Democracy in City Leap

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Introduction

This is a first exploratory study into options for designing in democratic accountability and community involvement in Bristol's City Leap programme. City Leap is Bristol's major energy infrastructure programme.

We see this as part of an economic democracy agenda for Bristol, and the concrete opportunity of the City Leap project as an example of developing meaningful citizen participation in ongoing decision-making around city infrastructure.

City Leap will be a joint venture between Bristol City Council and a private partner, with a 50:50 stake. An essential question to explore as a next step will be how far participation and accountability reaches into the City Leap business operations and commercial decisions. This report does not answer that question, as all the channels of participation identified in this study would be affected by the way that City Leap approaches the tensions of commercial confidentiality and accountability. Bristol City Council's commitment to working closely with communities and ensuring that this becomes a cornerstone of City Leap's future approach is a positive step.

Summary

Through a combination of interviews and desktop research, we identified the following channels of participation which could be used for Bristol's City Leap:

- Direct participation of a representative group of citizens, e.g. Citizens Assembly.
- Community organisations and VCSE sector.
- Intermediary coordinating role.
- Neighbourhood based action.

Each of these has its strengths and weaknesses. We recommend using an integrated hybrid approach, combining several of these channels. This would make the most of their strengths and should be designed so that each supports the other rather than being separate. While some of these channels have more potential to hold confidential information, if they are to be democratically accountable to their wider communities there are limits to how far they can remain within a boundary of confidentiality.

Next steps include:
- **Immediate inclusion of participation:** City Leap preferred bidders to include citizen participation and accountability processes in their governance proposals. They are welcome to use ideas from this report (with reference) directly in their bids.
- **Top down development:** Greater clarity on the governance of the JV itself, including the principles and values of citizen participation and clarity on how commercial confidentiality will be balanced with accountability, and how commercial interests will be balanced with social value. Ideally this should be developed collaboratively with Bristol City Council, the commercial bidders or chosen JV partner, and through the participatory channels identified in this report.
- **Bottom up development:** Increase understanding of City Leap among community organisations in Bristol, and develop more specific proposals for democratic governance of City Leap. This should include scrutiny of the commercialisation of public assets and how their value is retained within communities. Ideally this should take place before contractual decisions are made, in discussion with Bristol City Council and the preferred bidders.

Background

This research considers how to develop democracy in City Leap in a way that strengthens democracy in the city of Bristol as a whole - potentially using City Leap as an exemplar of best practice for other aspects of city governance. Democracy is understood as being more than the national and local formal democratic structures of voting for representatives. It is about everyone in the city having a voice and being able to participate in creating the future of the city and its neighbourhoods. As such, it is important that any democratic approach developed for City Leap should strengthen and develop the existing democratic ecosystem of the city.

City Leap

City Leap is an initiative by Bristol City Council which is intended to be the biggest energy investment in the city, to make a major contribution to the climate emergency agenda. The programme is based on a joint venture, which will be 50:50 owned by Bristol City Council and by a commercial partner. The City Leap prospectus[1], published in May 2018, sets out the following investment opportunities:

Potential investment opportunity	Estimated investment opportunity over ten years
Heat Networks	£300m
Smart energy system	£125m
Domestic energy efficiency	£300m
Commercial energy efficiency	£100m
Renewable energy	£40m
Monitoring, dissemination and evaluation	£10m
Transport	Additional
Hydrogen	Additional
Marine energy	Additional
Total	£875m

The council plans to make its estate available for City Leap to undertake low carbon projects (Wind, Solar, Heat Networks, EV charging infrastructure etc.), and will expect a significant financial investment from the partner, as well as technical expertise.

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[1] https://www.energyservicebristol.co.uk/wp-content/pdf/City_Leap_Prospectus%204-5-18.pdf

Whilst Bristol City Council has actively engaged with community stakeholders throughout the development of City Leap, the nature of commercial confidentiality will of necessity limit the level of detail that can be shared. The council will need to navigate the challenging tension of balancing commercial confidentiality with the need for scrutiny and accountability by councillors and citizens. There is potential for learning from the recent experience with Bristol Energy, the energy company set up by Bristol City Council.

