

# BIRCHILLS STRATEGIC REGENERATION FRAMEWORK: ROUND TABLE WORKSHOP

July 22nd 2010, Reedswood Methodist Church, Birchills





Walsall Council



July 2010

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# CONTENTS

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Introduction	4
Table Discussions	6-16
Table 1	6
Table 2	10
Table 3	14
Table 4	16
Next Steps	18



# INTRODUCTION



Jonathan Brown speaking at the Round Table Workshop at Reedswood Methodist Church

On the evening of Thursday 22nd July 2010 a Round Table workshop was held in Reedswood Methodist Church with over 30 participants involved in the workshop. The purpose of the event was to bring together interested parties who are involved or have interests in the management and future development of Birchills, to list current key issues and scope out its future prospects.

The event took place between 6.00 and 8.00pm in the centre of the Birchills neighbourhood. The evening was split into two discussions, after a brief introduction from Jonathan Brown and Charlie Baker (URBED) a presentation was given that outlined the initial findings from the consultant team. After which the attendees split into four tables, each facilitated by a member of the consultant team. The first round table discussion focussed upon identifying the key physical, and socio-economic issues that Birchills currently faces. This was followed in the second session by discussing what key projects Birchills may need to deliver to help sustain economic, social and physical regeneration over the next 20 years.

What follows is a summary of the main issues and challenges raised by the evenings discussions. These will help form a base, from which we will develop strategic regeneration options for Birchills. We will follow this by consulting with the public in October based on what we have learnt so far and what could be possible for the future of Birchills.

## Programme:

6.00 – 6.15	Registration
6.15 – 6.30	Introductions by Emma Segal WMBC followed by: Short Presentation by Jonathan Brown (JB), URBED - "Birchills Today"
6.30 – 7.00	Discussion 1 – "What does Birchills offer as a place to live, work and invest?"
7.00 – 7.15	Feedback and Refreshment
7.15 – 8.00	Short Presentation by JB followed by: Discussion 2 – "Where next for Birchills?"



A gentleman fishing on the canal in Birchills

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## Round Table Participants

Aftab Nawaz	PMWA
Alan Watts	Regeneration Manager Walsall Housing Group
Alastair Thornton	Councils Enterprise & Business Support
Donovan Bailey	Area Manager
Emma Seagal	Project Manager
Gulfam wali	PMWA
Keith McEwan	Firms Limited
Marje Brindle	Training and Development Officer
Mark Ledo	Crime Reduction Officer & Crime Prevention Design Advisor
Neamh Rogers	Housing Services
Pauline Churcher	
PC Bruce Wilson	Birchills Neighbourhood Police Team
Zaheer Iquba	PMWA
Sijadd Hussain	
Steve McGregor	Regeneration Manager Walsall Housing Group
Steven Edwards	Transport Planner
Terry Edis	WATMOS
Will	Housing Services
Sam Mills	Green Space Services, Walsall Council
Mandy Findlay	Energy Efficiency, Walsall Council
Hillary Hastings	Sure Start
Diane Platt	Walsall College
Ursula Barrington	Watmos
Mike Hour	Caldmore Housing Association
Changis Raja	Resident
Bashart Hussian	Resident

## Consultant Team

Jonathan Brown	Urbanism-Environment-Design (URBED), Project Manager
Grace Manning Marsh	URBED
Paul Bower	URBED
Charlie Baker	URBED
Jonathan Tutt	DTZ
Jonathan Breeze	Centre for Local Economic Strategies (CLES)
Rupert Greenhalgh	CLES
Richard Cornell	JMP (Transportation)
Errol Stewart	Rider Levett Bucknall (RLB)
Jane Openshaw	RLB

## Client Team

Emma Segal	Walsall Council, Senior Regeneration Officer (Town Centre & WRC)
Stephen Edwards	Walsall Council , Transport
Sam Mills	Walsall Council Green Spaces
Alistair Thornton	Walsall Council Economic Development
Mike Hew	Caldmore Housing
Terry Edis	Burrowes St. TMO
Donovan Bailey	Walsall Council Neighbourhood Manager
Alan Watts	
Marge Brindall	WATMOS



# TABLE 1



The SRF Study Area

## Discussion 1 – “What does Birchills offer as a place to live, work & invest?”

### Themes

1. People
2. Economy
3. Housing/Property Market
4. Place
5. Access

### Round Table Participants:

Jonathan Brown – Facilitator, URBED  
 Bruce Wilson – West Midlands Police, Neighbourhood Officer  
 Mark Ledo – West Midlands Police, Architectural Liaison  
 Alistair Thornton – WMBC Economic Development  
 Jonathan Tutt – DTZ  
 Richard Cornell – JMP  
 Steven Edwards – WMBC Transportation  
 Steve McGregor – Walsall Housing Group

