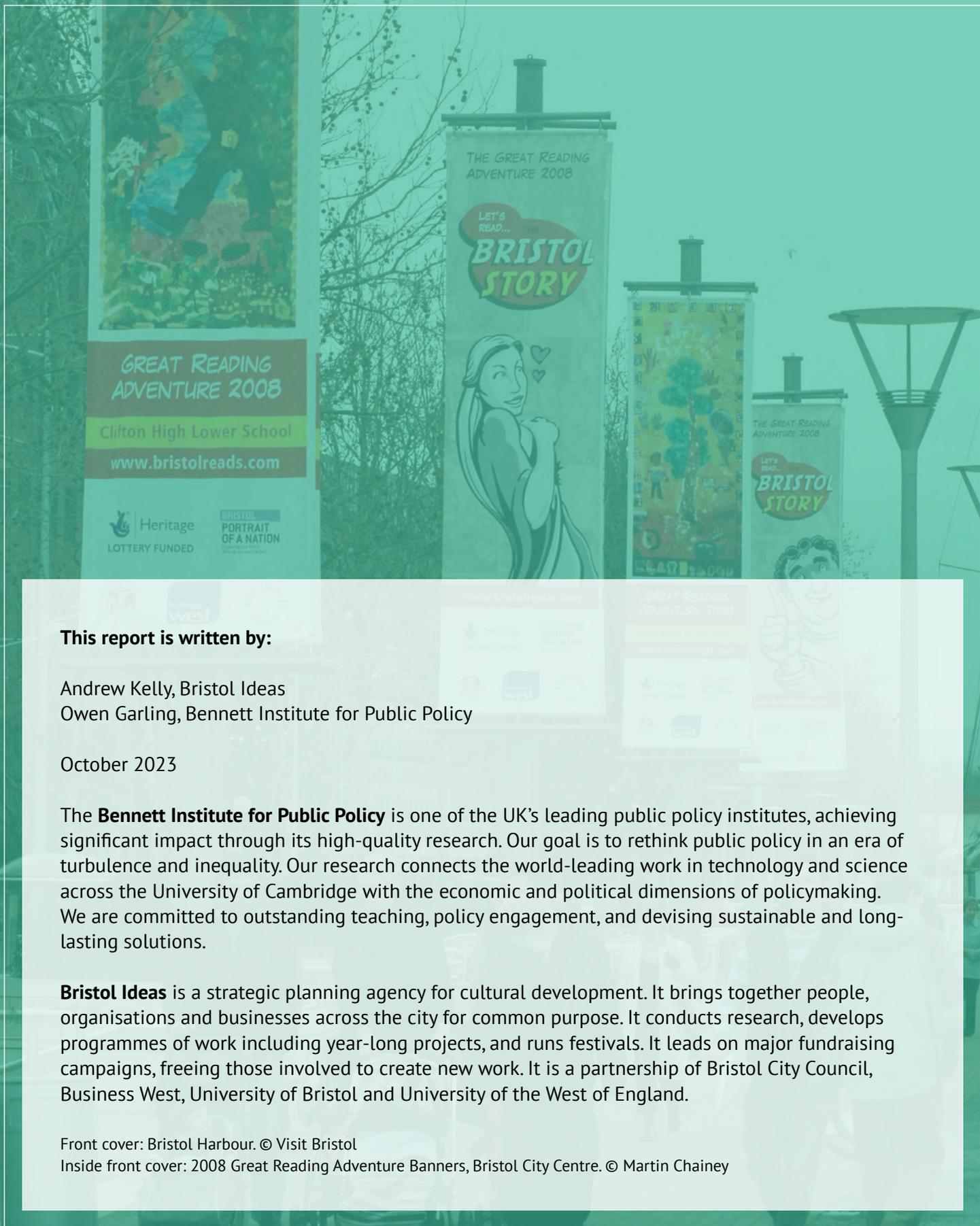


The City is the Project

The work and impact of
Bristol Ideas 1992–2023





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The **Bennett Institute for Public Policy** is one of the UK's leading public policy institutes, achieving significant impact through its high-quality research. Our goal is to rethink public policy in an era of turbulence and inequality. Our research connects the world-leading work in technology and science across the University of Cambridge with the economic and political dimensions of policymaking. We are committed to outstanding teaching, policy engagement, and devising sustainable and long-lasting solutions.

Bristol Ideas is a strategic planning agency for cultural development. It brings together people, organisations and businesses across the city for common purpose. It conducts research, develops programmes of work including year-long projects, and runs festivals. It leads on major fundraising campaigns, freeing those involved to create new work. It is a partnership of Bristol City Council, Business West, University of Bristol and University of the West of England.

Front cover: Bristol Harbour. © Visit Bristol

Inside front cover: 2008 Great Reading Adventure Banners, Bristol City Centre. © Martin Chainey

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Bring your ideas by Caleb Parkin, Bristol City Poet

This poem was written in February 2021 for the relaunch of Bristol Ideas

bring your ideas

and let's stitch them into the city, weave them through streets chattering with trees
and we'll sip your ideas, a little fizzy, a little bitter, served with lemon or a pinch of salt

bring your ideas and serve them up

in a meal for 91 tongues, of cardamom, jerk seasoning, garam masala and cumin
serve them in the chalk horizons of equations, the antimatter of cosmic failure

bring your ideas and keep bringing them

even when they laugh, when you have to switch continents for a healing Yes
even if your ideas drop from towers into dark pools, fizzing with threat

bring your ideas and spray them

on the wall of the tallest tower in the city, in a map of the body's earth
we'll learn our edges in a quiet prayer for wellness, a hymnbook for health

your ideas might make us lightheaded or ease our pain

or can we drink them with marshmallows and whipped cream?

Can we count them one hand, eat them from a fruit-bowl?

Or will we watch them in shoals and burrows, in fights for survival?

Let's purple your ideas, infuse them with vitamin C

let them BUNGEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE

maybe they'll smash in bright blue smithereens in the Gorge of Disappointment

or become smash-hit tracks cut-up remixed and trip-hop glitched

bring your ideas and cast them
in bronze and pop them on a plinth and let's animate them
or cast them differently, turn them to clay then let them dance

let your ideas stop the bus until injustice gets off
let them magic lantern Liberty from Fishponds to the Docks
let's talk ideas across borders, over trenches
make them supersonic fledglings

bring your ideas and let's live in them
together – share a bright green common, but keep a backyard
because sure, that new idea might become a regret
or a neighbour you wish you hadn't met
or maybe it'll be that BFF you haven't quite
nearly but – plucked up the courage to chat to – yet



Caleb Parkin takes over the Bristol City Poet role from Vanessa Kisuule. Here Parkin and Kisuule are interviewed by Madhu Krishnan at Bristol Old Vic.

Executive summary

“Culture is who we are and creativity helps us to become something... culture is the making, shaping, and evolving of a place and the identity and the people within it.”

Charles Landry
Comedia

Bristol Ideas has been central to the cultural life of the city of Bristol for the past three decades. It was established by a partnership of Arts Council England South West, Bristol City Council and The Bristol Initiative in 1992.

At the heart of the organisation is Bristol Ideas' belief in the importance of cultural planning – the strategic use of cultural assets to support the cultural, economic and social life of the city. Since its creation, it has worked in Bristol, and sometimes in the wider South West, as well as nationally and internationally, on a range of cultural projects including the creation of new cultural centres, the renewal of existing cultural venues, annual festivals of ideas and economics and a biennial Festival of the Future City. It has also worked on many smaller projects, given help to organisations, and commissioned artists, poets, and writers to create new work.

Its work over the last 30 years has seen a move from the consolidation and enhancement of Bristol's culture in the 1990s, to the development of Bristol's cultural profile through long-term cultural planning, to an approach that has most recently seen the creation of a city of ideas.

This report reflects on the work of Bristol Ideas and highlights lessons that those in Bristol and elsewhere, including local, regional and national government, business, academia and civil society organisations, can learn from its work in the city.

From this work, five key themes emerge that will relate to wider interest.

1. Longevity

Bristol Ideas illustrates the importance of not just having a long-term approach, but also having an organisation that is able to stand the test of time. While other organisations may have had a shorter lifespan, Bristol Ideas has been able to adapt and respond to the changing world in which it operates. As this report shows, Bristol Ideas has moved from an organisation focused on the development of 'hard' cultural infrastructure such as a new centre for performing arts for the city and one-off events such as the City of Culture, to one which focuses more on delivering a wide programme of events that can bring together different parts of what is an incredibly diverse city around the concept of ideas.

The organisation's belief in remaining small and working through other organisations has made it stand in good stead, as has its belief in ensuring that most funding raised is invested in creative work and creative people.

2. Partnership rooted in place

Bristol Ideas is built on the idea of partnership. From its founding partners of Arts Council England South West, Bristol City Council and Business West, later joined by the city's two universities, through to the partnerships that are developed for specific projects, Bristol Ideas is founded on the importance of partnerships and the creation of strong and supportive networks.

A key feature of Bristol Ideas' partnerships is the presence of the private sector. Bristol Ideas' private sector members have understood the important role that culture can play in making Bristol both

an economically and socially vibrant city from the outset. Bristol Ideas has also worked to commemorate and understand the connection that key Bristol businesses, such as the Bristol Aeroplane Company, the tobacco company, Wills, and others have with the communities of Bristol in creating a sense of place.

3. A broad definition of culture

Culture can be defined narrowly. However, Bristol Ideas and its partners have always taken a broad view of culture - moving beyond ideas such as 'high' and 'low' culture and a division between the arts and science, to see culture as encompassing the diversity of the city.

Alongside this broad definition of culture is the role that cultural planning can play. For Bristol Ideas, cultural planning is more than just delivering a programme of cultural events. Rather, it is about enabling and convening partnerships, establishing standing and trust, and working together to raise funds.

Above all cultural planning has been a way in which the different communities that make up the city can be brought together to express their differences and understand their similarities with the vision of making the city a more equitable place.

4. Assets of a place, including its past

Bristol Ideas has always worked with and through the assets of the city. This includes both the physical assets – it is of no surprise that one of the organisation's earliest projects was to improve the waymarking in the city, through the ongoing Bristol Legible City project, which started in the mid-1990s and continues today – and the less tangible assets of the city.

Key amongst these is the history of Bristol itself, which has been used by Bristol Ideas as a way of both convening people and communities around the commemoration of events in the long civic life of the city, as well as a starting point to think together about the future of the city.

Through these assets, culture contributes to social capital. It helps build trust, promotes civic engagement, and brings together and bonds communities. Culture also contributes to the creation and maintenance of social infrastructure in the city, such as new third spaces for networking, discussing and debating differences, and encouraging better ways forward.

5. Measurement

Finally, it can be hard to measure the impact of cultural activity. Various methods have been tried, including economic value-added, the contribution to wellbeing and happiness, as well as engagement, attendance, and demographic data. Apart from basic information – such as details of those attending events – none have proved to be satisfactory.

But this does not mean that we should not try to understand the role that cultural activity can play. Rather, it is through understanding the role that it can play in creating a sense of civic engagement and contributing to the social capital of a place, that we can really understand its value.

Despite all of the lessons that can be learnt from the work of Bristol Ideas, culture and cultural activity remains vulnerable and faces major problems. The post Brexit/pandemic cost-of-living crisis makes it harder for organisations to remain profitable, audience numbers have not yet returned to their pre-Covid levels, and fundamentally there have been significant funding reductions for the arts over the last decade.

Bristol Ideas' ability to adapt and respond to the challenges that it has faced over the last three decades, whilst using culture as a way of bringing people together to debate and discuss the ideas that will shape the future, make it a useful subject of a study into the ways in which culture can help shape cities in the 21st century.



Temple Gate Temple



City Centre
Civil Justice Centre
Old City
Broadmead Shopping
Harbourside

Bristol is a hard city to navigate. Bristol Ideas believed from the start that a connected city is essential for all. It became heavily involved in Bristol Legible City – a new movement and information system – of which a new signage and mapping system was central. Bristol Legible City won many awards and accolades. It also contributed to a new philosophy of thinking about and developing cities for Bristol Ideas.
© Bristol City Council

Introduction

“Engaging with cultural activities is critical to making people feel they are part of society and have a part to play.”

