

A response to:

Vibrant urban villages
A Birmingham Green Paper

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This is a response by Richard Burden, MP for Birmingham Northfield, to the Birmingham City Council's Green Paper on neighbourhood working called 'Vibrant urban villages' published in 2007.

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Abbreviations and acronyms

AWM	Advantage West Midlands
BCC	Birmingham City Council
b:cen	Birmingham Community Empowerment Network
BSP	Birmingham Strategic Partnership (Be Birmingham)
CBHO	Community Based Housing Organisation
CNSW	Community Network South West
COGA	Conditions of grant aid
CSP	Constituency Strategic Partnership
CTG	Constituency Tenant Group
LAA	Local Area Agreement
LILA	Local involvement, local action
LSC	Learning and Skills Council
MGR	MG Rover
NDC	New Deal for Communities
NEETS	Not in employment, education or training
NWLC	Northfield with Local Control
RCAT	Rover Community Action Trust
SOA	Super Output Area
VCS	Voluntary and Community Sector

1 Introduction

- 1.1. I welcome the opportunity to respond to 'Vibrant urban villages', the Birmingham Green Paper on neighbourhood working. Although this response takes up a number of the questions listed at the back of the consultation document, it does not follow either the order or format of those questions. I hope that does not present too many problems for those compiling the analysis of responses.
- 1.2. One issue on which I would appreciate clarification by way of introduction is the ultimate 'ownership' of the Green Paper, to whom responses like this one are to be addressed and where the final decisions on the Green Paper are to be made. The document contains the logos of both Birmingham City Council (BCC) and the Birmingham Strategic Partnership (BSP) – now called 'Be Birmingham' – and there are three forewords to the document. All three come from senior Councillors. Two are writing in their capacities on the Council itself, whilst one is also writing on behalf of the BSP, a partnership body representing a number of different and independent organisations. Although BCC chairs the BSP and understandably plays a leadership role in it, the fact remains that it is one (albeit a highly significant one) of several partners in the BSP. My question therefore, is whether ultimately the Green Paper is:
 - a) A BCC document on which it is consulting the BSP collectively as well as individual organisations within the BSP and other stakeholders? In this model, final decisions about the future of proposals arising from Green Paper, following consultation, will presumably be made by the City Council through its Cabinet or other structures, presumably with suggestions for the BSP to adopt compatible forms of working.
 - b) A collective BSP document to which BCC is being invited to respond alongside with other BSP partners and other stakeholders? If this is the model, then presumably the final decisions on what happens to proposals arising out of the Green Paper are anticipated to be reached by agreement at the BSP.
- 1.3. How inter-agency partnerships work is obviously an important theme within the Green Paper. It is important that there is clarity on the ownership of the Green Paper at the outset.

2 Support for the neighbourhood approach

- 2.1. I support the Green Paper's vision in putting neighbourhoods at the centre of strategies to regenerate Birmingham and build a better future for its citizens. The document contains many imaginative and worthwhile suggestions about how that vision can be put into practice.
- 2.2. As Part Two of the Green Paper makes clear, the neighbourhood agenda has been an important theme in City Council strategies since the launch of Local Involvement, Local Action (LILA) by the previous Labour Administration in 1997, in the Democracy Commission and Constitutional Convention it hosted in 2000/01 and in its subsequent endorsement of the policy for Devolution and Localisation (*Going Local*) in 2002 and in the implementation of *Going Local* in April 2004, just before the change in the political administration of the Council. There have been further developments since then, including a major City Council Scrutiny Review and the promotion of Urban Villages as the theme for neighbourhood development.
- 2.3. In my own constituency of Birmingham Northfield, the localisation agenda was enthusiastically embraced from well before the city wide implementation of *Going Local* in 2004. Indeed, some of the initiatives mentioned in the Green Paper were pioneered in Northfield. Examples include:
 - The mapping of natural neighbourhoods to reflect community identities rather than political or agency boundaries;
 - Inter departmental and inter-agency neighbourhoods, with a particularly innovative approach on environmental improvement projects in the Frankley pathfinder area;
 - The creation of Birmingham's first urban Parish Council at Frankley;
 - Neighbourhood-based approaches to flood prevention and river conservation work along the River Rea;
 - The introduction of community wardens and neighbourhood caretakers;
 - The establishment and resourcing of a local youth forum – *Northfield Involve*;
 - The introduction of participatory constituency conventions;

- The development of Northfield with Local Control (NWLC), as a pathfinder for the development of resident-led community based housing organisations (CBHOs);
- A range of community-based initiatives arising out of MG Rover crises at Longbridge in 2000 and 2005;
- Other community based initiatives arising out of regeneration projects over the last decade – ranging from those associated with the development of Birmingham Great Park to community consultation and town centre management in the centre of Northfield.