In December 2020 the three preferred bidders were announced. The chosen partner is expected to be made public in late 2021. The criteria used by Bristol City Council to select the bidder include a significant weighting for social value[2], and an expectation of community engagement and participation. Community engagement and participation are terms which can mean a lot of different things to different people, and are not very clearly defined in City Leap. This means that there is space to input into how participation and engagement are conceptualised, which this report aims to do. Given that the votes on the board of City Leap may be split equally between Bristol City Council and the JV partner, there is a question as to what meaningful citizen participation means without a vote on the board.

Community Energy Steering Group

In response to the City Leap project, a steering group of community energy practitioners, including representatives of Bristol Energy Network, Triodos Bank, Centre for Sustainable Energy, Zero West, Low Carbon Gordano, Bristol Green Capital Partnership, and Bristol Energy Co-operative, have developed a proposal for how City Leap could provide social value. Bristol City Council has engaged with this steering group and referenced it in the documentation provided to bidders. This proposal has been presented by the Steering Group to the three shortlisted bidders, with the hope that they will incorporate these ideas into their more detailed proposals to the council.

The community energy steering group's five asks are shown in the diagram below:

This research focuses on ask number 4, governance, representation & participation in the wider City Leap project itself. This report will be shared with the three preferred bidders to inform their thinking about governance of City Leap. The authors are available for further discussion and input on request.

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[2] The Public Services (Social Value) Act 2012 means that all councils have to consider social value when they buy services or contracts e.g. local jobs, apprenticeships, volunteer hours or support for disadvantaged groups.

Interview methodology

The purpose of this research was to ground the design of citizen participation in City Leap in an understanding of current democratic thinking and practice in Bristol. A qualitative interview based methodology was chosen, both to gain an understanding of key actors' perceptions of democracy in Bristol, and to build relationships with civil society actors in the city who may be interested in being involved in a next phase of this project (both in terms of research and in terms of actual City Leap governance development).

The interview methodology followed a mix of purposive and snowball approach to sampling to interview people in Bristol who have roles in democratic and civic participation. This included roles in local government (3 interviews), roles in local community or neighbourhood anchor organisations (2 interviews), and roles in intermediary organisations (4 interviews). These interviews provided a diversity of perspectives on democracy in the city and the City Leap initiative. However, as this is an exploratory stage piece of research, the number of interviews were limited. For a more comprehensive qualitative study we would carry out an in-depth conceptualisation of an integrated City Leap hybrid democratic process, and review this with further stakeholders. There is also a need for a better understanding of City Leap and its vision and plans, to ensure that the conceptualisation is rooted in a detailed understanding of the governance and of the partnership. Doing this would require an extension of the project.

Interviews took place on zoom between December 2020 and February 2021, were between 30 and 90 minutes and recorded if consent was given.

Democracy in Bristol

Bristol already has a rich ecosystem of channels for citizens to have a voice between and outside of local elections. Interviewees identified gaps and potential for development of this ecosystem, but were clear that any new citizen participation organised for City Leap should build on the existing ecosystem. One respondent noted the danger of having a one-dimensional conversation about what the city wants focused only on energy, rather than the city's energy future being integrated into a more holistic democracy process.

Mapping the democracy ecosystem in Bristol

Bristol City Council official channels:
- One City boards, with representation across sectors.
- Voice and Influence Partnership - not currently funded, partnership with VCSE sector organisations.
- Community Development officers - working in different neighbourhoods.

- Annual quality of life survey.
- Citizen Panel - surveys are sent to this panel regularly.
- Consultations.
- Planning process.
- Responses to COVID - We Are Bristol - and coordination of community emergency response.
- Citizens Assembly - run for the first time in early 2021.

Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) sector:
- Organisations representing particular communities, including communities of interest and local neighbourhoods.
  - Some are former neighbourhood partnerships, and may be developing neighbourhood plans for their area.
  - They may carry out regular surveys within their communities, including door knocking to reach more people.
  - They may be leaders within their communities.
- Organisations which provide services to people and have relationships with people who are least resourced to have a voice.
  - They listen to the needs and wants of people who may not speak up in community organisations or through other channels.
- Intermediary organisations which provide support, training, networking, organisational development and representation for smaller VCSE organisations.

