

Bristol Green Councillors' response to The Corporate Strategy 2017-2022

The funding crisis facing local government and the need for national opposition:

We are currently facing an assault on Local Government funding which will prevent Bristol City Council from providing all but the most basic services for the people of Bristol. This is a crisis for all of us who rely on the services that the Council provides.

The proposed cuts outlined in the Corporate Strategy 2017-2022 will impact on the local traffic schemes that help to keep our children safe as they walk to school, slash invaluable funding for those about to be made homeless and reduce youth services that our young people need. To balance its books, the Council will be forced to cut services that older people and those with disabilities rely on – from day service provision to carer bus passes. Cuts will affect how the Council maintains our parks, our libraries and our streets, and will reduce the 'social glue' that binds our city together.

But it doesn't have to be like this. These cruel cuts to our services are a choice being made by National Government – to dismantle our public services instead of focusing on raising money by closing tax loopholes, reforming our finance system, bringing "good growth" to our economy or increasing tax for the top 1%. As Greens we do not believe that the public sector, and those people who rely on the services it provides, should be punished for the mistakes made by politicians and the financial sector which led to the financial crisis. Local government services and social care are being abandoned while National Government remains committed to the ever spiralling costs of replacing Trident, building a new nuclear power station at Hinkley Point, or building HS2, which have a combined cost of way over £100bn.

Bristol City Council has already suffered savage cuts – we have seen over £170 million of cuts over the last 6 years. Despite this, the Council still faces a budget gap of £90 million plus over the next five years. The proposals put forward in the Corporate Plan 2017-2022 paint a grim picture of how the funding cuts will affect services in Bristol. This will be exacerbated by the funding crisis being faced by the NHS, education, social care and local policing. We do not see how it will be possible to implement further funding reductions on this scale without dismantling many of the services that Bristol relies upon – trying to do so is increasingly a case of 'rearranging the deckchairs on the Titanic'.

Austerity is a downward spiral – as you cut the state you reduce job quality and tax revenue leading to less money available for investment, which in turn cuts the state further. Cuts on this scale are also likely to affect the future of Bristol and whether it will remain a vibrant, thriving city that businesses will want to be based in by 2020. For businesses to thrive, Bristol needs good infrastructure as well as skilled, productive employees who live securely in homes they can afford and good public transport networks to get to work.

The attack on the services that many of our most deprived communities rely upon is unjust and must be stopped, and we are calling on our city leaders and all those who oppose the cuts to say enough is

enough. The [10 Core Cities](#) outside London are home to almost 19 million people and contribute more than a quarter of the combined wealth of England, Wales and Scotlandⁱ – that’s a strong voice if these city leaders choose to work together and use it. It’s an even stronger voice if cities join with an alliance of progressive political parties and networks to unite in opposing further cuts. The benefits of this approach can be seen in a recent report by [Local Government Association](#)ⁱⁱ.

The current chosen path is not inevitable, and it must not go unchallenged. We believe Bristol should be taking a lead in exploring and calling for alternatives to local government cuts including:

Unallocated business rates should be used to help ease the adult social care crisis – The £2.4bn of unallocated business rates collected from local government should be used to provide real additional funding to address the social care crisis, as supported by [UNISON](#)ⁱⁱⁱ. We must call on the Government to stop playing games with people’s lives and use these unallocated business rates in the communities in which the rates were collected.

Cities should not have to bear the brunt of cuts – Bristol is not alone in facing hard times, but the pain is also not being evenly shared across the country with many Conservative authorities tending to suffer less brutal spending cuts. Figures from the [Institute of Fiscal Studies](#) show that in the West of England, 70% of spending reductions have been borne by Bristol City Council, three times more than by neighbouring authorities. Whilst Conservative shires like Hampshire and Surrey have seen cuts of just 1%, and the City of London has even seen a slight increase, England's major provincial cities have seen an average cut of 28%^{iv}. The Core Cities – which include Bristol – have seen £1.4bn worth of annual spending removed from their budgets. Without effective opposition this Government will continue to impose damaging cuts, as recent news on school funding demonstrates.

