

Local Action for the Global Goals: A Case Study of Bristol

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FOREWORDS

Since 2015, the All Party Parliamentary Group on the UN Global Goals has championed the Sustainable Development Goals as the universal framework to leave no-one behind. However, delivering on the Global Goals is not only about our actions abroad, but also what we choose to do here at home.

The UK can lead through innovation and action, charting a path to a more sustainable future. National action is needed to achieve this, but it is not enough. Complex problems, such as climate change and ending extreme poverty, require broad engagement from everyone, in every community.

As this brief shows, Local Authorities and local stakeholders including businesses have a critical role to play. Bristol was the first city in the UK to publish a Voluntary Local Review of progress towards the SDGs in 2019 and has since published a second, detailing how they have been actively grappling with the challenges of delivering sustainable development. This brief offers a short summary of their latest progress report, published in September 2022.

Importantly, the report reflects on the challenges that Local Authorities face in delivering sustainable development for their citizens, echoing cross-party interest in devolving more power closer to the people. It also highlights some of the innovations that have arisen from local initiatives designed to accelerate progress. In the case of Bristol, the City Leap initiative is a particularly exciting and creative example of how local leaders can make an impact.

Supporting and empowering local efforts to achieve the Global Goals will contribute to material improvements for UK citizens while raising awareness and advancing our global ambition for the UK to be a leader in building more sustainable futures for all.



A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jack McConnell'.

Rt Hon Lord Jack McConnell

In 2019, Bristol was the first UK city to produce a Voluntary Local Review of progress towards the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). These goals reflect a holistic view of sustainability, recognising the importance of reducing our collective impact on the planet while tackling poverty and addressing entrenched inequalities within and between nations.

Much has changed since 2019. In 2020, COVID pandemic lockdowns kept many of our citizens indoors while, during that year's summer, Black Lives Matter protestors took to our streets. Neither the pandemic nor the inequalities that motivated people to take to the streets have passed. As a city, we continue a process of healing while working together to ensure a more just and sustainable future for all our citizens.

Against that backdrop, this report updates Bristol's progress against the SDGs since that first review in 2019. Its production reflects the culture of partnership that has defined our efforts to build that fairer future, involving a collaboration between University of Bristol students, staff from the Cabot Institute for the Environment and the City Office hosted by Bristol City Council. It offers a comprehensive review of progress through available local data and reflects on some of the constraints local governments and organisations face as they work to accelerate progress.

As a city, we should be proud of our successes. Emissions have been falling while the share of renewables in our energy mix continues to rise. Our economy has grown, unemployment remains low despite a small uptick during the worst phases of the pandemic and the share of city waste going to landfill continues to fall. But we know there is much more to be done and that we must work together more than ever.



A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Marvin'.

Marvin Rees
Mayor of Bristol



A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Evelyn Welch'.

Professor Evelyn Welch
Vice-Chancellor
University of Bristol

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Bristol is a diverse, creative and internationally connected city in South West England with a strong commitment to sustainable development. The city and many of its organisations are committed to delivering the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

In 2019, Bristol was the first city in the UK to publish a Voluntary Local Review (VLR) to assess local progress in meeting the SDGs. This report provides updated data and information about Bristol's progress, examines how other UK cities have approached sustainable development – especially considering recent challenges – and reflects on how national government could better partner with local governments to deliver that development.

In 2019, Bristol was the first city in the UK to publish a Voluntary Local Review to assess local progress in meeting the SDGs.

Bristol has achieved much progress since the last report. Some areas of education, particularly early years' attainment and higher education, have seen improvements although due to the COVID pandemic not all data is recent. Since declaring a climate and ecological emergency in 2018, Bristol has made some important gains, with citywide carbon emissions falling every year and the share of renewables in Bristol's energy mix growing. Progress against economic growth measures is harder to determine given the impact of COVID-19 on data collection. However, unemployment rates have generally fallen, earnings for men and women have increased and the pay gap between men and women has decreased.

