Executive Summary

Participatory democracy in practice:

evaluation of the Bristol City Council Community Resilience Fund

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University of BRISTOL

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Report authors:

Jack Nicholls (lead and corresponding author):
jack.nicholls@bristol.ac.uk

Josephine Tate
Rebecca Sykes
Di Robinson
Judith Taylor
Nora Pau

1. Introduction

This Executive Summary of the evaluation of the Bristol City Council's Community Resilience Fund (CRF)[1] captures the key findings and recommendations that are addressed fully in the Evaluation Report. The evaluation examines the decision-making process which led to the awarding of grants to understand the value, impact and potential of the collaborative decision-making process.

The CRF was set up to support the recovery of the community and voluntary sector in the wake of the COVID pandemic and build future resilience. Bristol City Council (BCC) was committed to involving communities in the decision-making process, and to explore involving residents and voluntary organisations alongside elected Councillors, as part of this project. The aim was to 'learn through doing', developing relevant skills which could be useful for conducting participatory decision-making processes in the future. The CRF decision-making process was split into **two stages:**

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

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

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

The CRF was an ambitious pilot project, aiming to share decision-making, while focusing on tackling inequality. The project was city-wide, with decision makers forming groups across 6 Areas and 1 city-wide equalities group. These groups each met 4 to 6 times between January and May 2023. The scale of this undertaking was in equal measure inspiring and challenging.

[1] The evaluation was carried out by researchers based at the University of Bristol and Vivid Regeneration.

The CRF team ran the process, which should be recognised as positive, open and collaborative. The level of ambition, scale and complexity of the process was recognised by many of those involved.

As the process was such a complex one, it's challenging to summarise. This executive summary includes Key Findings and Recommendations taken directly from the Evaluation Report. We would advise readers of this executive summary use the full report to provide further context to any insights gained here. Participatory and deliberative democracy is not quick – it requires significant intent and commitment to make it happen. Any process of democratic decision-making that attempts to share power with citizens should be treated with respect and goodwill. There is a lot to celebrate and much to learn from the CRF process. This evaluation highlights successes, challenges and changes or different ways of doing things to consider in future, in order to constructively learn from this process. We hope that the evaluation will help inform and enhance deliberative democratic decision-making processes in the future.
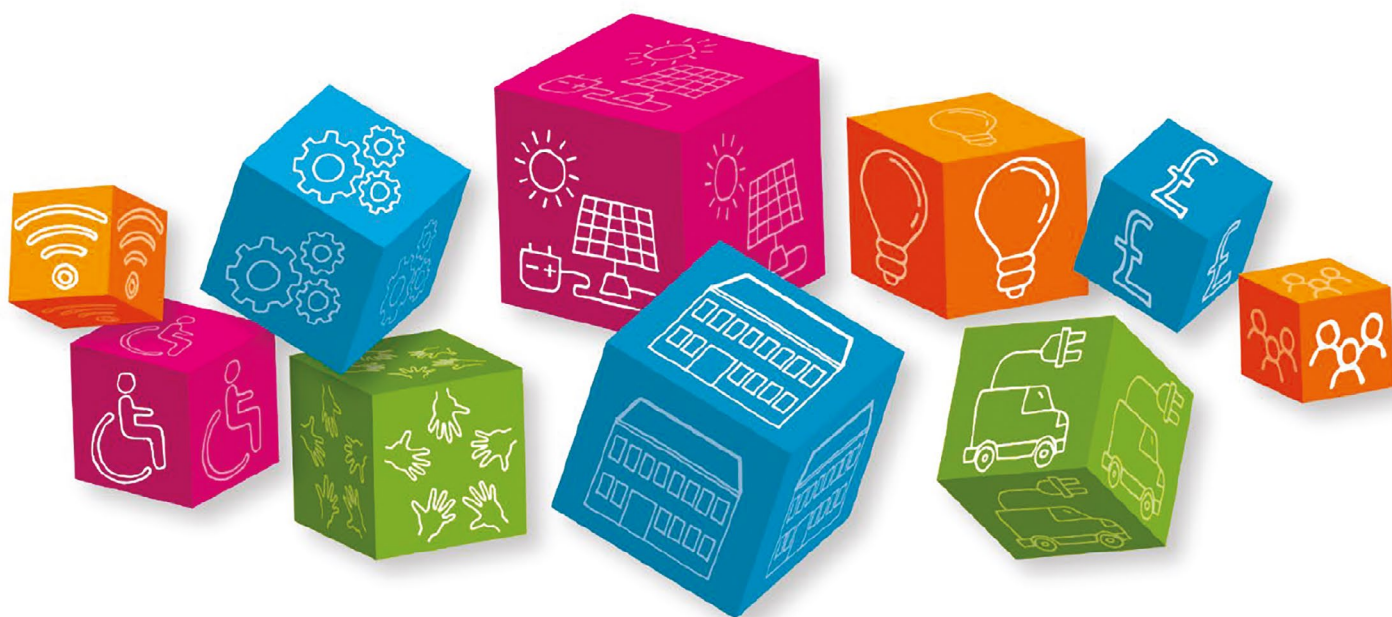
2. Key findings

The Council's CRF team worked effectively both internally and with external partners to manage a complex and multifaceted process. Overall, the CRF was an impressive decision-making pilot project and represents a significant step-forward for designing and managing participatory decision-making in the city. There is great potential to build on this strong approach for future decision-making processes.

