organisations can be far more vulnerable. Clearly, we need to achieve a situation where colleagues feel they are supported, respected and have breathing space for balance in their lives.

Learn from lockdown to help solve the homelessness crisis

Our homelessness report describes how the 'Everyone In' initiative largely succeeded during the first lockdown. Collaboration between those working and volunteering in homelessness and organisations such as restaurants, taxi services and others were hugely successful. But while some legacy benefits continue, as we enter this 'post-pandemic' stage there is the risk of these slowly unravelling.

Several short-term shelter providers have closed their facilities to pursue better quality, more secure and supportive solutions. A long-term consequence of the pandemic is likely to be the repurposing of commercial office and hotel space within the city. This creates the opportunity for longer-term accommodation that offers Bristol's homeless a permanent space with associated support services. Collaborative funding between the local authority, VCSE providers and other investment streams is there to be pursued.

Fully implement the Feeding Bristol strategy

One of Bristol City Council's main areas of progress in tackling the insecurity many feel around food is the food equality initiative it has sponsored. The project is coming to a critical phase of its strategy formulation. It has been a far-reaching research project that has included input from an extensive list of representative community groups. We are immensely grateful to Feeding Bristol and their partners in allowing us to use extracts of their report – a good example of the collaboration which our city fosters.

More resources, more investment please

The cry for more resources and funding for the VCSE world leaps out from each of the research streams. At one level it is obvious, if we are to have any hope of closing the social inequalities we face in our society we need more resources to be allocated toward them, but it is more nuanced than simply asking for 'More!' Within Bristol we need to re-assess how we prioritise the resources we collectively access. Possibly, the key catalyst toward finding such a rethink is in recreating and sustaining the urgency for collaboration and mutual support and of shared hopes. A new forum to democratise the VCSE sector could be an important starting point



Above: helping with social distancing in Queen Square
Previous page: Negat Hussein, Refugee Women of Bristol.

Recommendations

The following recommendations summarise those described within each of the chapters.

■ Volunteering p10-15

Democratise the voluntary sector

The pandemic has underlined the expertise and energy that local groups have; they now need to be offered a place at decision making tables.

Invest in community groups

Groups that flourished as a result of the pandemic need more secure foundations from which to operate. This could include more accessible funding streams, improved training opportunities and better sector-wide communication.

Promoting collaboration

The pairing of smaller, more agile groups with larger, better resourced organisations can be a winning formula. This must go beyond the inclusion of smaller organisations as ‘bid candy’ on the funding applications submitted by larger organisations.

Improve wellbeing support

Pandemic burnout is still visible in the VCSE sector today. Concerns around our colleagues’ mental health must be taken seriously.

■ Homelessness p16-20

What is homelessness?

Nobody in Bristol should be unsure or fearful of where they lay their head each night. Understanding of the many meanings of homelessness needs to be improved. Those we see living on the streets are a tiny fraction of the number of people who are impacted by this scourge.

Dignity and privacy

Those living under the shadow of homelessness must be able to live in the way the rest of us take for granted. Opportunities for homelessness organisations to take on empty buildings and vacant land must be explored with the council and local grant makers.

Work to improve sector/local authority relations

Short term changes brought about by the pandemic – such as Everyone In – showed how successful partnership can be. However, many in the homelessness sector expressed frustration at their relationship with Bristol City Council, making some sort of ‘reset’ desirable.

New partnerships

The pandemic enabled partnerships between organisations that had never worked together before, which further helped increase understanding of what homelessness means in Bristol. Homelessness needs to become a subject that many more Bristol businesses and organisations think about in their corporate and social responsibility strategies.

Support for those working in the sector

As homelessness figures rise, so do staff and volunteer stress levels. Sector resilience will be greatly enhanced with coordinated and resourced mental health support.

■ Open space p21-25

Ensuring there is resource for our shared spaces

Short term funding is not sufficient, what is needed is long-term investment in green, open spaces. Better management of these open spaces, along with ideas for investment from other revenue streams, would be welcomed by many who volunteer their time to care for them.

Recognise the link between open space and health

Whether exercising, growing food or spending time with nature, public open spaces should be accessible to everyone in Bristol. The parks and areas of open space that many have (re)discovered during lockdown should be an integral part of all our daily lives.

Increasing public participation

Friends groups have shown the eagerness that many have for looking after their local patch. The city council's Future Parks Project, as well as initiatives such as Your Park, should aid and improve how all Bristolians use their open spaces.

Finding your green space

Many Bristol residents are unaware of, or feel unable to visit, their local open spaces. Local signage and communication to help guide people towards these spaces should be prioritised.

■ **Digital exclusion** p26-30

Treat digital as a utility

In a city that boasts more tech companies than any other outside London, all Bristolians, wherever they live and whatever their circumstances, should have access to fast, secure broadband.

Investment in equipment, skills and community spaces

Lockdown showed how vital access to the digital world is. Without decent WiFi or access to spaces where computers are available, people are unable to learn, work and move on. With so many services, cost savings and information sources now online, those with no access to the advantages that digital brings will fall further behind those who are connected.

Working with users to co-design services

When it comes to access to council services, thankfully one size fits all is a thing of the past. However, when these services are described as 'a minefield' to get through, there is clearly still work to be done.

Stop relying on goodwill

Piecemeal donations from the public have undoubtedly helped during the pandemic. However, in order to ensure the sustainability of digital access, more companies need to factor donating their digital hardware into their corporate and social responsibilities.

■ **Food inequality** p31-36

Access and availability

Not everyone in the city is able to reach affordable, nutritious or culturally appropriate food. Improving travel options for food shoppers and ensuring that everyone can prepare food in suitable surroundings will help to improve both access and diet.

Communication

Many living in Bristol are unaware of food services that are available to them; there needs to be improved information about food banks, food clubs, cookery skills courses, pop up kitchens and more.

Education

Better food options and skills are needed for a number of groups, including young people, the homeless, refugees and asylum seekers, men and older people living on their own. Cookery skills provision in local community centres are a way of increasing knowledge and bringing people together to eat and celebrate food.

Growing food

Community gardens have sprung up across Bristol over the past few years. Improving public access to land for growing food and encouraging those with knowledge and skills to pass these on can help to reduce the cost of the weekly shop and bring communities together for the good.

Decision making

Ensure green space that can be used to grow food remains this way. Maintaining access to allotments and community gardens should be uppermost in councillors' minds when considering planning applications.



Volunteering

The local, voluntary groups that sprung up around Bristol since March 2020 have been a lifeline for many. **Hal Arnold-Forster** investigates how these informal groups played a vital role in ensuring residents were looked out for during the pandemic, and how their work can contribute to the city's voluntary, community and social enterprise sector in the future.

Volunteering became front page news during the pandemic, with calls for volunteers often yielding impressive results. More than 750,000 signed up for the NHS volunteer scheme, while 9,000 applied to help via 'Can do Bristol'. At the same time, many volunteered their time through newly-founded mutual aid groups and other self-organised, community groups. At the time of writing, 4,300 of these groups were registered in the UK, with 50 of these in Bristol.

These grassroots, community-level groups played a vital role. Their organisational flexibility, which gave them a great deal of agility, combined with their in-depth knowledge of local communities, allowed them to uncover and address local needs in the earliest days of the pandemic. Even before the first lockdown was announced in March 2020, many communities had organised food deliveries, prescription pick-ups and neighbourhood befriending. Once local authorities and established voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) organisations had co-ordinated their responses, community-level voluntary groups remained indispensable, often filling gaps in pre-Covid provision.

However, these groups rarely achieved such success alone. For all the agility these groups possess, they often lacked the resources and infrastructure of established

organisations. As such, they have benefitted greatly from facilitative relationships with larger organisations and local authorities, which provided community groups with access to resources and advice while granting them the discretion to use their local expertise and close-to-the-ground capacity as they saw fit. These partnerships have often been key in allowing groups to sustain or scale up their services.

Volunteering during the pandemic: Research findings

Those who took part in this research spanned a wide range of organisations from the VCSE sector in Bristol. Most were volunteers from Covid response groups working at the community level, however, this research also included participants from more established community organisations, city-wide VCSE organisations and the city council.

THE POWER OF COMMUNITY

When the pandemic began, many residents across Bristol were placed in precarious situations, often faced with isolation and insecure access to essential supplies. In

response, mutual aid groups and other voluntary Covid response groups popped up across the city, while many pre-existing community groups pivoted towards Covid support. These groups put their in-depth knowledge of their communities to use, providing essential help at a localised level. While Covid support typically involved food provision, picking up prescriptions and befriending services, the work of these groups was ultimately defined by the needs of the community.

“We kind of did what everybody did and responded to the need of our residents... we matched those residents with volunteers around picking up prescriptions, doing shopping. And then we also tapped into... an organisation providing befriending and social prescribers to help provide more in-depth support.” Tracy, Eastside Community Trust

Perhaps the greatest strength of Bristol’s informal community-level voluntary groups was their on-the-ground capacity and organisational agility. These attributes allowed these groups to identify and meet need within their communities in the earliest days of lockdown.

“[When we started] ... the council was still coordinating whatever their response was going to be, which was too late for people who needed help immediately.”
Becky, BS3 Covid-19 Response

Being able to act quickly was one advantage such groups had. The Greater Stockwood Alliance were preparing to launch as a community development organisation in May 2020 however, when the pandemic hit, they quickly mobilised to provide Covid-related support in Stockwood (an area with a significant elderly demographic). Their quick action filled a gap that could have left vulnerable people without support.

“By the end of March, we’d already filled up our WhatsApp [volunteer] group with 80 people... we had a dedicated phoneline, a dedicated email and we’d already started getting leaflets out... we went from being a group with no activity to coordinating a ward-level response within the space of two weeks.”
Sam, Greater Stockwood Alliance

Several participants noted that this agility was invaluable in allowing them to immediately identify and help people.

“I had a lady contact me, she was having cancer treatment and had kids... she said ‘I’m waiting for a wheelchair, I cannot get out without one. Is there anything you can do to help?’... within two hours a wheelchair, free of charge, was delivered to her door.” Representative from Our Whitchurch and Hengrove Community Group

But despite their success these groups also encountered challenges, chief among which was burnout; the intensity of demand created a workload that was a huge amount to ask of unpaid volunteers.

“One organisation had 150 volunteers in the initial lockdown and now they’re down to four... there was a really hard point where people were like ‘enough is enough. I can’t go on’.” Lucy, Feeding Bristol

While some community organisations were able to provide pastoral and mental health support to volunteers and staff, all research participants described the available mental health support for volunteers and staff as insufficient. In many cases, newly formed groups that were unable to provide support for their volunteers lost a lot of this help.

Building on community engagement

Despite these challenges, many participants expressed their intent and optimism to build on the community engagement brought about by the pandemic. While some groups have dissipated and volunteering rates have dropped since the first lockdown, it would be wrong to say things have ‘returned to normal’. Even where groups have stopped operating, their work has left behind swathes of often new connections within and between communities, creating a new and strengthened foundation for other organisations within the voluntary and community sector to build on.