Unfortunately, progress against other measures has been less advanced. There are a growing number of children under 16 living in low-income families. According to our analysis, violent and sexual crime, domestic abuse, fear of crime and mental health issues have also risen. An increasing number of

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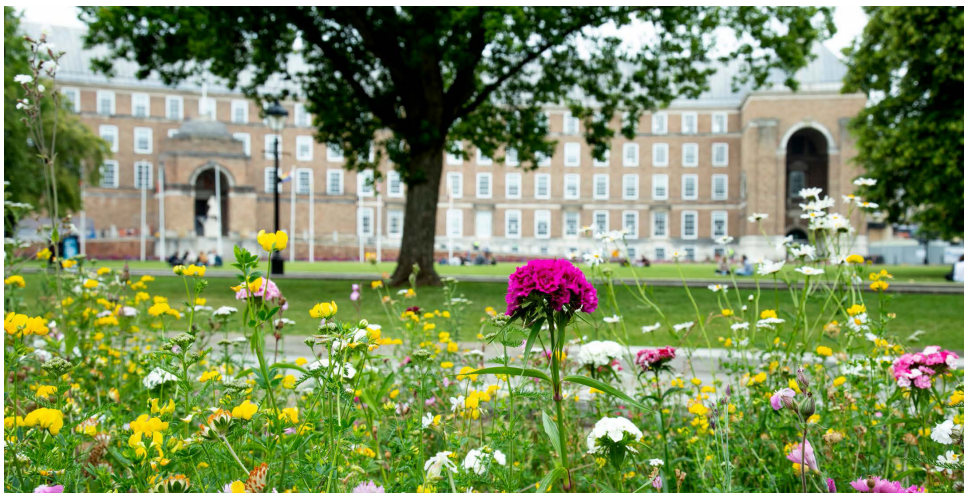
households are using food banks, with wards on the edges of the city boundaries most severely impacted.

Some indicators were missing due to a lack of reporting during the pandemic on issues like education results and public transport usage, and the COVID-19 pandemic clearly impacted others results, such as community engagement with green spaces.

The growing engagement and adoption of the SDGs at a local level in the UK has occurred while local authorities (LAs) have faced smaller budgets and growing needs. For the past decade and through the pandemic and now an escalating cost-of-living crisis, LAs have been asked to maintain services while spending less and less money. But the financial challenges go far beyond shrinking local budgets. The many short-term, competitive funding mechanisms that LAs increasingly rely upon undermine long-term financial planning and take up time and effort that could be devoted to delivering services rather than fundraising undermining local stability.

It was in this context that Bristol's localised approach to sustainable development emerged, and the strong partnerships that have formed between public, private, civil society organisations, unions and academia have been crucial in delivering the SDGs: Bristol's One City Plan is an example of how collaborative, cross-sectoral approaches can help achieve them.

Looking forward, establishing a more stable financial environment for local authorities, deepening devolution, resourcing partnership coordinators, supporting community action and investing in national and international collaborations would all help amplify local action to address our shared global challenges.



CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR LOCAL ACTION

Bristol faces several financial and institutional challenges, that are also shared by other UK local authorities, in its ambition to accelerate local action in pursuit of sustainable development. The city has responded innovatively to these challenges through initiatives such as the One City model, Bristol City Funds and collaborative efforts to improve data sharing and integration.

In an attempt to produce viable and meaningful recommendations for national government that would facilitate better local delivery of the SDGs, we interviewed policy officers from five of the UK's Core Cities (the UK's alliance of 11 cities outside London) as well as the Bristol City Council Policy and Public Affairs team. Several common themes emerged, including the piecemeal nature of devolution in the UK, the financial difficulties of maintaining key services while investing in sustainable development, and barriers to monitoring progress. Yet there were also examples of positive change facilitated by partnerships and community action, which became particularly important in the face of the COVID crisis.

Challenges: piecemeal devolution, an unstable fiscal context and data deficits.

Opportunities: partnerships and community action.

PIECEMEAL DEVOLUTION

Bristol's first Voluntary Local Review highlighted the challenge of jurisdictional complexity. It is often the case that the functional urban areas of UK cities do not correspond with local authority boundaries. In Bristol, for example, the City Council local authority area only contains about 70% of the total population of the Bristol Built-Up Area and less than half of the city-region population of 1.1 million. But critical social, economic and environmental challenges do not disappear at the edge of local authority borders. Flows of people, goods, money and pollution cross the council borders daily. The local authorities within the city region are interdependent with one another.

These interdependencies are complicated by the varied political systems within each local area and the role of the regional administration. While the devolution deals that brought about mayoral combined authorities have brought



new local powers in adult education, transport and housing, they have been criticised for not going far enough, leaving “a patchwork of institutions which are still at the mercy of central government.”