### 1. People

- Bruce Wilson, West Midlands Police: Perceptions of Anti Social Behaviour here are worse than the reality – Birchills is relatively low level.
- The main issues are in Reedswood Park, and in a sense this is an inevitable consequence of any park’s appeal to younger people as places to gather in the evenings.
- On balance it is better to contain low level issues in the park than displace problems in surrounding residential streets where they cause more concern and disturbance.
- The BMX track is popular but otherwise there is very little in the way of facilities for young people, either formal centres or outreach provision.
- There is a persistent problem of quad bikes using the Ash Track and coming into the park – barriers should be considered to restrict such vehicles whilst allowing push bikes, wheelchairs etc.



Table 1 at work

- Basically there is nothing for young people to do – we tried with Burrowes Street TMO to get the old Tannery pub as a base but this fell through.
- Ideally there would be at least two bases – the park would be an excellent location for more focussed youth provision such as JB's suggestion of Play Builder adventure playground etc.
- Steve Edwards, WMBC: Schools used to open sports halls etc. after hours, but unsure if this happens any longer.
- Mark Ledo, WM Police: Alumwell secondary school did offer such access.
- The Afro-Caribbean centre in the former Primary School still offers a facility, but having gone in very recently it does appear in need of improvement.
- The condition of the building is poor; I believe a developer may have spoken to them regarding retaining a re-housed facility somewhere on site.
- Bruce Wilson, WM Police: The centre is still in use but is not really busy.

## 2. Economy

- Alistair, WMBC Economic Development: Your analysis of the range of local businesses was fascinating, I'm sure few people know of the armoured vehicle makers.

- It is always good to highlight 'business to business' capabilities so that enterprises are aware of local supply chains and opportunities for mutual support.
- Perhaps we could make more of the really diverse range of skills and products we do still offer in the area.
- Mark Ledo, WM Police: Observant locals will see vehicles on test in Metropolitan Police liveries and products for other big security firms.

## 3. Housing/Property Market

- Bruce Wilson, West Midlands Police: The central part of the area is as suggested very stable and will remain so.
- Pouk Hill/Reedswood is different in that it does act as an 'escalator' – it's the kind of place that has a more mobile population.

## 4. Place

- There is no clear focal point until you enter the town centre, and the local centres that should offer a positive sense of identity like Old Birchills/Birchills Street and Stafford Street are very run down, damaging perceptions and deterring investment.
- Some key character buildings are underused e.g. pubs, shops, former schools etc. Some premises have upstairs floors that could be better used.

# TABLE 1

## 1. The People....

- Population c.8,000 rising until 2006 - levelled out?
- Young - 58% under 34 compared to 45% nat. ave.
- Diverse - 35% BME - "people feel safe; sense of belonging; ethnic & religious differences respected"
- larger ethnic groups very stable (+6 years in the area), smallest groups most likely at address < 2 years
- health poor in comparison with borough; mental health, respiratory and circulatory diseases main factors

 urbid

Slides from the evening's presentation

- Lighting could be used to improve the public realm and pick out key landmarks like St. Andrews etc.
- Landmarks as important as St. Andrews church appear derelict – its priceless stained glass windows have to be covered to insure against vandalism, but the plastic covers give the impression the building is boarded up despite actually being in active community use.
- Bruce Wilson, West Midlands Police: Agree with the break down of the area into three broad zones, with Burrowes Street quite self-contained. However, Stafford Street and Croft Street etc. would not really see themselves as Birchills – Green Lane, the canal and industrial areas are too much of a barrier.
- People feel Birchills is a run-down area. The centres and busiest through routes compound this poor impression.
- A sense that the place is derelict and run down has become deep rooted – it demoralises people. This loss of pride can have all sorts of negative effects.
- Terry's TMO shows what can be achieved if people get together to improve their environment. It must be one of the best examples in the country, not just in the borough or even Black Country.
- Because of the well kept environment the estate offers a sense of security and welcome as soon as you enter, which has an effect on both perceived and real behaviour.
- What we need to do is make more of the park, which is indeed a hidden gem as suggested, and address run down streets and sites.
- Steven, WHG: Burrowes Street has the clear identity and strong community we would love to see in all our estates.
- This is often a real struggle and great credit has to be given to local leaders like Terry and his team for making such a difference.
- Mark Ledo, Police: We are asked to review all significant planning applications and there has been little of late in the way of development proposals for the Birchills area.
- 5. Access
- Steven Edwards – WMBC Transportation: Stafford Street is heavily trafficked and is a priority public transport corridor feeding to and from the ring road.
- It may be that the current configuration of the central bus lane and other traffic flow measures impacts on the business environment and community amenity; there has certainly be a decline in conditions and an increase in empty shops/gap sites over a long period.
- Any proposals to rebalance the roles would need to be discussed with CENTRO, who would want to maintain the function of the bus lane.
- The exceptionally heavy traffic flows associated with J10 mean the strategic corridors like Wolverhampton Road will always be affected by heavy traffic; the challenge is to make these busy roads still offer a good impression of Birchills and Walsall for passers by, and keep them easy to walk along and cross for local people.



