

Why the One City model works: Local governance to achieve the SDGs and leave no one behind

Allan Macleod, SDG Research and Engagement Associate, Bristol City Council

Many U.K. local governments are under severe financial stress, much of which predates and so has been worsened by the spread of COVID-19. Before the pandemic, Bristol City Council's budget had shrunk by more than 75% over the preceding 10 years.

During this period of austerity, Bristol developed a partnership-based approach to governance that has, among other things, helped support delivery of the U.N. Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This is governance in its broadest sense, involving representation from all sectors of society, its key institutions, and community groups in the process of decision-making. It is not only improving Bristol's ability to tackle complex challenges, but also the speed and agility of our work. By coalescing around a common vision and communicating a common set of objectives and outcomes for city partners (held in Bristol's One City Plan for 2050 and the SDGs), this effort is taking bold steps towards transformative action.

Bristol: A tale of two cities

Bristol is a wealthy city with a global reputation for environmentalism. However, like many cities, it is riven with deeply entrenched social and racial inequalities. Its overall prosperity is, on closer inspection, a contrast of deep wealth versus generations of poverty. Nearly 15% of the population live in neighborhoods that are among the 10% most deprived of areas in England,

and inequality in access to higher education is almost 80% between local government wards. Addressing these long-standing challenges is further complicated by an increasingly challenging economic landscape resulting from COVID-19 and the U.K.'s impending departure from the European Union.

The One City Approach

In the U.K., local authorities operate in a hyper-centralized system, where most notably central government controls the majority of budgets. As such, city governments have had to find new mechanisms to tackle long-standing issues of social inequality and met their interconnected environmental aspirations.

In late 2016, Mayor Marvin Rees began a process of strategic restructuring in an attempt to tackle this through the One City Approach. With strong mayoral commitment, the city office convened a series of biannual stakeholder gatherings (City Gatherings) and regular citizen consultations to identify a collective set of priorities and challenges for public, private and third sector organizations. Strong political willingness to engage outside the city council, and a recognition of the strength in collaborative partnership work, has meant that City Gatherings are now attended by well over 250 stakeholders.

By consulting on long-term aspirations, Bristol was able to form a commonly adopted One City Plan

vision for 2050. The collaboratively developed vision and objectives in the One City Plan provide tangible opportunities for partners to be involved in improving the city, and city gatherings provide an opportunity to reflect, refocus, and make commitments of action towards this vision.

These meetings are supported by six thematic committees, known as the One City boards, which meet on a quarterly basis to discuss issues around 6 key themes for the city: Connectivity, Economy, Environment, Health and Wellbeing, Homes and Communities and Learning and Skills. These committees comprise influential stakeholders from public, private and third sector organizations. The chairs of the One City boards also meet quarterly at a multi-board convention to discuss the interactions and trade-offs between themes. Above the multi-board is the City Leaders Board, where the heads of the key institutions (police, fire, hospitals, universities, chamber of commerce and city council) meet on a quarterly basis to improve collaboration, communication, and information sharing. At the community level, citizens participate and feed into the process through monthly drop-in sessions and annual community development worker gatherings.

This structure is supported by a small core team, the City Office, which facilitates partnership working and empowers stakeholder action. Working with the One City boards, the City Office facilitated collaborative initiatives to increase foster care numbers and tackle period poverty. Through the One City Climate and Ecological Strategies, interconnected environmental issues are being addressed by all sectors of Bristol. Moreover, during COVID-19 the City Office supported Bristol's resiliency with rapid, targeted, coherent messages throughout the crisis to struggling sectors and communities, and lobbied the national government on key issues for the city as well as consulting on a citywide Economic Recovery Strategy.

Partnership challenges

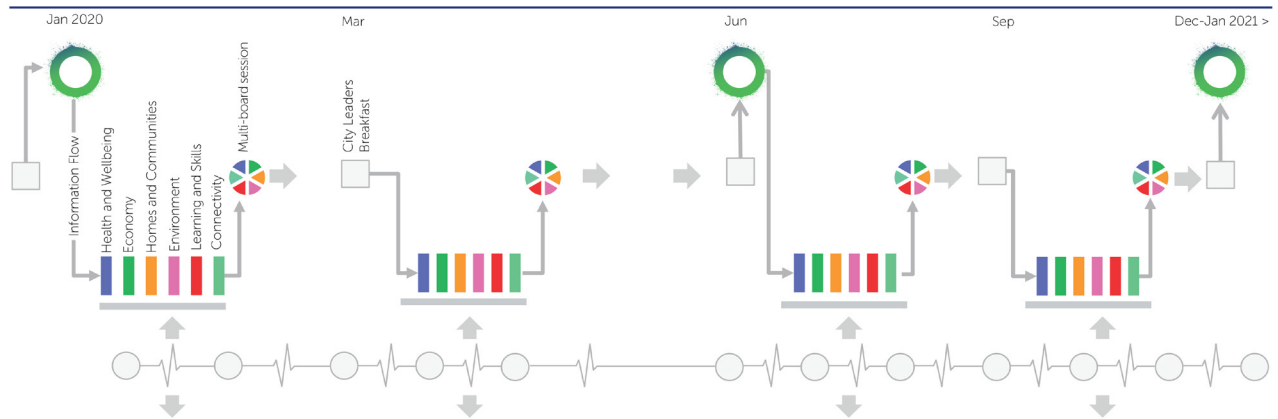
The ambitions held in the SDGs provide a difficult dynamic for a city faced with such deep inequality. Currently, the leadership of Bristol's anchor institutions does not reflect our city's desire to leave no one behind. This is the ongoing challenge we are seeking to address by supporting the development of leaders across all spheres of society through the Stepping Up and Green and Black Ambassadors programs. We want to ensure future city leaders reflect the city they serve and represent, and we hope this will support our efforts to tackle systemic inequality.

Similarly, the nature of the governance structure requires engagement with local leaders. Leaders have different drivers and can conflict when their priorities overlap. However, these areas of interaction can be harnessed and spur innovation. By communicating our shared vision through the SDGs, organizations have been able to see that "competing" social, economic or environmental issues are in fact interrelated and have co-benefits which deliver on multiple goals.

Despite this, asymmetrical buy-in remains a problem. In Bristol, the city council is a key delivery partner which can pose challenges. In asking for support, partners are only funding the work of the council, which should be covered by local taxation. Conversely, because the council is a key partner, council staff can feel they need to control the process and delivery of work, reducing the agility and ease of partnership working. This tension requires working closely with city council staff and processes, while demonstrating to city partners their key role in delivery.

Despite the challenges of partnership working, the One City model shows that collaboration with a view towards a common goal across sectors can achieve sustainable change. Every organization in a city has a role to play in that city's success.

One City Governance Structure



Ongoing development of the One City Plan, support of the City Leadership Forums, Coordination of City Office workshops, programme management for specific activities as required

Key



City Gatherings

- Bi-annual event Winter/Summer
- Connects the city to shared priorities and city 'Offers and Asks'



City Leadership Forums

- Four City Leadership Groups per annum representing key organisations including the City Funds



Multi-board Sessions

- Four Multi-board sessions which bring together chairs and support officers of thematic boards



Thematic Boards

- Multi-agency thematic strategic boards e.g. Health & Wellbeing, Learning City, Safer Bristol etc.
- Meet in between the City Gatherings
- Develop and enhance the thematic priorities



City Office Drop-ins

- Hosted by the City Office each month
- Focused on city priorities
- Open door city democracy