



Restorative Bristol (UK) – from Rising Star to Lessons Learned

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Abstract

Aim: This article aims to show how Bristol set out to become a Restorative City, and initially succeeded to a considerable extent. However, external events, exacerbated by internal structural failings, conspired against this.

Methodology: It is a narrative account, including a history of events, followed by reflections.

Findings: There was a lot of initial enthusiasm, constructive energy and planning, but circumstances provided difficulties, and there was not enough thought given to succession planning of Board members.

Value: These findings should be helpful to other cities, to help them on their path towards becoming Restorative Cities. The article contains pointers towards specific actions needed.

Keywords: values, services, membership, setbacks

Introduction

This article is based on the section about Bristol in the European Forum for Restorative Justice *A journey around restorative cities in the world: a travel guide* (EFRJ, 2023). The general introduction and principles of restorative cities are

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covered in other articles. Some sections of this article have been updated but it is basically a historical account of the ways in which Bristol worked towards becoming a restorative city, and an analysis of the factors causing its loss of momentum, and demise.

Social, economic and political context

Bristol is the largest city in the South West of England, with a population of 466,000. It is an important regional centre, as shown by being one of the UK's eleven 'Core Cities' (an alliance of large regional cities) 2026. It has more children under 16 than people of pensionable age. 16% of the population belong to a black or minoritised ethnic group (including African, Caribbean, Somali, Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Chinese, Arab, Mixed Race).

Bristol's economy is built on creative media, technology, electronics and aerospace engineering industries. It has a reputation for new initiatives, which draws young creative people and entrepreneurs to the city.

Bristol is very hilly, leading to an informal segregation of neighbourhoods, with some very wealthy areas with a village atmosphere and several poverty-stricken areas. The latter may be found in some inner-city districts but mostly in large council housing estates, built between the two world wars or in the 1960s, when there was a big expansion of council house building on the edges of the city. These areas have many social problems and few resources, and give rise to much conflict and crime.

Restorative justice: legal and institutional context

In the UK, responsibility for restorative justice (RJ) rests with the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) (for England and Wales), the Scottish Government (for Scotland) and the Northern Ireland Executive, and there are differences in approach in the three jurisdictions.

In England and Wales, restorative justice (RJ) services have been funded in the main by Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs) and the three directly elected mayors with PCC responsibilities. This may change due to the abolition of these elected posts, but liaison with the police will continue in much the same way. The MoJ devolves funding for some (not all) victims services to local police departments via an annual grant, subject to a grant agreement. Currently there are no requirements to fund RJ, however it was previously an expectation that this

would be an element of provision, and it is a common but not universal feature of the services provided. Services may be provided through the commissioning of an external provider or in house, most commonly the former.

In Bristol's case Avon and Somerset police service currently commissions Restorative Approaches Avon and Somerset (part of Resolve West, formerly Bristol Mediation).

The draft Revised Victims Code (2020) refers to restorative justice, specifically in two of the 12 rights. Rights 3.4 and 3.5 refer to a right to information about RJ and how to access local RJ services if available. In some areas, victims of certain crime types, such as domestic abuse and sexual violence, may experience difficulties in accessing RJ, due to local views on suitability, or lack of services, or lack of communication between agencies.

Funding and policy for RJ services for those organisations working with offenders are less well developed. However, youth offending teams (YOTs), overseen by the Youth Justice Board for England and Wales (2026), have a duty to abide by the Victims Code, including its provisions regarding RJ. This is widely interpreted as a duty to provide RJ, where the offender is under 18. YOTs are the responsibility of upper tier local authorities, i.e., those with responsibility for education and social services.

In Scotland, the Scottish Government put in place a national action plan (Scottish Government, 2019) with the aim of ensuring that services should be widely available across Scotland by 2023.

In Northern Ireland (NI), the provision of RJ where the offender is under 18 is the responsibility of the Youth Justice Agency (2026). The Justice Act (Northern Ireland) 2002 formalised RJ approaches by including youth conferences in the youth justice system as the main option. This is the only place where RJ is the mainstream option.

