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Welfare innovations  
at the local level  
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## WORK PACKAGE 4

# THE LOCAL WELFARE SYSTEM IN BIRMINGHAM, UNITED KINGDOM: CORE IDEAS

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## INTRODUCTION

This city report introduces the local welfare system in Birmingham and describes the analysis of the policy fields of housing, the labour market and childcare. It focuses on the relationship between the local welfare system and different sectors, and also which groups of actors determine what happens in these areas. It concludes with an assessment of the consistency of the local welfare system and the relevance of innovation experiences. The analysis reported here is based on documentary sources covering a ten-year period (minutes of council meetings, a small number of local party manifestos and newspaper articles) and interviews with representatives from local organisations and groups. The focus is on the debates around the labour market and housing as responsibilities for childcare policy are determined by central government.

To place the analysis in context, Birmingham is located within the West Midlands region of England and is the regional centre for business, retail and leisure. Birmingham is the largest city in the UK outside London and has a population of just over one million inhabitants. Local government for the city is the metropolitan authority of Birmingham City Council, the largest local authority in the UK made up of 40 wards (administrative/electoral districts within council boundaries). It has the youngest population of any major European city, over half the population is aged under 35 years old. Birmingham's population is significantly diverse in terms of ethnic composition. The city has unemployment rates twice the national average and in some areas over 50 per cent of the working age population is not in employment.

### *Local welfare system*

There is general agreement in Birmingham about a welfare system that should support vulnerable people and promote equality and inclusion, which are key orientations and values. However, social policies tend to be centrally driven and it is how these are translated locally where local councils have the most influence. Single tier local authorities such as Birmingham are responsible for providing services to local residents which include: education; social services; planning; waste disposal, recycling and collection; trading standards; emergency planning; roads, highways and transportation; housing; environmental health; parks, open spaces and countryside; and markets and fairs. Therefore, direct responsibility for local housing policy lies with the local authority but for other areas such as the labour market (and child care) this is described as a 'leadership role'.

Local government financing is a mixture of central government funding and local taxes. The current economic downturn and the 28 per cent reduction in funding for local government announced by the Coalition Government in 2010 have influenced debates about the future orientations of the welfare system. The council needs to reduce spending by a significant amount when Birmingham has been disproportionately affected by the recession compared to other cities particularly in terms of unemployment.

### *Local governance*

In Birmingham the dominant coalition consists of local politicians of the three main parties and leading officers of the administration. Co-ordination is achieved through the local government decision-making process, which is largely consensus-oriented. In 2001 Birmingham City Council adopted the Leader and Cabinet model of local government, which includes Overview and Scrutiny Committees as well as quasi-judicial Regulatory Committees. Local residents vote for councillors, these elected councillors then choose the leader of the local authority. The leader selects a small group of councillors (the Cabinet) to work with him/her on making day-to-day decisions about the running of the authority. Scrutiny Committees are based around Cabinet Member responsibilities, review the work of the Cabinet and act as a check on its power.

Scrutiny Committees perform the role of ‘critical friend’ to the decision-makers within the council and assist in strategic policy development. Each political group has a role and membership on committees is in proportion to the total number of seats on the council they hold. Committee meetings consist of councillors sitting at a table in the centre of the room, with members of the press and public around the sides. Organisations outside of the council may be asked to provide evidence for a review or meeting. Scrutiny Reviews look closely at one issue and then findings and recommendations are debated at city council meetings. Residents do not vote on single policy issues, there may occasionally be consultations with the local population but with no requirement for politicians to act on the results.

### *Local political context*

There are 120 Birmingham City councillors representing over one million people across 40 wards (electoral districts). Each ward has three councillors and those elected serve a four-year term. The main political parties in Birmingham mirror the national picture, Labour (centre-left), Conservative (centre-right) and Liberal Democrat (social liberal) Parties. There is broad agreement on social problems but emphasis on solutions over time has usually been influenced by political affiliation. Local politics does also involve a certain amount of negotiation to secure support for social policies with councillors trying to ensure the ‘best deal’ for their constituents in return. There are ten elected members of the national UK parliament covering Birmingham (8 Labour, 1 Conservative and 1 Liberal Democrat) but their main function is to represent the interests of Birmingham at a national level rather than a direct involvement in local policies.