These community sector organisations have the potential to play a role in the city's democracy. Many of them already do, but it is important to recognise that within the community sector there are a range of more and less democratic practices.

Identified gaps and ideas for development of Bristol's democracy

The interviewees talked about what is and isn't working in Bristol's democracy. Some spoke about the importance of providing support so that the people who find it hardest to participate are able to have a voice, that "environmental approaches don't make sense if you don't include everyone", and that you need to address systemic inequalities as part of addressing climate change and energy. Others spoke about the role that 'community anchor organisations' - for example neighbourhood development trusts - have in understanding the needs and wants of people in their communities, and successfully advocating for these. The new organisational structures set up to coordinate responses to the Covid pandemic have enabled good collaboration between the city council and community organisations, and given people the experience of doing things for themselves. There were suggestions to continue to resource and develop these responsive coordination meetings as longer term democratic structures.

The interviewees also described their concept of what democracy is or should be. The table below summarises respondents' views of what is and isn't working in democracy in Bristol, their conceptualisation of what democracy can deliver, and potential opportunities for improvement.

What's working	What's not working
- Mayor is visible and accountable. - Digital spaces of engagement and communication. - Individual council officers who act as liaison/allies to make connections in the council. - Organisations providing support to most marginalised people have trusted relationships and are well placed to articulate their needs and voice. - Pandemic has shown people doing things without institutions. - Democracy is taking place at neighbourhood level in Community Anchor Organisations.	- Democracy not embraced by citizens/people feeling ignored. - Civic space limited - need permission, becomes bureaucratic, a lot of legal work. Feels disempowering, the amount of bureaucracy involved. - Participation is mostly from retired/elderly people. - Frustration people feel that there are powers outside of their control that have the most influence. - Lack of resource in the council and tight timeframes for decisions.
What can local democracy deliver?	How to make improvements
- Decision-making. - Control over/benefit from resources and funding - land, energy, housing, buildings. - Commissioning - The ability to deliver services and public funds going into very local organisations. - People doing things, having more control to do things in their own lives rather than needing others to do things for them. - Marginalised people having a voice, which means multiple approaches to democracy - not one size fits all.	- Continue to develop/use/invest in infrastructure created for responding to the pandemic e.g. We Are Bristol. - Organise insights from community organisations who provide services to people who find it hardest to have a voice - share as feedback to the city in a systematic way. - Continue to resource and develop community anchor organisations which work at the neighbourhood scale, often as neighbourhood development trusts.

Developing democracy for City Leap

The following is a sketch of how democracy could be developed in City Leap. The next step would be to turn this sketch into a democratic conceptual map for City Leap in collaboration with stakeholders.

Benefits of participation

Some potential benefits of citizen participation in City Leap include:

- **Capacity:** participation in City Leap could build capacity in different communities to become active partners with the City Leap JV and coordinate democratic participation of individuals in the communities.
- **Innovation:** an open conversation with communities could lead to opportunities for grassroots innovations that wouldn't have otherwise been identified.
- **Projects:** the initiation of appropriate projects. For example, community buildings that are near the planned district heating network could be connected if there are open communications.
- **Impact:** the impact of City Leap in terms of key performance indicators such as carbon emissions saved could be increased through collaboration with citizens and community organisations.
- **Skills:** through being part of City Leap conversations, Bristol residents could gain an awareness of energy and a motivation to develop skills in this area. Coupled with training and apprenticeships, this could increase the number of local skilled workers to have jobs in City Leap and the wider supply chain.
- **Unintended benefits:** maybe identified. For example, in relation to specific community buildings, streets, bits of land, routes, through tapping in to local knowledge and ideas.

Principles of participation

In the interviews we discussed specific approaches to citizen participation that could be part of City Leap's governance. These are described in more detail below. However, some interviewees emphasised the values and principles over structure. This would mean embedding the purpose and the level of power and influence of the 'conversation' that City Leap has with citizens in the contract with the council/JV from the outset. This leaves room for change over the 20 year relationship, including the wider context of approaches to democracy and engagement.