For adults in Northern Ireland, a new Adult Restorative Justice Practice Standards and Accreditation Framework was launched in October 2025, encouraging RJ for adults and providing opportunities for community providers to achieve accreditation (NI Department of Justice, 2026).

The Restorative Justice Council (RJC) was established in 2001 as the independent third sector membership body for the field of restorative practice covering England, Wales, and Northern Ireland. The RJC's role is to advocate for the importance of restorative justice and set clear standards for restorative practice. It ensures quality and supports those in the field to build on their capacity, professional knowledge, and practice skills. It has a registration scheme, which provides robust quality assurance for organisations and individual practitioners. However, the use of the scheme is not mandatory and is reliant on the good will of commissioners and service providers (RJC, 2026).

The Restorative Justice All-Party Parliamentary Group was set up in April 2021, with the following aims:

- To examine the use of restorative justice principles within the UK justice system and beyond
- To raise the profile of restorative justice principles within Parliament
- To provide opportunities for policy discussion and consultation

It published a report of its Inaugural Inquiry into Restorative Practices in 2021/2022, which included nine recommendations about further action the Government needed to take in respect of the provision of RJ in England and Wales. The RJAPPG was restarted in July 2024 following the General Election, and during the following year produced four further reports on: raising standards; universal access to RJ; RJ in education, health and social care; evidence and evaluation (Restorative Justice All-Party Parliamentary Group 2026).

Recently the Ministry of Justice set up a department called Re: Hub (short for Restorative Practice Hub). It has a national remit to check all serious cases for risk, and includes a ‘presumption of unsuitability’ for certain cases, such as domestic abuse, rape and sexual abuse against children, while allowing for exceptional circumstances in which services can put forward cases in these categories but must provide evidence. This is the first time such restrictions have been introduced in England & Wales, and they are being strongly challenged by most RJ services and organisations, who fear this will lead to a diminution of RJ practice with serious cases (Why-me?, 2026).

Support from the State

Support from the national government waxes and wanes according to the political climate. There was a period of three years (2013-2016) when the MoJ (Ministry of Justice) initially made an indicative allocation for RJ in the local victims’ services grants to Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs). However, this was advisory rather than mandatory, and discontinued after 2016. The level of funding for RJ from this source has been determined locally by PCCs. This results in a ‘postcode lottery’ in which provision of restorative justice depends on where people live. In the Avon and Somerset PCC / Police area, which includes Bristol, there has been a supportive PCC, who has been happy to fund the work of RAAS (see above) (Find your PCC, 2026). Regarding funding for restorative cities, so far there has been no state support. Local support has come from the City Council and from voluntary charitable organisations. The

Restorative Justice Council has a registration scheme for service providers, training providers and practitioners. Resolve West is the only organisation in the Bristol area to be registered with the RJC, they hold the Restorative Service Quality Service Mark (RQSM) accreditation.

Why and how did Bristol become a restorative city?

In late 2007, Bristol City Council heard about Hull being a restorative city and held a high-profile conference about making Bristol a Restorative City. However, although many restorative initiatives already existed in the city, some of 20 years' standing, most of them were not included in the conference - speakers came from restorative initiatives in other parts of the UK. So a small group gathered existing practitioners and in 2010 began meeting in workshops of about 30 participants, helped with slender resources from a local NGO (non-governmental organisation). The objectives were to:

- identify common underlying principles of restorative process;
- bring people together to be inspired by what they were all doing;
- create an ongoing restorative justice forum for Bristol, to discuss issues;
- identify a common vision and find more ways to work together collaboratively;
- work out how to make Bristol a 'Restorative City'.

The group ran several workshops and mini-conferences between 2010 and 2012, exploring restorative themes and working collaboratively. Examples were: restorative justice in prisons, restorative practice in schools, police involvement in restorative justice, mediation with homeless people, restorative approaches with young people, hate crime, and more. However, from April 2014 financial cuts to many national and local services led to the demise of these workshops (Liebmann, 2019).