And while some groups working in Covid-response have faded away, the pandemic has simultaneously led to the formation of brand-new community groups. Several Covid-response groups are currently working to develop their efforts into ongoing community groups.

“There was no physical or online focal point in Hengrove and Whitchurch... we wanted to be the glue of the community. We said, for all of the awful things that have happened, let’s try to make something good come of this.” Representative from Our Whitchurch and Hengrove Community Group

In other cases, the pandemic has allowed smaller, pre-existing community groups to gain a trust within their communities that typically takes years to develop. The intensity of the pandemic and the urgency of the services these groups provided has afforded them great credibility within their communities and, consequently, a unique opportunity to build on their work and further embed themselves as core components of collective community life.

“We’re more embedded in the community, people know what we’re about, who we are, whereas they didn’t necessarily before.”
Wendy, Henbury and Brentry Community Council

CASE STUDY:

BS3 Covid-19 Response and BS3 Community

BS3 Covid-19 Response - an organisation that quickly gained a volunteer database of 1,100 and 5,000 followers on Facebook - provide an elucidatory example of what is possible when community-level voluntary groups are supported by more established organisations.

The group was able to assist BS3 residents in the very earliest days of the pandemic, and soon after was contacted by BS3 Community, a local development charity, asking if they could help in any way.

Working together allowed the groups to play to their respective strengths while reducing pressure on the other. The voluntary capacity of BS3 Covid-19 Response allowed it to handle the large numbers of shopping and prescription collection requests while BS3 Community, with its safeguarding procedures and social prescribers, were able to take on befriending and cases involving more complex social needs.

With funding from Action Greater Bedminster, BS3 Covid-19 Response were also able to print leaflets in Somali and Polish. This kind of reach was crucial in allowing them to identify and fill gaps in council service provision.

“We were amazed at how well it worked and that’s why I think I came to the point that BS3 community and the admin team said ‘we have to carry this on. This is too good a thing not to sustain’.” Jackie, BS3 Covid-19 Response

After the success of their work throughout the first lockdown, this led to conversations around how the work of BS3 Covid-19 Response might be continued past the pandemic. As a result of this partnership, the group is now responsible for the befriending service, a local helpline, a food club, a bereavement support group and the enhanced volunteer database (volunteers with DBS checks and safeguarding training), offering a powerful example of what supporting and sustaining volunteer-led community groups can look like.

“We’ve now got a bit more credibility in the community, which allows us to then perhaps take on some bigger projects.”

Sam, Greater Stockwood Alliance

While several community-level voluntary groups described their desire to build on achievements from the past 18 months, participants from larger VCSE organisations and local authorities reported that the pandemic had shifted their thinking around community groups and their role in Bristol.

“During the pandemic... there was an understanding that there is real value in working closer with grassroots organisations and with communities. We have continued and incorporated that as a fundamental core thing that we do, and I don’t envisage that changing anytime soon.”

Lucy, Feeding Bristol

“What the pandemic showed people in the council was, ‘look at the community, they’ve done it!’ We’ve just fitted our resources around them to support what they are doing. It’s not about us, they can mobilise themselves. It really has showed the worth and value of community, because it wasn’t really valued, and I think that’s changed opinion about that... hopefully that will provide additional resources or more co-design and collaboration in the future.” Representative from Bristol City Council
Community Development Team

Indeed, the pandemic has highlighted just how much Bristol’s community groups are capable of. Almost all participants mentioned their desire to better integrate community-level voluntary groups into decision making processes within the VCSE sector. These groups possess detailed understandings of their communities and drawing on this can only enrich and enhance the VCSE sector in Bristol.

Collaboration, support and funding

Almost all participants mentioned collaboration as key in strengthening their efforts, in some cases allowing groups to scale up operations dramatically. Henbury and Brentry Community Council’s partnership with FareShare, the UK’s national network of charitable food redistributors, helped them get their food delivery scheme off the ground, allowing them to deliver 79,000 meals across BS10 since the pandemic began.

“We joined the FareShare scheme... and that’s when we really started to be able to support people with food properly.”

Wendy, Henbury and Brentry Community Council



Please recognise the power of local engagement... this pandemic has highlighted that there are so many people in the local community who are willing to help and have great views. They're on the ground and know what will work and won't work, so engage with them and make sure that they're actually listened to."

Other participants credited these collaborations as important in sustaining services such that residents were not left in the lurch. St Mary Redcliffe started an emergency food bank during the pandemic, working in conjunction with Faithspace and the North Bristol Foodbank. While St Mary Redcliffe is no longer involved in running the foodbank, these links allowed the foodbank to continue under Faithspace's management.

"[The food bank] is still going on, but it's been taken over by Faithspace and has evolved to better suit resident needs. Instead of volunteers packaging and delivering food parcels, residents can now come and choose the foods that they need."

Aggy, St Mary Redcliffe

Community-level voluntary groups were also supported by larger, established organisations in ways that were more administrative, for example by adjusting internal processes to make it easier to respond to the needs of smaller community-level groups. Quartet, for instance, pared down the administrative burdens of their funding application process to reduce turnaround time and become a more accessible source of funding. This was particularly helpful for voluntary groups with limited experience of grant application processes.

"[The pandemic] accelerated change in terms of our understanding and practices around power dynamics and making organisations jump through hoops... we're being much more led by what groups need rather than our processes."

Lucy, Quartet Community Foundation

Quartet has also been able to help in other ways, for example matching free resources with those in need through pro bono support (see page 15).

Bristol City Council worked with partners to set up 23 Covid-19 Community Hubs across the city. This way the council was able to match requests for support from the We Are Bristol helpline and volunteers from Can Do Bristol to their local community hubs. This model, fusing community expertise and council resources, provides a promising framework for

supporting Bristol's communities in the future.

However, experiences of this system have been mixed, with several participants noting teething problems in its pandemic infancy. Though participants generally acknowledged that the council was facing a very tricky situation, some community groups reported teething problems at a particularly difficult time (during the first lockdown), the consequences of which were invariably felt directly by those on the ground receiving council referrals.

"It was really frustrating because we were literally having to phone every single referral that came through to double check it was what it said on the spreadsheet... it could have been done at source and it would have saved me 2-3 hours a day." Representative from BS3 Community

However, it is important to note that, despite some difficulties, most participants felt that collaboration and mutual support blossomed in Bristol during the pandemic, providing important benefits to smaller community groups and larger organisations alike.

"There's a sweet spot there between the capacity and energy brought by mutual aid-type groups, all of that volunteering power and all of that reach, brought in to sit alongside community anchors which might be doing really great work that maybe had not had the engagement on quite that scale." Lucy, Quartet Community Foundation

When asked about support needed moving forward, funding was mentioned by all but one participant. Though different issues were raised surrounding funding, most frequently participants suggested that the current funding landscape is too project specific. Participants noted the detrimental effects this can have on group longevity, forcing them to hop between small pots of project specific funding, while making it harder to plan for the long-term.

"There is a great lack of core funding... we should be given a little bit more scope and leeway... to make us more sustainable in the future."

Wendy, Henbury and Brentry Community Council

The pandemic has shown how powerful the local knowledge of community groups can be in identifying and meeting need within their communities, and several participants felt that greater discretion and less restrictive grant conditions would put them in a better position to put their expertise to use.

A further issue around funding that was frequently raised was that of collaborative funding opportunities. While most noted the potential strengths of partnership grants, many expressed concerns about how they play out

in practice. Several participants mentioned the tendency of collaborative funding opportunities to foster superficial collaborations; even more that they often produce uneven working relationships.

“I’ve seen partnership grants work really well... but often you get one organisation that’s actually leading on it, they take the majority of the money... and the others are just pencilled on there so that they can apply for the grant.”

Representative from National Food Service Bristol

As such, while incentivising collaboration was felt to be an important goal, most participants said that there needed to be some reconsideration of approaches to incentivising partnership working if these projects are to foster the long-term partnerships and networks they are designed to.

Several participants also expressed frustration at the lack of funding for embryonic groups. Established funding procedures (even small grant processes) are often beyond the administrative capacity of volunteer-led groups that are just starting out, with no experience of applying for funding

Recommendations

DEMOCRATISING THE VOLUNTARY SECTOR

Almost all participants wanted to ensure that community-level voluntary groups had a seat at the table in decision-making processes. The pandemic has underlined the immense value of these groups’ (hyper)local expertise. As well as helping to recognise their work, involving community-level groups in decision-making processes will also strengthen the efforts of local authorities and organisations across the sector.

There have been encouraging developments in this area: Bristol City Council recently trialled the Citizens’ Assembly, which gave a voice to individuals from around the city, while Feeding Bristol and others are currently working on a food strategy for Bristol (see page 32), which is being developed in consultation with community-level groups. However, more can be done to encourage voices ‘from the ground up’. Whether this involves more participatory budgeting/grant-making processes, or the establishment of a democratic body/forum that enables community groups to voice their opinions in a deliberative context, there is clearly an appetite to better incorporate community groups into decision-making processes.

INVESTING IN COMMUNITY GROUPS

Over the pandemic, many community-level voluntary groups have built up a credibility that they now have the chance to build on. Much of this will be dependent on the availability of funding and other support. Several participants expressed a need for funding that granted

more discretion. Grants with greater leeway put community groups in a stronger place to identify and meet the community needs as they arise, rather than having to fit their work around grant conditions.

It was felt that overly prescriptive funding threatens the long-term viability of such groups when they are faced with little other choice but to hop between funding streams to stay afloat. Several participants also mentioned the need for more accessible funding opportunities for smaller groups trying to establish themselves, particularly in the wake of their pandemic work.

Although the second round of the Bristol Impact Fund – council funding which offers four-year grant funding to VCSE organisations and smaller 18-month grants to encourage new ideas and involvement from more diverse communities – was based around investing in community infrastructure, even the smaller grants were beyond the capacities of several grassroots groups that were part of this research.

Finally, supporting these groups may not solely come in the form of funding. Several smaller community groups commended the training that was made freely available through organisations like Voscur; training in areas such as safeguarding, funding applications and managing volunteers are often of great help to emergent groups.

PROMOTING COLLABORATION

Where smaller grassroots groups worked alongside established VCSE organisations, the combination of smaller groups’ local expertise and on-the-ground capacity and larger organisations’ structures and resources often produced impressive results. These partnerships have prevented many groups from being overwhelmed, and where long-term collaborations have developed, these have often helped smaller organisations establish themselves and integrate into Bristol’s network of voluntary organisations.

Where possible and mutually beneficial, concerted efforts should be made to engage with community-level voluntary groups to see where opportunities for collaboration lie. While partnership funding opportunities have been cited as a potential method of incentivising collaborative working, participants expressed concerns about how these work in practice. As such, developing new approaches to collaborative funding opportunities might be usefully explored.

IMPROVED WELLBEING SUPPORT

While the end of furlough undoubtedly played a significant part in the reduction of volunteer numbers, the impact of burnout on volunteers cannot be underestimated. Some interviewed mentioned that the effects of pandemic workloads were still visible in their teams today. Accordingly, improved mental health provision for voluntary groups and organisations will both help support staff and volunteers and ensure these groups are sustainable in the long term.