2.4. Initiatives that have developed in Northfield over the years are scarcely mentioned in the Green Paper's selection of examples of innovative practice in different parts of Birmingham. This is curious, particularly as the approaches adopted in Northfield have, until recently, commanded a broad measure of cross-party support amongst locally elected members, as well as reflecting an emerging consensus amongst the statutory and community-based organisations represented on bodies such as the Northfield Constituency Strategic Partnership (CSP). With the expansion of the Northfield Constituency to take in Kings Norton (including its New Deal for Communities area - NDC), the potential for expanding the horizons for localisation, devolution and neighbourhood working in this part of the city is now even greater. It also goes with the grain of recent developments in central government policies – such as the Action Plan for Community Empowerment (October 2007), perspectives for 'double devolution' and the contents of the recent Local Government White Paper and Bill.

2.5. In welcoming the broad thrust of the Green Paper, this response also reflects some of the experience gained through my work in Northfield over the last 15 years. My response does not claim to be comprehensive but it does try to highlight some of the issues that need to be resolved by the City Council and other partners in order to make the vision of neighbourhood working in Birmingham the success in practice that it deserves to be.

3 Consultation, engagement and empowerment

- 3.1. Part 2 of the Green Paper helpfully provides a guide to some of the terminology used throughout the document. The distinctions drawn between the terms ‘consultation’, ‘engagement’ and ‘empowerment’ are particularly interesting.

Consultation means asking service users and residents’ opinions before making decisions about services or facilities. It can take a variety of forms from the distant (opinion surveys) to the more direct (e.g. focus groups, citizen’s juries or workshops)

Engagement means involving the community directly in addressing local problems, through community organisations and local planning

Empowerment means supporting individuals and communities to make their own contribution to the local community or run their own services or projects and to make their own choices about services they receive.

– *Vibrant urban villages: A Birmingham Green Paper, Part 2, page 3*

- 3.2. The Green Paper sees a role for all of these approaches to local involvement and provides a number of examples of good practice which has already take place in different parts of the City. However, it also carries with it a warning:

Building on the previous success factor, the involvement of local residents and communities can give them more confidence, power and influence. The key issue is who sets the “rules of the game.” Arguably, unless local communities can set priorities and determine the pace of change they are not fully empowered.

Whether this challenging interpretation is placed upon empowerment, there is much research that emphasizes the importance of being open and clear about what is “up for grabs” when working with local communities. It is often dashed expectations that do most damage to relationships between policy makers and local residents.

– *Vibrant urban villages: A Birmingham Green Paper, Part 2, page 30*

- 3.3. This raises some complex issues for policy makers – particularly those representing statutory agencies delivering public services. How do you balance the competing desire to give residents a say over issues that affect their local community with the need to ensure equity in decision

making and fairness in the allocation of resources between communities and service areas? Some communities are themselves not easily defined by geographic location and it is difficult to see how issues of race, gender, disability and sexuality can be easily addressed by localisation alone.

- 3.4. For elected representatives, potentially conflicting democratic mandates at neighbourhood, ward, constituency, city and even national levels make the problem even more complex.
- 3.5. Nevertheless, the presumption in the Green Paper, which I support, is that neighbourhood working should – where it is possible, practical and fair to do so – seek to promote the empowerment and engagement of local communities at the local level, not simply their consultation.
- 3.6. To build on the work done by the Birmingham Community Empowerment network programme (b:cen) and other initiatives, the Green paper says:

The next challenge in Birmingham is to extend this work further into neighbourhoods, using networking tools to support communities in their ability to communicate with one another and do things together.

– Vibrant urban villages: A Birmingham Green Paper, Part 2, page 19

- 3.7. The City should look beyond simply promoting consultation, and where possible, beyond engagement too. If something is not ‘up for grabs’ not only should policy makers be open and clear about it, they should also have good reason for it. It is not enough for solutions and initiatives being fashioned at the local level to be rejected simply because they do not conveniently fit with centrally determined policies or ways of working. Equally, it is not acceptable for policy makers to blur the distinctions between empowerment, engagement and consultation for reasons of convenience.
- 3.8. It is not clear that the City Council always follows this logic through in the specific ways of working that it adopts. In September 2006, two years after its designation by the Home Office as a Civic Pioneer to promote civil renewal through Active Citizenship, stronger communities and partnerships to meet needs, the City Council adopted the Strategy for ‘Consultation and Engagement’. Although it contains some useful and forward looking aspects, the Green Paper’s vision of community *empowerment*, rather than simply consultation and engagement, is not prominent in the 2006 Strategy document. Indeed, the Green Paper itself gives an interesting example of how the City Council defined empowerment when it said that consultation should be:

Empowering – ensuring feedback is given about what changes as a result of consultation, or explanation given about why things could not change in the way suggested.