David Kendall

Co-director, Pinned Up

UK cities face many challenges. These include economic crisis, faltering productivity and stubborn inflation; populist politics and concern about the health of democracy; an ageing society and a longstanding failure to deal with the social care crisis; the hollowing out of the middle class; clashes over immigration; debates over justice such as Black Lives Matter and Me Too; dealing with Brexit; and the long-term impacts of the pandemic and lockdowns.

This report looks at the possibility of addressing these and future challenges through the lens of cultural planning in a British city over the last three decades. Building on our previous work on social infrastructure, it assesses whether and how the work of Bristol Ideas has contributed to the city’s social capital and bolstered its sense of identity.

Bristol Ideas was launched in 1993. At the heart of Bristol Ideas’ work has been a vision of a city in which all have the opportunity to flourish, where arts and culture are central to the life and work of the place, where all who wish to contribute can, and where the benefits of work done are shared as widely as possible.

As a small organisation, Bristol Ideas’ work in recent years has been devoted to seeking and debating solutions to these challenges that some characterise as the polycrisis. This case study has implications beyond Bristol – one of the UK’s more prosperous second tier cities. As the world becomes more urban – the United Nations (UN) estimates that over two-thirds of people will live in urban areas by 2050 (UN, 2018) – it is essential that cities are developed in fair, sustainable and just ways.

Bristol Ideas, then Bristol Cultural Development Partnership, started as a project in 1992 and formally as a company in April 1993. Coming out of one of the first in-depth studies into the possible role of cultural planning in a British city, Bristol Ideas was launched with an ambitious programme to make Bristol a major centre of culture. Its initial projects were to include a new performing arts centre, greater awareness of the cultural assets of Bristol, the creation of new festivals and events, increased investment in culture and a better approach to cultural policy and strategy across the city. This programme evolved over the next 30 years, though its mission and core principles remained consistent throughout.

To date, there have been three main overlapping periods in the work of Bristol Ideas. The first phase in the 1990s focused on understanding and consolidating Bristol’s culture. The second phase, running from 1999 to 2004, looked to build Bristol’s cultural profile, including the bid to be European Capital of Culture 2008 and the follow-up programme. Through this period, the importance of long-term cultural planning emerged as a key issue. The most recent phase, starting in approximately 2005, has focused on building a city of ideas. Bristol Ideas is now in a new period of its evolution as it seeks to address a number of challenges, including reductions in funding from core partners and concerns about continuing relevance.

Cultural policy

The role of culture continues to be of policy interest at national, regional and local scales. At the national level, the government has recently published a sector vision for

the creative industries: 'Creative industries sector vision: a joint plan to drive growth, build talent and develop skills' (Creative industries sector vision, 2023). In the foreword, Prime Minister Rishi Sunak highlights the importance to the UK economy of the creative industries which contribute six per cent of GDP and employ 2.3 million people.

Culture's importance is also recognised at the regional and local level. For instance, the Northern Culture All-party Parliamentary Group has recently published 'Our Case for Culture', which argues that, "it is time to maximise the social and economic benefits which stem from our cultural assets and time to tap into the North's rich seam of talent – if we are to unlock the North's cultural capital and truly level-up." (Northumbria University, 2022). Similar cultural strategies based on public engagement are also emerging from Combined Authorities, such as West Yorkshire Combined Authority (WYCA, 2022), and North of Tyne Combined Authority (NTCA, ND).

The importance of culture at a more local level is also clear through the interest that interventions such as the UK City of Culture attract. The local importance of culture can also be seen in the various funds associated with the government's levelling up agenda that either looked to directly invest in cultural assets, such as heritage locations, or that are designed to boost people's sense of belonging and pride in place.

Given this recognition, there are many lessons to learn from the work of Bristol Ideas for national policymakers, city leaders, cultural organisations and individual artists. These include:

- the critical importance of having a strong, long-term partnership which funds the core work and provides legitimacy. Each partner should be committed to the mission and ensuring that their colleagues and organisations buy in and support this.

- employing a wide definition of 'culture' to allow for maximum participation and involvement and having knowledgeable cultural leaders who can build a wide network of relationships.
- understanding the history of a specific place and how it contributes to both the present and the future. There is path-dependence in cultural policies, with past events shaping the present and the direction that cities can take in their future.
- delivering on a wide variety of projects that help the city to move forward by engaging with as many people as possible in the place.
- having a small team of dedicated staff committed to working with and through others over a long-term period, with the tenacity and resilience to overcome defeat and disappointment and continue to make progress.
- having an open mind about a place and its potential.

One question arising from this case study is the extent to which the approach taken by Bristol Ideas will travel. Is the work and organisation of Bristol Ideas possible elsewhere?

This work suggests the answer is 'yes'. Bristol Ideas has learned a lot from people, organisations, and other cities during its three decades. The key difference between Bristol and other cities is the longevity of its cultural planning. There are few other organisations like Bristol Ideas in the UK that are responsible for helping to move a city forward in terms of its cultural activity. This has been a key strength for Bristol over the last three decades. Another key consideration is that Bristol Ideas was developed and run locally by partners with a stake in the city. Any initiative like this needs to be locally specific and not transplanted from elsewhere. Nonetheless, there are general lessons that can be used.

A note on Bristol

Bristol is a trading city. For many decades it was one of the leading cities in the Transatlantic Trafficking and Enslavement of Africans. Its industries have also included maritime trade, chocolate, aerospace, tobacco, and alcohol. Now it is known as a centre for knowledge intensive industries, green technology, higher education, law, services, creative industries, culture, and tourism. It is a paradoxical city in many ways.

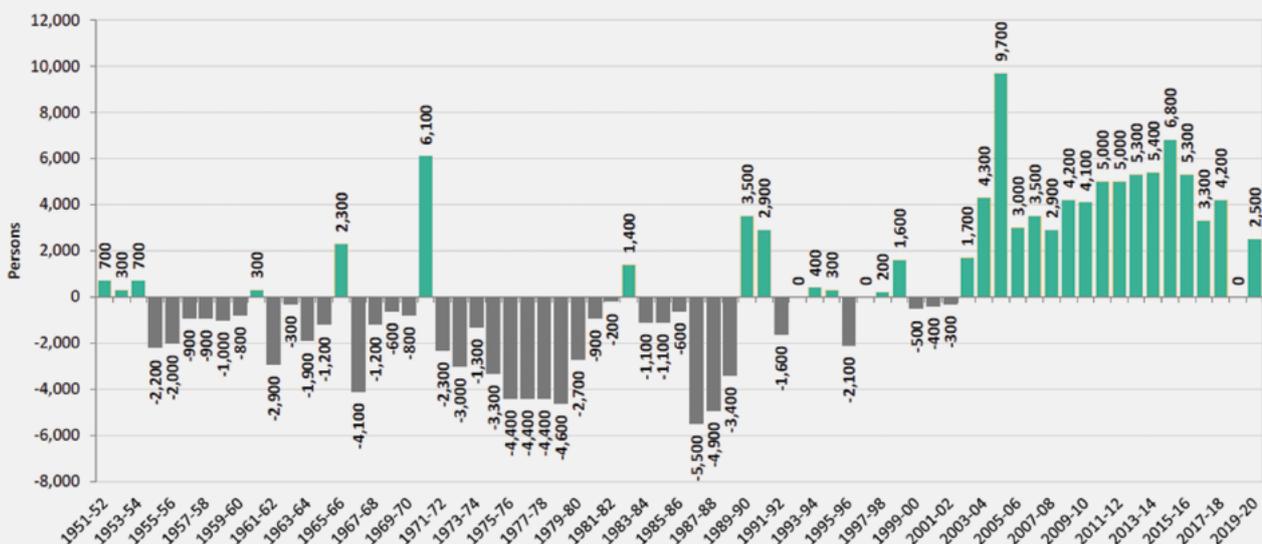


Bristol is the main city in the South West of England, a region that now – at least in administrative terms – stretches from Swindon to Cornwall. Bristol is also part of the West of England area, made up of what used to be called Avon: Bath and North East Somerset, Bristol, North Somerset, and South Gloucestershire. In 2021, Bristol’s population was approximately 471,000 and it is predicted that the city will continue to grow. This follows the trend of the last 20 years of population growth in Bristol, which stands in stark contrast with the previous 50 years that generally saw the population of the city remain static, or indeed reduce in number (Bristol City Council, 2021).

Population growth brings challenges as well as opportunities. Pressures on housing, schools, healthcare and transport continue and are likely to worsen. One opportunity is the changing nature of the city. As the city council’s recent report on the city’s population notes, Bristol’s population, “has become increasingly diverse and some local communities have changed significantly. There are now at least 45 religions, at least 187 countries of birth represented and at least 91 main languages spoken by people living in Bristol” (Bristol City Council, 2021, p. 4).

Bristol is a wealthy city, one of the Core Cities, an alliance of the largest cities outside London that aims to unlock the potential of the UK’s great city regions. But in 2019, 15 per cent of Bristol’s population lived in the most deprived 10 per cent of areas in England and 17,200 children and 13,600 older people in Bristol live in income deprived households (Bristol City Council, 2022). In 2017 the Runnymede Trust found Bristol’s Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) communities have “poorer job prospects, worst health and fewest academic qualifications than those in white communities of the 10 core cities in the country” (Bristol 24/7, 2017).

Currently, the city’s budget faces considerable pressure when it comes to social care and other statutory services. It is likely that these pressures on statutory services will increase, which will make funding for ongoing cultural activity harder to secure.



Bristol annual population change 1951–2020

Source: ONS Mid-year Population Estimates. Crown Copyright

Lessons learned elsewhere have been transferable to Bristol and informed some of the organisation's early thinking. The partnership behind Bristol Ideas was unique when the organisation was established but has become less so over the years. This approach is supported by recent research undertaken at Warwick University which highlights the importance to successful bidders of a wide range of partnerships and calls for the involvement of, "not just the usual suspects," as well as at least one university as a core partner (Warwick, 2022).

There are also new methods being used to bring in more voices and democratise cultural planning further. When Bristol Ideas ran its bid for 2008 Capital of Culture, the option to run a citizens' assembly was not available. This approach is now being considered for the future development of the West of England cultural strategy.

The importance of vision

There is one further important lesson for all - vision for a just future is essential. In 2011, Bristol Ideas worked with Business West – the representative body for business in Bristol and the West of England – on their book, 'High in Hope', (Savage, 2011) which looked at the great changes likely in the city and West of England over the 40 years to 2050. The book identified that by 2050, the sub-region will need to accommodate an additional 500,000 people requiring 300,000 new jobs and a further 200,000 new homes.

"Without a vision and thoughtful strategic planning," 'High in Hope' argued, "the unavoidable growth [of Bristol and the West of England] will be haphazard, unproductive and possibly, corrosive." The plan brought together ideas for housing, work, spatial planning, and transport with a civic and cultural vision and a commitment to be the first city to abolish poverty. It was put forward in a spirit of debate and welcomed ideas and comment from the city. Bristol and the West in 2050 will look different from the vision put forward in the book, but it is projects like this which help move to that new future.

As Bristol approached its 650th anniversary as an independent county in 2023, Bristol Ideas worked on the Bristol 650 project. As with all anniversary projects Bristol Ideas ran this project to be more about the present and future of the city than about the past, though it was on a smaller scale due to budget constraints. But at least by identifying the challenges that Bristol faces as well as some of the possible solutions, the city – and cities elsewhere – might begin to move forward in the most socially and economically challenging environment for many decades.

Lessons from urban planning history

The key inspiration for 'High in Hope' was the Chicago Plan of 1909. The plan, initiated by a group of Chicagoan businessmen who identified the need to plan for the city's growth, "sought to beautify Chicago and improve efficiency of commerce" (Chicago Architecture Center). One of the report's co-authors, the architect Daniel Burnham, famously said:

"Make no little plans. They have no magic to stir men's blood and probably will not themselves be realized. Make big plans, aim high in hope and work, remembering that a noble, logical diagram once recorded will never die, but long after we are gone will be a living thing, asserting itself with ever growing insistency."

"Cities of the future must embrace and deliver social justice. This is what just transition is about. Culture has a critical role to play here. We need works of the imagination to find solutions to the many challenges cities face and to encourage the learning and debate we need to go through to deliver change that works."

Sado Jirde
Director, Black South West Network



In 1373, Bristol became an independent county. To mark the 650th anniversary of this, Bristol Ideas launched Bristol 650, a year-long project looking at the past, present and future of the city. One project was a book which looked at the many challenges facing Bristol and some of the solutions to these.
© Till Lukat

Burnham's words have been one of the many inspirations in the work of Bristol Ideas. Apart from changing some of the language, these words stand today. When it comes to cities – and the contribution of cities to the future of the planet – little plans are no good, even if today they seem to be favoured over grand visions. Big plans are essential even if it takes many small steps to move towards achieving them.