CASE STUDY: Bristol's City Funds pro bono service

Connecting businesses and the VCSE sector, the City Funds pro bono service enables local businesses to advise VCSE partners on a broad range of vital business needs, including HR, IT, legal, building, financial, creative and web, business planning, and mentoring support.

One element of the broader Bristol City Funds initiative, the City Funds pro bono brokerage is a partnership between Bristol and Bath Regional Capital, Bristol City Council, Quartet Community Foundation and Voscur, and works to strengthen organisations helping to solve some of the biggest challenges facing Bristol.

The brokerage offers businesses a concise understanding of the challenges and opportunities that Bristol's charity sector faces, developing insight and knowledge of the communities where businesses operate.

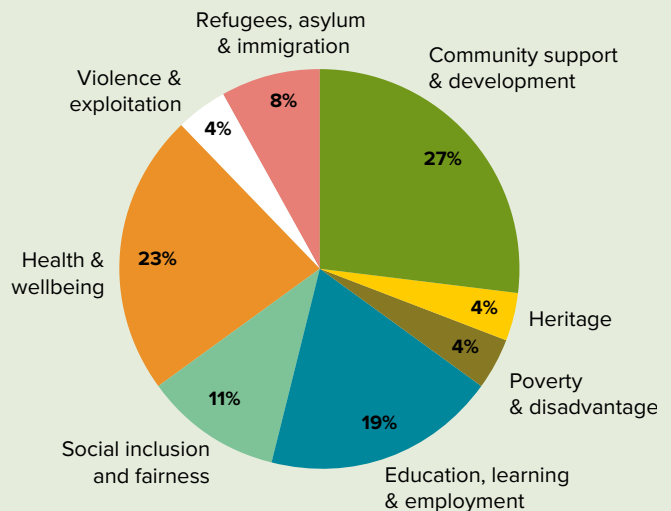
Year one impact

Through the service, in the 12 months to October 2021 pro bono support and resources was provided to 36 organisations, equivalent to over £100,000 of services. Of these, 28 were provided with pro bono support while two were supported by Voscur's development officers.

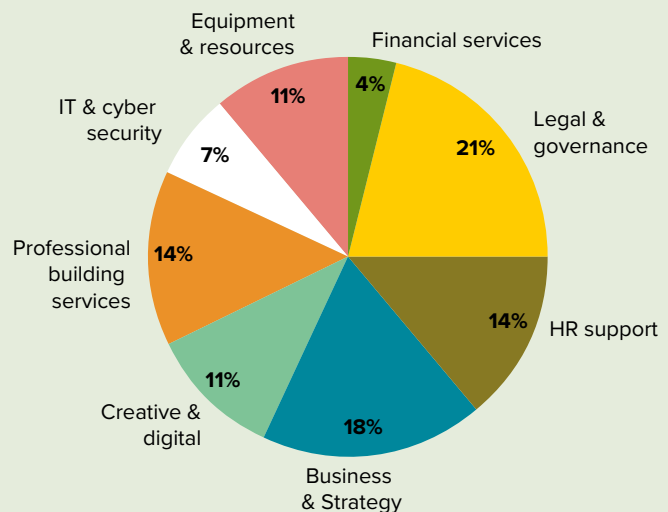


The pro bono support has been of huge help; our own ignorance and the cost of professional fees has always been a blocker on us getting our legal side sorted. At a stroke, the pro bono matching service has overcome this. What you're doing is really valuable for charities like us, and I've been really impressed with the speed, professionalism and friendliness of your communications."

WHO DID THE SERVICE HELP?



WHAT DID THEY NEED?



To find out more, contact the City Funds pro bono service: www.bristolcityfunds.co.uk

Homelessness

When we were told to stay at home with the first lockdown of March 2020, most of us were able to do so secure in the knowledge that we had a roof over our heads. However, as **Tahlia Jurkovic** found, for those who were sleeping rough, squatting, sofa surfing, threatened by domestic violence or living in other insecure conditions, the pandemic added to already considerable worries. However, this research also showed that many organisations used the crisis as an opportunity to adapt and expand their services to reach more people, and to provide more than just advice.

For people in unsafe or non-existent housing arrangements, following government public health advice during the pandemic proved far more difficult. The Covid-19 pandemic has resulted in drastic changes to social interactions for everyone, and this has led to changes to services, support, and spaces that are heavily utilised by those struggling to find adequate housing. The move to working from home also meant that many homelessness charities ceased their face-to-face services – facilities and support which is often a lifeline for those without a home.

According to the 2019 National Rough Sleeper Count, Bristol ranked third among local authorities in England for numbers of rough sleepers. As alarming as this may be, it only scratches the surface of the much wider spread of homelessness in the city. A 2017 Shelter report on homelessness found that 97% of homelessness in Bristol did not involve rough sleeping. Many participants in this study echoed these findings, commenting on the expansion of the 'hidden' homeless in recent years, a situation that has been exacerbated by the pandemic.

Many people experiencing homelessness, including those who are 'sofa surfing', at risk of domestic violence, in unsafe homes, squatting, van and tent dwelling, or generally in insecure and unstable accommodation, are not visible to the general population, and often do not appear in official local and national counts of the homeless. Often, charities and service providers are left to manage the large numbers of people who do not fit into government definitions of homelessness but are still at risk of or experiencing issues finding, securing and maintaining a home.

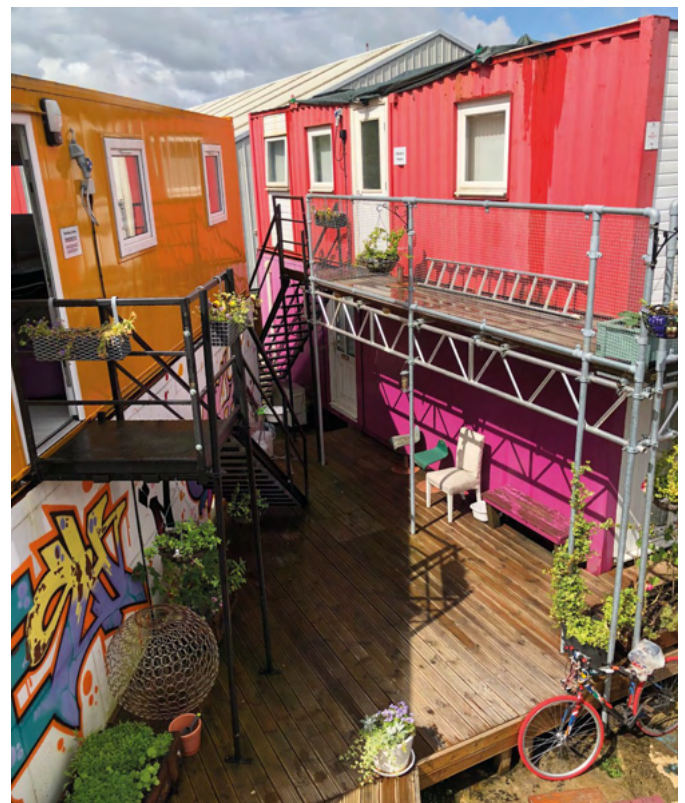
"The government's definition of homelessness completely disregards the experiences of a huge portion of people that we see." Maria, Bristol MAPS

In March 2020, the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government announced a national strategy to bring rough sleepers off the streets, guarding against the spread of Covid-19 by housing those in need in unused hotels and hostels. This strategy, named 'Everyone In', was mostly hailed as a success for the homeless and, according to the Bristol City Council Joint Strategic Needs Assessment, reduced the numbers of rough sleepers to 43 by March 2021.

However, the numbers of homeless people in temporary and emergency accommodation have increased substantially. The number of people living in temporary accommodation in Bristol has increased by 330% compared to pre-pandemic levels, with numbers being bumped up after the end of each lockdown. Organisations participating in this research echoed these findings, stating that their referrals and support requests have increased dramatically.

"I've had young people that will be on my [waiting] list for a year [...] no-one's moving on."

Chris, 1625 Independent People



Help Bristol's Homeless, Bedminster



Many of us will have seen tents in our local parks

Findings

The research undertaken for this report offers an insight into the journey through homelessness in Bristol and was undertaken through interviews with those working in homelessness services and with homeless people themselves. The following section describes these findings.

Creativity and innovation

In alignment with the health and safety guidelines introduced at the outset of the pandemic, services including in-person drop-in clinics, shelters and dorms were closed within a matter of days. Organisations had to quickly formulate new ways of working to continue to meet the needs of their service users. In addition, the change to home working for staff was a huge challenge for most organisations. However, many saw benefits for workers and service users alike.

Harriet from homeless advice service CHAS noted that remote working had many benefits for employees, including saving time by not having to travel to other organisations' offices, as well as ensuring employees felt safe from the virus. She commented that this is something CHAS will continue to do into the future.

"It has made us come up with new and effective ways of working with other organisations." Harriet, CHAS

Commenting on the switch to home working, Anne-Marie from LBQTQ+ youth homelessness charity AKT notes how some organisations have adapted by offering their services online. With many of their service users living in rural areas outside Bristol, AKT's expansion of online services was beneficial for those worried about going into a city, spending money, or speaking face to face to a support worker.

"It hasn't been all negative by any means, I think that organisations have had to look at different ways of engaging young people ... it has worked quite well."
Anne-Marie, AKT

CASE STUDY: Cheers Drive

The 'Everyone In' campaign, which reportedly housed 90% of the nation's rough sleepers through the first lockdown, was extended with extra funding in Bristol and ran up until mid-2021, with some hotels housing the most vulnerable homeless populations until July. This unique situation provided an opportunity for organisations to innovate in order to meet the many needs of these hotel residents.

"It became clear that as part of the 'Everyone In' initiative [...] that food was needed because other food provision that people experiencing homelessness normally accessed had closed."
Steven, Caring in Bristol

The free food delivery service Cheers Drive was set up by longstanding Bristol homelessness charity Caring in Bristol, in response to the need for residents housed in hotels, and therefore without access to cooking facilities, to have access to regular, healthy meals. Caring in Bristol saw gaps in provision, reached out to partners across the city and mobilised their volunteers to start delivering food to those who were now housed in hotels.

"We were able to do that project [Cheers Drive] because of relationships we had with the caterers and food suppliers and restaurateurs. And in a way it kind of came from them as well, because they suddenly had a lot of staff that couldn't do anything, a lot of food that was going to go to waste, so it was putting two and two together." Steven, Caring in Bristol

"I think Cheers Drive has provided us something like 28-30,000 meals over the pandemic. And before last March it didn't even exist. It's been incredible."
Brian, Golden Key

By thinking creatively, Cheers Drive was able to offer thousands of meals to residents in hotels and provided much needed support to residents. In October 2021, Cheers Drive is still able to call upon 150 volunteers and has so far delivered over 160,000 meals.