There are also complexities brought about by the newly forming Integrated Care Systems (ICS). Across England, these systems are being developed jointly by local authorities and the NHS. While many local authorities consulted for this report appreciate this new approach to meaningful devolution, smaller or less proactive local authorities stand to lose out considerably if they are unable to participate in the consultations being carried out as these regional healthcare bodies form. In the case of Bristol, the local authority is one of three in a single system. The Bristol Health and Wellbeing Board acts as an effective bridge between local authorities and the ICS, whereas the formation of the Kent and Medway ICS demands the engagement of 26 borough councils. Conversely, Cornwall County Council has just one council and one ICS, making it far easier for the local government to align its priorities with the ICS as it develops. This contrast between different systems will make it harder for some local authorities to focus on tackling issues of health and, consequently, the SDG agenda. Engaging meaningfully with the ICS formation process requires capacity within local authorities, which has become more difficult to resource post-COVID in the face of significant financial pressures, exacerbated by COVID and the requirement workforce pressures.

In sum, devolution has been piecemeal, undermining coherent and ambitious local and regional action. These challenges have been significantly compounded by fiscal constraints.

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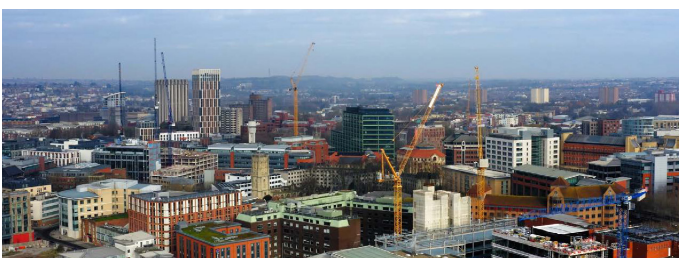
AN UNSTABLE FISCAL CONTEXT

Finance is a critical barrier to accelerated local action. Since the introduction of a programme of austerity beginning in 2009, local authorities have been in a persistent state of fiscal triage. The Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government (now known as the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities) estimates that national funding for local authorities fell by 49.1% in real terms between 2011 and 2018. As the austerity programme was spatially blind to the varying socio-economic conditions of each local authority, its effects have been experienced unevenly. Cities in the North were particularly affected by the cuts, with Newcastle City Council currently facing a £94 million spending gap in addition to the £305 million reduction in their budget since 2010.

The cuts have resulted in significant restructuring of budgets and strategies as local authorities seek new ways of addressing important issues with increasingly limited resources. Immediate social and economic issues are prioritised over longer-range challenges, including sustainable development. Funding cuts and the lack of large-scale regeneration financing which existed pre-2011 in some cities interviewed, have led to programmes such as statutory sustainable development plans being dropped in order to prioritise critical services.

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Due to the burden placed on the NHS and the cost of the Treasury's furlough scheme, the COVID pandemic exacerbated these challenges, forcing further restructuring of city council priorities and budgets, including the suspension of services deemed non-essential. Representatives of the Core Cities reinforce this point, stating that during the initial stages of the pandemic, everything considered business as usual was put on hold. As such, cities' visions for sustainable development were temporarily side lined. Increased funding for local government will be essential to accelerate sustainable development.



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However, limited funding is not the only fiscal challenge. Our research revealed widespread frustration with the way critical resources – particularly for investment – are allocated through competitive, time-bound and ringfenced funding mechanisms. Councils are required to bid for funding from Westminster or negotiate a deal to address critical local priorities, which one policy officer deemed a “waste of time and resources,” especially for unsuccessful bids and negotiations. The increasing reliance on “bidding and deal-making rather than capacity building” for local government in the UK undermines the strategic planning that sustainable local development demands.



For example, in 2017, Bristol was awarded funding from Feeding Britain for Feeding Bristol, a pilot to tackle food poverty in the city. However, the city was unsuccessful in its follow-up bid and the project paused. Eventually new funding was secured, but the fundraising activity itself diverted valuable resource from getting on with the work. This model of competitive funding also means that successful pots of funding for one local authority come at the detriment of others, exacerbating regional inequalities. Under-resourced authorities grappling with protracted austerity have simply been unable to access certain funding opportunities due to capacity constraints (ibid). Such inequalities are compounded by universal reductions in grant funding. Consequently, many of the most deprived local authorities, which relied more heavily on grant funding, faced greater reductions, resulting in local authority budgetary changes ranging from -1.6% to -46% (Gray and Bradford, 2018).