The council had a period of over twenty years of Labour Party control from 1983, but from 2004 until 2012 there was no party in overall control. The Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats entered into a governing coalition, and the Council Leader from 2004 was the Conservative group leader with the Liberal Democrat group leader as Deputy Leader. The Leader of the Council used the term the “Progressive Partnership” to describe the coalition but over time Conservatives from within and outside Birmingham accused the Conservative group of teaming up with the Liberal democrats to pursue “quasi-socialist” policies. They claimed that the council had failed over the years to implement any Conservative Party

policies and in a widely predicted result the Labour Party won control of the city council in the 2012 local elections.

The Labour Party was the only party to campaign in 2012 with a local manifesto (the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats campaigned on their ‘record in office’) ‘Labour’s Vision for Birmingham’. This was a campaign that used the same language of all politicians of all parties during the economic downturn both locally and nationally. It talked about “tough choices” and a commitment to “delivering fairness in tough times”. It used a combination of national and local policies to campaign on, for example:

*Youth unemployment will cost Birmingham £400 million in the decade ahead. Nationally, we would tax bankers’ bonuses to create a fund to help 4,000 of Birmingham’s young people back to work. We know Birmingham’s families are feeling the squeeze; that’s why nationally we would temporarily reverse the VAT rise - putting £450 back into families’ pockets and knocking 3p a litre off fuel.*

At a more local level the focus was on boosting local jobs and businesses such as:

- New standard for achievement for schools to educate and train children for the skilled jobs of the future
- Fast-track plans for 6,000 private sector jobs on derelict manufacturing sites
- Demand the £7.5 billion spent by public services supports local jobs and businesses
- New Birmingham housing partnerships to build affordable homes, creating jobs for local people.

### *Sector representation*

In Birmingham policy actors make particular reference to ‘sectors’, public, private, voluntary and community (although the latter two are sometimes described as the third sector). Public sector can refer to central government but more usually here refers specifically to the local City Council. The third sector is represented at a strategic level by a number of umbrella organisations, some of the most influential are, Birmingham Voluntary Services Council, Birmingham Race Action Partnership, Birmingham Community Empowerment Network and Birmingham Association of Neighbourhood Forums. However, the role of civil society in the local welfare system has been described as relatively weak, with the relationship between the City Council and the third sector being described as like a “parent and child”. However, there was acknowledgement that this situation was improving.

Various ‘partnerships’ also exist in Birmingham including a local strategic partnership (LSP) under the banner of Be Birmingham, in addition to a ‘Family of Partnerships’ (seven thematic partnerships operating at a citywide level). They bring together representatives from the local statutory, voluntary, community and private sectors to address local problems, allocate funding, and develop strategies and initiatives. The LSP was allocated resources to deliver a Local Area Agreement, which would usually have been administered

by statutory bodies (until the national Coalition government announced the abolition of such agreements). The aim of the LSP was to encourage joint working and community involvement, and prevent 'silo working' (different agencies that share aims working in isolation) and ensure resources were better allocated at a local level. In general it is believed that LSPs have suffered from a low profile outside of the organisations they work with, despite their potential to impact on local governance and the implications this could have on the local democratic process. However, the LSP in Birmingham would seem to have a higher profile and influence than elsewhere and it is through this mechanism that actors outside of the City Council can exert most influence.

There have been a number of key influences shaping the main debates in connection with the local welfare system over the past few years.

