

Speech of Cllr Alan Rudge, Cabinet Member for Equalities and Human Resources, Birmingham City Council on the occasion of

What Makes Communities Work?

BVSC Community Cohesion Report Launch with the City Housing Partnership Housing Report held at Lakeside Centre, Aston University, 8 December 2010

1. Birmingham is a City of great diversity, both in terms of culture, art, faith, race and language. Yet it is a city that is cohesive, vibrant and innovative. It is a city that has welcomed people from all over the world, and they have benefited from the peace and harmony that exists in our city, and also from the social and economic development that the city is famous for.
2. The City Council and its partners recognise the need to continue to strengthen our society here in Birmingham and have expressed this through our **Community Cohesion Strategy** which has been reviewed in the light of the Be Birmingham Summit that took place in January 2009.
3. My vision of cohesion in our city is based on four pillars. It is about everyone having a stake in society and being able to join in and influence the decisions that affect their lives. It is about making sure that people from different backgrounds and communities feel that they belong to the place in which they live; therefore, it is important that being a citizen of Birmingham is more important than being a citizen of any other part of the world. We cannot achieve what we want to achieve by living in isolation to one another, it must be as a united city, where the differences of race, colour and religion are not barriers but sources of strength for progress. Community Cohesion is in the interest of all our citizens, whether they live in Sparkbrook or Sutton Coldfield; consequently building community cohesion must therefore be at the heart of the work of the Council, our partners and our communities. Political correctness must not be allowed to stifle engagement discussion understanding of each other thereby enabling true trust and cohesion to occur.
4. Therefore for Birmingham, real community cohesion means:
 1. **Living together positively**; which means people are able to get on with their own lives feeling safe that disagreements and disputes can be resolved fairly through agreed processes. The diversity of people's different backgrounds and circumstances is appreciated and positively valued.
 2. **Having a stake in society**; requires all citizens of the city feel that they have a stake in its success. Those from different backgrounds have, and feel they have, similar positive life opportunities.

3. **Building links and relationships**; this requires that adverse, offensive or anti-social behaviour is significantly reduced. Strong and positive relationships are developed between people from different backgrounds and circumstances.
4. **Being proud of the City**; means that we feel good about our city. There is a common and compelling vision for the success of the city across the whole population.
5. For me there are a number of principles which underpin good community cohesion: **Enterprise, achieving excellence, being innovative, ensuring all our citizens have access to opportunities, fairness and openness.**

To promote these principles we need to strengthen a range of attitudes and behaviours which we take for granted, but in the diverse world in which we live we need to further cultivate. Some may say they are the enduring values that have made our country Britain, great, and our city, Birmingham attractive to live in. They are:

- **Value and respect all people** that is, we recognise that all people have ideas, energy, skills and talents. Therefore for individuals to reach their full potential, they must be encouraged and allowed to fulfil their own aspirations and goals, so that they can make a positive contribution to their family, community, neighbourhood, and the city.
- **Trust** is a major source for building good relationships, between individuals, between and across communities, and vital for good citizenship. Trust cements cooperation between citizens and communities for the common good, and allows for those occasions when individual preferences, goals and opinions are put aside for the greater good of the community and the city as a whole.
- **Empowerment** allows us to ensure that the social capital that citizens and communities bring, generates and releases individual capabilities and collective resources, so that we can all contribute to the growth of our communities, and thus making our city prosperous, vibrant, and harmonious.
- **Relationships** are dependent on the values I have just mentioned: respect, trust, and empowerment. Relationships are key to good community cohesion. And as someone said: *hard to make easy to break*. Yet, it is through relationships we build partnerships, whether in marriage, the family, the community, the neighbourhood, and across communities. Through relationships people work together, they develop bonds of trust and respect; which they develop over time and through experience. These bonds open up a network for ideas and resources to flow. The friendships between individuals, as well as the relationships that individuals build with groups, and groups with communities are the organic backbone for a cohesive, peaceful and stable city.

6. I can add many more values that are important to community cohesion, but I believe these to be the essential ones. In meeting our aspirations about community cohesion, we need to recognise that these values have to be embedded into the social ethos of our society, and make effective through our social institutions. Therefore I would like to give some pointers where I think emphasis needs to be made.
7. The first is **the family**. The values of community cohesion begin in the family. This to me is important because we live in a world where the family is under threat; more and more pressures and demands are put upon the family, and increasingly the family is being fragmented and ignored as an important source of social development for our young. Yet, for all our faiths and cultures in Birmingham, the family is at the core of human and spiritual development, and the centre of community growth and stability. That is why it should be valued and recognised as a source of strength for our quest in supporting community cohesion. It is the quality of the family and its inner strength which gives rise to the quality of our city, country and community cohesion.