– Vibrant urban villages: A Birmingham Green Paper, Part 2, pages 27-8

3.9. A call for clarity and transparency perhaps, but hardly one of empowerment.

3.10. The Vibrant Urban Villages Green Paper appears to be far less ambiguous about the importance of developing local solutions to local problems.

*While the City Council and its partners will provide a positive framework for neighbourhood working, **it will be the devolved constituencies and their local partners who will be directly responsible for developing the right solutions for each local area***

*– Vibrant urban villages: A Birmingham Green Paper, Part 1, page 15
(my emphasis)*

3.11. There are numerous examples where the City Council has followed through this vision and it should be congratulated for that. However, the following case study of the Northfield CBHO suggests that the City Council needs to show greater consistency in accepting models of community organisations which may be different to its own preferred way of working.

3.12. Other BSP partners may also wish to consider how their own governance structures or ways of working can best respond to and promote the vision of neighbourhood working outlined in the Green Paper.

CASE STUDY

Northfield with Local Control

It is right that the Green Paper should provide examples of good practice. However, in framing policies for the future it may also be helpful to learn from examples which illustrate some of the difficulties which large statutory bodies, such as the City Council, can sometimes have in coming to terms with the diversity that often goes hand in hand with empowering communities to decide things for themselves.

One such example has been the fate of the Community Based Housing Organisation (CBHO), Northfield with Local Control (NWLC). Page 48 of the Green Paper reports on the creation of pilot CBHOs following the recommendations of an Independent Commission into Birmingham's Housing Stock, headed by Professor Anne Power. The title of the Power Commission report cogently summarised its central message: 'One Size Doesn't Fit All'. Active community engagement and leadership in the creation of local housing strategies was emphasised, along with the way that engagement on housing can form a cornerstone of neighbourhood renewal. And partly because of the size of Birmingham and the range of challenges faced by different areas, the Council needed to 'let go', allowing different areas to meet those challenges in different ways.

One of the pathfinder CBHOs set up in 2005 was in Hodge Hill: 'One Hodge Hill'. The Green Paper reports on some of the good practice which has been developed by this

organisation. Another CBHO was created in Northfield: 'Northfield with Local Control' (NWLC). The enthusiasm with which NWLC went about its work reflected the constituency's general enthusiasm for devolution and localisation and it was supported by both officers and elected members from different parties locally. NWLC's work was widely praised and it was even noticed nationally. In signing off on the City Council's Decent Homes Business plan in 2006 the Government placed the following condition on Birmingham City Council:

the Government Office will be seeking evidence that the "positive retention" outcome continues to meet tenant aspirations, and where tenants come forward with their own neighbourhood solutions, such as may emerge from the continued development of the Northfield Community Based Housing Organisation, we will expect the City to consider these.

– Yvette Cooper, Minister for Housing and Planning, October 2006

In fact, the same year the City Council decided to scrap its recognition of Northfield's elected CBHO, preferring to merge it into a new city wide model of Constituency Tenant Groups (CTGs), whose members were to be centrally appointed by the City Council. NWLC's Board were aggrieved that they were given no choice by the City Council. Locally elected representatives – again on a cross party basis – also expressed their concern about the Council's decision to wind up the CBHO initiative in Northfield.

Despite local representations, the City Council maintained its decision to remove its recognition of the emerging CBHO in Northfield. Instead, the elected members of the NWLC Board were given places on the City Council's newly appointed CTG. Today, those involved in NWLC are continuing to pursue their ambition to create a Tenants Management Organisation in the ways available to them under statute.

The Neighbourhoods Green Paper does not focus on the experience in Northfield, but instead congratulates One Hodge Hill for having responded pragmatically:

the policy on CBHOs having been laid to rest [by the City Council]

– Vibrant urban villages: A Birmingham Green Paper, Part 2, page 48

From what the Green paper says, One Hodge Hill is pursuing some creative options in the changed environment and those involved with it deserve credit, as do NWLC for their work. There may well be good arguments for the system of appointed CTGs adopted by the Council, just as there are for the elected CBHO model pioneered by NWLC. A key issue for the Green Paper, however, is why the decision about which model to go for had to be taken by the City Council centrally rather than locally in Northfield or Hodge Hill. Why should local communities not be allowed by the City Council to pioneer different ways of working in different areas?

4 Community leadership and partnership working

- 4.1. As a body that dwarfs most others in the city on the scale of its remit, it is natural that the City Council should play a leadership role both on the BSP and often in constituency and more locally based partnership arrangements. Indeed the developments envisaged by the Local Government White Paper and Bill emphasise the importance to democracy of local councillors playing a leadership role in their communities, and for elected councils to play that role city, district or county wide.
- 4.2. However, it is an area in which the Audit Commission has urged Birmingham City Council to improve its performance. It made this observation in its corporate assessment of Birmingham City Council published in February 2007 in which, interestingly, the Commission also questioned the effectiveness of the Council's approach to partnership working.