At a time when gloom and pessimism abound, optimism is essential. As David Landes said in 'The Wealth and Poverty of Nations':

"In this world, the optimists have it, not because they are always right, but because they are positive. Even when wrong, they are positive, and that is the way of achievement, correction, improvement, and success..."

"Educated, eyes-open optimism pays; pessimism can only offer the empty consolation of being right...The one lesson that emerges is the need to keep trying. No miracles. No perfection. No millennium. No apocalypse. We must cultivate a sceptical faith, avoid dogma, listen, and watch well, try to clarify and define ends, the better to choose means" (Landes, 1988).

Few would question that the world needs new ideas. The looming climate crisis has been joined by an ecological crisis that threatens humanity and may destroy the, “endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful” that Charles Darwin – himself the subject of the main Bristol Ideas 2009 project – wrote about at the end of ‘The Origin of Species’.

Putting culture and cultural planning at the heart of cities will not solve these but can contribute to sustainable and prosperous urban communities with the social infrastructure that enables collective action to address the many challenges cities are facing.

Underpinning this report is a series of 60 interviews carried out by Andrew Kelly, Director of Bristol Ideas (1993–2023) and now Creative Programmer, with key stakeholders between May 2022 and May 2023, who have either been directly involved in the work of Bristol Ideas or seen its impact at first-hand. Direct quotes from participants are included throughout this report, and the interview transcripts will become a valuable resource for others interested in Bristol or questions of cultural planning. A list of most of those interviewed is included in the appendix to this report.

This report begins with a historical account of Bristol Ideas and its key activities since its formation in the early 1990s. It highlights three phases of its work – the consolidation and enhancement of Bristol’s culture in the 1990s, the building of Bristol’s cultural profile and long-term cultural planning, and finally the building of a city of ideas. The section concludes by asking what the future of the organisation will look like. The second section outlines and describes cultural planning in general terms, highlighting a number of key influences and texts before setting out the framework of cultural planning used by Bristol Ideas to develop networks and social infrastructure in the city. The final section assesses the impact of this purposive cultural planning on the city focusing particularly on how it has contributed to civic engagement in the city as well as the role played by culture as social infrastructure in the city.

“The richness of our culture is a combination of shared language, shared values, diversity of thinking and being able to meet and talk about those sorts of things. Culture is what makes our cities and our lives good places to be in. And without it, there is very little that makes you stick in one place, or in one job even. It is enormously important, especially for a multicultural society that we have in our cities, in the UK.”

Jaya Chakrabarti
Business leader and President, Bristol Chamber of Commerce & Initiative



Arundhati Roy speaking at a Bristol Ideas event in Bristol Cathedral (2017). © Jon Craig

Part one: A history of Bristol Ideas

“Why have you come to the city where good ideas come to die?”

Anonymous

To Bristol Ideas Director on arrival in 1993

Bristol Ideas was established in 1992 following research commissioned and funded by Arts Council England South West, Bristol City Council and The Bristol Initiative (Boyden, 1992). Peter Boyden of Boyden Southwood consultants who led the research, knew Bristol well and had previously worked with cultural planning consultants Comedia. The research assessed art forms in the city and their impact and the potential of cultural planning. It concluded that a body, independent of the partners but bringing them all together to plan and deliver long-term cultural development, should be established.

Each partner had their reasons for joining. Arts Council England South West (ACE) felt that Bristol, as the main city in the region, should have higher and greater aspirations for cultural development and activity. Business West knew of the importance of culture to a city's prosperity and life and this was one of a range of joint-venture partnerships they led at the time. Bristol City Council wanted to be more ambitious in its approach to culture and to work better with others in the city. ACE left the partnership a decade ago as they discovered they were not allowed to own a company they funded, according to the Department for Culture, Media, and Sport (DCMS). This had no material effect on the work of the partnership: they replaced directors with observers but continued to provide core financial support until the end of March 2023 when the current funding round ended. Both of Bristol's universities have joined the partnership more recently.

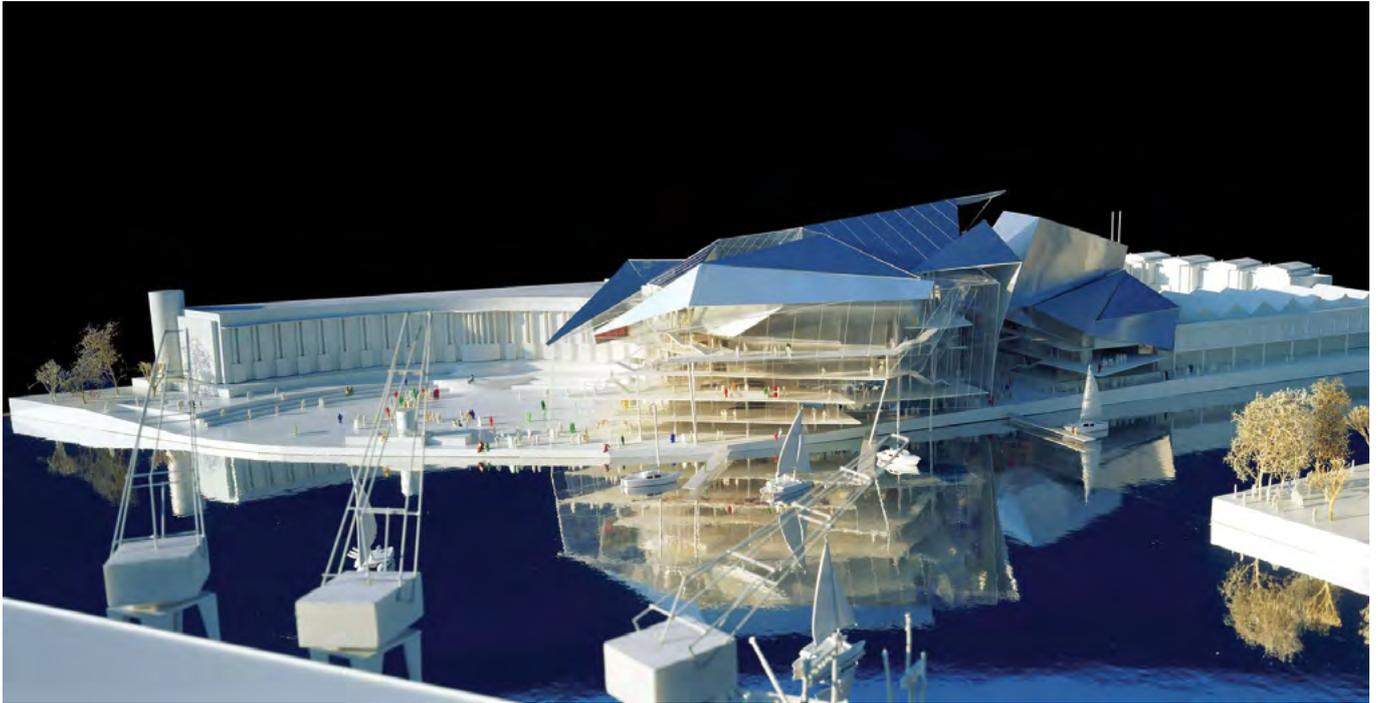
Beginnings (1992–1998)

Bristol Ideas formally started work in 1993. The priorities of the partners at this first stage included:

- raising Bristol's profile nationally through greater awareness of the cultural strengths and assets of the city.
- leading on the cultural redevelopment of harbourside with a new performing arts centre.
- the creation of new film festivals.
- increased investment in culture through sponsorship and the soon to be launched National Lottery.
- new cultural strategies in the city looking to a long-term period of development.

The impetus for The Boyden Southwood research came from the Bristol Initiative – a group of business leaders set up as one of 17 public/private sector partnerships or taskforces established following the publication of the 'Initiatives Beyond Charity' report by the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) in September 1988 (CBI, 1988). The CBI had been concerned about rioting in some British cities and believed that businesses in cities needed to be more involved in city leadership and urban regeneration. The Bristol Initiative was established in 1988 with the appointment of John Savage as Director/Chief Executive (1988–1993). An early priority was culture. He said:

“It was clear to us as a business organisation, and especially to some key business members, that culture and cultural activity is an essential part of looking to the future and planning for better things. It's also catalytic in the partnership work of celebrating and building a better city. People need



entertainment, cinemas, clubs, bars, theatres, educational opportunities. If you have a place that's devoid, not only of adequate housing but also of decent and reasonable things for people to occupy themselves with, talent goes elsewhere. That was very clear to us then and remains our position today. A place needs to have all the constituent parts to make it workable and, at the time, Bristol was short of so much."

Three major projects marked the first phase of Bristol Ideas' work. First was a proposal to contribute to the regeneration of the harbourside area of Bristol through the construction of The Harbourside Centre as a centre for performing arts. The second – following the formal launch of the National Lottery and Millennium Commission, was a new science and wildlife media centre, now 'We the Curious'; the third – which came around six years after starting work, was a bid to become European Capital of Culture 2008. Many other projects were launched in these early years as well, including the Encounters Film Festival.

Whilst The Harbourside Centre and the Capital of Culture bid were unsuccessful in achieving their primary aims, their legacy lives on in the ways in which Bristol Ideas has worked in and across the city.

The Harbourside Centre (1989–1997)

Perhaps the most exciting of all of Bristol Ideas' projects was the proposal to create a new concert hall in the harbourside area in the city centre. Symbolically, it would have been as important as the Opera House is to Sydney, Australia. Artistically, it would have created one of the best and most impressive concert halls in Europe with an active programme across the city in music and dance.

Architectural model of The Harbourside Centre (Behnisch Architekten).

"Culture is how a city feels. Culture is how people inhabit a city. And I think too often arts organisations get stuck on art as something special and apart. And I think that whole push to try to take a much more holistic view was quite farsighted in the early 90s."

Dick Penny
Former CEO, Watershed Media Centre

Harbourside – Canon’s Marsh as it was then known – was a prime redevelopment opportunity of around 72 acres owned by five different landowners next to Bristol’s Floating Harbour. Since the traditional uses of the harbour had ended in the 1960s, the site was derelict with abandoned and rotting buildings, polluted land, and an old railway goods shed which held car boot sales. Much of the useable land was devoted to parking. One proposal had been for the area to be turned into a car park for the city centre. Old tobacco bond warehouses had been removed in 1998 and Lloyds Bank had established their European headquarters there, but much remained ready for renewal.

There’s an interesting point about philanthropy and cities worth noting here. When Lloyds created such a large headquarters in the centre of Bristol it was hoped – and expected – that the company would make a major contribution to cultural activities. There was little contribution. In the past, companies that had a home in Bristol – such as Wills, the Bristol Aeroplane Company, Harveys – helped the city develop and grow with substantial donations for civic buildings, hospitals, contribution to charities and support for cultural activities. As Bristol Ideas relies on fundraising for much of its work, this lack of major company interest in the arts and culture posed problems at least in terms of projects; it remains easier to raise funds for some city centre cultural buildings.

The redevelopment of the harbour had been a slow process, with progress made in a piecemeal fashion. Arnolfini, a centre for contemporary arts, had moved to the harbourside in 1975, pioneering culture-led regeneration of redundant city-centre spaces. They were followed in 1982 by Watershed Media Centre, as ‘Britain’s First Media Centre’ (Presence, 2019). The Architecture Centre, now Design West, opened in 1996. Further down the Harbour, the SS Great Britain had returned to the city in 1970 and opened as a visitor attraction in the same year.

Reflecting on first hearing about The Harbourside Centre, Duncan Fraser, the project’s director said:

“Is this really as good as it looks? This is ‘the’ arts job. This is the performing arts job. It’s high risk. Am I going to risk it? The building as it was at that stage was extraordinary, wasn’t it? For me, the wonderful creative opportunities to be part of making a space, making a cultural semiotic, if you like, because that’s what I think it was, was just amazing. The team were fantastic. Behnisch and the acousticians and Theatre Projects. I had an instant rapport with all of them. They were just serious professionals at a level that, as Lord Gowrie said, we didn’t have here.

