



Commons

At the heart of The Bristol Approach is the idea of the ‘commons’.

The Bristol Approach stems from a belief that the city is a place of abundance where so many resources, skills, tools and knowledge already exist. Instead of reinventing the wheel, the Approach asks:

- how can we work together to use what’s already in our cities
- how can we connect the right people to create new resources that will address what’s missing?
- how can we ensure new technologies, tools and systems work for the common good?

Wikipedia is an example of a successful digital commons - created, used and maintained by many people. The resource is open and shared but there is a collective agreement about how it should be used, to ensure no one uses it for malicious purposes or in ways that would be damaging to others.

Our collaborators Ideas for Change shared the following story from Bologna, Italy, which is useful to illustrate the commons in action. A group of people tried to donate benches to their local park to improve the environment but the local council wouldn’t allow people to add permanent objects or structures.

Although it would’ve cost the council much more to source and install their own benches, their rules meant they couldn’t accept this free and useful offer from enthusiastic citizens. In this example there is the potential for a ‘commons’ but it’s not functioning properly. How can citizens and decision-making organisations like local councils work together to avoid situations like this and create opportunities for people to contribute to the common good?

Some useful commons principles:

Abundance = by working together and drawing on the resources and assets that already exist we can create more ‘abundance’ for the city. Forming a ‘commons’ is about bridging gaps, inviting people in and making more opportunities together.

Rewards = everyone will have a different motivation for taking part in and contributing to the ‘commons’. What do people want or expect in return? A range of incentives and rewards will be needed throughout the process; these can range from knowing you’ve made a positive difference to your community to free training or support. Relating the incentives to the issue and shared goal is often most effective.

‘low floor/high ceiling’ (or accessibility) = make sure there are no barriers to taking part (‘a low floor’) but that everyone can be challenged to the best of their abilities (‘a high ceiling’). Ask yourself how you can ensure that everyone can access the ideas and opportunities created within your ‘commons’.

‘Sharing skills’ (or actionability) = a broad range of skills are needed to create a ‘commons’. Do you know people that can help to teach skills or transfer knowledge and who will encourage others to learn new things?



Governance = it is essential to find open, collaborative and adaptable ways to manage the 'commons':

- What are you comfortable contributing?
- How will we use the resources that are created?
- What will happen if someone abuses the 'commons'?

Technology can aid this management process but it should never function alone without face-to-face community decision making.

1/9/90 'power-rule' = in a large collaborative digital venture only a small number of users actively contribute - just 1%!

After that, only 9% will edit or tinker with what's been produced, while 90% will observe or use what's been made. What's in it for each user group? Consider how you can support the 1% to create content that matters, the 9% to tinker with integrity, and the 90% to stay interested.