Partnership and collaboration

Organisations innovated by seeking out and supporting others in the sector and as a result expanded on what they were able to do for service users.

Homelessness charity Julian Trust ran a night shelter before the pandemic, which then had to be closed due to Covid restrictions. After the first lockdown began, Julian Trust gave those who were part of Caring in Bristol's Cheers Drive initiative access to their kitchens and financial donations (see Cheers Drive case study). They also pivoted their volunteers to assist St Mungo's in helping homeless people who were now in the hotels. Despite not being able to offer their services directly, Julian Trust invested in other services, allowing them to flourish.

"What we then did was start to think creatively about what we can do in the absence of the usual service ... through facilities, volunteers and cash, we found outlets to help those who needed it in a new way, so we had to think quite creatively." Dush, Julian Trust

The hotels that were used to house the homeless are another example of successful collaboration. An anonymous participant who managed one of the hotels, felt that having multiple organisations in one place to support the homeless was hugely beneficial for those accessing the services, because of the ease it provided.

"This was about using it as an opportunity to get people in ... [giving them] a space to really access services in a way that they might not have done previously."
Anonymous, Council commissioned service

New partnerships were also developed as a result of the pandemic. Rachael from refugee and asylum seeker support organisation Bristol Hospitality Network commented that their local café became involved in food provision and delivery and collaborated with them to deliver food to families that they support.

"There have also been some really interesting new partnerships around food provision, for example the development of partnerships with people in the food sector who previously maybe didn't know much about asylum seekers or refugees."
Rachael, Bristol Hospitality Network

Missed opportunities were mentioned by some participants, especially from those services who moved their services entirely online. These services are now transitioning to a blended approach to meet the needs of service users who cannot access technology, and to strengthen partnerships between agencies.

"I'm sure there are some missed opportunities in the last year, where if we'd been at a face-to-face event or a face-to-face community advice session or outreach session, we would have built more links with other organisations or strengthened the links that we already have." Harriet, CHAS

Despite some organisations finding it difficult to forge new partnerships, most participants expressed a desire to continue with collaborative working post pandemic. Chris, who works for Brighter Places housing association, an organisation with close ties to the homelessness sector in Bristol, noticed the increased drive for working together as a response to the changes to services and hopes that determination will continue.

"There is that passion to maintain that relationship with the homelessness sector and work creatively."
Chris, Brighter Places

Requests for future support

Citing the numbers of people in temporary or emergency accommodation, nearly everyone spoken with in this research stressed the need for more social housing to be built and managed by local authorities.

Closely tied in with these conversations were requests for more affordable housing.

"We need more social housing in Bristol. I think there need to be rent caps, we need more responsible landlord regulations, we need rooms in Bristol to not cost £600 a month, we need letting agents to stop discriminating against people on benefits and with disabilities." Maria, 1625 Independent People

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We need more social housing in Bristol. I think there need to be rent caps, we need more responsible landlord regulations, we need rooms in Bristol to not cost £600 a month, we need letting agents to stop discriminating against people on benefits and with disabilities”
Maria, 1625 Independent People

CASE STUDY:

Clive Chick

Clive, who became homeless about a year before the pandemic, regularly used homelessness services around Bristol. He moved into a hotel in April 2020.

Despite the hotels being beneficial in offering self-contained accommodation for many of the homeless, some of whom had been on the streets for decades, Clive expressed frustration at the hotels not being well equipped for living in, including lacking basic amenities such as chairs in the rooms.

Clive said that charities and other organisations banded together to provide food, laundry, hygiene products and clothing, but said that the system could be confusing.

“I was grateful, don’t get me wrong, but it did feel like it was a bit of a mish mash. With things like Cheers Drive it felt like the people of Bristol did more than the actual government did. I didn’t have a clue what was going on. I didn’t even know if I was going to get charged for it at first.”

Clive was offered accommodation at Help Bristol’s Homeless and is now happy to be involved in homelessness services helping others.



Jasper Thompson, Help Bristol's Homeless

Help Bristol’s Homeless is in Bedminster, and has converted shipping containers into self-contained flats, which are offered to rough sleepers in collaboration with Bristol Outreach Services for the Homeless (BOSH). Jasper Thompson, who runs the project, sees self-contained accommodation as the future for homeless people, especially in response to public health crises. Jasper imagines further collaboration with other services in Bristol will help them continue to get rough sleepers off the streets. Support from Bristol City Council is seen as essential to this goal, especially in the provision of vacant land that might be appropriate for further container flats.

Multiple participants expressed frustration at the lack of support given to those who have no recourse to public funds (NRPF): those who are in the UK with temporary immigration status. Homeless people who had NRPF were housed regardless of their immigration status during the ‘Everyone In’ initiative; however, once this ended, they were not offered any further statutory services or temporary accommodation, leaving many to return to the streets. Some charities, such as Bristol Hospitality Network, Emmaus, and Julian Trust, have funded accommodation for this already vulnerable population. Organisations believe, however, that it should not fall solely on their shoulders to accommodate them and should be the responsibility of central and local government to ensure they avoid destitution.

“It should be inclusive, it needs to include people without recourse to public funds, we need a more inclusive approach and more local authority support.”

Fran, Emmaus

Recommendations

With the help of participants, this report highlights the resilience and dedication of the VCSE sector operating within homelessness services. Despite the many challenges, organisations thought creatively to innovate and adapt their services to continue to meet the needs of vulnerable populations. Through collaboration and partnership, organisations developed new ideas and started new projects that will continue to benefit service users long after the pandemic. This research has highlighted a number of clear recommendations.

Increasing quality of services

Due to public health concerns, many organisations have had to pivot their services to meet new needs regarding health and safety. This in turn has led to some working in the homelessness sector to question the long-term benefit of offering nightly accommodation (such as shelters and dorms) due to their temporary nature and lack of dignity and privacy. Caring in Bristol and Help Bristol's Homeless have both shut their short-term sleeping facilities for good, in favour of developing long-term housing. This also has the benefit of reducing dependency on crisis services, with those proposing these changes saying it will provide a safer, more secure and longer-term option for those sleeping rough. However, organisations such as Julian Trust still see the benefit in providing an option for those who need short-term emergency accommodation. Organisations within the homelessness sector would welcome debate around the future of provision for those in need.

Importance of wellbeing

The pressure of working through a pandemic, while at the same time developing new services and responding to the needs of increasing numbers of service users with complex needs, has taken its toll on staff. Many of those interviewed mentioned the challenge of volunteer and staff burnout and the high turnover that can result from this, all of which raises concerns about the long-term effect of working in crisis response. Some charities offered mental health support to their employees by means of wellbeing phone lines. However, due to the rising numbers of homeless people accessing services and much of the nature of the work involving emotional connection, stress and burnout will continue and may indeed increase in the near future. Wellbeing services set up specifically for those working in the homelessness

sector would undoubtedly help those feeling overwhelmed by their work, and would help to improve the resilience of these teams in the face of further crisis.

Relationships with local authorities

Participants acknowledged the success of the Everyone In programme, which had quickly enabled a majority of Bristol's homeless to be accommodated in hotels during lockdowns. However, there was frustration felt by many in regard to their relationship with Bristol City Council, with some perceiving a lack of empathy towards homeless people in the city. Most participants felt that the process of transition between services was lacking, whether between emergency accommodation and more permanent housing, or between child social care services and adult services.

Many of those interviewed felt that increased funding from central government would help to alleviate the stress that council workers were under, as they tried to cope with the huge demand for housing in Bristol. Others felt that better lines of communication were needed between housing officers, other council workers and organisations providing services. Fran, support team manager at Emmaus, suggested that a VCSE/homelessness liaison role within the council would be invaluable to homelessness services, enhancing communication and relationship building.

Being open to new partnerships

Most participants expressed an eagerness to collaborate and innovate even more with other organisations within homelessness services. Participants found that working together helped to reduce stress on their services and enabled service needs to be met more effectively, for example by directing users to more specialist services. However, some felt as though their voices were not being taken seriously within the wider Bristol homelessness sector.



Sleeping bags and clothing in Broadmead



Access to open space

Access to open space has been brought into sharp focus since the start of the pandemic. Will Romain found that pre-pandemic barriers to access were often exacerbated in this ‘new normal’, while the increased use of these spaces created additional pressures around preservation and maintenance, with the burden often falling on local volunteer groups.

Suddenly confined to our homes in March 2020, those of us with gardens, patios and balconies made the most of what outdoor space we had access to. Furthermore, unable to travel more widely, many of us took to our local parks or discovered new patches of green on which to stretch our legs or take exercise with family and friends.

The National Trust found that some city parks experienced up to a 300% increase in visits during the spring of 2020, while research by Natural England this year found that almost half of adults recognised that visiting green and natural spaces had been made more important by lockdown.

However, the increased importance of open space also highlighted existing inequalities around access. The Office for National Statistics found that while 12% of households in Great Britain had no access to a private or shared garden during the pandemic, this figure is considerably higher for Black (37%) and Asian (22%)

people. The National Trust found that white people were 60% more likely to visit natural settings than people from Black, Asian and other minority groups.

Similar trends can be seen in relation to socio-economic status, with Fields in Trust reporting that, on average, park and green space users typically earn more than non-users). The Office for National Statistics found that people in semi-skilled and unskilled manual occupations, casual workers and the unemployed are almost three times as likely as those in managerial, administrative, professional occupations to be without a garden (20% compared to 7%).

These national trends were reflected in Bristol. Residents living in the more affluent areas of Clifton, Southville and Hotwells have a likelihood of 19-28% of not being able to access open space, a figure in stark contrast with a likelihood of 62-64% for those living in the Redcliffe and Temple Meads.

Research findings

This research investigates how interactions with open space changed during the pandemic, with a particular focus on the voluntary, community and social enterprise sector. This was done by speaking with people who have worked to improve open spaces, such as volunteer 'friends' groups (which advocate for particular areas of open space), as well as those who began using or enhanced their use of open space to provide a service, such as youth groups.

Inequalities and barriers

There was a strong awareness among those who took part in this research around the inequalities and barriers in accessing open space, with only one respondent to the online survey arguing that Covid-19 had not exposed inequalities.

Among those asked at interview, there was unanimous agreement that access to open space was impacted by socio-economic status and class, with many saying that the pandemic had helped to increase awareness around the issue.



Access to green space is an indicator of deprivation and, therefore, affects people differently.”

Aisha Hannibal Living Streets

Furthermore, there was also evidence that Covid-19 had increased existing barriers to open space, with these barriers existing unequally across the city.

“I feel like there are some nice green spaces, but I wouldn't want to go there because I feel that the area isn't as safe as others. I wouldn't feel comfortable going there alone.” Anonymous survey response

Barriers were also present for the youth organisations who took part in this research. These challenges were particularly felt with regards to publicly accessible land when compared to private land. The former brought challenges around personal safety and safeguarding, while there were also concerns around the quality of open space, with common issues such as dog excrement making the use of some areas less practical.