“There was already a vision about what it would be, which was a concert hall and maybe a smaller space. Having worked with a big cultural organisation that put artistic excellence and community engagement equally I added this to The Harbourside Centre. And we quickly got to four spaces – we had the concert hall, the dance theatre, there was going to be a club and jazz and all sorts of things. And the third and fourth spaces were absolutely integral in terms of community use. They would’ve been hot spaces all day, every day. What I think is really interesting – and it didn’t start with The Harbourside Centre, some of us had been doing it before – but those kinds of things and those kinds of intellectual and philosophical approaches, ethical even, no arts organisation worth its salt would not do now. And I think that’s significant in a way.”

After nearly a decade of work in building support, conducting design work to an advanced stage ready for construction to start, obtaining planning permission, and fundraising, Arts Council England refused to support the final funding bid in 1997. It claimed that the cost had risen too high and was too risky. More likely, ACE had overcommitted. The Bristol project was not the only one to lose out that day. The full

story of The Harbourside Centre – and Bristol’s renewal of its concert halls – has not yet been told and may need to wait for the 30-year rule to apply in 2027.

The impact of this decision was felt in many ways. Some of the ambition in and of the city for large-scale investment in grand cultural projects was lost. Private sector leaders – who had invested time and money in the project – seemed reluctant to commit further and this problem was shared by others involved, including some of the councillors who had devoted years of work to this. It was difficult to continue to convince the council that joint-venture partnerships were the way forward. And trust between some in Bristol and Arts Council England declined, seeing the decision as a betrayal.

It took a long time to return to a sense of optimism and move forward. A key underpinning of this was the bid for 2008 European Capital of Culture, which not only saw a case for culture in the city debated over a four-year period but also saw a plan created which included new cultural institutions, some of which, such as M Shed – the Museum of Bristol – were delivered, even though the bid had not been successful.

In November 2023, Bristol Beacon, previously known as Colston Hall, will reopen after a major and sometimes controversial refurbishment (Bristol Beacon, ND). Thirty years on since detailed work started on The Harbourside Centre, Bristol’s long-running saga of a new concert hall ends.

2008 Capital of Culture Bid (1999–2003)

Bristol Ideas spent four years leading Bristol’s bid to become Europe’s 2008 Capital of Culture. For Bristol Ideas, the bidding process was as important as being crowned Capital of Culture. The intention was to use the bid to raise the profile of culture, learn more about the city, develop plans, and set up a programme for the next five years at least.



Whilst the bid was unsuccessful, Bristol was shortlisted and – informally, according to a DCMS officer – was ranked third behind the winners Liverpool and the runners up Newcastle/Gateshead.

Simon Cook, former Bristol City Council councillor (1999–2016), leader (2012), Lord Mayor (2004–2005) and Chair of Bristol Ideas (2010–2015) said:

“The application process brought the city together and brought a seriousness about how we should invest in culture and how

Tony Robinson, patron of Bristol 2008, holds a copy of Bristol’s first round submission, with the Bristol 2008 balloon – contributed by Business West – in the background.

we should bring our institutions up to date. It was a fantastic catalyst. Projects were certainly being thought about but seemed to lack the energy and determination to make them happen.

“The bid gave an energy and a determination to stop the rot and reverse a process of culture in Bristol being deemed as hopeless and not deemed important. It helped us pick ourselves up from the disaster of the Centre for the Performing Arts [The Harbourside Centre] being cancelled and refocus on those projects which were deliverable.... I think there was a great deal of hurt about the fact that the money had essentially been pulled from it. The 2008 bid helped us stamp our mark on the city and put in a marker for the South West, because we are its largest city.

“We wanted to reverse the general feeling that Bristol and the sub-region were pretty hopeless culture wise, even though we have a very strong economy. And that was the ironic thing, that the northern cities and the largest cities outside London built part of their economic success on the back of having an excellent cultural brand, whereas we’d achieved some economic success without bothering to do that.”

“Festival of Ideas has been a significant part of my nearly 30 years in Bristol. I remember conversations with friends going on long into the night after listening to a speaker. The work that you have done over the years will have left a lot of people wiser than they would have been without the experience and hopefully this has made us make better decisions (or at least less bad decisions) individually and collectively. Not many people get to nudge cities/organisations/populations on better paths than they would have gone left to their own devices. That is quite a legacy.”

Kami Lamakan
Audience member

Whilst the bid was unsuccessful, it did have a significant impact on the role of culture in Bristol. For Colin Skellett of Business West, the bid, “was really empowering. And it also got people thinking about culture.”

For Bristol-based orchestral conductor Jon James, “Bristol 2008 engendered a sense of collective pride around the city and that fuelled aspirational ideas that would not otherwise have found their way to the table. It was good to have cross-disciplinary dialogue and to flip the focus from deficit to potential.”

The work that was put into the bid also formed the basis of Bristol Ideas’ programming for the next seven years. For Stephen Wray, Head of Culture at Bristol City Council at the time, “the important thing ... was that you delivered a big chunk of what you said you would have delivered as Capital of Culture.”

Creating and celebrating a City of Ideas (2003–2019)

Whilst the Capital of Culture bid was ultimately unsuccessful, the planning that was put into the bid sowed the seeds for the next phase of Bristol Ideas’ work. The work delivered by Bristol Ideas in this period fell into two distinct categories.

First, a series of annual or biennial festivals was established in the city:

- the **Festival of Ideas** launched in 2005 provides a platform for the discussion of ideas across the city. For the director of Bristol Ideas’, Andrew Kelly, the purpose of the festival was, “to challenge, provoke and learn” (Bristol Ideas 2018).

The festival takes place year-round with no fixed dates. To date there have been 17 Festival of Ideas with a total of around 2,000 events. Across all of the festivals there has been a consistent audience satisfaction rating throughout with over 90 per cent of participants describing the events as ‘good’ or ‘very good’.



- since 2012, Bristol has held an annual **Festival of Economics** where economists and experts from around the world debate some of the key economic questions of our time with each other and their audiences.

In the words of Diane Coyle and Richard Davies, the co-directors of the 2023 festival, “the Festival of Economics is an opportunity to discuss the big economic questions of our time. Our events are for everyone, with a strict no jargon and no PowerPoint rule for our experts from around the world. They can help us all better understand the latest academic research, government policies and big ideas needed to improve our lives, and we can help them understand what questions people have about the economy” (Bristol Ideas, 2023).

- most recently the biennial **Festival of the Future City** started in 2015. The festival brings together a wide range of thinkers with an interest in cities to consider some of the pressing issues facing the world’s urban areas.

For instance, core themes for the 2023 festival include: just transition; democracy; cities recovering from crisis and conflict, with a focus on Syria, Ukraine and cities coming out of lockdown; culture in cities and regions; and cities coming to terms with their pasts to create new futures.

Through these recurring events, the importance of the sharing and debating of ideas has become central to the work of Bristol Ideas. It was a natural development for the partnership given this work, but also filled an important need. The bid for Capital of Culture 2008 had seen events take place throughout the city about ideas for the cultural future of the place. Other programmes of work – such as Bristol Legible City – meant detailed research into ideas for city planning deserved discussion. And the growing nature of the crises facing cities meant that new ideas for solutions were needed, not least from people that live and work in Bristol. Finally, it was also essential that the city could host discussions about issues such as Brexit, immigration, the future of work, women in cities, race, science and the environment to help thinking and future action.

Festival of Economics event (2016).
© Jon Craig

The other strand of events took as their starting point events in Bristol's history, such as the 200th anniversary of the birth of Isambard Kingdom Brunel, the 800th anniversary of Bristol's first mayor, and commemoration of locally and nationally important events such as the centenary of the start of the First World War.

These events demonstrated how a connection to the history and heritage of a place can help to create a space in which ideas about the present and the future can be shared. They told the story of Bristol in new ways.



For the 2004 Great Reading Adventure, a giant triffid toured the city.
© Martin Chainey.

Great Reading Adventures (2003–2012)

This was an annual series of projects where everyone in the city, and in two cases other parts of the UK, were encouraged to read the same book in the same time period and learn about and debate issues in the book relevant to Bristol. The largest in the city was 'The Bristol Story' (2008 – a cartoon history of Bristol) though others involved large numbers of people: from the 6,000 who started the project with 'Treasure Island' to the 50,000 who read 'The Lost World' in Bristol, Edinburgh, and Glasgow.

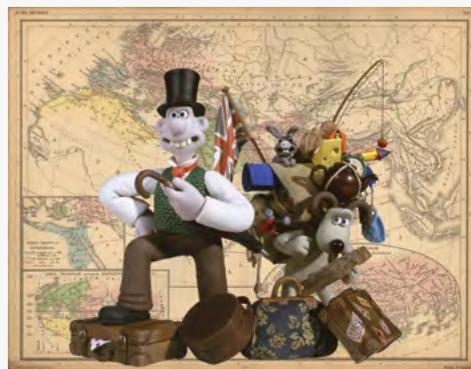
Subjects included Bristol's maritime history; the environmental crisis; war and peace in the city, especially the Second World War; trade and exploration; Bristol's different communities; science and Darwinism; and ideas from the city.

A smaller project was brought back in 2015 where a thousand-strong reading group read 'The Autobiography of Malcolm X' including a group of prisoners at HMP Bristol. As well as reading the book, essays were written by prisoners, most of which were published on the Bristol Ideas website. The prize for the three best essays was a dictionary, the same thing that Malcolm X had been given when incarcerated and which helped turn his life round.

All material was provided free of charge.

Brunel 200: Brunel, engineering, and the transformation of Bristol (2006)

This project celebrated I K Brunel, arguably the greatest of engineers, his impact on Bristol and other places, his role in innovation and the lessons for today. The project brought together major civic celebrations, city-wide learning, walks and tours, book publications, art projects, exhibitions, media work, and industry activity. A key part of future thinking in Brunel 200 was the call for 200 Ideas for Bristol which led to an exhibition and the implementation of some of the ideas proposed. This built on initiatives like 30 and 50 ideas for Bristol events that had taken place before.



Wallace and Gromit set off around the world in 80 days with Bristol Ideas for Brunel 200 in 2006. © Aardman

Darwin 200 (2009)

The 200th anniversary of the birth of Charles Darwin had little to do with Bristol directly, but it was a critical anniversary to mark. Bristol Ideas focused on public education with a fully illustrated collection of essays, and a cartoon book on Darwin's life and work, of which 60,000 copies were printed. The 2009 Great Reading Adventure saw 50,000 copies of Conan Doyle's 'The Lost World' plus cartoon books and reading guides distributed again for free across Bristol, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Westminster, Portsmouth, Shrewsbury and the whole of the South West. It was the largest national Great Reading Adventure.



Many schools joined in the BAC 100 project. Here children from Hillfields Primary School are with the banner they created. © Martin Chainey

BAC 100 (2010)

BAC 100 was a West of England wide project that celebrated a centenary of aviation production in and around Bristol, from planes made out of wood and glue in 1910 to Concorde and the Airbus 380. The project enabled Bristol Ideas to examine the meaning of aviation production for the people who had worked at the Bristol Aviation Company, and an assessment of where the aerospace industry goes next in terms of the need for environmental sustainability and in the face of some opposition in the city. It included the apprentices at Rolls Royce and Airbus building a replica First World War fighter plane.

Bristol 2014

Bristol Ideas organised the largest programme outside London to mark the centenary of the First World War. This project looked in part at social history, which it was felt had not been covered well in work on the history of the city, as well as Belgian refugees to Bristol during the war and trade unionism and conscientious objection. It included two exhibitions: 'Moved by Conflict' which explored the physical, social and personal changes brought about by the war through the stories of Bristol people, and another on contemporary art and warfare. It also encouraged people in the city to research their family history and to visit sites of importance relating to the war in Bristol.



Two major exhibitions were held in 2014. One looked at Bristol during the First World War, and the second focused on art and contemporary war.; the second at art and contemporary war. © John Seaman



Bristol Ideas led the major arts programme for Bristol European Green Capital 2015. Projects included The Bristol Whales; two sculptures made from wicker and single use plastic bottles by Cod Steaks. © @paulbox

Bristol 2015 and the Romantic Poets (2015)

Bristol played an important yet little known role in the birth of Romantic poetry. This small project, part of Bristol's European Green Capital year, saw 23 contemporary poets commissioned to write in the spirit of Romanticism; a walking tour in the footsteps of Coleridge and Wordsworth; and a series of lectures and debates – the Coleridge Lectures – which looked at Romantic themes in the present such as the clash between rural and urban perspectives about rewilding and use of Greenbelt land; animal rights; science in society; and the trade in enslaved people. It was one of many projects run by Bristol Ideas as part of Bristol's year as European Green Capital. Others included: Sanctum with Situations and the Bristol Whales.