Bristol should receive its fair share of infrastructure spending – Infrastructure spending is also not fairly distributed across the country, with London and the South East receiving the lion’s share. For example, the South West receives just [£219 per head of transport infrastructure spending in comparison with £1,869 per head in London](#)^v. As a large and growing city, Bristol badly needs investment in infrastructure if it is to continue to thrive in the coming years, so we call on the Mayor to make it a priority to lobby National Government for Bristol to get its fair share of infrastructure investment.

Public appeal for those on higher rate tax to help fund libraries and other services – The Autumn Statement saw a tax cut for top earners, reducing the number of people who now fall in the 40% tax bracket. At a time when our frontline services are being devastated, we believe cutting taxes to top earners is immoral. While local government cannot change National Government policy, we could start a public appeal here in Bristol asking those on higher rate taxes who are getting their taxes cut to voluntarily continue to pay this into a specific fund for libraries and other services that the whole city relies upon.

Working with the Local Government Association (LGA) – The LGA has already outlined many detailed suggestions for ways in which funding to local government needs to be changed in their [submission to the Autumn Statement](#). These include ensuring reforms to business rates effectively benefit local authorities, such as allowing councils to use additional business rates to address the £5.82bn funding gap before any additional responsibilities are considered. Important savings could also be made locally, for example if local authorities could retain 100% of Right to Buy receipts or the 2p levy on fuel was allowed to be used to maintain local as well as national roads. We would like Bristol to

play a leading role working with the LGA to call for sensible changes to local government financing to be changed.

Specific responses to the proposed savings outlined in the Corporate Strategy 2017-2022:

In addition to outlining our opposition to the national austerity agenda and our hope that the Mayor of Bristol will take a leading role in opposing it the Green Group we have highlighted below our response to some of the specific proposals outlined in the Corporate Strategy 2017-2022. This includes feedback, concerns, suggestions and other alternatives that we wish to be considered.

General comments

Funding for objectives – There are many creative suggestions put forward in the objectives for each section in the Corporate Strategy, including some detail on how these would be achieved and which key performance indicators would be used to measure success. We would, however, like to know how much each of these objectives will cost, how they will be funded and how they fit into the wider budget savings.

Business efficiency savings – We note that almost 60% of the Corporate Strategy's proposed savings are for 2017/18 and that 60-75% of those first year savings are defined as 'business efficiencies'. The corporate plan does not include much detail on exactly what these business efficiencies will be. We request a full breakdown of the proposals for these business efficiencies, including to what extent these will include job losses and how these differ from the second phase of the 'Single Change Programme' that was being developed under the previous Mayor. We would also like to know how this change process will be managed, what the involvement of democratically elected representatives will be and how this process will be properly resourced and coordinated to ensure joined-up thinking.

High predictions for income from business rates and council tax – The Corporate Strategy uses Council Tax predictions based on an annual rise in council tax of 3.95% every year. The overall income predicted from Council Tax is higher than the previous Mayor's predictions, as it is based on a 40% higher prediction of new homes being built. We sincerely hope that the equivalent of 900 extra band B homes will be built every year as predicted, but would like to know what contingency plan is in place if for any reason this is not achieved. There is also considerable difference between National Government predictions for Bristol's Business Rates income and those predicted in the Corporate Strategy. Last year, Bristol's Business Rates income grew by approximately £2m, which is far lower than the year-on-year growth predicted in the Corporate Strategy. Given the impact of Brexit and the changes to small business rates, what is the contingency plan if these predictions turn out to be too optimistic?

Continue to protect the Council Tax Reduction Scheme – We are pleased that there are no current plans outlined in the Corporate Strategy that put the Council Tax Reduction Scheme at risk. The scheme helps households on low income pay their Council Tax, something which is essential given that our current Council Tax system is so regressive, meaning that poorer residents in the city proportionally pay more of their income than the richest. Green councillors have been active in successfully campaigning for the Council Tax Reduction Scheme to be protected over a number of years, and wish to emphasise that this must be a continued priority in the years to come. This is especially relevant given

that the Corporate Strategy predicts that overall (with the inclusion of the adult social care precept) Council Tax in Bristol will rise by 3.95% every year between now and 2022.