### *Community cohesion*

In 2005 there were disturbances in certain areas of Birmingham due in part to racial tensions. One policy actor stated that this resulted in the coalition politicians focusing on this *“to almost the exclusion of everything else”*. The City Council response was to try to implement a new political framework for the engagement of ethnic minorities to draw them in to the democratic process. This also led to a process of capability-building trying to engage the affected communities in a dialogue to lead and shape local programmes. Local policy makers identified a “leadership gap” and the council launched a programme to identify and support leadership talent. A key influence in developments in this area was a community cohesion strategy produced by a senior council officer that broadened out the concept to include factors other than race and faith resulting in a community cohesion index, which could then be used as a basis for developing policy.

### *Devolution*

The predominant paradigm over the past few years has been devolved decision-making or ‘localisation’. Localism describes a range of political philosophies, which prioritise the local, and all political parties in Birmingham have pursued a localism agenda, but with slightly different ideas about how this should be implemented. There is a belief that problems become more definable and appropriate solutions more easily created. Therefore, devolved decision-making is seen as the instrument by which social problems are best dealt with, and introducing this effectively is seen as essential to the realisation of other goals such as reducing unemployment.

In 2003 the Labour council took a decision to devolve services and governance and implemented this in 2004, during which time there was a change in administration. Following this, there was a change from the original manifesto intention around localisation but the Conservative-Liberal coalition did attempt to introduce a version of this at various points in their administration. From 2008, responsibility and budgets for a number of services were devolved to eleven then ten-district committees across the city. It was felt that there was limited success with this, one council officer felt that during this time “the policy lost its way in terms of devolved services and decision-making through district committees” as no real decisions were made about changing the way services were delivered or re-prioritising or outsourcing to the third sector.

In 2010 there was a consultation about continuing with local decision-making and retaining executive powers with district committees. All three parties were keen to keep the existing model. The Labour Party since their return to power has set out their intent to “reinvigorate” localisation and restructuring of the council included a return to having a local services directorate with a framework to deliver localisation. There does appear to be consensus on localism as the way forward but it is emergent, as one policymaker stated, “it requires a sophisticated understanding that the city is too big to govern and manage through a citadel in the centre of Birmingham”.

The vision is that 80 per cent of council services will sit out with district committees. This work in Birmingham is taking place within the context of the national government localism agenda and a discourse about “community-led interventions and the state not being so necessary”. One policy actor stated, “it was necessary to incorporate our localism with a kind of macro localism”.

The Labour Council has plans for a new strategy for neighbourhoods working with other cities in the UK and Europe to “create the most ambitious programme of social cohesion and regeneration in Europe”.

### *Social inclusion*

At the local level there is a deep core belief in social equality despite the political behaviour of left and right. The Council states, “promoting equality and tackling inequalities is at the heart of the council’s goals”. The discourse about social inclusion and inequality and a number of factors came together during 2010 and 2011, which brought these issues to the fore. The local strategic partnership raised concerns about the continued existence of significant inequalities across the city after the publication of the Closing the Gap report, there were riots in Birmingham, unprecedented budget cuts were announced, and there were on-going issues with safeguarding, which all contributed to this. There was cross-party agreement that despite numerous projects and programmes and millions of pounds of investment in the areas of greatest need, inequality still existed and lasting change in Birmingham’s disadvantaged neighbourhoods had not been achieved.

In 2011, the then Deputy Leader of the governing coalition (a Liberal Democrat) asked the Bishop of Birmingham to lead a ‘commission’ to look at social inclusion. The Be Birmingham Executive commissioned the Social Inclusion Process project with the aim of developing a new approach to help raise aspirations and the quality of life of the most disadvantaged communities and neighbourhoods. When the Labour Party took control of the council they stated their intention to make this their “number one priority”. A Cabinet post for Social Cohesion and Equalities was created to indicate commitment to this process. The Social Inclusion Process has been widely acknowledged as a success, as the dialogue involved a wide range of organisations and individuals across Birmingham many of whom had not had this opportunity before. As one local stakeholder commented, “third, community, private sector had not been engaged before in debates around social inclusion”. Various actions and recommendations have been made which could have a direct impact on the local welfare system and how it operates.

