

European Conference
Cities and Urban Spaces: Chances for Cultural and Citizenship Education

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Input

Workshop V
**Between Gentrification and Social Cohesion: The Role of Cultural and
Citizenship Education in Processes of Change**

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In the UK, successive governments have aimed at encouraging and empowering citizens to enable them to be more engaged in civic matters. They believed that this approach would lead to more successful and socially cohesive neighbourhoods in which citizens would be proud to live.

Governments recognised that, many inner city areas in England were blighted by high levels of deprivation, poor housing and high rates of unemployment. When New Labour came to power (1997) they set up the Social Exclusion Unit (SEU) to look into the problems faced by poor communities. The incoming Government felt they had “inherited a country where hundreds of neighbourhoods were scarred by unemployment, education failure and crime” and they promised to halve the number of children living in poverty.

The SEU would work on an “integrated approach to reverse the decline” *and* to “narrow the gap between outcomes in the deprived areas and the rest” - a very big vision. To inform the *National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal* they set up 18 policy action teams (PATs) to find “*joined up solutions for joined up problems*”. The PATs found that many inner city areas had deep-rooted problems, which needed longer term solutions. There was little or no joined up working between statutory services, agencies, service providers and community services and no one was accountable overall for rescuing poor/deprived neighbourhoods. The need for integration would be tackled through setting up Local Strategic Partnerships with all the providers of services around one table. The Government also recognised the importance and cost effectiveness of neighbourhood management and established 20 Pathfinder projects in the first instance to develop an integrated approach to connecting services. More substantial resources were invested in ‘New Deal for Communities’ areas with a £50m investment being given to a number of areas over ten years to challenge the decline in that community and create a positive and lasting change in the future for these areas and the citizens that lived there.

But even these significant policies and initiatives failed to tackle the deep-rooted multi-faceted problems that the most deprived communities faced especially those such as Balsall Heath in Birmingham. Here residents from BME (Black Minority Ethnic) made up a majority of the population. In the late 1990s over 60% of the population in Balsall Heath was from an Asian (majority Pakistani, Indian & Bangladeshi) background, 20% were White British 15% were Black (Caribbean and recently Somalian African) and 5% were others including Chinese. An Asian woman in Balsall Heath was three times more likely to be unemployed than any other group. There were poor educational achievements and no local secondary school. Overcrowding was above the Birmingham average. The health statistics were of serious concern. Men living in Balsall Heath would die on average 9 years sooner than the surrounding neighbourhoods. Most residents wanted to move out.

Balsall Heath was known as the unofficial red light district of the Midlands where 450 women were working as prostitutes in a square mile in the neighbourhood on a daily basis and drug dealers operated openly in the area. Residents felt there was no support from the police and other service providers when they complained. When the prostitutes working the streets started to sit in windows (Amsterdam style) the community felt it had to take action as the police were seen to be doing nothing about getting rid of the nuisance from prostitution that was blighting their neighbourhood.

The residents set up 'Street Watch' a residents organisation which started to picket their own street by standing together in large groups noting down vehicle number plates and monitoring the kerb crawlers. All the community from all backgrounds and faiths began to stand on the streets together in a common struggle. They erected "CCTV is watching you" signs onto lampposts even though there were no CCTV cameras at that time installed in the area. They began to stand opposite the particular houses from which the most visible prostitutes operated.

The Police threatened to arrest the residents for obstructing the pavements as they felt that Street Watch would cause trouble in the area. But through hard work, determination and being out on the streets on a daily basis the demand for the prostitute's services began to decline. Through working with local housing officers the prostitutes were removed from the local properties. The police finally began to work with the residents to stop the kerb crawlers by warning and sometimes arresting them and having a visible presence on the streets. With statutory service providers and residents working together the prostitutes began to leave and kerb crawlers too began to stay away from Balsall Heath.

As a result of this successful working partnership with the police and housing officers the local residents decided to set up the Balsall Heath Forum with an executive body made up of local residents. The Forum worked hard to bring together service providers, agencies, community and voluntary sectors and residents from the different minorities to "gentrify" their own area and to tackle some of its deep-rooted problems. They worked in partnership to develop and publish a Balsall Heath Neighbourhood Plan. The Forum set up residents groups including two women's groups as they wanted to ensure they involved the 'silent majority' of the local Asian women.

Now crime in Balsall Heath is down. House prices are up. A study done by researchers from the Chamberlain Forum showed that the average increase of the house prices in inner city Birmingham was 162%. Between April 2000 and March 2010 the largest increase in price was in Balsall Heath and there are now residents on a waiting list hoping to move in.

The Community is very active and engaged. In the Annual Opinion Survey, which was carried out by independent researchers in 2009, 2,754 people were interviewed covering all 40 wards in the city of Birmingham. Balsall Heath came first out of twenty-five neighbourhoods for residents who felt they could influence decisions in their locality. Balsall Heath also came first for residents who said they were satisfied with their area, first for feeling safe in their area and finally third for those



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who felt, different communities get on well together. These statistics show that Balsall Heath scored higher on these indicators than even the more affluent areas of the city.

In 2010 Balsall Heath's success has been recognised by the UK Government and the neighbourhood has been selected as a Vanguard area as an example of national good practice, which has been established by the new coalition government. In September 2010 the residents won the "Regeneration & Renewal Homes & Communities Award 2010 and the Balsall Heath "Building a Stronger Community" award.

Much still needs to be done. The lessons that can be learned from Balsall Heath's experience are now being utilised to inform and to pioneer the new thinking for the David Cameron's "Big Society" agenda. Balsall Heath has shown that gentrification can be "bottom up" with residents in the lead and not done by big outside intervention or by money simply being thrown at a problem. A community's aspiration can grow and achieve transformation when statutory service providers, third sector voluntary and community organisations are all working together to achieve one common goal.