Cuts to services for disabled and older people

Review dementia care home provision – It is predicted that in Bristol the number of people living with dementia will increase [by a third](#)^{vi} over the next 30 years, something that will exacerbate the existing social care crisis. While it is important that dementia services are reviewed, it is also essential that the Council continues to provide a good service for the growing number of people suffering from dementia. Those who cannot afford to pay for dementia care must continue to receive the services they need. As the number of people living with dementia increases, and social care and NHS services become more stretched it is hard to see how it will be possible for the Council to spend less money on dementia care over the coming years, while continuing to provide the services that those with dementia need.

Removing carer bus passes – Companion Bus Passes provide carers who assist elderly or disabled people who cannot travel alone with free bus travel. Removing these bus passes means that carers would have to pay for their bus passes. This is something we oppose and would like to see removed from the proposals as it will make it harder for disabled and older people to get about, increasing isolation in our communities. It also denies carers – who are often on a low income – access to cheaper travel.

Day care services for adults – The Corporate Plan includes proposals to combine or close Bristol Community Links Centres. When combined with potential withdrawal of transport, this could lead to older and disabled people having to travel further for services at the same time as there is less transport provision to get there. We request more information on whether the Council has talked to those who would be affected to find out whether such a change would impact on their ability to access these services.

Withdraw reimbursement for concessionary travel – The council currently reimburses community transport operators who provide free travel for people who are eligible for concessionary bus passes – this includes people of pensionable age and people with disabilities. The Corporate Plan proposes removing this funding which we are concerned may severely impact some people who rely on this service. We would like to know whether the Council has looked at reviewing the criteria to ensure that this can be continued for those who need it most, rather than removing it entirely.

Disabled bays – We are deeply concerned at the proposals to charge £200 for introducing disabled parking bays outside disabled people's homes, especially when combined with other cuts to disability transport budgets.

Cuts to services for children and young people

Recommission Bristol Youth Links – Bristol Youth Links provides a wide range of services for 13-19 year olds (and up to 25 with a learning disability) including advice on drugs, housing, sexuality, work and education. The proposed savings are extremely broad – between £900,000 and £1,700,000, and while there may be a need to review how youth services are provided, we would be concerned if this meant further cuts to youth services across Bristol. We would like more detail on what these proposed savings could consist of and how this could affect services provided to young people across Bristol.

Review Early help services – It may make sense in some cases to combine some services for birth-5 , 5-11 and 11-19 into the same building, but we would call for this to be looked at on a case-by-case basis and in consultation with service users, to ensure that frontline accessibility is not compromised.

Cuts to other social services

Local Crisis and Prevention Fund – We are extremely concerned by proposed cuts to the Local Crisis and Prevention Fund. This fund provides vital one-off financial support for citizens who are on the edge, to help them pay for food or a utility bill or buy furniture after leaving temporary accommodation. People can only ever apply once, and we know from talking to people who have applied that it can be the difference between tipping them into homelessness or not. Cutting this service is not just wrong, it is also economically illiterate. It costs the Council far less to pay a small one off grant to prevent people from falling into crisis than it does to help them once a crisis has escalated.

Library cuts – We are concerned about proposed cuts to the libraries, which are a much loved resource across Bristol. We would like to know how the Mayor’s proposals for library cuts differ from that of his predecessor and exactly what they entail.

Housing, homelessness, planning and green spaces

Homelessness – Homelessness has more than doubled in the last year and the Council’s budget for preventing homelessness has already seen a 20% reduction^{vii} between 2011 and 2015. While we welcome recent announcements on moves to prevent homelessness, we have concerns about proposed budget cuts to temporary accommodation and other services for the homeless at a time of growing need. Those on the streets must have access to a safe place to sleep and help accessing appropriate services, as well as affordable housing and jobs for the longer term.

Pest control – There will always be a need for pest control services in Bristol, and we do not see why this has to be run by a private for-profit company to be effective. We would question why a council-run pest control department can’t continue to offer these services in a reputable way across the city, both in public health priority cases where the Council provides the service for free, and in smaller/domestic cases, where the Council’s services could be hired for a fee, raising much needed revenue.