Bristol 800 (2016)

The 800th anniversary of Bristol's first mayor saw a collection of smaller projects looking at events in the city over the past 800 years and included work on the 250th anniversary of the Bristol Old Vic; the author Angela Carter and her life and work in Bristol; and Bristol's connection with Mary Shelley and 'Frankenstein'. For the Shelley project, new poetry was commissioned, a play performed, and debates held about today's 'Frankenstein technologies.'



In 2016, Bristol's work on Mary Shelley and the city included a specially commissioned play which took place in John Wesley's New Room – the oldest Methodist building in the world – in Bristol city centre. Founded in 1739 by John Wesley, the New Room became the cradle of the worldwide Methodist movement. © Jon Craig



Books published for Bristol Ideas' celebration of the council estate, Homes for Heroes 100 (2019).

Bristol and council housing (2019)

Bristol had one of the first council estates – Hillfields – and this project looked back at communities on four Bristol estates as well as forwards with the need for a new, mass council house building programme. It included guided walks and a book of walks of four council estates; a collection of essays by writers and others who had grown up in council housing; a comic looking at Bristol's council housing which was made available to all council tenants in the city as well as read elsewhere; and local history work with people in communities outside the city centre.

Chatterton and Bristol (2020)

This project celebrated the 250th anniversary of the birth of Thomas Chatterton, born in the city, and called the 'marvellous boy' by Wordsworth. This built on the 2015-2016 work on the birth of the romantic poetry movement in Bristol. It included new poetry commissions. Whilst the programme was much diminished by the pandemic, it led to Henry Wallis' classic painting 'Chatterton' being put on show in the city.



Henry Wallis, 'Chatterton' 1856. Photo © Tate. Image released under Creative Commons CC-BY-NC-ND 3.0 (Unported)



Bristol cinema city (2021)

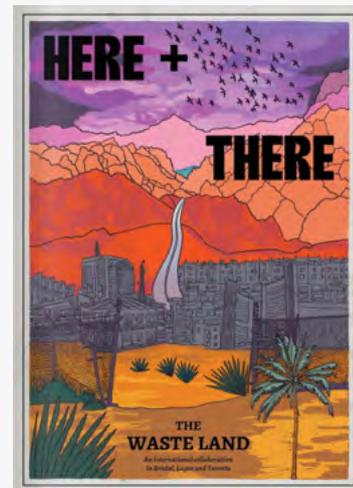
This project aimed to bring to public attention the life and work of Bristolian filmmaker William Friese Greene as well as highlight what cinema has meant and continues to mean for people in the city. It included films, walks, and a book of essays.

Silver gelatin photograph by and showing William Friese-Greene (1855-1921). Bringing back to public attention the life of pioneering photographer and filmmaker William Friese-Greene was a key aim of Bristol Ideas' cinema 2021 project. This was first suggested in 1995, but the project did not take place until 2021. This is another example of the importance of longevity in planning and delivery.

Credit: William Friese-Greene: Analysis of Motion Experiment c. 1886. Science Museum Group © The Board of Trustees of the Science Museum, London

Here + There: The Waste Land project (2022)

For the centenary of the publication of 'The Waste Land', Bristol Ideas worked with Aké Festival in Lagos and the Toronto International Festival of Authors to look at the similarities between the world then and now – including war, despair, pandemic – and commissioned four poets from each country to respond to those themes. This was the first big international project run by Bristol Ideas after lockdown ended.



Cover of the Zine for the Aké-Bristol-Toronto project looking at 'The Waste Land' 100 years on (Grace Kress/ Shelby Studios).

Where next? (2019–)

In 2019, what had been known as the Bristol Cultural Development Partnership became Bristol Ideas. By this time the organisation had run many projects over its 25-year existence – festivals, year-long programmes, one-off events – each with their own website, promotional material and archives. The programme was well known, but the organisation was not. At a time when demonstrating impact and showing what had been achieved had become particularly important, what had been a deliberate strategy for many years – to allow others to take credit and to promote projects rather than the organisation – had become unwieldy and counter-productive.

The change in name was more than just a rebranding. It involved a process of carefully looking at the history of the organisation,

reviewing the previous programme and considering the likely future work for the organisation. Even before the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, the increase and ease of online activity meant that the ways in which the programme of activities was going to be delivered had to be considered.

At the heart of the discussions, which involved all parts of the organisation – owners, partners, staff, stakeholders, audiences – were ideas. Debates, learning and implementation had become much more important with the development of Festival of Ideas 14 years before and it was agreed that there was a need to unite all areas of work – past, present, and future – in one programme and on one website.

In March 2021, Bristol Ideas was adopted as the new name and a new set of principles was put in place.

Operating principles of Bristol Ideas

Bravery

Great ideas are not constrained by caution, so neither are we. ‘Difficult’ does not stop us. We are proudly bold and relish our freedom to be able to say, explore and debate issues and ideas freely.

Rigorousness

In a world of clickbait and fake news – to us thoroughness is anything but boring. Our rigour and respect for facts allows us to be accountable, credible – and on the side of the truth.

Reflection

For us looking back, reflecting and analysing is all part of being purposeful. Reviewing not only helps us gain knowledge from what has already happened – it helps us continue to move forward.

Agility

Ideas are forming, developing, and evolving all the time, as are the issues they look to address. As true allies to ideas we are ready to react and debate them.

Openness

We encourage discussion, we value debate, and none of that happens without a willingness to hear opinions and ideas that differ from our own. To inspire openness in our audiences we are committed to being open ourselves.

Future focus

The ideas and issues we discuss reach into the future and will be felt years, decades, even centuries ahead. We are ready to go with them.

The revised plans were highly interrupted and disrupted by Covid-19 and lockdown. Bristol Ideas lost its May 2020 programme – which had been the strongest for some years – and it proved difficult to plan any further activity during that and subsequent years as the pandemic developed and lockdowns continued. The pandemic also jeopardised the key projects planned on poetry and cinema and hampered planning and fundraising for the Bristol 650 project in 2023.

As Bristol Ideas managed to deliver a programme of activity online, it did not receive any support from the Cultural Recovery Fund. The changes to the organisation in 2019, especially the adoption of a web strategy, helped the resilience of the organisation through the pandemic. But online events failed to bring in much financial support and audience viewing figures declined rapidly. Some subsequent funding decisions were not successful, including the loss of regular Arts Council England funding as a National Portfolio Organisation.

By 2023, the partnership which had underpinned Bristol Ideas had begun to weaken with problems for funding core operations.

Conclusion

From its beginnings in 1992, Bristol Ideas has run many projects. It has moved from its early work in developing the harbourside area and filling some of the gaps in Bristol's cultural provision to the direct delivery of projects, underpinned by work on cultural planning in the city. Projects have ranged widely, from engineering and science to romantic poetry and cinema, all of which make up the idea and delivery of cultural planning.

Part two: ‘The city is the project’

Cultural planning and Bristol Ideas

“Science is inherently creative, messy and beautiful, while the arts possess the unique power to deeply inspire action in response to the ideas they present. Both are interconnected and an integral part of everyday culture.”

Donna Speed
CEO, We the Curious

Cities have always been hotbeds of culture. With the density and diversity of their populations providing an audience for cultural activities and creating opportunities for new forms of cultural expression to be developed, culture is a key way in which people can connect with place. For UNESCO, “cultural activities foster social inclusion and dialogue among diverse communities, while tangible and intangible heritage are integral parts of a city’s identity, creating a sense of belonging and cohesion” (UNESCO, ND).

For the past 70 years, culture and cultural planning has been seen as a key policy lever for policymakers working in urban areas. Its application has stretched from culture for its own sake – the belief that everyone should have access to ‘high’ culture – to an interest in the economic and social impact that culture can have in the regeneration of cities and neighbourhoods.

Writing in 2013, Kloosterman identified four phases of cultural planning policy:

1945 to mid-1970’s

This period saw a ‘paternalistic approach’ to bringing culture to the masses, with culture being seen as a merit good alongside education and healthcare.

Mid-1970’s to mid-1990’s

This period saw a shift away from culture as an end in itself, to culture as an instrument in local economic strategies. As Kloosterman argues, “culture came to be seen as an instrument to strengthen the local economy, brand the city, and as a crucial plank in the strategies for inter-urban competition that was heating up at that time.”

Mid-1990’s to 2010

This third phase built upon the second and “added an emphasis in cultural planning on boosting the quality of place to attract or retain high-skilled workers.” Building on the now contested work of Richard Florida (Peck, 2005) and others, culture in its broadest sense, was seen as a way of attracting those creative classes that can invigorate the social and economic life of cities.

2010 onwards

The final phase that Kloosterman identifies is the period of austerity that started after the global financial crisis in the first decade of the 21st century, where “the scope for this kind of cultural planning was drastically reduced.”

In many ways the journey of Bristol Ideas has followed these later phases with an approach, as set out in the previous section, that initially focused on ‘big ticket’ projects such as the bid to become European Capital of Culture and the harbourside project, before evolving into an approach that was more tightly woven into the warp and weft of the city.

What is cultural planning?

Cultural planning is not just the planning of culture. As cultural consultant, Lia Ghilardi argues, it is: “a cultural (anthropological) approach to urban planning and policy” (Ghilardi, 2001). It is not just about the cultural infrastructure of a place; it is about the whole place. For Charles Landry of Comedia, “the city is the project.”

Cultural planning is not a collection of city projects. It is more than just putting on a festival, delivering a community arts programme in a deprived area, installing a

piece of public art or the creation of an arts strategy. It might encompass some or all of these, but it is much wider and involves many people and organisations that would not normally be involved in planning cities. It is both a method and approach – it is as concerned with the way things are done as much as what is done.

Colin Mercer, the UK's first professor of cultural planning, called cultural planning, "the strategic and integral use of cultural resources in urban and community development" (Mercer, 2006). Rather than seeing culture as a discrete subject, cultural planning links culture with the economic and social life of a place. As such it takes a broad view of culture, making no definition between 'high' culture and 'low' culture, all of which contributes in different ways to the economic and social life of places. Likewise, cultural planning - at least for Bristol - includes both the arts and sciences, with no space for C P Snow's 'Two Cultures'.

Cultural planning should not be restricted to an arts or culture department nor solely to a local authority. Rather it is about bringing people together with a shared interest in a place. The approach taken needs to be cross-departmental, bringing together city planners with professionals working in economic development, health, leisure, housing, and education, and perhaps most importantly, members of the different communities that make up the place.

An assessment of what makes a place unique – which might be as much about community spirit as it is about the industry of the place – is essential. For cultural planners, culture is about more than the arts. It includes habits and history as well as natural assets such as parks and gardens. It embraces urban myths and how people and communities perceive a place.

An early influence on cultural planning was the polymath town planner, ecologist, biologist, conservationist, and sociologist, Patrick Geddes (1854–1932), who brought these perspectives and more together in



thinking about the three key elements of folk, work, and place. Patrick Geddes was inspired by the French sociologist Frederic Le Play's triad of 'Lieu, Travail, Famille' – which Geddes translated to 'Work, Place, Folk'. The work of Lewis Mumford has also been cited as important. And writers and consultants like Ghilardi have seen elements of cultural planning in "the 19th century City Beautiful Movement, the WPA of the 1930s, and the community arts movement of the 1940s" (Borrupt, 2017, p.49).

Arts, nature and science came together in the first major Bristol Ideas' project, what's now called We the Curious. Nicholas Allan Innes, Unsplash

“Culture isn’t just events, culture is jobs. It’s not just about watching, acting, singing, performing. If we’re building affordable homes, that creates a culture. If kids are eating, it creates a culture. If they get work experience, that creates a culture as well. There are many things going on that contribute to culture in Bristol.”

Marvin Rees
Mayor of Bristol

As Wahl notes, Geddes saw in regional and town planning, “the integration of people and their livelihood into the environmental givens of the particular place and region they inhabit. He emphasised that sound planning decisions have to be based on a detailed regional survey, which established an inventory of a region’s hydrology, geology, flora, fauna, climate, and natural topography, as well as its social and economic opportunities and challenges” (Wahl, 2017).

