

Birmingham Friends of the Earth
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4 June 2018

Dear Sirs

Re Integrated Communities Strategy Green Paper

Birmingham Friends of the Earth welcome the opportunity to comment on the Integrated Communities Strategy Green Paper. We are an organisation based in Birmingham which campaigns on advancing the principles of environmental sustainability and positive environmental change with an emphasis on issues which affect Birmingham. Please find below our comments for your consideration:

Chapter 2: Residential Segregation

We see that in a large urban area like Birmingham, Migrants tend to be concentrated in areas with poorer facilities and poorer quality environments. However it should also be recognised that other factors can work towards segregation such as people wanting to live near their friends and relatives and with people sharing similar backgrounds to themselves. That said, disparities between areas in terms of quality of environment, provision of facilities and lack of opportunities should be reduced by improving the worst areas and bringing them up to the standard of the best areas. Without improving standards in such areas, segregation becomes entrenched and will be perpetuated.

Fast, busy roads can be physical dividers, separating communities and preventing people from meeting and further exacerbate residential segregation. Measures to slow traffic to 20mph and restore flourishing High Streets would help roads to be meeting places, not dividers. Boundaries of wards, constituencies, districts should not follow main roads, or they reinforce them as social dividers. Public transport on the other hand can unite different areas with tram lines, suburban railway stations and bus routes.

Chapter 3: Education and Young People

The document notes that it is desirable for school catchment areas to be widened and varied in order to attract pupils from a wider diversity of backgrounds so that the pupil composition of a school becomes more varied. However, widening catchment areas may have the undesirable effect of increasing the number and length of journeys to school which may result in more car journeys and increased congestion and pollution. We believe that pupils should ideally be within easy walking cycling distance of their schools or at least be able to use public transport or school bus services. Any widening or altering of school catchment areas should be carefully assessed in terms of School Travel Planning to ensure that the number of journeys made to school by car is reduced or minimised.

The Paper gives the example of Birmingham University Free School which has four city-wide catchment areas. These would result in increased length of journeys to school which it may not be possible to accommodate on public transport. We believe that having schools which are accessible by walking or cycling and being part of the community in which they are located are more likely to lead to integrated communities than having schools which are remote from their catchment areas.

Out of school education is mentioned as an important means of increasing integration, but omits to mention the importance of environmental and outdoor education. These activities should be considered as important means of broadening pupils horizons.

Chapter 5: Places and Community

We agree that community hubs and shared spaces such as parks and libraries are important for integration. We believe that facilities should be kept as local as possible to the communities they serve, thereby reducing the need to travel. Although we agree that it is beneficial for communities to be involved in the running and management of these assets, we believe that actual ownership may be a step too far and that it is often more appropriate for assets to remain in public ownership, even where management and running of such assets is carried out by community groups. Furthermore there is a risk that once such assets are removed from public ownership, they could be lost to communities for good. It should also be recognised that there may be a limit to what community groups can achieve unless they have adequate support and funding from local authorities and public bodies.

We are pleased to note that local parks and open green spaces are recognised as important assets in promoting well being and are recognised in the government's 25 year environment plan. We further note that DCLG plans to work closely with parks groups and volunteers through the Parks Action Group to identify how parks can be protected. However we would like to see local and sustainable solutions to the management and running of our green open spaces which should not exclude local authorities.

In general, we hope that the promotion of community ownership and management of assets is not used as a deliberate means of reducing the role of local authorities by divesting them of their ownership of and responsibility for such assets. While we recognise that community management and running of assets can have desirable and beneficial outcomes in some cases, in other cases it may not be appropriate.

We strongly believe that safe, walkable and cycleable streets significantly improve the health and vibrancy of an area and contribute to community cohesion and integration. Encouraging walking and cycling and making these activities safer by for example implementation of 20 mph zones increases the presence of people outdoors and reduces the fear of crime. This results in a virtuous circle where the reduced fear of crime leads to more people out and about. On the other hand fast traffic and high speed rat runs produce an unpleasant environment which deters walking and cycling reducing the presence of people outdoors. The feeling of deserted streets increases the fear of crime resulting in fewer people cycling and walking.

We believe people friendly streets are essential in improving the safety and attractiveness of an area and this facilitates better community integration. People from different backgrounds are therefore more likely to 'bump' into each other on the street which is likely to contribute to a happier and healthier community.

In summary, we believe that the following measures or combination of measures are a pre-requisite for 'people-friendly' streets which we have outlined above:

1. 20 mph zones
2. traffic calming
3. safe crossings
4. reducing physical barriers and community severance caused by main roads and making these barriers more permeable by slowing traffic and improving crossings
5. basic facilities should be within easily walking and cycling distance of peoples' homes via safe and pleasant routes.

We note that the Green Paper mentions a consultation on the refresh of the NPPF to include policies on facilitating social interaction and prevent barriers between communities. We believe that 'people - friendly' streets as we have outlined above are essential in achieving these aims.

Chapter 6: Increasing Economic Opportunity

The paper notes the importance of tackling barriers to employment to improve community integration. To this end we believe that safe, accessible and cheap public transport has an important role to enable

people to access jobs. Planning policies should also facilitate local sustainable businesses and flourishing town centres.

Yours faithfully,

Martin Stride

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Birmingham Friends of the Earth