### *The Council's vision*

The current Council Leader set out the Council's vision, which can be characterised by an emphasis on inclusion and localism. Innovation is also referred to explicitly. "We want to an inclusive city, in which many more people can play their part - a fair chance for everyone in Birmingham. I want a strategy that is compelling, innovative and far-sighted."

The key priorities to achieve this link back to a belief in social equality and inclusion, and were identified as:

- To tackle inequality and deprivation, promote social cohesion across all communities in Birmingham, and ensure dignity, in particular for our elderly and safeguarding for children;
- To lay the foundations for a prosperous city, built on an inclusive economy;
- To involve local people and communities in the future of their local area and their public services - a city with local services for local people.

A series of work programmes have been set up: jobs and prosperity and education and skills; crime and police; health and social care; housing; localisation; and re-inventing the council.

## **2. HOUSING POLICY**

The driver for policy development has been Birmingham's huge housing challenge. The city's population is increasing and is projected to grow by 100,000 residents to 1.1 million by 2026. Birmingham is a young city and children aged 0 to 14 are due to increase by 36 per cent over the same period. The 25 to 34 age group is predicted to increase by 21 per cent. Birmingham's 85 years old and over population is also expected to increase by 40 per cent. In total 90,000 additional households will be formed by 2026 and these residents will need housing. With the average city income insufficient to buy an average priced property there is collective recognition that additional social and affordable housing is needed across the city.

By far the biggest player in the housing field in Birmingham is the city council. It is the largest social landlord in England with 65,396 dwellings, holding 17 per cent of the housing stock in the city. This is the result of social housing tenants voting against a transfer of stock to residential social landlords at a time when this was happening in the majority of local authority areas. Demand for social housing significantly outstrips supply and there is a large waiting list for council housing of over 30,000 applicants. Registered social landlords (RSLs) hold 40,579 social rented dwellings in the city, there are approximately 40 providers across the city, the largest being Midland Heart.

The council has a long tradition of working in partnership with the local housing sector through dialogue with the City Housing Partnership (CHP) and the Birmingham Social Housing Partnership. The CHP is the cross sector partnership comprising the council, housing associations, voluntary organisations and the private sector. RSLs report being satisfied with their relationship with the council generally. The provision of housing in the city is dependent on a complex range of partners. The council has a strategic role as well

as a regulatory and house building function. The RSLs and the private sector are key partners and the national Housing and Communities Agency and the HomeBuy Agency provide finance and co-ordinate the low-cost home ownership schemes.

The major debate in Birmingham, particularly since 2008, has been around the provision of affordable housing. The economic downturn resulted in a slowing down of the housing market, a major drop in house building and a more challenging environment for those seeking mortgage lending. A reduction in private sector development activity and investment and the restrictions on public and private sector funding were seen to be affecting the provision of affordable housing. At the same time repossessions, mortgage arrears and unemployment were increasing demand for social housing. This has frequently been reported in Birmingham's local press as the 'housing crisis' and has been debated regularly within the council.

For a number of years the Coalition Council had sought to maximise receipts from land sales to assist with programmes such as the Decent Homes Programme (which stock transfer was meant to support). Conflict arose as some observers claimed that this was resulting in less land available for social housing developments. These claims were strongly refuted by the Coalition Cabinet Member for Housing and the Birmingham Social Housing Partnership. Local media has included several reports about a group 'Justice not Crisis' who occupy derelict buildings in protest at the lack of affordable housing.

As Birmingham is the UK's second largest city urban planning and transport have received a lot of attention with several large infrastructure projects started and maintained by successive administrations. The Coalition oversaw the initial regeneration of the city centre but in order to encourage the creation of a new housing market no affordable housing was planned, which was criticised by other parties. Traditionally the RSLs have been seen as the house-builders but the coalition moved to closer collaboration between the public and private sectors to encourage house-building. The Birmingham Municipal Housing Trust (BMHT) is an example of this with the council working in partnership with construction companies to build a mixture of social and affordable housing, albeit on a small scale.

