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Local Context

There are many things that set Bristol apart and make it a place where an increasing number of people want to live, work and study. In fact, Bristol's population is increasing at a higher rate than other similar UK cities with its wealth of culture, creativity and easy access to other places appealing to many. Bristol is now a truly global city and is home to a unique mix of cultures and ideas with at least 91 different languages spoken.

Like many places Bristol faces challenges. It remains a city of contrasts where some of the most affluent areas border some of the most deprived. Economic success has also created new problems such as travel congestion, environmental pollution and increasing house prices.

"Vibrant", "Diverse" and "Friendly" – The top 3 words used by residents to describe Bristol (Quality of Life Survey 2018)

Key Population Facts

- We have a population of about 463,400; the largest city in the South West of England
- We are one of Great Britain's ten 'Core Cities'
- Bristol's population is expected to reach half a million by 2027
- We have more children under sixteen than people of pensionable age
- 16% of our population belongs to a black or minority ethnic group

Governance Structure

- The Council is led by a Mayor who is elected directly by the people of Bristol for a fixed four-year term. The Mayor appoints one or two Deputy Mayors and between one and eight Executive Members from the 70 Councillors, to work with them.
- There are 70 Councillors in total, each of whom is elected for a 4-year term and who represent the 35 wards of the City. The overriding duty of Councillors is to the whole community, but they have a special responsibility to the constituents of their ward.

- All Councillors and the Mayor meet together as the Full Council.
- The Full Council sets the broad Policy and Budget Framework within which the Council including the Mayor and their Executive operates. The Full Council is chaired by the Lord Mayor of Bristol. This role is a ceremonial and civic one. The Lord Mayor is a councillor and is chosen and appointed for a one-year term by the Full Council at its annual Council meeting in May.

How Council Decisions are Made

Decisions in the Council are made by Full Council (all Councillors), The Mayor and Cabinet, Regulatory Committees (planning and licensing etc) and a range of other bodies such as Human Resources and the Audit Committee.

Scrutiny Commissions act as the 'critical friend' and have an important role to play in providing local accountability, openness and involvement in decision-making, aiming to improve results for people in Bristol.

Statutory Framework – Decision Making

UK law states that every Council must publish:

- Details of when decisions will be taken
- Papers of meetings – at least 5 working days beforehand
- Minutes of meetings – showing the decisions that were made
- All meetings must be held in public, except where 'exempt' (confidential) information will be discussed.

Decision Making Key Facts

- Around 200 public meetings a year which vary in scale and levels of public interest.
- We accept statements and questions from the public at most meetings – there is no limit on the size of statements or the number of questions. Statements can be presented at the meeting and are usually simply noted. Written answers to questions are provided one hour before the meeting and a supplementary question can be asked at the meeting arising from the reply.
- We have a petitions scheme where those securing 3500 signatures or more can lead to a debate in Full Council. We have around 5 of these each year.
- Some public meetings are also webcast and available to view on our website (see also 'Covid-19 - New Ways of Working' below).

Covid-19 – New Ways of Working

Covid-19 has required us to rapidly modify our ways of working in order to continue to meet statutory requirements around decisions being made in public. We have now moved

to webcasting all public meetings on our website, with the Mayor and Councillors participating remotely. At the moment, we are only accepting written statements and questions from the public, but after 21st May 2020 (the start of the new Municipal Year) we will move to enable residents to join the meeting via video conferencing to present their statement or ask supplementary questions.

Approach to Civil Participation – Commentary

- Bristol has a very generous scheme around public engagement; many other UK Councils don't allow any residents to participate at meetings.
- This brings many advantages as the public can and do play an active role in local decision making (we have received 800 public forum statements for one meeting).
- We are proud of our levels of participation and really value the way the public can directly affect decision making. However, there are also challenges, which include;
 - The need to process large numbers of public submissions in a short space of time, such as reading them to ensure they do not contain information that is confidential or defamatory.
 - Difficulties with managing time at meetings. We usually allow between 30 to 60 minutes for public forum, but this often isn't sufficient and frequently leads to disappointment if people are not permitted to read their statements or ask supplementary questions.
 - Regular and sometimes disruptive public protests at meetings.
 - The potential for disappointment when a decision is made against the apparent weight of public opinion.
 - The risk that public engagement is dominated by a relatively small group of individuals. Usually those from the more affluent groups (see 'Next Steps' below).

Next Steps

We know anecdotally that public participants in our democratic processes are not representative of Bristol's diverse communities so have agreed the following measures to address this;

- Our website and public guides will be reviewed in order to improve accessibility. We will also include an equalities statement.
- We will conduct targeted promotion of opportunities for engagement with underrepresented groups (including via third sector organisations) to include establishing a focus group to invite comments to assist with our understanding of the barriers to participation.
- We will introduce a (voluntary) feedback mechanism to enable those who submit public forum to advise us of their protected characteristics and use this to assess progress/plan additional actions. This will include a (new) customer services survey.