Like Geddes, all cultural planners need to be polymaths. Strong awareness of and immersion in the literature of cultural planning is essential. But reading needs to be much wider and needs to take in a range of literatures and voices including city histories, memoirs and fiction. It is also important to learn from other places. Any cultural planner working in urban areas needs to visit other cities, walk around them and talk to their people.

Cultural planning makes culture integral to the life and work of a place, as well as ensuring the widest possible involvement. It starts with developing an understanding of the cultural assets of a place and the networks that connect them, often through a process of cultural mapping. The people involved in the process need to be as wide-ranging as the assets identified. Going beyond traditional planning boundaries means that more ideas come forward. And this includes gaining the full involvement and talents of communities

in the city, in the broadest sense, including communities of place and locality as well as communities of interest.

But, rewarding though it is, it can be hard for cultural planning to get accepted. Academic and consultant Franco Bianchini argues that, “cultural planning is marginalised and [is] not fully accepted by the cultural policy establishment. Either it’s seen as impractical or, maybe... as a threat.” And Thomas Borrup, author of ‘The Creative Community Builders’ Handbook’ states, “the creative and cultural sector, including artists, creative entrepreneurs, cultural practitioners, and most non-profit arts and cultural organisations, remain on the fringes of the larger enterprise of urban planning and city building. Only recently have limited forays demonstrated potentials that theorists and cultural planners called for 40 years ago... While a full integration of cultural planning with urban planning may not be around the corner, the increasing complexity and diversity of populations of cities creates greater urgency to bring the disciplines closer” (Borrup, 2017, p.46).

The Bristol Ideas approach

Bristol Ideas’ takes these influences in cultural planning and makes them locally meaningful. Each place takes inspiration from different sources, especially in making work as locally specific and relevant as possible.

Bristol’s cultural roots run deep. The Bristol Old Vic theatre built in 1766 is the oldest continuously working theatre in the English-speaking world. And Bristol saw the first publication of the works of the romantic poets in the 18th century. More recently, Bristol has been feted for its vibrant music, with the ‘Bristol Sound’ reflecting the city’s cultural diversity (Harnell, 2021).

Some ideas for cultural planning in the work of Bristol Ideas come from the think tank Comedia which has advised cities around the world (a good overview of work

is Landry, 2020). Some Comedia associates have also conducted evaluations of major work, including the evaluation of Hull City of Culture, led by Franco Bianchini and the University of Hull (Culture, Place and Policy Institute, 2019).

Added to this has been the international influence of Harvey Perloff in Los Angeles, (Perloff, 1979), Robert McNulty and his work for the Washington-based Partners for Livable Places, later Partners for Livable Communities (Partners for Livable Communities (ND), and, more recently, some of the work of Richard Florida. Within the UK, Glasgow's cultural plan was also influential. The Bristol Initiative made an early visit to Glasgow to see the role and impact of culture on the city and came back impressed.

Two further important influences on the work of Bristol Ideas are Jane Jacobs' 'The Death and Life of Great American Cities' (Jacobs, 1961), and Kevin Lynch's work on legibility and places.

Jacobs, influenced by Geddes, and with an approach based on campaigning and much personal observation (another key role for a cultural planner), saw the city as an ecosystem with many people and organisations participating. Jacobs wrote about seeing all aspects of city life and the need to be involved in many different areas.

For Lynch, the city is "a work of art, fitted to human purpose" (Banerjee and Southworth, 1995, p 33; Kelly, 2001). Values are important, with Lynch highlighting in particular: engagement, freedom, justice, control, learning, creativity, access, continuity, adaptability, meaning, health, growth, development, beauty, choice, participation, comfort, and stimulus. Lynch's work looked at how people perceive and evaluate their environments and was interested in the experiential factors of a place to ensure that the right questions were asked. His practice was concerned primarily with substantive clients – the present and future users of a place – and is focused not on how cities work

but on how they 'should' work for people. For Lynch, it was people, not designers, who made places successful. Though he appreciated the work of experts, he found their hold over city design aesthetics not helpful as they failed to promote public debate.

For Bristol Ideas, cultural planning is place-specific and builds on and extends local strengths, assets, and distinctiveness. In an age of clone towns and cities, off-the-shelf solutions to the challenges a place faces do not work, and so cultural planning enables the character of places to shine through, however hard it is to achieve.

At the centre of it all is culture and the importance this has for people; for the place where they live, study, work, or visit; for jobs and prosperity; and – most of all – for quality of life.

Bristol Ideas aims to 'implement' a few projects directly; 'influence' as many organisations and individuals as possible to develop joint projects through coordination of initiatives, fundraising and marketing; and 'inspire' widely so that all can participate and take pride in what the city does and has achieved. In this way, significant projects are created, with maximum impact, for relatively modest investment from public funds.

Bristol Ideas has run many projects. Each project is different, but all have similar elements. They are driven by ideas and made

"I think of Bristol as a kind of blank canvas. We can use it as a place to test ideas out before we then hand it on to the next generation who will use the city in a different way. Something you're really good at is getting things actually over the line... your organisation is perhaps a little bit more willing to make things happen and... a bit nimbler."

Luke Jerram
Artist



Bristol Ideas likes to get people walking round the city to learn more about Bristol. Here, novelist and commentator Will Self leads a guided walk.
© Jon Craig

up of many activities including exhibitions, artistic commissions, public debates and discussions, music, theatre, film, heritage work, industry and business activity, poetry, fiction, reading and writing, walks and tours, and essay collections. This multi-activity approach allows engagement at many levels.

In reviewing the work of Bristol Ideas and through the series of interviews that have been conducted with key stakeholders of the organisation, four key principles have been identified.

1. Build on the local

Like every place, Bristol has many local strengths and challenges. An assessment of these strengths and challenges is the starting point for cultural planning. In Bristol's case this involved considering the city's cultural strengths and weaknesses; its significant anniversaries, individuals, and companies; the city's built environment; urban myths and perceptions of the place; and past successful innovations and failures. Looking back at the history of the city does not mean ignoring the new. Rather, building on local distinctiveness and how it has developed over time helps to

strengthen both the city and cultural planning and helps to plan for the future.

This approach appears in different ways in the work of Bristol Ideas. The first Great Reading Adventure, 'Treasure Island', was chosen as the *Hispaniola* sails from the city and it allowed learning, discussion and debate about Bristol and trade, the British Empire, and the trade in enslaved people. The national celebration of Brunel's bicentenary in 2006, led from Bristol, meant that engineering then and now could be discussed, amongst many other projects, as part of culture.

A celebration of the local is key. An early project with Business West was the recognition of individuals and community groups helping to Build a Better Bristol. Some years later, Bristol Ideas introduced the Bristol Genius Award to reflect innovation that made change happen. Anniversaries associated with Bristol have often been catalysts for the work of Bristol Ideas. In 2016, Bristol 800 – marking the first mayor of the city – looked at many local strengths, including the 250th anniversary of the Bristol Old Vic, Mary Shelley's connections to Bristol, and Angela Carter's work in the city.

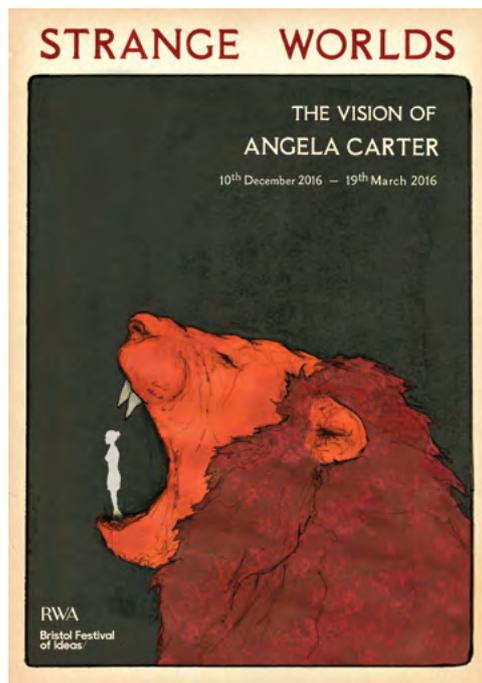
Commemoration is another. Bristol Ideas has been involved in much work to mark the city's role in the transportation of enslaved people. In recent years Bristol has struggled with its past, especially the leading role it played in the triangular trade. The toppling of the Colston statue in June 2020 was the culmination of a long-running campaign, built on failure over many decades to acknowledge Bristol's role and to deal specifically with the statue. In recent years, the German approach of 'Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung' – working off, or through, the past – influential in how Germany has come to terms with Nazism and the Holocaust, has inspired Bristol Ideas' work, as well as giving it an underpinning foundation. Susan Neiman's work has been important here as has the work on the Stolpersteine project (Neiman, 2019).

As well as examining their relevance to the present and the future, bringing aspects of Bristol's history to public attention, in as many creative ways as possible, has been critical. Each project aimed to have multiple opportunities for participation. Some participants might read the books distributed; others may read the books, take the walks, and join the debates; some might watch a television programme inspired by the work, listen to the poetry that has been commissioned, or visit a gallery exhibition.

2. Networks

Bristol Ideas is deliberately small, never employing more than four and a half full-time employed members of staff. It has always worked with and through others. An early insight into managing Bristol Ideas' multiple projects, and the many customers and stakeholders involved, came from discussions with academics at the University of Bath about the importance of networks.

Building on this insight, it became clear that managing Bristol Ideas was not just about managing an organisation but about simultaneously developing and managing many networks and stakeholders. At the heart



Part of the work of Bristol Ideas is bringing back to public attention the people associated with the city. One of these is the writer Angela Carter who did much of her early work in the city. Bristol Ideas worked with students in the University of the West of England to create posters for the exhibition that took place at Royal West of England Academy.
© Willem Hampson

of the networks is the network of Bristol Ideas partners. Woven into the network there are also networks of funders and sponsors, political networks, and project networks.

An important principle in bringing together and managing networks is to organise around enthusiasms (an influential book was 'Organizing Around Enthusiasms: Patterns of Mutual Aid in Leisure' (Bishop, Hoggett, 1986)). The idea is at the start of all projects. This builds on and is strengthened by enthusiasts who then go on to deliver the projects. It is sometimes a long search, but enthusiasts can be found for most projects including amateur historians, academics, family history researchers, model plane builders, cinema-goers, past employees of companies.



Bristol Ideas works with many partners in Bristol and outside the city, such as the Black South West Network which participated in the Festival of the Future City.
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3. Partnership working

As well as the need to create and maintain networks, key to Bristol Ideas' approach to cultural planning has been partnership working. Trust is a key element for partnership working, and a shared purpose for the partnership is also essential. Any partnership needs to make sure that there are opportunities for each partner to gain benefits beyond the purely transactional and develop deep and long relationships. Partnerships also need to be time limited and in place for the duration of the project rather than just existing for the sake of working together. Finally, each partner needs to bring value with skills and connections that the other partner organisations do not have. Partnership comes down to relationships and trust; patience; building and making connections; diversity and inclusion.

Nearly a decade after Bristol Ideas was established, Barry Taylor, then Director of Communications and Marketing at the University of Bristol, having spent many years working for Bristol City Council in a similar role, was asked about partnerships for the Bristol Ideas' pamphlet, 'Managing Partnerships' (Kelly and Kelly, 2002). For Taylor: "Partnerships have made all the difference:"

"As well as the obvious, tangible benefits of partnerships – from buildings to projects to events – there are the more subtle benefits. These include a shared sense of purpose and progress, greater civic pride, a significantly improved reputation, and a better atmosphere in which to work. The overall transformation has been extraordinary – it is as though the city has recaptured the pioneering spirit, which is an essential part of its character, but which went into near-hibernation during the rigours of the 1980s and the early 1990s."

4. City leadership

Leadership is more than just leading an organisation. Cultural planning needs to embed leadership in others, within the partnership and outside. Getting culture and cultural planning embedded into Bristol City Council has been an ongoing task, partly successful and partly challenging. One of the chief aims of cultural planning is to overcome silos by using culture as a way of bringing diverse viewpoints and activities together. Other authorities – such as Glasgow and Manchester and the more recently formed combined authorities - have a broad conception of culture which is reflected in their organisational structure. When councillor – and deputy mayor – Estella Tincknell took over the culture portfolio, library services were managed as part of leisure, while decisions about the cityscape (including the location of public artworks and spatial design) were part of planning and therefore not seen as cultural activities. Major cultural decisions – such as the renewal of the library service – were taken elsewhere when there would have been benefit in a more joined-up approach with other aspects of the city's culture. Culture was also absent from the first draft of the 'One City plan' prepared by the Mayor's Office.