Since June 2010 there have been a number of reports made to the Housing and Urban Renewal Overview and Scrutiny Committee about the effect unprecedented welfare reforms planned by the national coalition government will have on thousands of Birmingham residents. This has been the subject of debate within the city council, in particular, the impact of changes to housing benefit. Birmingham City Council is to move to developing a policy position on welfare reform and how the Social Fund (loans from the local authority) will be administered.

The current Council leader set out the vision for housing in Birmingham. "Our vision is to make individuals and families proud to live in Birmingham in a decent home at a price they can afford, enjoying stability whether they rent or buy." To achieve this vision the Council states it will: provide new affordable homes; aspire to decent homes for all; introduce a new deal for council tenants; give local people a say in the future of their communities; and focus on homes and jobs (Be Birmingham, By Birmingham, Build Birmingham).

The Council has identified in various statements and documents that it wants to encourage innovation and creative thinking in housing policy. There have been various suggestions for the future including: co-operative housing; long-term deferring of land payments; further models of mixed tenure options through BMHT; and off-site modular construction methods for affordable housing. One independent observer did believe that with regards innovation it was difficult to do new things without fitting into established structures, for example it was hard for the housing voluntary sector to have a voice.

### **3. LABOUR MARKET POLICY**

Birmingham has unemployment rates twice the national average and in some areas over 50 per cent of the working age population are not in employment. In some areas of Birmingham unemployment has been an issue for two decades or more, as one policy maker stated, “it is a generational issue now, it’s not just that they are unemployed, but the parents and grandparents have been unemployed. Or more likely locked in a cycle of periods of unemployment and periods of low paid insecure work and then back into periods of unemployment again”. These entrenched problems have resulted in consensus over unemployment or worklessness as a particular social problem.

Labour market policy is largely a function of national government that are responsible for activation strategies in local areas. In Birmingham local activity has been co-ordinated by JobCentrePlus, the Learning and Skills Council and the city council. Each has a different remit but been brought together under partnership arrangements including the local strategic partnership. The council has a small budget in comparison to the other organisations but has been the accountable body for a number of funding streams and has a leadership role. Employment strategies are a web of inter-linked programmes and funding streams, and this complexity is due to the national agenda governed by more than one government department. The third sector is active in reintegration but has little influence over local strategies.

The main orientation in Birmingham has been enabling people depending on social assistance to access measures to reintegrate into the labour market. The issue is largely seen as structural by all sides as there have been multiple sources of evidence that there is a mismatch between the demands of the labour market and the skills of the people seeking work. Currently, local actors in Birmingham find the current discourse by the national government about ‘whether you are a striver or a shirker’ and the focus on work rather than welfare with the reduction in social protection in the context of welfare reform unhelpful. The focus on ‘hardworking people’ and the moral judgements implied by phrases such as ‘poorly motivated’ and ‘culture of dependency’ used by the Coalition government they feel suggest unemployment is a result of poor choices, rather than the general orientation in Birmingham that it is an issue of the structural distribution of resources, capacities and opportunities.

Over the years politically there have been different approaches to labour market issues, the Coalition focused on “raising standards across the city” whereas the new Labour administration has focused much more on the causes of unemployment and “closing the

gap” in terms of inequalities based on geographical areas. However, as one council officer stated, “a key driver for Birmingham under any administration has been access to jobs and that means both an investment in skills for the population but also actively creating jobs and then connecting people to those jobs”. This has resulted in a low level of conflict in this area.

Various central government initiatives aimed at the most deprived areas have been implemented through the City Council in Birmingham since 2000, with either employment as their sole objective or one amongst others. For example, the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund (2001 to 2008) led to strategies for local employer engagement and access to employment and training. The Single Regeneration Budget (2000 to 2007) included a number of successful and innovative employment and skills projects. The Working Neighbourhoods Fund (WNF, 2008 to 2011) resulted in the cross-agency Integrated Employment and Skills model as the basis for employment support across the city and around 40 individual innovative pilot projects targeting different groups and needs. The handling of the WNF in Birmingham was criticised by the then national Labour government for the slow pace of commissioning and locally there were accusations that the money had been used to support other areas of the Council’s work. This was refuted by the deputy leader of the Coalition Council and this exchange also received coverage in the local press.