The group had begun to build links with Bristol City Council, and in August 2012 met with senior professionals, who wanted to mainstream restorative working. The professionals set up the Restorative Bristol Board to include heads of department of Bristol City Council, as well as statutory agencies, police, criminal justice agencies, voluntary organisations and independent members, including a few RJ practitioners. The Board met every six weeks. A senior probation officer compiled a report of all the RJ activity in the city, and a large conference launched Restorative Bristol officially in December 2012, providing a showcase for all the projects. In 2013, restorative work continued to gain momentum

across the city. A Project Officer was appointed by the Board (funded by the City Council) for one year to help develop a strategy for future development of services. The 'strapline' adopted for Restorative Bristol was 'Working together to resolve conflict and repair harm'. A website was set up and a membership scheme initiated. Further conferences took place, although with increasing financial pressures, they became harder to arrange. The website was taken down post-Covid, so the following references can no longer be accessed.

At the heart of Restorative Bristol was a clear set of values. These values were listed on its website in 2016 as follows:

- *Organisations*: We want to encourage the effective use of restorative approaches amongst staff and employees across all sectors.
- *People Harmed Through Conflict*: Restorative Bristol will place the victims of crime at the heart of any restorative approach.
- *Perpetrators*: Although the victim of crime should be at the very forefront of restorative justice, a restorative process can also meet the needs of the offender.
- *Communities*: By involving a diverse range of communities in Restorative Bristol, we will be better placed to develop solutions at a community level.
- *Families and schools*: Restorative Bristol is embedding restorative approaches in schools, parenting and tackling conflict within the home.
- *Training*: Restorative Bristol will work to make more training opportunities open to staff, volunteers and parents.
- *Innovation*: We want to make Bristol the national leader for restorative approaches and become a city that sets the standard for their uses.

Restorative practices, projects and services

In 2014 Restorative Bristol published a report entitled 'Restorative Bristol Report: Restorative Bristol One Year On'. This included its aims and strategy, and short pieces about the existing services in Bristol. The then chair wrote: 'There is an energy and commitment to restorative approaches in Bristol with many partners actively offering restorative approaches to repair harm and resolve conflict. Restorative approaches have built up a momentum in the city and are here to stay'.

Developments continued to take place until Brexit and Covid-19 led to many of the leaders in the City Council losing their posts (see below), and meetings of the board became less frequent and less well attended. However, many individual services managed to continue operating.

Restorative projects and services in Bristol in 2021 were:

- Resolve West (formerly Bristol Mediation), established in 1987, providing a range of conflict resolution tools to neighbours/communities in dispute in Bristol and the surrounding areas, using a team of over 40 volunteer mediators and two casework staff, dealing with over 150 cases per year (Resolve West, 2026).
- Restorative Approaches Avon & Somerset (RAAS), part of Resolve West, offering restorative approaches including conferencing, shuttle and restorative letters, for criminal justice (including sexually harmful behaviour and domestic abuse) and some school cases. It had 34 volunteers (including 17 trained for complex and sensitive cases) and three managers. In 2020-21 the service received 122 referrals, including 22 complex and sensitive cases (e.g. historic sexual abuse, serious violence, etc).
- The Probation Service and police referred cases to RAAS.
- Bristol Youth Offending Team (now Bristol Youth Justice Service, 2026), working with offenders between the ages of 10 and 17, encouraging them to take responsibility for the harm they have caused their victims, and to make reparation to them.
- Bristol Reparation Service, run by Catch 22, a national charity working in Bristol with Bristol Youth Offending Team, providing reparation projects - practical community service projects to make amends, such as cleaning up graffiti, serving teas in elderly persons' homes, etc.
- Bristol Hate Crime and Discrimination Services (2026), a joint venture between Resolve West, SARI (Stand Against Racism & Inequality), Off the Record LGBTQ+ (gender & sexuality), Brandon Trust (disability), Bristol Mind (mental health) and Bristol Law Centre, providing a range of restorative interventions.
- RESTORE, part of the Forgiveness Project, working with offenders at Eastwood Park women's prison (2026).
- Shirehampton Primary School, run completely on restorative practices.
- Resolution at Work, providing workplace mediation services, and running workshops for organisations, helping them to resolve disputes and improve working relationships.
- Several large public sector organisations had their own in-house workplace mediation services.
- Salaam Shalom brought Muslims and Jews together in a variety of ways, such as radio work, art exhibitions and workshops, plays and conflict resolution work in schools.