Parks – Green spaces are crucial for both physical and mental wellbeing, and highly valued by local communities. Parks are the green lungs of the city, places to exercise and relax, places for families, carbon-sinks which also help to cool the city, a home for wildlife and a key part of the city’s ecology. Parks are a part of what Bristol is. The future wellbeing of the city relies on them and they are part of a resilient future. We wish to know how the Council plans to work with local communities to ensure that these much loved facilitates are well maintained.

Planning enforcement – Proposed cuts to planning enforcement is very worrying. Planning enforcement within the Council is already extremely stretched, and it is hard to see how any further cuts to this service could be made without the Council becoming entirely toothless in enforcing planning conditions. Planning enforcement is important if we want our city to continue to be a pleasant and exciting place to work, live and play in the future, and a place where businesses will want to relocate to.

Expand discretionary licencing – We support the proposal to extend landlord licencing to ensure landlords provide minimum standards in their rented properties.

Transport

Parking charges at Oldbury estate, Blaise Caste and Ashton Court – We support an introduction and an increase in fees for parking at key tourist points across the city, especially as this will generate desperately needed income at a time when the Council is struggling to pay for frontline services.

Cuts to ‘lollipop people’ – Safe routes to school are crucial if parents are to feel safe encouraging their children to walk to school. Last year, we saw Labour, Tory, and Liberal Democrat parties vote down a Green amendment to help fund safer routes to schools. The Corporate Strategy proposals suggest replacing lollipop people at school crossings with ‘alternative methods’ but does not explain what these methods are. We call for further information on what these alternative methods would be and how they will ensure the safety of our children when walking to and from school.

Reduction of subsidised bus routes – The council subsidises certain bus routes where the private company cannot make a profit but the route provides an important transport link for local people, particularly those least able to get about easily. While there may be a need for some of these routes to be reviewed, the halving of this subsidy will lead to the end of routes that provide a lifeline for people who need to get to local shops, healthcare facilities or other parts of the city.

Stop funding the freight consolidation centre – Air pollution leads to 300 premature deaths in Bristol every year, with many more people suffering from wider health complications. This is why taking action to reduce the air pollution in our city must be a priority. A freight consolidation centre should help to keep the number of delivery vehicles in our city down by providing a single place for delivery. If this scheme is not being used enough, we would call on the Council to review why not and explore other options such as making it mandatory for shops and firms with high levels of deliveries rather than abandoning it altogether. We would also like to know why the Council does not use this service for its own deliveries.

Local participation, community and energy

Neighbourhood Partnerships – Neighbourhood Partnerships have varying degrees of effectiveness and local community input across the city. At their most successful, Neighbourhood Partnerships can enable local communities to actively participate in improving their neighbourhoods. Volunteers can provide a large multiplier of officer time and effort, small grants and local traffic schemes are instrumental in enabling change at a local level. The future of a resilient Bristol will depend on community engagement and active participation. The benefits of wellbeing grants, for example, on projects such as the excellent ‘Playing Out’ can act as a catalyst for increasing community cohesion, increasing pride in an area and encouraging people to both work with and cooperate with each other. While not all Neighbourhood Partnerships currently work effectively, those enacting any changes should work with the local community to improve the way in which these partnerships work, not merely strip them of their funding as is currently feared will be the case.

Remove funding for local traffic schemes – There is a real need for local traffic schemes, for example to improve road safety around schools. The more local community involvement there can be in designing and implementing these schemes the more effective they will be. In some cases funding for local traffic schemes has led to excellent new traffic schemes that are based on good evidence and sound design and are highly valued by the local community. In other cases there have been challenges with implementing local traffic schemes, but this is due to problems with financing the implementation or not enough money being available for a successful scheme, not because local people don’t badly want

better local traffic schemes. We are concerned that just removing these grants would not only make it much harder to improve local traffic problems, but also spell an end to an important community-led approach.

Police Community Support Officers – Police Community Support Officers have made a significant contribution to community policing in the last few years. They are perhaps the nearest we have to ‘bobbies on the beat’ and make a significant contribution over and above the direct roles they have.