In 2010 elected members across all parties expressed concern that after regular updates on strategies and approaches to tackling worklessness and large amounts of money spent since 2007 they were unclear as to the impact this had made. There was a view that Birmingham was good a job creation but not necessarily for people in those wards where unemployment sat at a higher level. The Labour Party believed that part of the reason that initiatives did not deliver a step-change was because they were quite top-down in terms of delivery, “sort of like an alien spaceship in the middle of the community, you splurge out a load of money and a load of activity, and at the end of the process you fly off but you actually leave nothing on the ground in terms of institutions that people feel they own and control”. Attempts had been made to devolve decisions about local employment and skills services in keeping with the dominant frame in the past but had not proved consistently effective.

The new Labour administration has promised to create thousands of jobs and tackle ingrained unemployment and poverty on a journey to make Birmingham the ‘enterprise capital of Britain’. The leader of the Council has said that his priorities for the next two years are jobs and enterprise, helping to get 52,000 unemployed Birmingham residents into work. New economic growth zones are to be created, which are likely to benefit from tax incremental funding schemes.

Youth unemployment is a particular subject of debate and a shared concern amongst political actors in Birmingham as the city has the highest rate of youth unemployment in the UK. The current leader of the local authority stated that a major theme for their work would be to improve the life chances of young people which links to the dominant discourse about Birmingham being an ‘*inclusive city*’. In the Leader’s Policy Statement, Sir Albert Bore stated, “Youth unemployment is a scourge that is damaging the prospects of a

new generation and will leave the scars on young people in terms of their future earnings and employability.”

One initiative instigated by the New Labour government, the Future Jobs Fund was widely believed a success in Birmingham. Around 2,000 young people, 45 per cent of whom then went on to unsubsidised employment afterwards benefited from the Fund. The national Coalition government abolished the programme against the recommendations of the City Council but there are plans to recreate this with resources drawn together from a variety of sources (a recommendation that came out of the Social Inclusion Process). This has been widely reported in the local press. As the Council Business Plan indicates,

*We.... are putting together £15m of funding for our Birmingham Jobs Fund, to support employers taking on young people and give additional training and support to young people themselves. With such bold initiatives we are showing what we can do by working in partnership with others who share our aspirations for the city.*

There was a view from the third sector involved in employment and skills provision that Birmingham business leaders were pushing a model of employment and economic growth that did not help in getting young people into jobs. Their view was that business of all kinds needed to be enabled to take responsibility for the development and training of young people rather than expecting the “finished article” and that this was lacking in the development of local labour market strategies.

#### **4. CHILDCARE POLICY**

The city council has a statutory responsibility to ensure that there is sufficient childcare by managing the local market, to secure the free entitlement for early years provision and to provide information, advice and assistance to parents. Childcare in Birmingham as in the rest of the UK is a mixed economy of private and public sector provision (the third sector play a very minor role in child care provision). The council manages Children’s Centres to support young children and their parents. Local authorities also have a role in improving outcomes for children. Due to the centralisation of childcare policy it is not high on the local political agenda and there is very little controversy around issues of childcare amongst political actors in Birmingham. There is also very little debate initiated by local interest groups or the public in this policy field, those which have occurred have been mainly in response to financial pressures.

The main focus politically has been on improving outcomes for all children, particularly vulnerable children and a reduction in child poverty. This is a directive to local authorities and health services from central government but is particularly pertinent in Birmingham, which has high numbers of children living in poverty when compared to nationally. In Birmingham 35 per cent of children are classified as living in poverty and in some wards this is as high as 52 per cent. There has been political and senior council officer support for full day care for vulnerable children and the development of free early years places for two year olds. Supporting families and children out of poverty is one of the commitments made by the current administration, although childcare is not mentioned explicitly.