The community leadership offered by the Council is weak. Partners have a wide range of views about the Council as a partner. While some are positive about the Council's role, too many key partners feel the Council is insufficiently committed to working with others to make truly effective partnership working possible. Collectively, political and managerial leadership has been ineffective in delivering a corporate approach to equality and diversity. In particular, its approach to community cohesion has been slow and has not adequately engaged with communities and other stakeholders.

*– Audit Commission: Corporate Assessment of Birmingham City Council
February 2007*

- 4.3. It is a difficult task to provide effective leadership without either dominating partnerships with others or slipping into the habit of treating them as consultative mechanisms at best or irrelevant at worst. Given its size and the complexity of its own departmental and interdepartmental relationships, it is not surprising that this is an area that presents particular challenges for the City Council.
- 4.4. Devolution, localisation and the development of strategic partnerships at the constituency level and below can provide important ways to address these problems. Northfield's Constituency Strategic Partnership (CSP) is regarded as one of the most successful in the City. A range of statutory

and voluntary bodies regularly attend its meetings but that does not detract from their acknowledgement or appreciation of the centrality of the City Council to its work. Indeed, at a very practical level, City Council officers usually provide the secretariat to partnership bodies and provide most of the organisational infrastructure that enable the CSP to function. However, confidence in the CSP as genuine partnership body – rather than simply an offshoot of the Council – has also been boosted by the fact that there has been no presumption that a City Councillor or Council officer should chair it. Indeed for the last few years the chair has been held by the local Police OCU commander. In Northfield, this level of engagement in the leadership of the CSP by an organisation outside the Council has been regarded as a significant strength.

4.5. Of course, even with initiatives like this, there is still a danger that the Council corporately or councillors individually can end up monopolising devolved decision making at ward or constituency level – sometimes unwittingly and even in a framework that theoretically promotes community involvement and neighbourhood working.

4.6. Page 15 of the Vibrant urban villages Green Paper proposes that:

The delivery of neighbourhood working is assigned to the Constituency Strategic Partnerships and in particular the thematic partnership work undertaken through the Local Delivery Groups (Community Safety Partnerships). Oversight will be provided by the Constituency and Ward Committees, as appropriate, and a prominent role for the Constituency Committee and Ward Committee chairs.

– Vibrant urban villages: A Birmingham Green Paper, Part 1, page 15

4.7. This is positive. It is right that local elected members collectively and individually play a full role in overseeing the delivery of neighbourhood working. However this also raises the question of who is empowered to provide oversight of the Constituency and Ward Committees or of their Chairs, outside the normal accountability provided by the electoral cycle. This is particularly relevant when, as occasionally happens, the majority party on a Constituency or Ward Committee moves towards greater ‘in house’ Party Group decision-making in advance of – or sometimes instead of – convening forums at which representatives of other parties and the public can fully participate.

4.8. The importance of addressing these tendencies is illustrated by the Green Paper itself when it observes on page 14:

We want democratic rights to be matched by responsibilities within a clear framework of standards of conduct that help to make our system of governance more open, transparent and accountable.

– Vibrant urban villages: A Birmingham Green Paper, Part 1, page 14

- 4.9. This underlines why the City Council and the BSP should urgently consider how to ensure that community representatives and other stakeholders from the third sector can acquire the resources and infrastructure at the local level to enable them to play a full part in governance and oversight arrangements locally as well as a creative delivery role in the provision of neighbourhood services (see Section 6).

5 Political boundaries or neighbourhood boundaries?

- 5.1. In chapter 4, dealing with the Single Neighbourhood Programme, the Green Paper rightly identifies a key methodology for neighbourhood working:

A principle that applies to each level of the programme both the single and discretionary is that the neighbourhood boundaries be drawn up by a process utilizing community and residents' views as to what makes up their neighbourhood, not one determined by physical boundaries or agency determined boundaries.

– Vibrant urban villages: A Birmingham Green Paper, Part 1, page 13

- 5.2. I fully support that principle. The work pioneered in Northfield and elsewhere to map 'natural neighbourhoods' provides a very valuable tool to achieve this.
- 5.3. Not only is this approach important to ensure the responsiveness of service delivery, it is also important in ensuring that resource allocation is both equitable and sufficiently sensitive to local needs.
- 5.4. Northfield Constituency has been one of those which have often suffered in the past from resources being allocated according to need calculated along agency determined boundaries – normally local government wards – rather than according to needs identified at neighbourhood level. The population sizes of Birmingham's wards are very large compared to those in most other local authorities. Often resources are (rightly) targeted to try to address deprivation. However, if deprivation statistics are calculated at ward level rather than at local or neighbourhood level, the sheer size of Birmingham's wards creates an averaging effect in which communities experiencing high levels of deprivation miss out, not because they are less deprived than anywhere else, but simply because there is a nearby area which is relatively affluent.
- 5.5. The collection of deprivation statistics at a much more local level in the past few years – called Super Output Areas (SOAs) – has provided local authorities and others with the means to target funds in a much more sensitive and equitable manner. Overlaying SOAs on to the 'natural neighbourhood' maps pioneered in Northfield and elsewhere provides

the opportunity for even more effective targeting, linked to the localisation agenda.