Both where cultural planning is located and what is included in the definition of culture and cultural planning are key lessons for any organisation. The eventual inclusion of culture in the Mayor's Office and 'One City Plan' in Bristol has helped make culture central to planning and working with others. However, it took a while for culture to be included and the results so far are limited.

Leadership is also not just the responsibility of one person or a board of directors. Someone must lead, but the approach should be about maximising the involvement of teams, partners, networks, funders, and audiences. Wider involvement and fresh people promote creativity and provides challenges to do better and so consideration needs to be given to how to involve those who may not have participated yet.

Leaders have to be resilient to work through setbacks and defeat. Having resilient people and organisations helps see cultural planning through setbacks and challenges. Bristol Ideas has had some major setbacks. The final rejection for The Harbourside Centre and not securing the 2008 Capital of Culture bid could have led to the organisation failing. Throughout both these, the resolve of the partners was critical, they had trust in the vision and the people working on it, and all this ensured that the long-term commitment was maintained. As a result, much of the planned programme was able to be delivered over the following years.

In 'The Tipping Point', Malcolm Gladwell talks about critical success factors in social phenomena, arguing that change leaders need to be connectors, mavens, and salespeople. Connectors are networkers who know a lot of people and know the right people; mavens accumulate knowledge and want to tell people about that knowledge; and salespeople sell. Gladwell sums up well the role of a partnership leader (Gladwell, 2000).

The increasing complexity of places, the challenges they face and the difficulties of finding solutions and funding means that any posts created need to have people with specific skills and competencies. There is no overall definition of a cultural planner as any post created needs to be built on and concerned with the place. But there are certain skills, competencies, and experiences that are of value including a wide knowledge and the ability and keenness to gather new knowledge about the history and people of the place through wide reading and ongoing learning; an interest in politics as well as the political nous to be able to work with changing political environments; a feel for how cities and places work; and an ability to scan the horizon to take advantage of opportunities coming up and to anticipate problems (Kelly and Kelly, 2002).

Conclusion

Throughout its three decades of operation, Bristol Ideas has been involved in a continuous renewal of purpose and work. The mission remained the same for much of this time but as the organisation added bidding and campaigning and then direct festival organisation to its work, renewal became an ongoing necessity and a valuable task for partners, staff, and projects.

Taking the long view has been key. Bristol Ideas looks to the future and plans three-to-four years ahead. This is essential especially for exhibitions in galleries and fundraising. But it is also necessary in ensuring that people are taken with the organisation and project and that the research needed is completed. Festival of the Future City, for example, has

a plan up to 2027, currently with key themes identified including: changing cities and the new British government (2025), and robotics, automation, and cities. It's by looking far ahead that funding opportunities can be grasped fully, the right partnerships built, the case be made, and projects developed that involve the widest range of people and organisations.

Bristol Festival of Ideas

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in the debate
of Festival



Salman Rushdie in conversation with Andrew Kelly, at St George's Bristol (2015). © Jon Craig

Part three: What impact has Bristol Ideas had?

“The first thing that springs to mind is mutual benefit, mutual payoff, and ease of collaboration – but I think beyond that... what’s the actual impact of the partnership and the collaboration? What’s the wider impact? What’s the wider impact on our current or prospective students and importantly on wider communities, their health and wellbeing, the quality of the environment, the opportunities, and pathways that we create together?”

Martin Boddy

Pro Vice-Chancellor Research and Enterprise, University of the West of England (2017-2023)

Bristol Ideas has been guided by a long-term vision of building a city with creativity at its heart delivered through a mission of partnership.

Raw data on numbers of people attending events and taking part in activities is easy to collect but evidence of changing behaviour, both immediately and over time, is much harder. Wider measures of impact are even harder to assess. For example, how do you measure whether through culture, and through Bristol Ideas’ projects, the city has changed for the better? That the image of the place has improved? That the city has attracted more jobs? That a project on housing actually increases the provision of social housing? That the provision of a space for debate has led to better civic discourse and less polarisation?

There are many ways to assess the impact of cultural programmes. Pioneering work by the Port Authority of New York in the 1980s on the arts industry in the New York and New Jersey region (Port Authority, 1982) and John

Myerscough’s influential 1988 book, ‘The Economic Importance of the Arts in Britain’ (Myerscough, 1988), looked at economic value. This, and linked multiplier effect analysis, was supplemented over the years with the social impact of arts programmes, measures of city creativity, the presence and importance of a creative class, cities and interculturalism, the role and impact of creative bureaucrats and more. Bristol Ideas has used these and many other measures in assessing projects and wider impact but made them specific to the city and the work.

But measurement and evaluation bring with them their own sets of challenges for an organisation like Bristol Ideas.

Being reliant on external sources of core funding as well as project specific funding, means that measurement is often designed to meet the needs of funders rather than drive the development of the organisation’s goals. After each project, reports are submitted on the amount of funding raised and spent, the size of the audiences attending, and sometimes an element of wider impact. Questions might be about happiness and wellbeing, and asking audience members how they felt.

As Liz Harkman, then Director of the Encounters film festival in Bristol, commented, “[evaluation is] not something I’m qualified in other than just doing it.” She added: “But at Encounters we did too much for a start because we’re required to for a variety of different funders with differing agendas. The evaluation and monitoring we did

“I think we should have the confidence to do cultural programming, arts, civic activity, without reference to instrumental metrics. Which is not to say that you don’t generate any evidence, or you don’t think about what you’re achieving, of course not, but you don’t reduce the activity to a cost benefit analysis or to a metric of something.”

Nick Pearce

Director, Institute for Policy Research, University of Bath

was exhausting, and we didn't do anything meaningful with it because we didn't have the time."

How can an organisation like Bristol Ideas think meaningfully about its impact on the city? From the interviews with stakeholders, two main themes emerged – the importance of civic engagement and the role of culture as social infrastructure.

Civic engagement

One of Bristol Ideas' key aims has been to encourage civic engagement in the city. This has encompassed many of the organisation's activities, particularly those that have brought attention to stories about the city and that have encouraged learning about the city. For each of these projects, the research underpinning each project has been communicated widely, with much of it being published in a series of books and reports about the work of Bristol Ideas.

Creating wider civic engagement through enabling better debates in the city has been a key aim. Speaking about the work of Bristol Ideas, philosopher Julian Baggini argued that it is about creating a "vibrant and robust civic sphere... You have to have the capacity to talk and debate and negotiate, because you're negotiating difference."

Nick Pearce, Director of the Institute for Policy Research, University of Bath, argued for the importance of civic capital:

"For me it's... about democratic debate and deliberation between fellow citizens, about a space in which... you're not trying to reach a policy consensus or make decisions, but you are engaged in public deliberation in that more formative sense, people are coming together to learn, to start to build opinions, generate knowledge, listen to others doing so in a respectful non-coercive environment, doing so off social media, without any of the tendencies to polarisation that you get in that.

"My impression of your organisation from the start was great. A Festival of Ideas that never stopped. It made a bold statement – that Bristol had a year-round festival of literature and thought. It was a sign of a city that took itself seriously on a cultural and intellectual basis. And that's a very exciting thing... But it brings a challenge with it. How do we find a way to widen these amazing conversations so that they include the whole city? If we can't find a wider re-engagement with meaningful political conversation, we're just chatting to each other on the bus. It's just you and me and people like us."

Tom Morris
Artistic Director, Bristol Old Vic

"It's partly about a democratic will formation, but it's also about civic identity... if you're going to invoke the term capital, it is more about a civic capital which embodies a sense of Bristol, I think, but also contributes to the sense that Bristol is a city that has these kinds of debates and discussions, So, for me, some of that is about democracy and civiness really, more than social capital."

The ways in which Bristol Ideas has engaged with the position of mayor of Bristol over time is indicative of the organisation's approach to civic engagement.

In 2016, for the 800th anniversary of the establishment of the role of the Bristol mayor, Bristol Ideas delivered the Bristol 800 project (2016). This project not only celebrated the anniversary of the mayoralty, but also other

"I think in these times actually applauding people who foster political debate in a sensitive and rational fashion is something to aspire to because what has happened is that political debate has become a bit of a slanging match."

Lucy English
Academic, poet and writer



In 2016, to mark the 500th anniversary of the publication of Thomas More's 'Utopia', 15 poets were commissioned to write about utopias as part of Bristol Ideas' Bristol 800 programme. All 15 read their work at a special evening hosted by David Olusoga (pictured). © Jon Craig

significant anniversaries including looking at the time that Mary Shelley lived in Bristol and may have had the ideas for Frankenstein and the 500th anniversary of Thomas More's 'Utopia' and utopian thinking today.

Four years earlier in 2012, a referendum was held on whether Bristol should have a directly elected mayor to run the city, with 53 per cent of voters in favour. Each year since the election of the first mayor in 2012, Bristol Ideas has hosted a State of the City address at which the mayor is able to communicate directly with Bristol's citizens.

Since the creation of the role of city poet, in effect a poet laureate for Bristol, each State of the City Address has also seen a poem written and performed at the event, bringing together the political and the poetical to paint a picture of the state of the city.

In 2021, Bristol City Council voted in favour of holding another referendum on the position of mayor. In the run-up to the referendum in May 2022, Bristol Ideas organised a programme of events to promote learning and debate on the governance of the city. Through the project, Bristol Ideas provided an impartial platform to, "commission and publish articles, interviews and provide information on the referendum, the different models being debated, as well as the challenges the city faces, the opportunities ahead, and how best to meet these" (Bristol Ideas, 2022).

But civic engagement goes beyond just engaging with the civic institutions involved in the governance of the city. For Sian Norris, the founding director of the Bristol Women's Literature Festival, which was supported by Bristol Ideas:

“I think people have very set ideas about what civic engagement is... there’s just so many different ways that you can do it: having diverse panels, thinking about platforming voices that might not be getting heard in other ways, that’s a really important aspect of civic engagement because that in itself creates more diverse audiences. And I think just creating a culture within a city where ideas and literature and history are being discussed is a really positive thing. There’s always going to be communities that it’s hard to reach...”

“What is important is that we broaden out our understanding of what civic engagement looks like, so that it stops becoming this kind of tick box of like, oh you need to go to this place and work with children, and actually think about the value of conversations in a wider sense. It’s creating an ecosystem really rather than trying to do everything at once.”

For the centenary of the first council estates being built in the city, the Homes for Heroes 100 programme of projects demonstrates how Bristol Ideas has taken a broad approach to civic engagement. A range of community projects involving local residents was held on Bristol’s council estates alongside other events including a launch around the Addison Oak tree planted 100 years ago in 1919 by Minister for Health, Christopher Addison, to mark the beginning of work on the Sea Mills council housing estate. There was also a new poem by the city poet, 20 new essays, and the publication of a comic telling the story of council housing in Bristol (Bristol Ideas, 2019).

Culture as social infrastructure

Much of Bristol Ideas’ work has been about strengthening and creating new social infrastructure as well as using existing social infrastructure in the city. The programming of the different festivals and the use of many different methods to encourage people to come together and debate and learn, has been central to this. Each festival, for example, might encourage attendees to join

“Any kind of politics is for me the negotiation of differences and different interests because people never need or want exactly the same things. There’s always inherent competition or conflict. When politics is working well, we harmonise those and we rub along. That requires a civic atmosphere where people feel they can talk about things, they can be heard, and people will listen, and they will respond. I think it has declined in most developed democracies. Having Bristol Ideas doing that work is contributing to that in some way. Quantifying it is very, very difficult. But you’d rather have it than not, I think is the answer.”

Julian Baggini
Philosopher

a walk, have dinner together, join projects in communities, watch a film and then discuss the lessons of this for cities, economics, race relations, and inequality.

All of Bristol Ideas’ work is rooted in the Bristol Initiative. Springing from the same CBI report that led to the creation of Bristol Ideas, the Bristol Initiative was set up to address the social and economic issues of the city following a period of unrest across the UK. The initiative, “is a collection of 160 leading employers and community groups across a diverse range of sectors in Bristol and the wider region, who are committed to creating an economically, sustainable and culturally prosperous region” (Business West, ND).