Organisations with fewer resources and no access to private open space faced greater challenges. “It's great if a youth organisation has access to green, private space. You can go into parks but there are challenges,” said



Social distancing guidance in Queen Square

Joel Barnes from Youth Moves. “We would like our young people to access more green space but there are so many barriers around this,” echoed Will Payne from Young Bristol.

Innovation

Innovation was also a theme that came up frequently in the research. Often cited was the council initiative to paint hearts on the grass at College Green and balloons in Queen Square. These actions generally received positive feedback as a means of accessing open space in a safe manner.

Local friends groups created new activities to replace those which had to be stopped. Friends of the Downs and Avon Gorge, for example, were able to re-plant flower beds at the top of Whiteladies Road, while at the same time sticking to social distancing and volunteer guidance.

Innovation was also prominent in organisations that had to adapt to their usual settings being closed. For example, the limitations to online youth work and loss of indoor activities made the use of open space crucial to sustaining youth support services. Joel Barnes from south Bristol's Youth Moves made particular reference to the benefits of discovering the Crox Bottom nature reserve, which is situated between Bishopsworth and Knowle West: “Covid-19 encouraged us to find new green places to explore and show young people. Often, we had not been there before.”

Growth and pressures

The increased importance of open space has led to a growth in volunteer groups with a focus on their local environment. A notable example is the Friends of the

Western Slopes in south Bristol which, formed during the pandemic, now has close to 1,000 members on Facebook. Groups also formed in areas of Bristol that have traditionally had less access to or access to lower quality open, public space, for example the Friends of Chaplin Road in Easton and the Friends of Dove Street just north of the city centre.

“Areas like Central Bristol and East Bristol, where access to open space is not quite as good, they have really re-discovered their local parks.”

Ella Hogg, volunteer park co-ordinator at Bristol City Council

However, while the increased usage and appreciation has led to a growth in volunteers, it has also resulted in increased pressure on these groups.

“There are more people in parks, which is great. However, this does put more pressure on friends groups.” Ella Hogg

An increase in litter was a common theme that emerged, with this often linked to concerns around a lack of facilities. The Friends of the Downs and Avon Gorge estimated there was a 40% increase in the use of the Downs, which led to a notable increase in the amount of litter and damage to grass from disposable BBQs. Friends groups often carry out volunteer litter picks, but with an increased volume of people using the spaces this sometimes posed a considerable challenge.

These additional pressures were particularly felt by smaller friends groups, which often had less access to funding. Eileen Stonebridge, from Friends of Old Sneed Park Nature Reserve, spoke of the need to raise £10,000 through crowdfunding to repair damage caused by the increase in people: “We keep hearing that it is wonderful how people have discovered their local areas, but this does not look at the other side of the coin: someone has to pay [for their upkeep],” says Eileen.

Aside from the financial pressures, lockdowns and social distancing meant that many friends groups had to cancel events such as litter picks and walks. This made it harder to manage the increase in visitors, but also removed a key form of social interaction, the importance of which was communicated on multiple occasions.

“People not being able to gather and do their usual activities has had a massive impact. For a lot of groups, one of the main reasons for them existing was the social side.” Ella Hogg

In general, however, it should be recognised that growth was generally welcome, in spite of the additional challenges.

“There was definitely an increase in litter, but most people got it to the bin area... there were definitely more positives than negatives I would say.”

Jo Moore (Friends of Eastwood Farm)



With increased numbers of people using parks, rubbish sometimes became a problem

Opportunity

With an enhanced appreciation for open space and many finding themselves furloughed, many viewed lockdowns as an opportunity; Covid-19 acted as a trigger to encourage the formation of new projects around open space.

Amy Cox is a founding member of The Birch Collective, a social enterprise which emphasises the therapeutic elements of nature in maintaining wellbeing: “It was the spark we needed to start something that we feel passionate about.”

Furthermore, volunteer projects also used open space to consolidate the community spirit that emerged from the pandemic. One example of this was the Oakupy Project, which provided free trees so that communities could ‘oakupy’ spaces including land attached to community centres and youth clubs. The project came about because people “wanted to focus on combining the environment and community together”, says Oakupy coordinator Ellie Potts.

Recommendations

The following recommendations emerged from the research findings. They describe not only the importance of open space, but also the need for sustainable solutions to maintain these spaces.

CASE STUDY: Young Bristol

The importance of open space for youth services during the pandemic is illustrated through the work of Young Bristol. Youth worker Will Payne outlines the initial impact of lockdown: “Having to shut all the youth clubs had a major impact. We had 80 young people attend a youth club on some nights and that was just 80 contacts gone”. Although Young Bristol were later able to successfully engage with some of these young people via online means, they had to innovate and adapt to reach many of those they were used to seeing face to face.

Lockdown led to a considerable increase in detached work – when youth workers go to where young people congregate and live – across areas such as Redcliffe, Whitchurch and Bishops Sutton, where a mobile unit was used to take the youth club to where young people were gathering.

While open space became even more crucial to Young Bristol’s work, it also allowed them to expand out and reach young people they may not have worked with before.

Find out more: www.youngbristol.com



Restore and repair funding of open space in Bristol

The need to increase funding was by far the most frequent response given by interview participants. Without such, concerns were expressed that parks and open space are not being treated with sufficient importance. However, there was also a general appreciation among local volunteer groups that council staff were working to the best of their abilities, often with limited resources.

“I feel sorry for the parks officers here in Bristol. They are supposed to manage with almost zero budget and still meet local need.”

Councillor Richard Eddy, Bishopsdown ward

“Whether we like it or not, we are reliant on these friends groups.” Ella Hogg

While there are grants available that help sustain and develop green spaces, there also needs to be long term funding to allow for sustainable management.

Recognise a formal link between open space and health

Several interview participants highlighted the link between open space and health, an area that is becoming increasingly well recognised and funded. An example of this is the Healthier Together project, which has been awarded £500,000 to implement a local Green Social Prescribing framework across Bristol, North Somerset and South Gloucestershire.

Recognising the link between access to open space and health strengthens the argument for statutory funding. Research from the National Trust has shown that an investment of £5.5 billion in green urban infrastructure would bring £200 billion in physical and mental health benefits, at the same time creating 40,000 interim and 6,000 permanent jobs.

As Nicola Hodgson from the Open Spaces Society concludes: “Granting statutory funding towards maintaining open spaces is another way of easing the pressure on the NHS.”

Increasing and maintaining public participation

Interview participants who operated within larger areas of green space, such as the Downs, expressed a desire for increased public participation. “I would like to see more citizen involvement in the management of parks across the city,” said Robert Westlake from Friends of the Downs and Avon Gorge.

This could allow individuals and groups to make suggestions around income generation, a subject that was frequently raised during interviews. It was clear that these groups had a passionate vision for their local area, with George Tapp from Your Park Bath and Bristol calling for: “More community ownership and collaboration within green spaces. More freedom for communities to use and enjoy parks in ways which they find empowering and engaging.”

This is already on Bristol City Council’s agenda, which is piloting the Bristol Future Parks project. This project is seeking suggestions from park users in Blaise Castle Estate, Chaplin Community Garden, Dame Emily Park, Eastville Park and Sea Mills Recreation Ground in relation to income generation and sustainable budgeting.

Signage and awareness

Many of the friends groups have individual campaigns around increased or improved signage for their areas of focus. With so many people ‘discovering’ open spaces that they had not visited before, increased local awareness of these spaces can help reduce pressure on well-known parks, as well as offering a low-cost solution to highlight and publicise valued spaces that are underused.



Some of our green spaces are not obvious. The lack of publicity does not help” Anonymous

There have been some successful examples of improved signage. The Friends of Bathurst Basin, for example, worked with the city council to erect signs across the Lower Guinea Street footbridge at the entrance to Bathurst Basin in the harbourside. However, plans for improved signage at Crox Bottom were approved in October 2018 but have yet to be implemented.

CASE STUDY: Westbury Park

The volunteer restoration project at Westbury Park is a prime example of Covid-19 presenting an opportunity. The park had not been publicly accessible since the 1990s and, by project founder Kira Emslie’s own admission, represented a “monumental project” that began with “no money and no resources.”

Kira recognised the importance of lockdown in allowing volunteers the time and energy to contribute to the project. In total, the restoration was made possible by 4,000 hours of volunteer work and over £10,000 in crowdfunded donations. One of the project’s most significant achievements was the creation of six wildlife ponds, which had dried up following flow issues from a natural spring.

“100% we would not have done it if lockdown had not happened,” says Kira.

While social distancing was maintained, friends, family and other volunteers would come every day. A combination of community spirit and the importance of open space that arose from the pandemic was instrumental to the success of this work.

“Even when it was pouring rain and snowing, we had people here every day. People just wanted to be outdoors.”

The park is now maintained by volunteers and donations, and offers a range of activities, including yoga and wellbeing sessions.

Find out more: www.wwpf.uk





Digital exclusion

With much of life suddenly moving to online during lockdown, those without sufficient access often found themselves unable to learn, work or access services online. Researching the issues, **Ethel Ng** found that charity and community organisations mobilised in unprecedented ways to support those most at risk.

Digital exclusion – felt by those with inadequate or non-existent access to information and communications technology – is a relatively new form of social deprivation. However, it is a deprivation that is exacerbated by, and contributes to, existing lines of inequality and poverty. In addition, with ongoing exponential digital innovation, this divide is widening.

The last decade has seen Bristol's economy grow faster than any other city in the UK outside of London. Priding itself as a leading city for digital innovation, Bristol is simultaneously rife with deep-rooted socio-economic inequalities. The benefits brought about by the digital age are not felt universally, nor are its outcomes equitable.

The pandemic has shone a spotlight on how the vulnerability of the socially excluded has been further compounded by digital exclusion. These sentiments are echoed by Bristol's voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) sector and other local actors who, especially since March 2020, have dedicated their physical and human resources towards connecting the disconnected.

Findings

All participants in this research have either a background within digital literacy work or have tangible experiences of digital exclusion, either themselves or through the communities they support. The research drew out the following findings.

Adjusting to lockdown

Thrust into a national lockdown in early 2020, it was clear that the VCSE sector was unequally equipped for migrating online. Organisations fortunate enough to be adept with digital technology transitioned far more smoothly than their counterparts. For example, John Bradford, CEO of Bristol based education charity DigiLocal, was able to quickly mobilise his resources: "When the UK went into lockdown in March, we migrated everybody onto Google Workspace for education, and that evening of lockdown, we hosted our first online session."



Digital exclusion was here before Covid, and it will be there after Covid. What Covid did was to shine a spotlight on it – very, very focused for a period of time. The danger is that the spotlight moved, and so people think it's gone away. The challenge for policy makers, large organisations and community leaders, is to keep the focus and activity on digital exclusion, alongside all the other challenges those communities face.”

John Bradford, DigiLocal

Matthew Young from WECIL – an organisation supporting the disabled community – remarked that, as working from home became more prevalent, attitudes were forced to shift: “disabled people have been very keen to do flexible working for years.”

However, it would be too simplistic to assert that all services could automatically be transferred online. Lockdown found thousands of Bristolians without access to the required equipment and digital skills needed to participate and engage.