- 5.6. Unfortunately, all this could be undermined if, in determining its priority neighbourhoods for the allocation of resources and other support, the City Council and/or other partner agencies re-aggregate SOA data back into wards. There appears to be a real danger that the way Local Area Agreement (LAA) funding is being prioritised could lead to precisely this result. For example, page 12 of Part 2 of the Green Paper gives the following description of how the Neighbourhood Element of the LAA will be rolled out:

*The £4.8m of Neighbourhood Element funding within the LAA has been allocated to kick start this rolling programme approach, focusing on the 11 priority (most deprived) **wards**. Neighbourhood Management schemes will be rolled out as follows:*

Year one and two (2006-08): six projects

Year two and three (2007-09): four additional projects

Year three and four (2008-10): five additional projects.

*– Vibrant urban villages: A Birmingham Green Paper, Part 2, page 12
(my emphasis)*

- 5.7. This is not simply a theoretical problem. Policies are already being agreed at City and City Region levels which threaten to undermine neighbourhood and community-based initiatives being developed in Northfield by their use of ward-based rather than local data. The recently agreed City Strategy is an illustration of the problem.

CASE STUDY

The impact of the recently agreed City Strategy on tackling worklessness in South West Birmingham

A City Strategy for tackling worklessness has been devised by Birmingham and other City Region partners over the last year and agreed with the Government. The strategy designates 55 priority wards across the City Region area on which resources will be targeted. Birmingham's share of those wards means that in my constituency of Northfield one ward – Weoley – has been designated as a target, whilst the other three wards (Kings Norton, Longbridge and Northfield) have not been identified as priorities. What is the impact of this on people living in the Northfield area of South West Birmingham?

The collapse of MG Rover nearly three years ago laid bare significant long term weaknesses in the economic and skills profile of South West Birmingham; most obviously in a radius around the Longbridge / Northfield area. A number of imaginative responses have been and are still being developed in response to this challenge. One of these has been the creation of a multi agency 'one-stop-shop' in the centre of Northfield.

Most of the agencies involved in the regeneration of South West Birmingham have seen the strategic importance to the process of the main Northfield shopping area around the 'high street' on the A38. It is an identifiable 'centre' to the area and, despite suffering similar challenges to other suburban shopping areas, it is still the place where a very large proportion of local people go to shop. In other words it is a place visited by people across the range of ages, skill levels and employment status that we need to communicate with if we are going to tackle worklessness and build opportunity in South West Birmingham. The physical and economic regeneration of the shopping area itself is also rightly regarded as of central importance to the regeneration of South West Birmingham as a whole.

The multi-agency advice shop brings together private retailers, a range of statutory agencies and a credit union to provide a resource centre for local people. It is ideally situated to be a 'front door' for access to initiatives of the kind the City Strategy is seeking to develop. Northfield shopping centre is also on the intersection of Weoley, Northfield and Longbridge local government wards and it is a local shopping centre for people living in Kings Norton. All of these wards contain neighbourhoods with significant levels of deprivation. Indeed, the Kings Norton ward has a New Deal Area precisely for that reason. Communities living in South West Birmingham also record high levels of young people not in employment, education or training (NEETS), of people on Incapacity Benefit and of teenage pregnancies. Logic would suggest they should not be passed over by any strategy for neighbourhood renewal focussing on need. But that is what ward-based approaches threaten to do.

Are the partners to the City Strategy really expecting the assistance given at the one-stop-shop to be dependent, not on the identified needs or deprivation faced by people coming through the door, but rather on whether they live on the Weoley side of the road rather than the Longbridge or Northfield or Kings Norton side? Presumably not – but targeting funding through a mechanism as blunt as wards the size of those in Birmingham can lead to precisely this kind of problem. Prioritising resources for neighbourhood working through the use of ward data will only make matters worse.

It is not clear how far the ward-based approach adopted in relation to the City Strategy is likely to be replicated in other City or City Region initiatives. However, agencies are likely to try to align their boundaries to enable them to deliver more integrated services. The Green Paper is also right to encourage this.

However, the danger is that the agencies involved will slip back into using administratively or politically convenient boundaries, such as wards, to achieve that alignment rather than more local ones which may be less convenient but which can better reflect community realities. If the vision of the Green Paper to promote neighbourhood working is to be followed through in practice – in the way useful initiatives such as the proposed Neighbourhood Support team will undertake its work and in the mechanisms and methodologies which are developed by agencies to allocate resources – then that requires changes to be made. And agencies have to face up to that.