Some questions to address in developing approaches to democracy and engagement could include:
- What decisions would a 'community advisory board' or similar make?
- What power and influence would it have?
- What is the purpose of an advisory board?
- How would citizens involved with City Leap balance co-production with critical accountability?

- Would it have a say how the resources are allocated between the JV and grassroots level?
- How much would delivery be contracted to external organisations or used as an opportunity to build capacity of local social enterprises?
- Would citizens shape who is trained and employed to deliver City Leap, and how the skills supply chain is supported?
- How would ideas from the grassroots be identified and fed into central decision-making?

Channels of participation

Below, we describe four different channels of citizen participation that could be part of City Leap governance. These are: sortition-based participation, where a representative sample of citizens directly participate in an informed deliberation; community organisations representing the interests and views of communities of place and of interest; intermediary coordinating organisations bringing skills and expertise; and neighbourhood based innovation focused on action and creativity.

The most effective and democratic approach would likely involve a combination of all four, to balance their different pros and cons.

Citizen assembly/sortition

The Citizens Assembly taking place in Bristol in early 2021 is based on 'sortition', a selection process whereby individual citizens attend, in a mix that is chosen to be representative in terms of various demographic factors including age, race, geography, gender and other factors. This format is usually used to examine controversial policy issues, as a one-off. It has been used successfully in Northern Ireland to prepare for the referendum on abortion, and in the UK to address climate change. The format is an informed deliberation on the topic of focus. Citizens participating have access to experts who brief them on various aspects of the topic, and expert facilitators support them through a process of examining the issue and discussing their different views.

Options for City Leap include: discussion of City Leap in any future citizens assemblies; specific citizens assembly or sortition based group to be convened periodically to consider City Leap, and potentially come up with new innovative solutions; a citizens assembly to consider the principles of how City Leap engages with citizens, and the social value element of City Leap, at the outset.

Strengths
- Representative sample of citizens.
- People participate as themselves, outside of the influence of institutions or power structures.
- People from all walks of life, with support provided to help people access.
- Deliberation means that they listen to different perspectives and make an informed judgment.
- Outcomes have a high level of perceived legitimacy by the general population.

Weaknesses
- People who are most excluded in society are less likely to be able to participate.
- Time and resource intensive.
- Not usually used for ongoing operational decisions - more for strategic decisions.
- The civil servants commissioning the citizens assembly have power to decide what topics are addressed, and to frame the issue.

Community organisations in the VCSE sector

All of the respondents were clear that community organisations have an important role to play. This includes the role of neighbourhood based organisations and communities of interest in gathering the views and feedback of their communities, identifying opportunities for local land and building assets to be improved or brought into City Leap in a way that also resources the community. They have long term relationships with people in their communities and deep local knowledge. It also includes organisations that provide services to the most marginalised people, and therefore have insights into their needs.

Strengths
- Community organisations who have carried out widespread consultation have confidence to put their views across which individuals participating in a citizens assembly may not have the knowledge, confidence or skills to assert themselves in the same way.
- Community organisations can get people to engage who are less likely to be there through random selection - who might systematically be excluded even from a sortition process. They may also be trusted in ways that official channels are not.
- They can be a core body which is consistently there in the long term - unlike citizens who come and go.
- They can deliver projects - housing, energy, big projects, on behalf of their own communities.
- They can own and develop assets in their community, building wealth, capacity, confidence and expertise at a 'micro-local' level, strengthening the civic fabric of the city.

Weaknesses
- Community organisations may have particular perspectives or stronger relationships with certain people within their communities.
- They don't necessarily have any expertise in energy.
- They may be stretched in terms of their resources for delivering services and representing their communities and may not have additional capacity for engaging in energy projects.
- Community organisations may have a strong anecdotal understanding of their community through in-depth conversations and good relationships, but this data may not be systematically captured or quantifiable.

Several interviewees differentiated between community anchor organisations which represent geographic communities or communities of interest, and service delivery organisations with stronger relationships with the most marginalised people in their communities. It is important to include both of these organisation types as part of any democratic process, so that they can complement each other's strengths and weaknesses.