Jaya Chakrabarti, President of Bristol Chamber of Commerce & Initiative, of which the Initiative is part, describes their work which brings together social capital and social infrastructure:

“... it brings together the churches, the voluntary sector, the arts, business, the city leadership, and the universities and colleges... To me, that group, which meets four times a year, is able to debate issues of concern about the city. And to look at some of the opportunities together, I’ve always thought it’s one of the most important groupings actually.”

As discussed earlier in this report, Bristol Ideas' early infrastructure projects were about creating spaces for learning and coming together. We the Curious provided spaces for the arts and sciences to be brought together, and The Harbourside Centre would have provided a similar space for music, dance and ideas. New symbolic public spaces – such as the work done on Speaker's Corner – and the public spaces created as part of the city centre and harbourside renewal have all contributed to the shared public realm of the city and provided spaces where people can meet together.

For part of the 1980s and 1990s, Bristol Ideas also helped organisations renew themselves in terms of their mission and funding. Work with Arnolfini and Watershed, for example, not only saw significant new investment but also the creation of spaces where diverse communities could meet and develop things, hence strengthening and adding to the cultural ecosystem of the city.

As well as the spaces that have been created as part of the work of Bristol Ideas, the events that the organisation has delivered, with their focus on creativity and culture, have also contributed to the social capital of the city. Tom Morris, then Director of the Bristol Old Vic, points to several areas where culture contributes to social capital:

“... the opportunity to be creative is, in my view, of huge benefit to every individual in society. It improves their employability. The Durham Report also showed an amazing range of surprising consequences from an increased likelihood to attend university to an increased likelihood to vote. The benefits are enormous and wide-ranging and include the kinds of community that tend to be built up by cultural activity, the relationships. At Bristol Old Vic we often talk about our activity in terms of creative collaboration between artists, public and the staff at the theatre. Artists and staff collaborate when you're planning how to put an event on; staff and public collaborate

when you're trying to get people into the building; artists and public collaborate in performance itself. And then very excitingly and most valuably, public and public collaborate on the bus, on the way home, in the street, in a round of applause, whatever it is. Festival of Ideas events create very similar patterns of cohesion and community which enrich the whole of Bristol.

“The Festival of Ideas also allowed Bristol to take itself seriously. The 'kudos benefit'... is a really important aspect of civic net gain. 'The civic pride' benefit, the way in which Banksy operates for Bristol, for example, the way in which Massive Attack operates for Bristol also applied to the Festival. Bristol Old Vic has a similar aim. We want people to say, 'Oh, yes, you're from that place where they have a Festival of Ideas. That's just the kind of brilliant thing that happens in Bristol.’”

For Nick Pearce, Director of the Institute for Policy Research, University of Bath, programming delivered by Bristol Ideas:

“... can have a benefit to people's sense of community, and... a sense of a benefit if they meet people at events and strike up friendships that might endure or make connections to others who are working on certain campaigns or in NGOs. So, some of the connective tissue that advocates of social capital argue for, you can definitely say are there.”

For Louise Mitchell, the Director of Bristol Music Trust, as well as the importance of trust, the work of Bristol ideas is “... more about joy. I think it's more about belonging. My view about why people go to live events is about belonging. I think it was said about cinema attendance that you go in as individuals and come out as a group. And I think that's even more true about the live music experience... There's a sort of bonding and a confidence that comes from that.”

Finally, those networks created and supported by Bristol Ideas themselves help to form the cultural infrastructure of the city. Since its outset, Bristol Ideas has helped to map, understand and connect the cultural assets across the city. This ecosystem of assets means that not only can the whole cultural infrastructure be greater than the sum of its parts in the city, but that there is also a degree of resilience and ability to absorb shocks.

Conclusion

There has long been an approach to evaluation that seeks to quantify the impact of organisations and cultural programmes and projects. Whilst Bristol Ideas has adopted this approach, particularly when required to do so as a condition of funding, the impact of an organisation looking to harness the assets of a place through cultural planning, needs a broader approach to understand its impact. This cannot just be measured in terms of the number of people who have attended events but rather how it affects the cultural, social and economic life of the city. The opportunity to reflect on the impact of cultural planning on the city as a whole is what may often be missed.

Conclusion

This report explores the role of Bristol Ideas in the cultural, social and economic life of the city over the past 30 years.

Bristol's public and private sectors were behind the conception of Bristol Ideas as they were looking to respond to the challenges faced by urban areas in the late 1980's and early 1990's such as crime, poverty and lack of opportunity. And, whilst some of these challenges may have changed over the last three decades, what is particularly noticeable is the longevity of Bristol Ideas, and the other organisations such as the Bristol Initiative which was founded around the same time. Change and ideas take time to develop and come to fruition and so the ability to plan, convene and deliver over the long-term are a key feature of Bristol Ideas.

Three key factors contributed to this longevity.

First, the ability to adapt. Bristol Ideas has transformed from an organisation focusing on developing landmark projects such as the planned Harbourside Centre, to one that focuses more on the provision of spaces in which ideas and differing viewpoints can be discussed and debated in a safe environment. This has required a certain resilience. When projects have not been successful, Bristol Ideas has adjusted and continued to deliver. It has seen a number of points where it was able to consider and adapt its ways of working and its relationship with the city of Bristol. Given the current funding challenges faced by cultural organisations and local government organisations, coupled with the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and cost-of-living crisis, the organisation is currently facing its most profound challenges.

Second, the importance of partnership working. Bristol Ideas' way of working has always been to remain small and work through other organisations. This approach has enabled strong partnerships to form across the city - long-term and others focussing on specific shorter-term projects. What they have in common is their involvement of a wide range of different partners. Bristol Ideas' approach has been to focus on cultural planning, but this hasn't meant just working with cultural organisations in the city to put on cultural events. Many businesses have supported and been involved in the work of Bristol Ideas which points to the importance of deep and lasting partnerships between the public and private sector. The partnerships go beyond the public and private sector to involve anyone with an interest in the city of Bristol. 'Enthusiasms' are a core element to the work of Bristol Ideas.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, is the relationship that Bristol Ideas has with the city of Bristol. As well as being intertwined with the cultural, social and economic life of the city, Bristol Ideas draws on the stories of the city for its inspiration. Whilst some of its projects may focus on significant events from the city's past, these are seen as a starting point for discussions of the city's future, and as meeting grounds for different viewpoints and changing perspectives to be discussed. In its conception, Bristol Ideas helped communities to navigate around the physical city, and has since helped steer the ideas that have contributed to its past, formed its present and that will shape its future.



Gordon Brown speaking at the University of Bristol about his political career and the publication of his autobiography (2017). © Jon Craig

Appendix

As part of this research Andrew Kelly interviewed a number of Bristol Ideas' stakeholders. The interviews were all recorded and transcribed, and the majority will be made available for further research.

None of the interviewees are responsible for the findings in this report. We would like to take this opportunity to thank the following for participating in the interview process.

Julian Baggini	Public philosopher, writer and commentator, chair and speaker at many events.
Lynn Barlow	University of the West of England; Co-Chair of One City Culture Board.
Alison Bevan	Director Royal West of England Academy. Collaborated on various exhibitions and events since 2013 with more planned for 2024-2027.
Franco Bianchini	Long-standing academic and cultural planning consultant.
Martin Boddy	University of the West of England. Former Bristol Ideas Board Member.
Eugene Byrne	Local journalist and historian. Co-worked on many programmes including the publication of graphic novel style books on Brunel, Bristol, Darwin, and council housing.
Jaya Chakrabarti	President, Bristol Chamber of Commerce and Initiative; collaborator on various projects.
Liz Chege	Director, Africa in Motion; collaborator on some Bristol Ideas projects.
Simon Cook	Former Councillor, Leader and Lord Mayor, Bristol City Council. Long-standing chair of Bristol Ideas.
Mark Cosgrove	Director of Cinemas, Watershed; long-time collaborator on many projects and festivals.
Diane Coyle	Bennett Institute for Public Policy, Cambridge. Co-Director, Economics Festival.
Geoff Crocker	Collaborator on Basic Income project and attendee at events.
James Durie	Business West. Member of the Bristol Ideas Board.
Lucy English	Co-Director, Lyra Poetry Festival. Collaborator.
George Ferguson	Former Mayor of Bristol.
Duncan Fraser	CEO, The Harbourside Centre.
Lia Ghilardi	Long-standing cultural planning consultant.
Paul Gough	Vice-Chancellor, Bournemouth University; frequent collaborator with Bristol Ideas.
Sheila Hannon	Director, Show of Strength; frequent collaborator.
Liz Harkman	Former Director, Encounters and Bristol Festivals.
Emma Harvey	Director, Trinity Centre; collaborated with Bristol Ideas on Mayoral Referendum work in 2022.
Sheila Healy	Former Chair, Arts Council England South West SW; current Vice-Chair of Bristol Ideas.
Margaret Heffernan	Writer and Bristol Ideas collaborator; former Board Member.
Stephen Hilton	Director, Bristol Global City Futures; former Director of Futures, Bristol City Council; supporter of Bristol Ideas projects.
Helen Holland	Current Cabinet Member for Health and Social Care at Bristol City Council. Worked for many years as a Councillor, Bristol Ideas Board member, and 2008 Capital of Culture contributor.
Jeremy Howe	Worked with Bristol Ideas on Encounters when at BBC Bristol.

Pete Insole and Ruth Myers	Directors, Know Your Place; collaborators on Bristol Ideas projects in 2019, 2021 and 2023.
Luke Jerram	Artist. Collaborator in 2015 and 2023.
Gavin Kelly	Chair, Resolution Foundation; collaborator on events. Resolution Foundation has donated funds to Bristol Ideas.
Kami Lamakan	Sometime collaborator, runs various agencies, and event attendee.
Charles Landry	Comedia. Long-standing consultant/thinker and writer on cultural policy; influential in Bristol Ideas since its conception including working on a project on openness and cities.
Liz Lane	Composer. Collaborator on projects including the First World War Centenary (2014), ACE 70th (2016) and cinema 100 (2021).
Louise Mitchell	Director, Bristol Beacon.
Tom Morris	Artistic Director, Bristol Old Vic.
Sian Norris	Writer and journalist; Bristol Ideas speaker and chair. Bristol Ideas is a partner in her Bristol Women's Literature Festival.
Rich Pancost	Cabot Institute, University of Bristol. Long-standing collaborator on sustainability and environmental work.
Nick Pearce	Director, Institute for Policy Research, University of Bath; collaborator with Bristol Ideas. Speaker and co-organiser of annual UBI conference.
Dick Penny	Former CEO, Watershed; long-standing partner with Bristol Ideas work.
Mike Rawlinson	Director, City Id; collaborator with Bristol Ideas on legible city project.
Clare Reddington	CEO, Watershed; long-standing relationship with Bristol Ideas.
Marvin Rees	Mayor of Bristol.
Suzanne Rolt	Current Chair, Bristol Ideas, long-standing Board Director, former Director of St Georges, now Director at Quartet.
John Savage	Business West; Bristol Ideas Board Member. Co-founder of Bristol Ideas and long-standing collaborator.
Colin Skellett	Chair, Wessex Water; business sponsor of projects. Chair, Business West; a core business partner.
Annabel Smith	Centre for Progressive Policy. Formerly at the Bristol Mayor's Office. Co-worked on city poet project/policy matters/ general links with the Mayor's Office.
Paul Smith	Former Councillor and Cabinet Member, Bristol City Council. Involved as a councillor in many projects - most notably events marking 100 years of council estates in 2019.
Donna Speed	CEO, We the Curious - the first major project of Bristol Ideas.
David Sproxton	Co-founder, Aardman; collaborated on various projects, most notably Encounters.
Judith Squires	Current acting Vice-Chancellor, University of Bristol; former Chair of Bristol Ideas, and current Board Member.
James Taljaard	Commercial Manager, Watershed; deals with commercial partnerships between Bristol Ideas and Watershed. Formerly at Arts & Business which gave numerous awards to Bristol Ideas.
Estella Tincknell	Lecturer, University of the West of England, and former Cabinet Member for Culture, Bristol. Former Board Director of Bristol Ideas.
Rich Warren	Current Director, Encounters Festival.
Savita Wilmott	Director, The Natural History Consortium; frequent collaborator.
Stephen Wray	Former Director of Culture, Bristol City Council.
Patrick Wright	Writer; influential in Bristol Ideas thinking.

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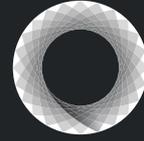
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