6 Resourcing the voluntary and community sector and enabling it to make its voice heard

- 6.1. Effective neighbourhood working does not only require statutory agencies to align their own activities and to make their resourcing decisions to reflect local needs. It also raises important questions about how the voluntary and community sector can be enabled to play a full part in the development of vibrant urban villages.
- 6.2. The preceding sections of this response suggest that an engaged and confident voluntary and community sector (VCS) is vital to the process. In some cases this will enable local community groups to fashion and run services in a way that meets local needs.
- 6.3. In addition, there is the contribution which a strong VCS presence can make to democracy at the local level. The fact that voluntary groups are independent of statutory agencies gives them a distinct perspective on the way services are configured that statutory agencies need to hear, even if they reserve the right to say no.
- 6.4. However, voluntary and community organisations are not a substitute for elected political representatives – councillors, MPs and MEPs. The roles of such organisations in promoting dialogue with elected politicians and accountability in the formal local political process outside election time potentially strengthen the democratic process at the local level.
- 6.5. These important themes are identified in the Government’s recent review of the Third Sector. They also inform much of the thinking behind ‘The Compact’: an agreement on ways of working between the voluntary sector and government, which Birmingham, as a designated beacon ‘civic pioneer’ local authority, has a particular responsibility to promote at a local level.
- 6.6. All this presents challenges to voluntary, community and other Third Sector organisations as well as to the statutory sector. With rights come responsibilities. The fact that a particular community leader or community organisation claims a mandate from outside the statutory sector or the formal electoral process does not remove that leader’s or organisation’s responsibility to be accountable for their actions. Nor is it an excuse for voluntary, community or other Third Sector agencies to be

soft on the search for quality in the provision of services. These issues are as important a part of the logic of the Compact as are the obligations on statutory agencies or on local and national Government.

- 6.7. In Northfield, though, the presence of community voices independent of the statutory agencies has been an important driver of some of the most creative neighbourhood initiatives in the area over the years. In reality, however, this has often relied on the tenacity of individual community activists in pulling things together.
- 6.8. Indeed, the fact that Northfield (and areas like it) have by and large missed out on targeted regeneration and other funding over the years (for the reasons described in the previous section), has meant that the resources available for the development of VCS infrastructure have been far less than has been available to local areas that have been targeted. The Learning and Skills Council's (LSC) designation of a local umbrella group of community organisations as a Development Agency a few years ago was a welcome attempt to address this deficit. Sadly it has not led to further sustainable funding streams being identified by the Council or other agencies for VCS infrastructure in the Northfield area.
- 6.9. Meanwhile, recent national initiatives to build infrastructure capacity in the voluntary and community sector – such as the Change Up programme – have so far failed to show much practical relevance to the situation facing voluntary organisations on the ground in places like Northfield.
- 6.10. Locally, all this has led to a dependency on statutory agencies – principally the City Council – for the management and further development of some of the VCS projects that do exist. Over the years, the area has benefited from the presence of a number of City Council and other officers sincerely committed to community development. The efforts they have made over the years should be recognised and valued.
- 6.11. However, this dependency has had some significant down sides. One has been an over-burdening of already hard pressed City Officers with 'too many plates to keep spinning at the top of poles'. Meanwhile, for voluntary and community sector activists, the inevitable pressure to conform to procedures and ways of working which may be appropriate to a large organisation like a city council, but are alien to their own lives, can easily snuff out the very spontaneity and creativity that voluntary or community groups can contribute to the neighbourhoods in which they work.
- 6.12. In some cases, this can mean that funding of voluntary sector resources can become almost entirely related to their delivery of services in line with models devised by statutory agencies – thereby undermining the distinctive contribution that voluntary sector organisations can make both as deliverers of services and as advocates for service users and the local community.

- 6.13. As far as funding is concerned not only do emerging voluntary and community groups experience difficulties in identifying sources of funding, but when funding streams are identified, they are often far from predictable or comprehensible. The procedures associated with the City Council's and other agencies' annual budgets paradoxically often manage to cause both delays in funding and then pressure to spend money more quickly than is required for rational project delivery. In addition, voluntary groups often face difficulty in securing recognition (and recovery) from statutory agencies of the real costs they face.
- 6.14. Such funding issues are also central themes in the principles of the Compact mentioned above. In a place like Northfield, though, it is difficult to see how the principles of that Compact are consistently reflected in practice on the ground.

CASE STUDY

Post MG Rover projects

Widespread tributes have been paid to the speed with which national government came together with local government, the private sector and other regional stakeholders to respond to the collapse of MG Rover (MGR) in 2005, through the MG Rover Task Force and other initiatives. This was mirrored in the area around Longbridge in the commitment and cooperation shown by City Council, constituency and neighbourhood office staff, by the trade unions, by local training providers and commissioners, and by local staff in Job Centre Plus and other agencies. Equally important was the community response that developed between and beyond these organisations, eventually taking on the beginnings of organised expression through the creation of the Rover Community Action Trust (RCAT).