Distribution of repurposed or spare equipment to those most in need was one solution (see the graph on page 30). However, as deputy head of one South Bristol primary school states, “we had just about enough laptops for everyone who required one, but we were desperately trying to source things like dongles to get it all working.”

Over 70% of students at this school are in receipt of the pupil premium. Often living in crowded households, in areas that rank highly in the UK indices for multiple deprivation and where individuals’ jobs were jeopardised, there were even cases where “quite a lot of parents didn’t want to be responsible for having a piece of equipment on loan – they were frightened that they would get broken or smashed and they wouldn’t have the money to pay for it.”

Another factor is digital illiteracy. Jacqui Ham, organiser for an Over-55s Social and Computer Café, drew attention to how “email is so automatic now [but] a number of the people coming never [used] computers during their work” – revealing a stark generational digital divide.

More broadly, Lorraine Hudson (Director of Bristol Living Labs at Knowle West Media Centre), acknowledged how “sometimes people are online because they bought a package to be able to access Netflix, but they’re not necessarily using the technology for work or study, so it’s quite a complex situation.”

CASE STUDY: Negat Hussein

Negat (below) is a community outreach worker with Refugee Women of Bristol, an organisation that offers English classes, wellbeing workshops, childcare and much more. The organisation runs weekly drop-ins in Easton, home to a large Somali community.

Recent research by the Bristol Somali Forum and Bristol Somali Youth Voice laid bare the long-term repercussions of precarious jobs and housing issues. The women Negat works with “have a lot of barriers compared to others: most of them are single mums; English was a barrier even before the lockdown; they live in compact, overcrowded flats; many of their husbands were taxi drivers who lost their jobs; some of them lost 80% of their household income.”

With lockdown forcing community centres and libraries to shut, suddenly many found themselves with no access to computers or reliable broadband. This excluded them from making GP appointments and their children from attending virtual classes. Mobilising to bridge this digital divide, “a lot of our funds and donations went to get people laptops and smartphones. We helped members set up their Zoom and referred them to others for WiFi and data.”

Like many other organisations, “all that was new to us. I was proud of how quickly we could adapt, learning new skills while we were doing it. We changed everything from face-to-face to online. We were doing English lessons, events like yoga and Zumba, and we invited health professionals to explain what to do with Covid and mental health.”

Asking how these women could be better supported, Negat said that “asylum seekers [often] live in temporary housing. In those flats and houses there should be WiFi so they don’t need to buy their own data”. Concluding, she remarked that “they might not have [citizen] status, but they still have the right to live a dignified life.”



CASE STUDY: Tyreke Morgan

Tyreke (below) lives together with his mother and younger brother on a council estate in Lawrence Hill – one of the most deprived electoral wards in the south west. He works with Babbasa, an enterprise that supports young Black and minority ethnic individuals, and is also involved in his church's community and charity work, regularly providing food for the homeless.

Complications with technology arose when devices had to be shared in Tyreke's household: "The problem was, when one of us is using the laptop, the other must wait. If my brother is home schooling from 9am to 3pm, then I'm using the laptop for work from 4pm to 8pm." Tyreke spoke of the burden of "helping my brother with his schoolwork, but also supporting my mum who isn't very trusting of online things in general – she likes to go to the store."

Living on a council estate proved particularly difficult during lockdown, with the lack of private or quiet areas for study, "the walls are pretty thin, so the reality is you're going to be hearing each other." But perhaps most notably, "not everyone has good WiFi – especially when everyone is using the WiFi at the same time. It makes it harder for people to stay focused on a Zoom call if they keep cutting out."

Fortunately, through his involvement with Love Entrepreneurs (an organisation that supports entrepreneurial ambition), Tyreke was able to get another laptop for the household: "They were the ones that helped me bridge the gap of digital exclusion."

Tyreke believes there should be more connectivity between the council and its residents. He suggests "a questionnaire to see who needs what, and what is available – that would be great."



Looking at external barriers to digital inclusion, WECIL found broadband connection to be the largest obstacle amongst their community; Matthew recollected how "there was some talk mid-way through the pandemic of trying to get low-income families and citizens free internet. That would have been a real positive."

Relationships and mental health

The pandemic prompted organisations to mobilise rapidly, often manifesting community spirit in new and less conventional ways. As we have learned throughout this report, many organisations adjusted their usual – or innovated to provide new – services during lockdown. This kind of innovation is highlighted in the example of Negat Hussein and the Refugee Women of Bristol, who repurposed their café to support the digitally excluded within their community (see page 27).

On the other hand, it would shock very few to find out that isolation and feelings of entrapment were major areas of concern throughout Covid lockdowns. Jacqui Hamm states "a lot of them had no social life at all for that period [during the pandemic]". She adds that, with the easing of lockdown, the eruption of QR codes confused, intimidated and excluded many older residents.

For Matthew at WECIL, Covid really highlighted how "people's interactions with us weren't just about getting services, it was the social element too". In response, WECIL set up 'Check-in and Chat', where volunteers phone people who have identified themselves as feeling isolated because of the pandemic. However, in a sentiment felt by many, phone calls and Zoom can be a poor substitute for in-person social interaction: "when people are really in crisis, they want to speak to an actual person".

For particularly vulnerable groups, including the young people that Rachel Robinson – CEO of Learning Partnership West – supports, there were instances where moving online was counterproductive. Echoing what youth organisations such as Young Bristol and Youth Moves also said (see pages 24 & 25), Learning Partnership West quickly realised that a lot of their services are ineffective when taken online as "a lot of the youngsters involved in violence, gangs and so on, you can't just phone and say 'how's it going?' Kids don't work like that. If you're just phoning people all the time, they feel like they're being checked up on – that's damaging to the relationship."

Recommendations

The following recommendations flow from the interview research findings, which often overlap and interweave with each other. Some are a push for additional resources, but there are also calls for enabling community-based contributors.

Adopt a digital and physical presence

Post Covid, many within the VCSE sector will not be returning to 'business-as-usual', instead adopting a hybrid operating model which can combine the digital and physical. Jacqui found that the people who attend their monthly online sessions and the people who turn up weekly in-person tended to be different. In a similar vein, Matthew spoke of "doing face-to-face visits where necessary, but we're still conscious that a lot of our users are very vulnerable – so we risk-assess each visit to make sure it can't be done any other way." In the office, WECIL have started "hybrid meetings where you've got some people face-to-face, and some people joining remotely" – making working from home a far more viable option for those who prefer to or must work this way.

Invest in equipment, skills and community spaces

All interviewees described how these are urgent priorities. Professor Jennifer Rowsell from the University of Bristol argues there should be "funding pots for infrastructure support [to be able to get] robust WiFi in pockets where there isn't robust WiFi". But, as Jacqui describes, digital exclusion is "not just linked with income and poverty. It's about confidence" too; reinvesting in community spaces that encompass group support like the Social and Computer Café helps with digital literacy and "encourages people to give it a go in a safe space".

Co-design solutions for local problems

One of many positives that came out of the VCSE sector's response to the pandemic was the wave of unconditional support and collaboration. Looking forward, solutions to local issues should be co-designed by local authorities, newer informal groups, and well-established organisations and community groups. As Lorraine explains, "when you look at the challenges families face – which might be around employment, or getting food on the table, or health challenges – you find that a lot of these things are interconnected. It's about working closely with a number of organisations at the community level."

Delivering on statutory remits

Research participants can see that, as a key partner for both formal and informal VCSE organisations, the City Council is overstretched. However, there is a widespread call to refocus resources to provide more quality support for the most vulnerable and socially excluded. Lorraine speaks of how "the national and local government have a statutory remit to support vulnerable people but it's actually the community sector that are picking up a lot of the work."

Matthew adds "because of the approach that we use, we're sometimes more accessible than some of the frontline services. Some of the frontline services, especially some of the council-led ones, are busy and they triage stuff. There's a lot of feedback from disabled people saying, 'it's almost like they're trying to not let us get through to them.'" Matthew recommends the co-design of the council's systems around its vulnerable users, because the council's systems can sometimes be "a minefield to get through."

Stop relying on goodwill

Many research participants feel that there is an over reliance on the goodwill of VCSE staff, volunteers and the general public. Lorraine emphasises the "massive workloads organisations have, with everyone putting in a lot of time going the extra mile", a model that is unsustainable at best and comes with the risk of high collateral at worst.

Also recognising the role the public have played during the pandemic, John Bradford at DigiLocal describes the shift that is needed in tech donations: "there has been tremendous support from the public during Covid, but most people don't change their devices that often. On the other hand, most companies do, so they can provide an 'evergreen' solution to the tech issue." It is also far more efficient to repurpose an influx of devices of the same model and software than to do so for a randomised intake from the public. Long term, there needs to be cyclical community engagement, embedding it within the way organisations, businesses and industry think about what they do in the wider social context.

Treat digital as a utility

Digital exclusion is a broad socio-economic challenge. Alongside provisions made for the distribution of relevant equipment, uptake of digital skills classes and investment in community spaces, attitudes need to shift. John Bradford again: "Digital is one of those disabling inequalities, if you don't have a laptop and connectivity, you don't have the same access to education, health advice, social services, government services, banking, business. People need to think about it more as a utility, and less about it as the latest iPhone."

Provide local actors with more autonomy and trust-based funding

Finally, the effectiveness of a VCSE organisation often hinges on the flexibility of the funder. Having greater autonomy to "do whatever needs to be done" (as put by Rachel) allows for customisation and sensitivity towards the nuances that – as local actors – they are best placed to realise, co-design solutions for and tackle within their community; "trust-based commissioning and funding remaining the norm would be really good".