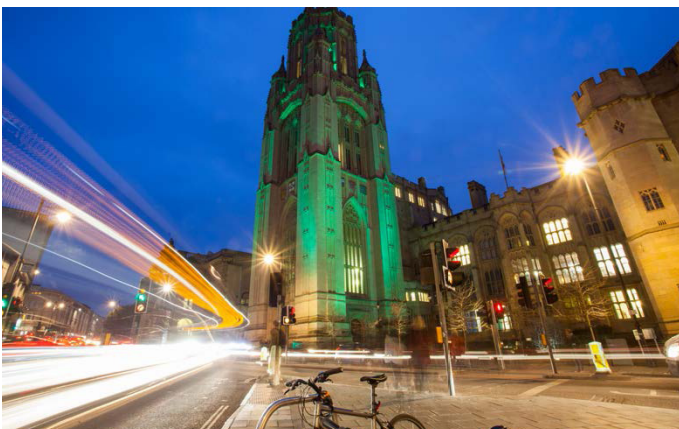
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Funding mechanisms are also often ringfenced for particular types of investment, or service improvements dictated by central government, rather than driven by locally defined priorities. For example, the recent Household Support Fund ringfenced spending percentages such that a proportion of the funding had to be spent on pensioners. While not an issue in itself, the funding allocations created complexity. By ringfencing the funds to be spent on pensioners receiving Pension Credit, the local demographics were not considered. In Greater Bristol, falling within the administrative boundary of the West of England Combined Authority, fewer pensioners claim Pension Credit than in many surrounding local authorities. As a result, Bristol's pensioners received disproportionately more funding per person than pensioners in surrounding local areas. It also meant that other vulnerable groups in Bristol received a lower level of support than they would have if the local authority had been able to choose how the finance was spent.

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The need for further devolution and increasing council capacity to raise finances independently of Westminster were repeated themes when speaking to council policy leads. Representatives from the Core Cities also stressed the importance of building private-public partnerships.

- In **Glasgow**, the SDGs were seen as a key hook for engaging businesses in positive social and environmental action – a message that resonates with Bristol's experience.
- Similarly, **Newcastle** shared its commitment to increasing stakeholder engagement, while Belfast is also investigating the opportunities presented by public-private partnerships to deliver its SDG-related ambitions.



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Giving local authorities greater autonomy over how regional finance is spent and providing longer-term, less competitive sources of funding would allow local authorities to better target their work to support the most vulnerable. It would also allow for better recognition of the specific challenges of each local authority and improve equity of funding for areas across the UK that face the greatest deprivation.

DATA DEFICITS

Access to the data required to report on the SDGs remains problematic. Local authorities in the UK are fortunate to have support from the Office for National Statistics (ONS), but not all relevant data is held by the ONS. Some government departments do not share data or do not geographically disaggregate data to the level required for local monitoring. A lack of disaggregated data, or a lack of access to data, can make targeted interventions by local authorities difficult to justify, deliver and monitor. This is particularly true for issues around biodiversity where a lack of concrete data for most local authorities and a lack of resourcing to record new data makes it difficult to target action.

Disaggregated data allows local authorities to compare regional and national contexts and therefore identify issues that may need prioritisation. With funding so tightly controlled, this is particularly important to justify any resourcing needs. It also allows local authorities to identify and learn from others that have successfully tackled similar challenges.



sure that German cities are also developing sustainably. The department funded sustainable development coordinators in cities across the country to coordinate action, strategies and delivery of the SDGs .

This model could easily be replicated across the UK and would provide hubs for national and global partnership activity. Coordinators could also raise awareness about the SDGs, provide information on what it means to take action on the goals, and support greater decentralised effort towards the goals across the UK.

The importance of timely, locally disaggregated data was made plain by the COVID pandemic. The absence and inaccessibility of data was identified as hindering the initial local and national pandemic response, and ministers have been called on to address 'structural, legal, and cultural impediments to data-sharing'. Addressing data deficits and mapping local data onto the SDG monitoring framework across UK local authorities could enhance intercity communication, coordination and the monitoring of progress.