Throughout 2005, 2006 and 2007, in cooperation with the City Council and other agencies involved in post MG Rover work, RCAT was instrumental in organising a series of social, support and other activities for the families of MGR workers and for the local communities affected by the collapse. Seed corn funding was provided by a benefit match hosted by Birmingham City Football Club at the height of the crisis.

It rapidly became clear however, that for sustainable community recovery and development, a more long term response was required. This once again exposed the absence in the area of a voluntary and community sector infrastructure around which such a response could be built. Birmingham City Council had already secured European Commission funding for a time-limited project called Community Network South West (CNSW). Since its formation, CNSW has undertaken valuable work in promoting community economic development in the area as well as training in capacity building for individual community projects. However, because of the terms of the original contract negotiated with the European Commission and because CNSW was set up within the City Council's own structures, it has not been able to form the nucleus of an independent voluntary sector infrastructure to sustain such work in the future.

Over the last two years, RCAT and others have lobbied at different levels of local and national government for funding to be made available to support the creation of a Community Development Trust or similar initiative to address the long term deficit in

community based infrastructure that exists in the South West Birmingham area. The support of the then Prime Minister for the principle of what RCAT was trying to achieve was enlisted in early 2007. A budget of approximately £2.5m was sought from the monies allocated to the Rover Task Force by Central Government and the City Council. The idea was both to provide funding both for a range of individual community based projects in response to the ongoing current effects of the collapse of MGR, and to longer term projects associated with the Community Development Trust. The programme was to be called 'A Step Forward'.

Inflexibility in the contract conditions and budget lines related to post MGR work administered by the City Council, Advantage West Midlands (AWM) and other agencies was already proving to be a problem for the organisation of community-based responses to the impact of closure. This was felt in some of the programmes developed to address access to employment issues in the area and in some initiatives to combat debt and promote financial inclusion. For example, plans to dramatically expand the work of the local credit union, Communisave, fell foul of the combined effects of procedural delays in the release of funds, followed by demands to spend monies which were released within the constraints of single financial years. Eventually the problems being experienced by Communisave were resolved, but they illustrated the vulnerability of community initiatives to these pressures.

Lobbying for a greater priority to be given to community based activities in South West Birmingham following the collapse of MGR and the Prime Minister's support produced an allocation of year end funding from AWM in the spring of 2007. This funding was used for a number of community initiatives co-ordinated by the City Council together with a smaller amount to enable the community activist who had been the driving force behind RCAT to spend more time developing the kind of activities it has been advocating.

By early summer over £350,000 was earmarked by AWM for the Step Forward programme – to be spent on specific projects within the 2007/8 financial year, and with the proviso that a recognised body could be clearly accountable for the disbursement of this money.

Although both understandable and justifiable for the proper accounting of public expenditure, together these developments inevitably shifted the emphasis of A Step Forward away from the long term establishment of sustainable community sector infrastructure towards the organisation of short term community projects which could be undertaken within the 2007/8 financial year. By this time the financial year was well into its second quarter. As the clock was ticking it was agreed to 'park' the time-consuming task of creating a new community development trust and accept an offer from the City Council to directly become the accountable body for A Step Forward, using procedures that it already had in place for handling budgets running into hundreds of thousands of pounds.

It then took a further four months – until November 2007 – for the City Council to resolve which of its departments should be made accountable for the handling of A Step Forward. It was only once this was agreed that the City Council was in a position to accept responsibility for the money that had been earmarked by AWM back in the summer. Even with this resolved, City Council procedures required the Step Forward money to be treated in the same way as the City Council's own grants to outside organisations with formal conditions of grant aid (COGA) agreements needing to be hastily drawn up and signed off before the money could be released. These ranged from financial regulations to ensure probity, to a requirement for the City Council to be credited on any materials published in connection with Step

Forward projects. Most of these arrangements were in place by the end of December. However, this left just three months left to complete projects that had been originally devised for introduction and refinement over a twelve month period, as the first stages of a longer term programme of community development in the South West Birmingham area. Not surprisingly, doubts are now growing about how far individual Step Forward projects will be able to achieve their objectives in the time available to them.

At different times a number of officers from different parts of both AWM and the City Council have worked hard to try to identify money which could be made available for A Step Forward and to help guide the projects involved through the procedures involved. They deserve credit for their efforts.