CASE STUDY: DigiLocal: Laptop distribution around Bristol

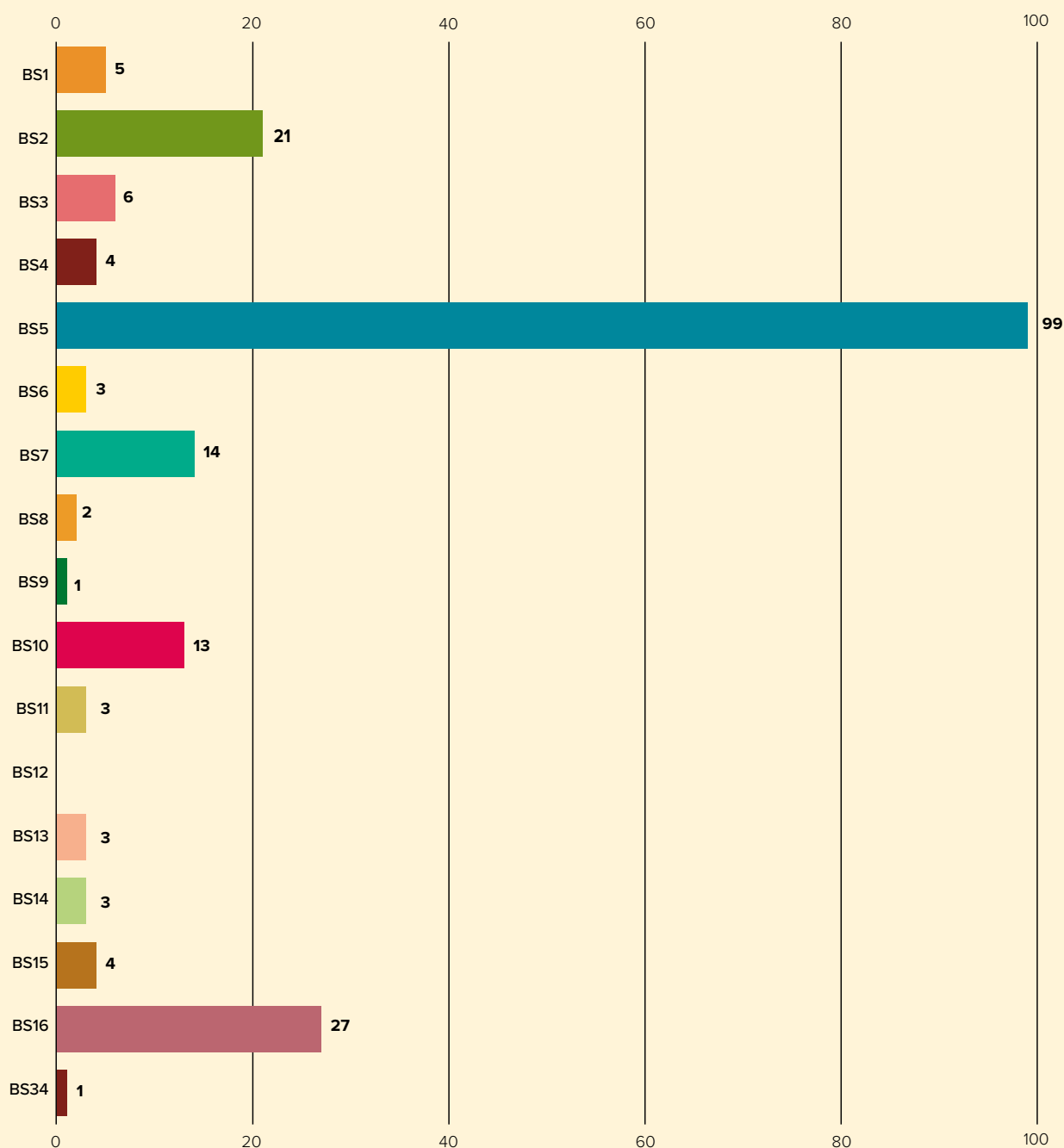
Coronavirus has thrown the digital divide into stark relief with many vulnerable families and young people excluded from education, and social support due to a lack of suitable equipment at home.

DigiLocal is working with a number of partners across the region to provide re-conditioned laptops for vulnerable families. The data below shows the

number of laptops that have been distributed, by postcode, to families in Bristol.

If your organisation is in the Bristol/West of England area, please consider the donation of laptops to DigiLocal. Even without laptops to donate, individuals and organisations can still help with cash donations to pay for 4G connectivity.

LAPTOPS DISTRIBUTED BY DIGILOCAL SINCE THE START OF THE PANDEMIC, BY POSTCODE





Food insecurity

Even before the onset of Covid-19 it was clear that food insecurity was a huge national problem, reports Jamie Ellis, with the Trussell Trust, the UK's largest food bank, distributing 1.6m food parcels in 2019.

Food insecurity is a national blight and no city, including Bristol, has escaped its effects. In research carried out before the pandemic, the JSNA Health and Wellbeing Profile found that around one in 15 Bristol households suffered from food insecurity. In the most acutely affected parts of the city, those with lower median household incomes, the figure is as high as one in five. Across Bristol this equates to 24,000 neighbours, friends and colleagues who may not be able to buy the food they need to eat healthily.

The pandemic has amplified existing inequalities, worsening the problems already faced by many. Covid-19 has exposed a precariousness in our ability to feed our households. The virus showed that many families were one pay-check away from food insecurity, forcing parents into 'feed myself or feed my children' thought patterns. It has shaken each of the four pillars of food equality: access, availability, stability and usage.

During the course of the summer of 2021, I spoke with many who had direct experience of food insecurity. From these discussions, the one quote that really sticks in my mind is "food insecurity; total insecurity", without access to food you will never feel safe.

Most people I spoke with gave, unprompted, definitions of food insecurity which encompassed far more than just food itself. Citing factors from income to safe food preparation areas to diet variety, they understood this issue as holistic and multifaceted. Covid-19 only deepened the disparity between food insecurity's breadth and the current approach as social cooking circles were curtailed, community solutions hampered and food preparation was made more difficult as houses became more permanently crowded.

It was also felt that one of the traditional answers to food insecurity – increasing the number and workload of food banks – was unsustainable. While the work of emergency food providers has been invaluable, it was now time to approach food disparities with a more all-encompassing ethos.

People also said that it should not be Marcus Rashford's responsibility to feed the nation's children. This all came back to, most concluded, a lack of understanding of food insecurity from the top down. More needed to be done, they said, to define and understand food insecurity and many felt that this was the responsibility of government at all levels.



Food inequality

A plan for Bristol

Developed in partnership between Bristol City Council and Feeding Bristol, and informed by over 60 organisations from across the city, the One City Food Equality Strategy will work to address issues of equality and equity around food security and sustainability over the next ten years. A Food Equality Action Plan will be developed in early 2022 to take forward the strategy.

Food equality is an important outcome within Bristol's One City Plan, which includes the goal (by 2050) that: 'Everyone in Bristol will have access to healthy, ethical and sustainably produced food.' It is a key element of Bristol's successful '[Going for Gold](#)' Sustainable Food Places campaign and will work alongside city-wide efforts to tackle poverty and inequality in the city.

Over the past year, Bristol City Council and Feeding Bristol have been working with local stakeholders to develop the strategy, which will be finalised in February 2022. The action plan is already in the pipeline and there will be significant cross-sector involvement in the creation of this plan.

To date, over 60 groups and organisations have been involved in the development of the strategy, which has also been informed by community conversations with Bristol residents who have lived experience of food insecurity or food inequality more broadly.

Collectively, five key themes have been identified as essential components of food equality in Bristol; these will form the building blocks for the Food Equality Action Plan:

- Fair access to nutritious and appropriate food
- Choice, empowerment and a feeling of security
- Being equipped with the necessary knowledge, skills and facilities
- A resilient and sustainable local food system
- Food is at the heart of community, economy and city planning

Throughout this process, the views of those who have lived experience of food inequality have been at the heart of this strategy. In order to make this a reality, in June and July 2021 Feeding Bristol and Bristol City Council held eight community conversations with Bristol residents. These took place in five localities across the city (Hartcliffe, Filwood, Lawrence Hill, Southmead, Avonmouth), and with three different communities of interest (people with lived experience of homelessness, disabled people, refugees and asylum seekers).

Living within the five localities – which are ranked among Bristol's most deprived wards – are residents who

are most at-risk of food insecurity. The communities of interest were included because of the high prevalence of food security and other forms of food inequality experienced by these groups.

The following findings are taken from the community conversations conducted by Feeding Bristol and Bristol City Council and will help to inform the Food Equality Action Plan that will be developed in early 2022.

Findings

Access and availability

Each of the groups highlighted issues around access and availability of affordable, nutritious and appropriate food.

“Cheap food – it’s rubbish. It’s not good for the children to eat. It’s just really awful.” Southmead group

“I lost my job so I ended up in food banks ... don’t get me wrong, I appreciated [them] - but generally, I have to decide who’s going to eat from the food bank because there’s not enough for [all] of us to eat.”

Hartcliffe group

POSSIBLE ACTIONS:

- Create affordable and accessible transport links. For example, create a ‘Free Rider’ day pass or subsidise tickets for people on benefits or low incomes.
- Ensure better distribution of food services across the city.
- Enable local, independent food businesses to be accessible and affordable for all.
- Improve availability of pop-ups to hard-to-reach locations (for example, open markets and fresh food vans). Ensure that these services are affordable and have a regular schedule.
- Where appropriate, establish affordable and substantial supermarkets for localities with poor access.
- Identify and develop community spaces where people can access, cook, grow, and learn about food.
- Improve access to culturally appropriate foods in each locality.
- Ensure online shopping is accessible and affordable to all.



Above: Harvesting veg, Grow Wilder, Bristol (credit: Hal Miller); Previous page: Super Supper Club, Baggator (credit: Janet Gibson).

Communication

Knowing about what is available, and where, was another theme that frequently arose. Many in the discussion groups had not heard about the wide number of food services that are available in Bristol.

“...it's not just access, it is making everybody aware that [services are] there. So, communication and good communication.” Filwood group

“We have no information at all. I know there is a lot in the city to make the most of. So, it's not only about not having the money, but sometimes the information... itself is an obstacle.” Southmead group

POSSIBLE ACTIONS:

- Use mixed methods of communication to promote food services and projects, such as local newspapers and magazines, leaflets at schools and community centres, websites, apps and social media.
- Develop a city-wide app or online platform to provide information on available support, resources, and classes.
- Create community food champions across the city.
- Support community food networking events in each locality to connect and share ideas about reducing food insecurity.
- Improve communication between the Council and the public.
- Improve information that comes with food boxes such as labelling ingredients, providing easy recipes and links to video tutorials, information on batch cooking and freezing, basic nutritional information, signposting to cooking classes or webinars on food.
- Provide translations and make information more accessible/visual.

Education

Participants raised the importance of food education in schools, but also the desire for affordable and accessible cooking and growing classes for adults across the city. Participants associated a lack of food skills and knowledge with reduced confidence, poor diet, and a reluctance to try new foods.

“I just think it should be a national thing, rolled out all over the schools across the country, like in other countries where kids get taught how to cook properly, you know?” Homelessness group

“... [as an adult] if you don't know how to cook, you won't be able to go anywhere or have access to places that will teach you how to cook and can teach you more about food.” Southmead group

POSSIBLE ACTIONS:

- Prioritise food education in school for both primary and secondary students. Nutrition, cooking and growing food should be on the curriculum in primary and secondary schools. The content should be age-appropriate, culturally inclusive and include learning about food systems.
- Provide adult cooking and growing classes in community spaces. These classes should be non-judgemental, open to everyone, and free or subsidised. Classes should aim to contact hard to reach groups, for example, men and the older population.
- Provide cooking classes during the school holidays using school kitchens.
- Increase opportunities for tasting foods and cooking demonstrations.
- Provide staff in all food businesses with training on dietary requirements and access needs.



Bee hives at Tynings Field, Shirehampton (credit: Jane Stevenson)



St Werberghs City Farm (credit: Jen Leung)

Choice and empowerment

Each group touched on the fact that food is more than just sustenance, and it is important to recognise the social and cultural significance of food when talking about food equality and developing these plans. Several other themes interconnect with this theme, in particular ‘access & availability’ and ‘education’. For example, participants explained that if nutritious food was more affordable, they would have more choice, and if they improved their skills and knowledge, they could make better use of food.