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Community Climate Action Plans

Following the launch of Bristol's One City Climate Strategy, a number of partners have been working to put communities at the heart of Bristol's Climate Action. The project, coordinated by Bristol Green Capital Partnership and supported by the National Lottery Climate Action Fund, involves enabling six of Bristol's communities (four geographic and two demographic) to play a leading role in shaping Bristol's transition to a low-carbon and climate-resilient city.

During 2021, the six community groups co-produced community climate action plans. These plans aim to both help Bristol become carbon neutral by 2030 and deliver a range of benefits across a number of the SDGs, including tackling fuel poverty, reducing waste and consumption and developing the local circular economy. The project is now moving into phase two where the six leading communities will mentor other communities across the city to develop and implement their own action plans.

THE POWER OF PARTNERSHIP COORDINATORS

A key reason Bristol has been able to take more action on the SDGs than most UK local authorities is the development of a coordinator role within the Council, initially funded by the University of Bristol but now institutionalised within the City Office. This role has ensured sustained capacity for cross-sectoral dialogue through regular SDG Alliance meetings and has acted as a stable point of contact for national and international partners engaging with the SDGs. Glasgow and Liverpool, two of the other main UK cities that have taken direct action on the SDGs, have had similar experiences. Glasgow has had an SDG officer funded by URBACT and Liverpool has hosted the Liverpool 2030 hub, which has provided a constant external advocacy point of contact.

GIZ, the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit, has taken the resourcing of local action for the global goals a step further, deciding that the best way to ensure sustainable development globally is to make



MOVING FORWARD

Despite the many challenges local authorities and organisations face in advancing sustainable development locally, there is clear and growing momentum for the adoption of the SDGs. Other UK local authorities, such as Liverpool and Glasgow, have recently incorporated some elements of the UN SDGs into policy. The COVID crisis has propelled innovation through cross-sectoral collaborations and laid the foundations for long-term change.

- **Belfast** City Council described the pandemic as a 'reset moment' for the city with hopes that priorities can be reassessed to guarantee a future in which no one is left behind.
- A representative from **Glasgow** City Council highlighted improvements made to active travel infrastructure using COVID-response funding.
- Over the next three years, **Liverpool** City Council has pledged £10 million to make the city greener by investing in parks and green spaces, with £3 million set aside for retrofitting public buses to reduce nitrogen dioxide levels and air pollution in congested areas of the city.
- In **Nottingham**, local councillors found that the reduction of mowing during lockdown helped change attitudes to rewilding. Greater numbers of wildflowers and more natural green spaces showed citizens the benefits of protecting biodiversity.
- An innovative partnership in **Bristol**, City Leap, will provide low-carbon infrastructure for the city.

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The COVID pandemic also inspired an increase in grassroots and community action. Surges in volunteering schemes demonstrate the power of community in building sustainable urban futures.

- In **Bristol**, many communities organised food deliveries, prescription pick-ups and neighbourhood befriending. These groups serve as critical social infrastructure, often filling gaps in local authority and voluntary, community and social enterprise provision.

City Leap: A ground breaking initiative to transform Bristol's energy infrastructure

The City Leap partnership is a new approach to providing low-carbon infrastructure for a city. **Bristol City Council has partnered with Ameresco and Vattenfall** to leverage over £1billion of investment in the city's low-carbon infrastructure across 20 years. As part of this commitment, Vattenfall and Ameresco will help deliver district heat networks and retrofit the city's social housing stock. During the first five years of the twenty-year partnership, the private sector will invest at least £424 million in a range of large infrastructure projects to reduce Bristol's carbon footprint by 140,000 tonnes.

- The Community Champions scheme introduced in **Newcastle** in response to COVID has focused on improving community education on healthcare and mitigating lower vaccine uptake in some demographic groups.

The hope underlying schemes such as this is that the momentum generated during the pandemic can produce an inclusive form of sustainable development, centred around ethical, social and environmental principles.

The empowerment of communities, local organisations and city governments is essential to accelerate progress. This can be achieved by devolving more powers, simplifying devolved structures, providing a stable funding environment and facilitating local partnerships. Finally, greater awareness and alignment with the UN's SDG framework among Core Cities could improve intercity coordination and generate productive dialogue on shared challenges that inspires creative solutions.

Further information

Scan the QR code to access the [full report](#).



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