- Feedback from the participants in the process was largely positive, and demonstrates a willingness and enthusiasm, particularly from the residents involved, to take part in further participatory decision-making processes and activities.

- The CRF has contributed to the building of closer relationships between the Council and the VCSE organisations who worked together on a more equal footing. This is also true for the relationships between the Council and members of the local community who shared decision making power. In most cases, there was a clear building of trust and communication.

- The CRF built a shared approach to decision-making, which ensured more equity and transparency in decision-making.

- The CRF process has developed significant assets that will support future devolved decision-making processes.

There were also challenges, and things that could be improved for a stronger participatory decision-making process. The CRF was ambitious, large scale and delivered in a limited timeframe. Sometimes, the expected outcomes couldn't be achieved in reality. This was especially true during the co-design phase and in deliberative workshops, and was seen in various ways:

- The size of the process was immense as it included areas from across Bristol, instead of initially focusing on a single or small number of areas. In stage one, the number of participants involved was too many for co-design to be fully effective and this did create some inconsistency and confusion.

- Designing the deliberative decision-making process at the same time as running the community conversations created delays that meant that there were gaps in information. This was particularly challenging for VCSE organisations who were trying to reach out to other organisations and run the community conversations.

- Designing the process at the same time as running it limited the potential for stage one to identify and learn about communities' needs and priorities. This knowledge and priorities would have benefited stage two.

- Deciding to operate at the Area Committee level limited the potential for genuine local decision-making because the areas extended beyond people's and organisation's knowledge

- Deliberative meetings were often fast paced, especially in areas where there were a high number of project proposals for participants to consider. This created a challenge.

- The structure the deliberative meetings and the multiple criteria against which each proposal had to be considered created a sense of pressure and inflexibility that impacted on the quality of deliberation.

- The use of decision-making criteria with complex terminology meant that participants required significant time to fully grasp the terms. That said, resources were provided to explain complex terminology and concepts which was useful.

- The decision-making process may have worked better for a revenue model than a capital model where technical issues of sustainability needed to be considered.

- Training participants in more depth on deliberation would have helped enhance conversations and given people confidence to fact check through back and forth discussions.

Please refer to the Evaluation Report for detailed insights.

3. Recommendations

The Evaluation Report makes the following recommendations based on the learning from the CRF evaluation, that could inform any future similar projects:

1. Co-design

• Be clear what is meant by co-design and give plenty of time to ensure that co-design can be delivered. Complete the co-design process before taking next steps.

• Be aware that the language of co-design is weighted and can be interpreted in different ways. Do not be afraid of focussing on collaboration if that better fits the scope of your project and is more achievable in your timeframe.

2. Scale of the process

• Work on a smaller scale. E.g. in fewer areas of the city at once, to reduce the complexity and volume of work for those running it and allow more focused attention of a smaller number of deliberative meetings. This could also be achieved by taking fewer applications into the decision-making stage.

3. Wider context and community priorities

• Make use of existing community needs and priorities information, such as local community plans, previous consultations etc, and where possible, build in time for a community (resident and VCSE organisations) conversation to set that local context.

• Support participants to have access to and discussion about this information and consider having more lead in time so that residents can be included in community conversations from the outset.

4. Distinction between consultation and community engagement

• In delivering community conversations, be clear about the distinction between building a view of community priorities (including residents and VCSE organisations) and then running conversations with VCSE applicants to support the development of proposals for funding, in the context of the community identified priorities.

5. Deliberation

When developing a deliberative approach in the future, consider the following:

- Build in clear time to develop the participants' understanding and skills around how to effectively deliberate by offering specific training at the start.

- Simplify the decision-making by reducing the number of decision-making criteria and allowing participants to consider the proposal in the round, rather than looking at proposals through only one lens, focussing on individual criteria.

- Increase flexibility in the deliberative meetings' agenda to allow for more deliberation and discussion and limit the number of applications to review.

- Prioritise time for deliberation and re-structure the time-management within meetings to ensure each proposal receives an equal amount of time for consideration.

- Be clearer about how local knowledge and experience (including the context from community conversations) would be fed into the deliberative meetings.

- Ensure all participants have hard copies of all the relevant information.

- Provide more training for facilitators, as well as opportunities to gain experience using deliberative tools and structures.

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

6. Planning and time

- Delivering high quality and meaningful engagement in this type of process is complex, nuanced and any good quality community engagement needs time to build trust and commitment, as well as the required skills to participate. The CRF was designed to learn as it developed and its success has been in no small part due to the level of commitment and energy provided by the CRF team and the wider Communities Team (as facilitators, participant and applicant supporters, community engagement experts and during resident recruitment), which enabled filling gaps, acting swiftly on learning and holding the process together for all the participants. This required a significant amount of these teams' capacity, time and energy. This may not always be possible to replicate. Therefore, for future initiatives, a simplified process spread over a longer time period could reduce demand on resources and staff, while enabling each element to be delivered effectively.