“What we have, it's not what we want... you just take what is given [to] you. [You] would like to have maybe fresh meat? You don't have that. You want to have fresh fish? It's quite expensive. You can't. You don't have that.” Refugee & Asylum Seeker group

“Do you get mum guilt as well when you can't afford the food you want for your children? I feel guilty when I say no to my kids... but you're doing the best you can.” Hartcliffe group

POSSIBLE ACTIONS:

- Provide and invest in community spaces to cook, grow and eat together.
- Provide non-judgemental spaces to access free food, such as community fridges and freezers.
- Prioritise food education for children and adults, as it acts as a gateway to a sense of confidence, ownership, and empowerment around food.
- Offer food vouchers or use a cash first approach instead of food boxes.
- Where food parcels are necessary, ask people what they want and need.
- Enable independent and local food businesses to become more affordable so that their community can support them.
- Hold more community conversations about food. The food equality conversations were acknowledged as being a valuable space to discuss shared experiences of food inequality.

Growing food

The main barriers to growing food included a lack of availability and accessibility to green spaces and allotments, as well as limited educational opportunities around growing food for adults and children.

“There's a community garden that's just appeared this year, which is really good. I think that's amazing. Where there's spaces in our community that no one's using, they've got children and people that live around that just come and look after it – I love it.”

Southmead group

“...going up the way, that was all the allotments. Loads and loads of allotments which is now the park and ride. You lose all that greenery and those spaces.”

Avonmouth group

POSSIBLE ACTIONS:

- Provide educational opportunities around growing food and learning about local food systems.
- Increase the number of spaces to grow, such as allotments, community gardens and school gardens.
- Improve communications for these spaces.
- Use community gardens where people are growing vegetables to feed into an affordable veg box scheme.
- For people who have small gardens or balconies, provide lessons on how to use small outdoor spaces for growing.
- Offer free seeds and growing equipment to low-income households.

Decision making

The importance of responsible decision-making featured highly in the community conversations, especially where this affected access to food and the ability for people to eat well. This was particularly directed towards centralised and statutory services such as decision making around transport, housing, care services and city planning.

“There’s a crack between the culture of the city and your individual needs.” Disability group

“People aren’t gonna keep on having conversations and then seeing nothing [change] – what’s the flippin’ point.” Filwood group

POSSIBLE ACTIONS:

- Include communities in the decision-making process around local food services and land use.
- Care packages for disabled people should be improved to better value people’s food needs.
- Housing services and the development of social housing should better consider food access.
- Improve strategic leadership over coordination of food services.
- Ensure better distribution of food services across the city and ensure these are available at suitable times (for example, convenient for people’s working hours).
- All food businesses should consider access needs for disabled people – accreditation could be developed and promoted for businesses that support access needs.



Long Ashton Growers (credit: Jane Stevenson)

Communities of interest

In addition to the common themes discussed in this summary, there were particular challenges faced by the communities of interest that should be recognised. The following points arose from these group discussions.

Homelessness

POSSIBLE ACTIONS:

- Provide drug free and safe spaces to eat, store, cook and learn about food.
- Improve access to public water fountains and hygiene facilities.

Refugee and asylum seekers

POSSIBLE ACTIONS:

- Provide a higher quality of food in support services, such as fresh vegetables and fresh sources of protein.
- Mitigate language barriers, especially with information on food boxes. Provide more translations and visual information.
- Improve access to support for refugees and asylum seekers who do not live in central areas of the city.
- Increase provision of community fridges and freezers across the city in community spaces (for example, within community ‘anchor’ organisations).

Disabled people

POSSIBLE ACTIONS:

- Independent food businesses must consider access needs and dietary requirements.
- Consider access needs of disabled people when developing city-wide plans (ie, plans for the city around environmentalism).
- Develop an emergency food safety net for priority groups, just as there is for other essential services.
- Increase staffing and provide training for staff to support people with access needs in supermarkets and restaurants.
- Introduce a ‘quiet hour’ at supermarkets, where bright lights, sound and scents are reduced.





Hope after the pandemic

What can we learn from all the extraordinary stories gathered in this report, asks **Professor Martin Parker**? A few years ago, before the virus, I wrote a chapter for a book about hope and academic work. It has always seemed to me that some sort of faith in a different, better world was at the heart of what it meant to study human beings. If we are doomed to carry on being violent and greedy, then why bother to investigate racism, class, discrimination, carbon capitalism and so on? All our studies would just be documents of failure, testaments to hopelessness. If there is a politics to the academic work that I do then it must be a progressive one, a painful crawl towards less cruelty and stupidity.

So when the virus began to sweep across the world, and across our city, I thought a lot about hope, and about the idea that this was a moment when we could reset our economy and head in some greener, fairer and more inclusive directions. There was lots of this sort of thinking around back in the spring of 2020, in a city suddenly silent enough to hear the birds. People were writing about the virus being the opportunity for a 'reset', that there should be 'no going back', and many carbon-based businesses should be 'closed for good'. Breathless with optimism, I put together a quick edited book, with chapters exploring what 'Life after Covid' might look like, in the lengthening shadow of global heating and the collapse of entangled ecosystems.

Now, a year later, that book seems like a historical document. There are traffic jams on the motorways again, and we continue to buy things we want but don't need.

And as this report shows, the virus exposed the many inequalities of our city, whether in terms of access to green space, housing, food and so on. It would be easy to sink into despair, to imagine that the vested interests that shape our world benefit so much from the present order that they cannot contemplate systemic change. If a shock as big as Covid can't elbow us onto a new path, then we seem to be doomed.

But, as this report so eloquently shows, there are so many examples of ordinary people and small organizations doing things differently. In Bristol, since March 2020, we have seen a real flowering of locally based responses, of citizen action and voluntary sector activism. The number of people volunteering on the City Council Can Do platform increased hugely. Add to this the AskingBristol and Bristol Model projects which are engaging students from both of our universities, the many

hyperlocal WhatsApp groups, or creative responses to homelessness, or food poverty, or lack of access to laptops.

This sort of grassroots action teaches us an important lesson about hope, because it shows us that many small actions can add up. It shows us that sometimes, what bigger institutions need to do is not direct and instruct, but provide some resource and get out of the way, and help to enable voluntary organizations, community anchors, and single-minded citizens solve the problems that we face. Covid may have clarified inequalities, showing us the ugly skeleton of our society, but it has also shown us something about the power of ordinary people and small organizations when they commit to action.

Writing in the run up to COP26 in Glasgow, this is an important lesson for thinking about how we deal with climate change too. Any form of production, transportation or consumption which does not fully deal with its carbon emissions will have to end. The economy needs to swallow its own smoke. So just as we collectively no longer tolerate the production of CFCs and the hole in the ozone layer has been shrinking, so will the production of greenhouse gases simply have to end, globally. It is as simple, and as complicated, as that.

But we can't simply assume that the actions of the powerful will sort this out for us and that, like grateful children, we don't need to do anything ourselves. With

the climate, as with Covid, there are a myriad of small actions that we can take individually and collectively, and our city is a fantastic example of that. As a [recent report](#) from the University of Bristol shows, everyday green action is taking place on allotments, streets and playgrounds across the city, galvanizing people into growing their own food, using their cars less and supporting small businesses, sharing toys and tools. This is more evidence of ordinary people taking action, not asking permission from politicians or business leaders first, and it gives me hope.

This isn't hope in the sense of believing that the clever leaders or scientists will work something out. It is not a hazy version of utopia, or a vague description of kindly humans. It is hope in the sense of an understanding that there is much work to be done to prevent one species from destroying their home. These are practical matters, requiring lots of small actions, not pipe dreams. Ernst Schumacher of '[Small is Beautiful](#)' fame completed his final book '[A Guide for the Perplexed](#)' in 1977, just before he died. He concludes like this: "Can we rely on it that a 'turning around' will be accomplished by enough people quickly enough to save the modern world? This question is often asked, but whatever answer is given to it will mislead. The answer 'Yes' would lead to complacency; the answer 'No' to despair. It is desirable to leave these perplexities behind us and get down to work."

Shall we get to work then?



Above: Young Bristol going out into the community; Previous page: King Street closed to traffic, for good?

Report team



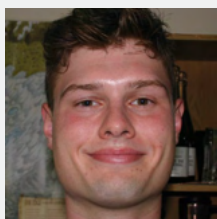
Hal Arnold-Forster has just finished studying politics and international relations at the University of Bristol. He is interested in local government and the role it can play in facilitating community mobilisation. In the future, he hopes to work more with these kinds of community initiatives and grassroots projects.



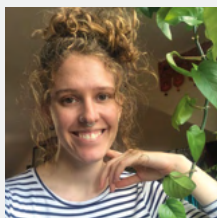
Tom Burnett works for Voscur, the support and development agency for Bristol's voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) sector. He is currently working on several research projects with academics and students from the University of Bristol and representatives from the city's VCSE organisations.



Derek Edwards is a freelance designer, poet and rapper. His design work is community based, covering arts, racism, education and health. His music is Hip Hop fused social commentary, reflecting lived experience. He released his debut album this year in response to the fallout over race amidst the Covid pandemic in 2020.



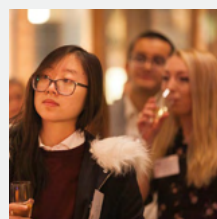
Jamie Ellis is a University of Bristol law student who is pursuing a career in socio-legal and economic research. Jamie is currently writing a dissertation on austerity as a means of class control and is hoping to continue exploring the law's role as a social reformer through postgraduate study.



Tahlia Jurkovic is a third-year social policy and sociology student at the University of Bristol. She has had experience of volunteering with many charities in the past, including living in Calais, France in 2018, where she worked with refugees. Tahlia is looking to do a master's next year to continue her passion for social research, with particular focus on gender, migration, and homelessness.



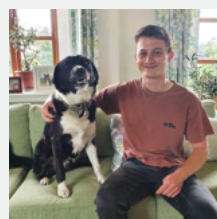
John McGoldrick completed his doctorate at the University of Bristol in 2017. This research was a study of how individuals manage and defend their sense of self in their workplace. Prior to that, he had a long commercial career across several industries and, after retiring, worked within Bristol's social housing sector as a non-executive board member.



Ethel Ng is an undergraduate at the University of Bristol's School of Education, and alumni of the University of Oxford's Saïd Business School. Particularly involved in social mobility initiatives within the VCSE sector, she is interested in pursuing a career in social science research and policy.



Martin Parker is Professor of Organisation Studies and Lead for the Inclusive Economy Initiative at the University of Bristol. His work is aimed at helping to tilt the city region towards a low carbon, high inclusion and high democracy economy.



Will Romain recently graduated from the University of Bristol after completing a degree in law. Will has a particular interest in environmental concerns and was part of the newly formed Environmental and Energy Law Society at the University. Will has recently joined Ashfords as a paralegal.

**“This sort of grassroots action teaches us
an important lesson about hope, because it
shows us that many small actions can add up”**

Professor Martin Parker, University of Bristol