In terms of managing the child care market, there has been some debate at council meetings about the closure of nursery schools due to service delivery becoming unsustainable financially. There was pressure from the Labour Group on the coalition to provide some protection for providers. The coalition council agreed that in these cases providers were to be given an injection of funds and helped to develop a sustainable business plan. In the local media reports about childcare were generally about openings or closures of child care facilities with the occasional opinion article written about the costs of childcare.

Children's Centres brought together the different strands of previous Labour government initiatives, Sure Start, the Neighbourhood Nurseries Initiative and Early Excellence Centres. Birmingham has 75 Children's Centres covering all wards in the city. There is widespread political support and cross-party recognition of the potential role Children's Centres have to play in influencing life chances and health. When budget cuts were announced by the Conservative-Liberal council there were debates both within the press and politically about whether Children's Centres would be closed. The governing coalition maintained their commitment to early intervention and prevention, "we have and will continue to develop our children's centres to address the needs of the most vulnerable, and work with parents and families to ensure their needs are catered for".

The Labour Group questioned how £5 million could be cut from the Children's Centres budget without closures and the local media reported on several areas where there were parent-led protests at reductions in Children's Centre funding.

Nationally, the Conservatives have raised issues of whether Children's Centres should continue to deliver universal services or become more targeted in approach. There are also plans to introduce a 'payment by results' system for Children's Centres to ensure that the most vulnerable families are supported. In Birmingham the universal element applies to health services and free nursery education alongside paid-for childcare for working parents. Currently, the Labour administration has had to introduce what amounts to an average 20 per cent reduction in funding and a reorganisation of services into 16 localities operating a hub and satellite model.

## INNOVATION IN THE LOCAL WELFARE CONTEXT

The local welfare system in Birmingham is characterised by working in partnership to develop social policy and a general consensus about the nature of the challenges facing the city. Economic growth, important for all cities, is not the only reason for consensus as there is also a willingness to enhance quality of life and promote inclusion. There is a belief that "we ought to be able to manage basic standards of housing, hygiene, health and access to jobs".

The council states explicitly in the documents it produces that it wants to encourage innovation and creativity. In terms of the role of local government and social innovation, the local authority sees itself as "*an enabler, a policymaker and also a funder*" in response to social problems. However, there was an acknowledgement that the Council was

operating in a very different fiscal environment than before which brought challenges but also possibilities, as one civil servant commented, “the approach in the good days was that here’s a good idea; oh let’s find a funding source to pay for it. We ended up with a plethora of small projects, some of which may have been useful but none of them capable of being implemented to scale”.

There was a much greater emphasis on partnership working, involving other sectors and « doing more for less ». The perception (and probably the reality) is that without some involvement from local government in terms of funding and/or support innovation is unlikely to be sustainable.

There was also the belief that Birmingham’s capacity for innovation went beyond the local authority and was also about Birmingham as a place. This can be illustrated by the following comments, “it’s a willingness amongst not just the council but other agencies to look at new ideas and promote them, and even if they’re somewhat unorthodox and I think we’ve got a tradition of that” and “the one thing Birmingham has built into its DNA is the idea of non-conformity and looking at different approaches to dealing with things and that comes through in social policy approaches as well”.

The common trend was for a move away from paternalistic solutions to empowering forms of welfare provision. The local government does acknowledge that what suits one neighbourhood may not suit another and recommends caution in parachuting in initiatives that have been successful elsewhere without understanding and involving the local community. Devolved decision-making was seen as a vehicle for innovation, as one policy actor stated, “the localisation piece is important because it is a lever for innovation”.

The financial crisis had created « a steeper mountain to climb » in terms of addressing social problems, but there was optimism. All stakeholders believed that the push for local people to have control over services could lead to innovation at the local level. This approach has not been without its difficulties over the years and so was not perceived as a solution that would happen ‘overnight’.