A misunderstood section of the family is our children, for some they can be a challenge, for others they are an inspiration. Birmingham is one of the most youthful cities in Europe, and as someone who has been involved in youth work; I am always amazed at their resilience, and inspired by their courage and creativity. That is why I believe special attention be given to this section of our communities, because they will be the future leaders and managers of our city, and they will make major contribution to the social, cultural, and economic development of the city. However, we cannot ignore the fact that some of our young do get into difficulties and are engaged in criminal activity, and, that is why for my part, I lead on Birmingham Reduction of Gang Violence, and Preventing Violent Extremism. My contribution is to work with our partners to ensure a small minority of young people do not undermine the good work and positive and constructive contribution by the majority of young people to the welfare of our city.

8. The second is **faith**. If what C. S. Lewis asserts is true, that “the geography of the spiritual world is different from that of the physical world: in the physical world contact between countries is at the frontiers, in the spiritual world contact is at the centre,” then certainly I can say that in Birmingham spirituality is at the heart of our city, no matter to what faith, if any, we may belong.

Faith communities are an important part of our city, although they do have distinctive characteristics and potential of their own. As sources of values and commitment, and with substantial constituencies, they have a valuable contribution to make, in building a sense of local community and renewing civil society, in addition to developing community cohesion.

I believe the new challenge for faith communities, and in particular their leadership, is how in a secular multi-faith society, they can emerge a theology that transcends their boundaries to reach out to others to work for a mission which promotes cohesion between and across faiths, which now make a significant contribution to the Birmingham landscape. *In other words, there will be no peace until there is continuing peace among faiths.*

9. The third is the **voluntary and not for profit sector**. I am passionately committed to the work of the voluntary and not for profit sector, having myself been a life long volunteer, and involved in a number of voluntary organisations, in particular youth groups. I believe that voluntary and community sector organisations have a crucial role to play in the reinvigoration of civic life and promoting community cohesion and its values. In Birmingham we have thousands of individuals who selflessly make a major contribution to supporting and working with community groups and individuals, making a difference to the lives of hundreds and thousands of people, to the sick, to the young, to the elderly, to the environment, to those in need.

We should aim to build a new partnership using the sector's strengths to challenge and stimulate new ideas, complement our shared objectives, to work with citizens and communities to respect, trust, value each other, so that we all contribute to making our city socially inclusive and cohesive.

10. The fourth is our **democratic culture**. There is no other country in the world more than England, Britain that has led the way in evolving a strong democratic culture. The Progressive Alliance in Birmingham City Council has been a champion and advocate of local democracy,
11. To improve our relationship with citizens at a local level, the City Council has established a Neighbourhood Strategic Partnership Board, chaired by me as the Cabinet Member lead for community engagement and cohesion. Through our Neighbourhoods Approach Birmingham is delivering one of the most ambitious programmes in the country, bringing together a wide range of agencies and organisations to focus upon improving the life chance of local people at a neighbourhood level. This approach has helped us to target resources and focus activity into 31 priority neighbourhoods that have been identified as those needing the most support in tackling a wide and complex range of economic and social issues whilst ensuring robust service delivery across all neighbourhoods.

We are also working to encourage more active participation by the public in neighbourhood and city-wide organisations, events and activities through a range of initiatives. This enables us to embed a culture of engagement and empowerment and to widen and deepen the involvement of local communities in shaping their own future.

12. I see democratic and civil renewal as a key priority for us where equal and high participation by our citizens in civic life is a central goal. Civil renewal should be about developing constructive dialogue between people and local government. Working together to make life and our environment better. People are core to the solutions, influencing the decisions that affect them and their communities, taking responsibility for addressing local problems, rather than expecting others to do so for us. In this way we are building, what I call democratic cohesion, the relationship between civic institutions and its citizens.
13. I believe that consultation, engagement and participation with the broadest cross section of our communities, is at the heart of the Council policy-making. That is why I have established a number of community networks to ensure we are able to hear the voices of citizens in various local communities, not the usual suspects, but the unheard voices, those who work tirelessly without proper recognition. The City Council's work around community cohesion, civil renewal and democratic participation are all instrumental in promoting and working for better community cohesion.
14. Community cohesion lies at the heart of what makes a safe and strong community. It must be delivered locally through creating strong community networks, based on principles of trust and respect for local diversity, and nurturing a sense of belonging and confidence in local people. Effectively delivering community cohesion also tackles the fractures in society which may lead to conflict and ensures that the gains which changing communities bring are a source of strength to local areas.
15. Community cohesion is therefore critical to the quality of life of local people and, as democratic leaders in their area, local authorities have an essential role to play in facilitating this. Through working with local partners, through influencing local services and through making things happen, local authorities can embed community cohesion principles throughout local life and bring about real change to the lives of the people living in their areas.
16. Building cohesive communities brings huge benefits by creating a society in which people from different ethnic, cultural and religious backgrounds can live and work together in an atmosphere of mutual respect and understanding. Cohesive communities are communities which are better able to tackle common problems, to provide mutual support and to work together for a positive future.
17. Ladies and gentlemen these are my thoughts and vision for our city. Community cohesion is about us all, we should all be engaged in it, we all have a stake in its success; please join with me in enhancing our city's reputation as one that is prosperous, safe, and at peace with itself.

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