Intermediary Coordinating Role

There are several organisations in Bristol which could have a role in building the capacity of organisations to deliver a more democratic City Leap, coordinate local community organisations, and represent the wider community in City Leap.

Where there is a technical and energy-related element, it may make sense for this role to be a community energy organisation, for example Bristol Energy Network or Centre for Sustainable Energy or Bristol Green Capital Partnership. They have good relationships with community organisations, and have technical energy expertise, as well as relationships with community energy organisations.

An intermediary organisation could work with community organisations to build their capacity for energy projects and literacy, and advocate for communities within City Leap. This role would involve acting as a 'broker' and technical expert - to sit alongside anchor organisations in City Leap discussions.

Strengths
- Intermediary organisations are already well connected.
- It's a values-driven sector with the interests of communities at its heart.
- Members of a network have technical knowledge that most people don't have.
- There is some trust that a network organisation holds for reaching out to other people when input is needed from a broader base of people.

Weaknesses
- Not every citizen's voice is included - certain groups are more represented than others.
- Lacks the authority that comes from neighbourhood partnership type groups - it's hard for communities of interest to establish authority in a specific geography.

Neighbourhood based action

This approach is focused on action and development of projects, rather than talking and making decisions. It is about learning by doing, and sharing that learning throughout the city. Bristol is a city made up of many neighbourhoods, which was described by one interviewee as a series of villages, where people don't necessarily want to engage in a city-wide concept. City Leap could engage with citizens at a micro-local scale, with workshops in different locations addressing site-specific issues, and identifying creative solutions. This could involve finding the residents who are interested in the topic.

Strengths
- Engaging and participatory in ways that are more than just making decisions.
- Collaborative and creative, at a really local level.
- A good way of being open to learning - we don't know at the outset what the issue really will be, and this approach allows new ideas to come to the fore.

Weaknesses
- Citywide approaches and participation are also important.
- Doesn't necessarily provide a systemic, strategic approach, where everyone's voice is heard.
- It may not provide accountability.

A hybrid approach

What is needed is to integrate these channels for democratic citizen participation in City Leap, and develop more specific recommendations of how they blend and work together. Each of these channels has its strengths, and we propose that the best approach would be to use a hybrid approach, with different modes of participation being used. This approach is supported by the idea that the principles and values for the conversation with citizens should be set into the contract, and the specifics should emerge over time to be flexible to adapt to particular situations.

However, emergent participatory approaches will only be developed if there is a relationship between City Leap and the community organisations working in the city. This could involve a commitment to funding a mixed set of participatory approaches, with a plan for the first year, and an ongoing long term budget commitment.

A hybrid approach in the first year could include:
- Meetings with a citizen board with representation from community organisations and the community energy sector. This could be a two-way communication, with community organisations presenting the priorities that their members have articulated to them over the years, the dilemmas and needs they are facing, the City Leap JV presenting the ideas and

potential activities over the term of the contract, and a creative conversation taking place between both sides to identify potential solutions.

- Community workshop events in two or three neighbourhoods, set up in partnership with community organisations, focussing on locally specific assets and projects.
- The community energy sector playing an ongoing support and coordination role in technical conversations.
- Citizen accountability through a sortition based process, e.g. working with the city council to discuss the approach to delivering social value in City Leap at a citizens assembly.

Next steps

To further develop democracy and accountability in City Leap, the preferred bidders are invited to include the ideas in this report directly in their bids. We are happy to meet with them to discuss or answer any questions.

More in depth development of concrete ideas for democratic governance should be developed collaboratively, and early. This should include input from community organisations in Bristol, from Bristol City Council, and from the JV partner. Shaping of democratic participation should take place before major contractual decisions are made, and therefore it would be appropriate for discussions to take place with the preferred bidders rather than waiting until the final partner is selected.

Immediate inclusion of participation:

Recommendation for City Leap preferred bidders to include citizen participation and accountability processes in their governance proposals. They are welcome to use ideas from this report directly in their bids, with reference to this report.