Energy infrastructure company – While we understand there may be some logic in setting up an energy infrastructure/service company, we need clarification on the relationship between this and the Bristol Energy Company. This should include information on how the two would be set up to ensure they work closely together and share costs. To be effective there is also a need for a continued commitment to capital funding, so that the Council can continue to apply for grants to retrofit houses that rely on match-funding. Without investment it is not possible to provide energy and therefore cost savings for our tenants and users across the city, or for the city to meet its carbon reduction commitments.

Raising revenue and taxes

Local tax in-house enforcement team – We would welcome more information on exactly what this team would do, and would hope the focus would be on working to reduce the number of cases that end up going to court and helping to identify problems early.

Reduce third party payments – The consultation suggests further consideration of the Council’s third party payments to deliver services including sports contracts, trees, waste and Voluntary and Community Sector grants. While reviewing our contracts at regular intervals is prudent, we would like to ensure that the Council is cautious if pushing for reductions in contracts that may have negative impacts in the longer term. The Council’s Social Value Policy and toolkit must also continue to be central to all contracts. A balance between cost and quality is essential to ensure that the Council provides good quality services for the residents of Bristol, as well as the added benefits of the social and environmental outcomes we need. This change could have a significant impact on how services are delivered, so we request more detail on how this proposal will remain consistent with the Social Value Policy and what the likely impacts are.

Use of Council assets – Bristol City Council has many assets, and we would welcome further analysis on whether these could be used more effectively or more imaginatively to raise revenue. Ideas to be explored could include loans of valuable art to wealthy individuals or businesses, potential sponsorship of trees, statues and other public benefits or looking at temporary conversion of any unused Council buildings.

Workplace parking – We support the introduction of a workplace parking levy and would like to suggest that this is included in the Corporate Plan. This would both help fund sustainable transport improvements and act as a disincentive to private motor car use, which contributes to air pollution, climate change and congestion across the city. In Nottingham over £9 million was generated last year through their workplace parking levy, and other councils such as Cambridge and Oxford are considering introducing similar schemes.

Culture

Reduce funding to Key Arts Providers – A key commitment within the corporate plan is for Bristol to be a 'leading cultural city making culture...accessible to all'. We know that arts funding is often used in areas of deprivation like Barton Hill to work with the community and provide education and training. We would like to know how any cuts to this service will be made without affecting local arts schemes that help to make culture more accessible across the city. We are also aware that arts projects generate a significant return – each pound spent brings a return of many more, and the cultural sector of the city is a significant local employer and generator of wealth for the city as a whole.

Review museum opening hours – Museums are important for bringing tourists into Bristol. Their funding includes earned income (from shop, café, donations, etc.) and grant income as well as local government funding. Any review should look at all funding streams to our museums and how they can be maximised, not merely focus on opening hours. It is important to be conscious of the tipping point where reduction of museum opening times would actually reduce both earned income (due to lower footfall) and grant funding (due to falling beneath a minimum hours criterion).

ⁱWealth contribution of the Core Cities: <https://www.corecities.com/about-us>

ⁱⁱLocal Government Association submission to the Autumn Statement:

<http://www.local.gov.uk/documents/10180/7991192/LGA+submission+to+the+Autumn+Statement+2016.pdf/ae76f5e3-7a8a-49a1-aeb0-67c4fc61fef>

ⁱⁱⁱ UNISON call for unallocated business rates to be used for Social Care: <https://www.unison.org.uk/news/press-release/2016/11/the-chancellor-should-use-2-4bn-in-unallocated-business-rates-to-ease-the-social-care-funding-crisis-says-unison/>

^{iv} <https://www.ifs.org.uk/publications/8780>

^v Unfair distribution of transport funding: <http://www.ippr.org/news-and-media/press-releases/transport-secretary-urged-to-close-1-600-per-person-london-north-spending-gap>

^{vi} Dementia care in Bristol <https://www.bristolccg.nhs.uk/your-health-local-services/help-and-support/dementia/>

^{vii} Increase in homelessness in Bristol and cuts to homeless services:

<http://www.emmausbristol.org.uk/homelessness/homeless-in-bristol/>