The reality is, however, that the combined effect of those agencies' rules, procedures, approaches to project management and funding envelopes have turned a programme originally intended to lay the foundation for long term community development into a series of individual projects. Those same processes have constrained the nature of the projects envisaged and then delayed their introduction for several months, undermining the viability of delivering the projects involved. Funding to support those community activists trying to put the programme together has been uncertain, sometimes with no guarantee that even agreed temporary salaries will be paid at the end of the month. Now, in an interesting role reversal of the 'full cost recovery' principle contained in the Government Compact with the voluntary and community sector, the City Council is considering charging post MGR community projects up to £10,000 in management fees to help fund the 'efficiency pressures' levied by the City Council centrally on its own constituency operation in Northfield.

At the same time, the creation of a post MGR endowment to boost the creation of a sustainable VCS infrastructure appears to be no nearer than it was at the start of 2007.

As a Board member of RCAT I declare an interest in the above case study. It is also fair to acknowledge that RCAT's own informal and activity-focussed approach may not always have provided a sufficiently systematic focus for the ideas behind A Step Forward. However, this case study is not a plea for funding for RCAT itself. RCAT's role has been to demonstrate the need for resources to be made available for a sustained community-led response to the challenges highlighted by the collapse of MG Rover. RCAT may not be the best home from which to develop the infrastructure for this. The fact is, however, that such infrastructure needs to be built and so far, no statutory agency has accepted a responsibility for doing so.

6.15. The above case study reflects the specific circumstances that followed the collapse of MG Rover and it therefore contains aspects that are not easily transferable to other situations. However, it still illustrates the barriers that can get in way of developing the independent and sustainable community activity that will be crucial to realising the vision of Vibrant Urban Villages outlined in the Green Paper.

6.16. The Green Paper's suggested creation of a Neighbourhood Academy to spread best practice and of a Neighbourhood Board to maintain the city level focus on the local agenda are welcome, although greater clarity is

required about their precise roles, relationships to other bodies at city level and about the resources available to them.

- 6.17. But this still leaves both the City Council and other BSP partners with a challenge. If they accept that a healthy voluntary and community sector at the local level as well as at the city level is a key component of the neighbourhood agenda, are they prepared to will the means as well as the ends, and are they prepared to rethink their own policies and procedures to empower and enable local community organisation rather than constrain it?

7 Summary

- 7.1. I welcome the publication of this Green Paper by Birmingham City Council and the Birmingham Strategic Partnership. I also welcome this opportunity to respond to the Paper.
- 7.2. I fully support the vision for putting neighbourhoods at the centre of strategies to regenerate Birmingham and build a better future for its citizens. The Green Paper contains many imaginative and worthwhile suggestions about how that vision can be put into practice. The experiences of community-based initiatives that have developed in Northfield over the years reinforce this.
- 7.3. This response demonstrates my support for the neighbourhood approach and seeks to highlight some of the key issues that need to be addressed in order for the vision of neighbourhood working in Birmingham to be the success in practice that it deserves to be.
- 7.4. Some of these issues are points of clarification. Some are ideas or suggestions. Others are challenges that must be faced. These issues have been raised throughout this response and are set out below in summary:
- The need for clarification on the ownership of the Green Paper and the next steps for taking this agenda forward (section 1).
 - It is important to balance the competing desire to give residents a say over issues that affect their local community with the need to ensure equity in decision making and fairness in the allocation of resources between communities and service areas. However, the presumption should be in favour of neighbourhood approaches where possible (section 3).
 - Neighbourhood working should – where it is possible, practical and fair to do so – seek to promote the empowerment and engagement of local communities, not simply their consultation. The Green Paper appears to support this approach but this vision has not always been built into the City Council’s strategies or ways of working. The City Council needs to show greater consistency in accepting models of community organisations which may be different to its own preferred way of working (section 3).

- It is important that the City Council both develops its role in community leadership as recommend by the Audit Commission whilst balancing this with a clear commitment to partnership working. There are local examples of good practice which could help to take this forward (section 4).
 - There is a need to urgently consider how to ensure that community representatives and other stakeholders from the third sector are encouraged and able to play a full part in governance and oversight arrangements locally as well as a creative delivery role in the provision of neighbourhood services (section 4).
 - I support the Green Paper's vision that neighbourhood working should be based on 'natural neighbourhoods' rather than agency determined boundaries. Policies and funding based on aggregated ward rather than local data threaten to undermine the neighbourhood and community-based initiatives that are being developed at the local level (section 5).
 - A strong voluntary and community sector infrastructure at the local as well as the city level will be vital to realising the vision outlined in the Green Paper. The experience of Northfield and elsewhere indicates the huge deficit in VCS resourcing at the current time. The Green Paper's proposals for the Neighbourhood Academy, Neighbourhood Board and other initiatives are welcomed but must be accompanied by a clear commitment to help resource VCS infrastructure in line with the themes of the Government Compact with the voluntary sector and the Government's recent review of the Third sector (section 6).
- 7.5. It is clear that unless these issues are properly considered and these challenges faced, the vision set out in the Green Paper will not be realised.