While this report has focused on the community energy steering group's ask number 4, governance representation & participation, citizen participation should be considered in all five of the asks. The community benefit fund (3) could be used for devolution of resources and participatory budgeting by communities of place or of interest. The participation of a broad base of citizens through the channels identified in this report could contribute to a strong pipeline of projects eligible for development grant (1), and to a large pool of citizens investing in projects eligible for match funding (2). The inclusion of a pre-emption right (5) enabling citizens to invest in the main City Leap JV would be another way that citizens engaged through participatory processes to be involved.

Develop greater clarity on the governance of the City Leap JV itself, including the principles and values of citizen participation. Ideally this should be developed collaboratively with Bristol City Council, the commercial bidders or chosen JV partner, and through the participatory channels identified in this report. At the same time, increase understanding of City Leap among community organisations in Bristol, and develop more specific proposals for democratic governance of City Leap, and build capacity to contribute through participatory decisions.

Ideally this should take place before contractual decisions are made, in discussion with Bristol City Council and the preferred bidders, and would involve:

- Clarity from the City Leap JV on the principles of citizen participation, including:
  - Which type of information and decisions will be open to citizen participation, and through which channels.
  - How early and openly information and ideas will be shared with citizens through participation channels - the earlier ideas are shared, the more potential for innovation and the benefits of shared creativity.
  - The extent to which City Leap decisions will be accountable to a citizen body or made by the JV.
  - Clearer articulation of the benefits of City Leap for communities in Bristol.

Being clear and honest about when and how people can meaningfully participate, and sharing ideas and options before they have been set in contracts can enable people to feel included. The timing of decisions is also important. Some decisions are made much earlier than when 'people' or communities get brought in. It is vital that people don't feel like they have been shut out of City Leap.

- Committing to a budget for participation:
  - Estimating the annual budget required for meaningful participation through each of the identified channels.
  - Commitment of budget contribution from City Leap to enable participation.
  - Identifying existing Bristol City Council democratic engagement processes where City Leap could be included in the conversation without significant additional budget requirements.

Engagement needs to be properly resourced. While we want people to engage because they believe that their voice will be listened to, when participation is not paid for, the people who turn up are those who have the time and money to be able to participate. Funding to pay for childcare, travel and to provide food at engagement events can make a big difference.

- Devolution of funding:
  - Use community benefit fund and development funding to address social inequalities in the city by putting control of the funds into the hands of communities.
  - This would allow more innovative and creative design of solutions in partnership with communities of place and of interest.

The Lottery funded Climate Action Fund sets a precedent for community led climate action in Bristol[3], and participatory budgeting is an established approach to empowering communities to make decisions on how funds should be spent, with several UK case studies recorded by the Participatory Budgeting network[4].

Conclusion

This initial study has explored the current context of democracy and community organisations in Bristol, focusing on the citizen participation that takes place in-between elections and in an ongoing way. The nine stakeholder interviews showed that Bristol's community organisations provide a rich context for further development of democracy, but that there is potential for improvement, which City Leap could contribute to. This would not only enable City Leap to deliver social value and meaningful citizen participation and engagement, but have a greater impact beyond the City Leap project itself.

The interviews contributed to understanding four different potential channels for democratic participation in City Leap: citizen's assembly style direct participation and deliberation based approaches, community organisations in the VCSE sector, an intermediary coordinating role, or neighbourhood based action. Combining all of these would bring in the strengths of each of these approaches.

The next step would be more in-depth conceptualisation of an embedded City Leap democratic process. This means creating a more detailed picture of these channels, considering how they might work together and what resource would be required to deliver this in an effective way. It also involves creating a more precise understanding of the internal governance and decision process of City Leap itself - the decisions which would actually be available for citizens to participate in, when these would be made, and how these opportunities can be communicated clearly to citizens in language that is meaningful to ordinary people.

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[3] https://bristolgreencapital.org/fund-awards-community-led-climate-action-project-bristol/
[4] https://pbnetwork.org.uk/

We hope that you have found this an interesting read, and would be happy to continue the conversation with anyone who is interested. Please get in touch with Emilia Melville and Jack Nicholls at Praxis Research.

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