

City Twinning and Partnership Working in a Changing World

Regional conference April 29th 2026

City Hall, College Green, Bristol BS1 5TR

Organised by Bristol International Twinning Association

The conference opened with a welcome from the Leader of Bristol City Council, Cllr. Tony Dyer, who emphasised the importance of these citizens' meetings, Bristol's links with Hannover and Bordeaux having been started in an era of mistrust after the Second World War, and these city partnerships now being more important than ever in today's world of conflict. He praised the work of volunteers in particular, working together to understand each other's cultures and languages.

The first keynote speaker was Heather Law, International Officer at Birmingham City Council, her theme being 'Young Women into Leadership'. After an introduction on Birmingham's city partnerships, Heather described the 'You WIL' project, started in Chicago 6 years ago, which has developed into an international endeavour. Women in leading positions are invited to speak, there are online meetings, research, activities, handbooks, led by a multinational team, all aimed at supporting young women in their ambition to make their mark in their field. More details can be seen in [Heather's PPT](#) presentation, which was sent to delegates after the conference.

The afternoon session opened with an address by Bristol's Lord Mayor, Cllr. Henry Michallat, in which he told delegates of his recent visits to Guangzhou and Bordeaux, both partner cities of Bristol. He praised the work of the City Council office and that of the volunteers who work with him and with the office.

The second keynote speaker was Dr Carl Wright, Chair of the European Local Links group, speaking about 'New Agendas for City Partnerships'. He felt that these partnerships had developed greatly between the end of the Second World War and the 2020s. Traditional twinning arrangements had evolved into modern output-based strategic partnerships, with a focus on policy and government, with outcomes which needed to be measurable, eg on sustainability. There are now innovative exchange models, and the new Erasmus+ arrangements should help UK groups to encourage young people in general to set up links which are not only academic. More details can be seen in [Carl's PPT](#) presentation, which was also sent to delegates after the conference.

The other parts of the day were devoted to discussions by the delegates in groups, focussing on three topics, and below is a summary of what emerged from the groups as a whole.

*Items added from my own notes

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Attracting young people into city partnership working

- Agreed that this is a problem faced by most partnerships, not least because of safeguarding issues, but learning packs and twinning pledge (Bristol) can increase teacher/school links; encourage school to school links, email exchanges, use the new international curriculum
- Also possible to engage with 18+ year olds to avoid these safeguarding issues and see young people as ambassadors who can do outreach activities eg in schools; youth councils also useful where they exist
- Unrealistic to expect young people to join organising committee.... But could use unemployed young people as volunteers, may help their CVs
- Involve young people in music/arts/Harbour festivals etc.
- International students are key, example of international peace camp in Cheltenham
- Use digital means to connect towns and cities, a sort of modern penpal approach; use Instagram, possibly TikTok.
- UK students/young professionals looking for “international” experience on CVs; also university to university links, scholarships
- Ethnographic work on how young people behave in towns and cities around the world; encourage sense of identity and belonging
- Help from worldwide events, such as World Cups, may encourage lifelong motivation for international affairs.
- Free membership for under-25s
- Offer to run an international day at local schools*
- Tap in to what partner towns do for young people to engage them eg environmental projects*

Publicity/Social Media

- This will vary according to size and capacity of association, also its purpose/audience
- All associations have a website, needs to be kept up to date, most have a leaflet/posters, do networking, presentations, but media access difficult
- Have publicity stands at events with leaflets/info – eg Bath Twinning are given a stall at the city’s Christmas market*
- Portsmouth has produced a printed QR code that takes people to the website and on there are also links to Facebook and Instagram.
- Social media: platforms tend to be generational - Facebook older, Instagram younger and visual, LinkedIn professional, TikTok young, perhaps not appropriate
- Need to post on regular basis – weekly? Have a social media committee.
- Use AI to create a language ‘brand’?
- WhatsApp used for committee and wider group participation
- Use of hashtags # and making of reels, which can appear on Facebook and Instagram, and spread information to others

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- If work colleagues are heavily engaged on social media, get them to add your association as a collaborator
- Use social media to plug events, but also use # or @ invite other similar groups along
- Set up open evenings
- Approach local 6th form colleges to find students who could help create content to give them work experience & something to go on their CV. Contributor of this suggestion (young Ukrainian man) pointed out that there are lots of young folk looking for work who might be glad of this.*

Fundraising and Sponsorship

- Different sizes of communities and associations mean financial needs vary
- Different types of links – eg fundraising for countries of the global south as opposed to fundraising for events/exchanges in Europe
- Some associations have relationships with specific foundations which help them achieve their aims eg Bristol-Beira
- Others have links to community funds eg Portsmouth/Isle of Wight Community Fund, Bristol-Bordeaux with Quartet Community Foundation, also Bristol's Community of Purpose
- Most also raise funds from grassroots events eg youth organisations fundraising, beetle drives, social events eg wine tasting, Karneval
- Digital platforms for specific events e.g. 80th anniversary, Just Giving or GoFundMe
- Organisations such as the British German Association and European Local Links can be helpful in providing contacts
- Bath mayoralty funds foreign exchanges
- Corporate Sponsorship is sometimes available from companies with links to the country concerned, for specific projects
- Corporate responsibility funds to support specific events – eg Brittany Ferries, COOK*
- Grants, eg EU community grant may be possible, also match funding – partner towns in a position to access EU funding so 'buddy up' with them on a project*
- Erasmus+ will be available in UK from 2027, applications from November 2026, this time not only for academic exchanges, but youth exchanges more generally
- Ask partner towns to tag you when they are running/involved in community events*
- Horizon funding*
- Join other local groups to federate and share resources – can sometimes help with cost sharing on trips (Devon & Somerset Twinning Circle)*
- Use support of partner towns to approach their local tourist industry – they want your business*

Ann Kennard

8.05.2026

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