- Restorative Justice Week (November) provided an annual opportunity to gather and promote a variety of restorative projects, such as films, workshops, talks and school conferences.

The projects/services described above show how different initiatives can come together to show examples of restorative work in practice. However, Restorative Bristol wanted to go much further in developing a restorative approach for all individuals and organisations in the city. Restorative Bristol's Strategy, developed in 2014, included the following (with examples of achievements in brackets):

- Develop a range of communication tools to promote our efforts, good practice and learning. (The Local Authority Human Resources department promoted a shift from punitive to restorative approaches for employee issues).
- Develop a standard for organisations and individuals to meet to become part of Restorative Bristol. (See Membership below).
- Identify training needs, developing and implementing a training package to meet these needs across the diverse population within Bristol. (The Learning and Development Adviser developed a training package 'Navigating Conflict – A Restorative Approach' and delivered this to 150 Council staff)
- Make restorative approaches available to everyone, with a skilled and diverse workforce across the city. (Restorative Justice Week – shopping centre information stall).
- Work collaboratively with key partners in different organisations, adopting a multi-agency approach to strengthen the use of restorative approaches across the city.
- Continue to develop innovative ways of using restorative approaches in Bristol with special emphasis on hate crime, substance misuse, homelessness and workplace tension, animal cruelty, anti-social behaviour and neighbourhood disputes.

Some projects worked on in 2016 included:

- A restorative intergenerational service for young and older people;
- A restorative justice service for young victims of sexual abuse to access;
- Restorative approaches in a supported housing setting for young people;
- Road sharing - a restorative approach, providing small groups enabling dialogue between different road users.

Governance model

Restorative Bristol was governed by the Restorative Bristol Board (RBB).

The aims of the RBB were to:

- Provide strategic leadership and direction to partners in delivering a Restorative Bristol Strategy;
- Champion restorative approaches and methodologies and increase awareness across the community;
- Ensure there were clear standards for the delivery of restorative approaches and that practitioners were trained to agreed standards;
- Ensure effective communication mechanisms were in place to promote restorative approaches, best practice and learning tools, and to celebrate achievements across the city;
- Maximise the use of restorative approaches across the city and in different settings (e.g. criminal and civil justice, neighbourhoods, schools, workplaces and families);
- Ensure restorative approaches were only used where appropriate.

The RBB met regularly, usually once every three months. It met more often at the beginning, to establish the groundwork, and not at all during Covid-19 times.

Membership

Restorative Bristol was open to any organisation providing a restorative service in Bristol (application criteria are listed below). Applications were welcomed from organisations who provided some restorative approaches, for example a service within a large organisation; and from organisations which had completely adopted a restorative culture across all services. Restorative Bristol gave members the opportunity to showcase their work and develop networks with other restorative providers across the city.

Prospective members were asked to submit a completed application that met the Restorative Bristol standard in line with its core principles, which were:

- Facilitating dialogue between all those affected by the wrongdoing or conflict;
- Encouraging those responsible for the harm done to become accountable for their actions and responsible for putting right the wrong;
- Ensuring that all those involved or affected were given the opportunity to share their story, their feelings and their needs;
- Involving everyone affected in finding mutually acceptable ways forward;

- Repairing the harm caused by any behaviour that had a negative impact on others;
- Repairing, or at times, building relationships between those affected.

Prospective members filled in a form providing evidence and examples to show that they fulfilled the six principles above. Membership was free of charge. These forms then came to a meeting of the Restorative Bristol Board, which decided whether the principles had been fulfilled. They sometimes asked for more detail or further examples. A sub-committee was sometimes appointed to read the details and make recommendations.

In May 2016 the RBB members represented the following organisations and professional roles:

- Housing Solutions & Crime Reduction, Bristol City Council
- Learning & Development Adviser
- Deputy Chief Probation Officer, Avon & Somerset Probation
- Stand Against Racism & Inequality (SARI)
- Bristol Mediation (now Resolve West)
- Independent Practitioner
- Avon Fire and Rescue Service
- Voluntary Community Sector (VCS) Advocate
- Mediation at Work
- Bristol Lighthouse Victim and Witness Care, Avon and Somerset Constabulary
- Senior Lecturer in Criminology, University of the West of England.

Collaborations with other restorative cities/networks

Bristol had some correspondence with Brighton, which adopted a similar model, namely, gathering together existing restorative projects under a ‘restorative practice umbrella’.

One member of the RBB (i.e. the author of this article) was on the European Forum for Restorative Justice Working Group on Restorative Cities, and also had some informal contact with Canberra (Australia) as a Restorative City.

What went wrong?

Unfortunately, much of the strategy remained incomplete. Factors affecting these plans include Brexit in 2016 (resulting in a shortage of workers from

European countries - many professionals decided to go home or were no longer admitted to the UK), then the UK government policy of cut-backs for local authorities (resulting in redundancies and redistribution of local authority tasks) and Covid-19. For example, with Covid-19, the Restorative Bristol City Council worker's time was first halved and then fragmented amongst many other responsibilities. Many workers were furloughed (that is, they received government pay for not going to work). Almost everyone still working was doing so from home. All organisations had to invest in huge amounts of new equipment, training courses and developing ways of carrying on their work via email, Zoom, Microsoft Teams, etc. The lack of staff and finance meant there was no time for 'extras', most organisations could not even fulfil their basic legal obligations. Many people suffered from depression, anxiety and other mental health conditions. Many people also caught Covid-19 or were dealing with elderly relations in hospital and dying. Most organisations in Bristol doing restorative work managed to carry on client work at a lower level using online applications, but coordination and meetings of professionals were beyond the limits of people's energy. Meetings of the Restorative Bristol Board ceased.

The first meeting of the Restorative Bristol Board post-Covid-19 took place in March 2022. The main decision was to take steps to achieve more engagement and 'political buy-in' by Bristol City Council, reminding them of the benefits of restorative approaches. There was also a recognition of the need to re-map all the organisations in Bristol using restorative approaches, perhaps through a student project.

Missing actors

When the Restorative Bristol Board came into being, it consisted mainly of heads of departments from the City Council and heads of voluntary organisations (NGOs). The Board took over the promotion of restorative practices from the informal group that had done the work up till then. Only one or two independent practitioners were allowed on the Board, because of concerns at the Board becoming too unwieldy. Probably more of these should have been included, as they were champions of restorative practices, and might have helped carry Restorative Bristol through the difficult times, whereas (because of the difficulties already mentioned) many heads of department changed roles and new RBB members were not always well-versed in restorative principles (Liebmann, 2016).

Originally the Restorative Bristol Board was chaired by the Executive Director for Children's Services, who was keen to drive the Restorative City vision for Bristol. However, the handover to his successor was to a lower position in

the hierarchy, leading to a smaller influence across the local authority. The lack of a leader in a sufficiently senior position was quite detrimental. More thought needed to be given to succession planning.

What results were achieved?

Within Bristol many restorative services were created and many of them kept going, with the encouragement of others, e.g. Resolve West, Youth Offending Team, Bristol Reparation Service, Bristol Hate Crime and Discrimination Service. Some of them had been in existence for several years, coming together to form Restorative Bristol, while others started through the encouragement of Restorative Bristol.

The project 'Road Sharing - a Restorative Approach' showed how a small-scale initiative could achieve understanding between different road users (see above).

The main factors that favoured these results were regular funding to ongoing services and also using special grants to create additional small-scale projects (e.g. the Road Sharing project).

Lessons learned for future implementers

The main lessons from Restorative Bristol for future implementers are:

- Buy-in (with budgets) at a high enough level to have impact across the city;
- A leader from a sufficiently high enough position in the local authority, who is well-versed in restorative approaches and can articulate the benefits of the model, as Chair of the Board;
- Multi-agency approach;
- Nurturing champions and enthusiasts;
- Inclusion of practitioners;
- Involvement of organisations as members;
- Collaboration with other cities;
- Effective succession planning if the leadership changes hands;
- A robust and resilient connection between the vision and a strategic plan.

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