## 1. The People (2)....

- smaller proportion of residents in work; also lower proportions are self-employed & part-time.
- barriers faced by residents include lack of basic skills; confidence issues; language & literacy; poor health.
- skills have improved but gap still widening - less qualified workforce means skilled jobs filled by in-commuters.
- 40% may have no formal qualifications - twice Walsall average (20%), three times national average (13%)



## 2. The Economy

- unemployment was improving until recession - now worsening at a faster rate than national picture
- manufacturing has declined from over a third to around a quarter of employment in just five years 2003 - 05
- However manufacturing still forms a resilient part of the Birchills economic base - rich range of businesses
- other key employment sectors are in Retail, Distribution, Hotels/Restaurants, Transport & ICT/Communications



## Discussion 2 – “Where next for Birchills?”

### Themes

1. Design/Delivery Vision for major development sites
2. Stock condition interventions – eco retrofit?
3. Community Capacity – skills/resources

### 1. Design/Delivery Vision

- Agreed the need to integrate site layouts and avoid further fragmentation.
- Linking park and canal with quality pedestrian cycle routes seen as particularly desirable.
- The major sites offer a double opportunity – to bring in aspiring newcomers to the benefit of Birchills and Walsall itself, and also to meet some of the identified housing need set out in the presentation
- (i.e. affordable routes to owner occupation, larger housing to address over-crowding, BME needs, extra-care for elderly people etc.)
- While there is a pressing need to get more stock built, it is also important not to compromise quality especially on the key canalside sites – the chance to transform inner Walsall will not come again.
- There would be a knock on effect on planning policy through allowing a ‘best employment’ site like Reedswood to go to residential – this has been subject to massive remediation with public support, and a long LDF process.

- It is thought to have the same ownership as the retail park; the latter was configured in such a way as to separate the Reedswood site perhaps in the hope it would be allowed to go for retail or housing.
- RSL led model could be of interest on some of the sites; we would look carefully at addressing local and wider housing need.
- Suggestion of rescuing moribund apartment schemes e.g. Hollyhedge 1, Thomas Street etc. by allowing conversion to extra-care is well worth exploring.

### 2. Stock Condition Interventions – eco retrofit?

- Supported this in principle if resources can be found.
- Interested in scope for using local suppliers of labour and materials.

### 3. Community Capacity – skills/resources

- There could be dialogue with the likes of Sainsbury’s and other employers – at present they turn their back physically on the area but may have a deeper role to play.
- Skills agenda has moved from demand driven (i.e. people asking for certain courses) to more economically led (i.e. employers identifying skills gaps and people being trained to fill them).
- There is a ‘think local’ scheme in Walsall to encourage local procurement by public and private sectors.

# TABLE 2



Table 2 in progress

## Discussion 1 – “What does Birchills offer as a place to live, work & invest?”

### Themes

1. People
2. Economy
3. Housing/Property Market
4. Place
5. Access

### Round Table Participants:

Paul Bower – Facilitator, URBED

Rupert Greenhalgh – CLES

Errol Stewart - RLB

Ursula Barrington, WATMOS

Zaheer Iquba, PMWA

Gulfam Wali, PMWA

Bashart Hussain, Hospital Street Resident

Keith McEwan, Local business owner - Firms Ltd.



Skate park in Reedswood Park

### 1. People

#### Positive aspects:

- “There is a strong sense of local community, mutual respect and tolerance between different communities, people feel safe.”
- “Get the sense that there is a real local community, this is a real positive, but they need support, quick wins to generate belief.”
- “Walsall College could be a turning point. But you have got to get youth in Birchills involved, got to get people to aspire to go to college – ‘I can do that.’”
- “You need to have a few quick wins, a demonstration project that will show local people what can be achieved.”
- “It needs 1 or 2 catalyst projects that the local community can build upon.”



Birchills junction/local centre

## 2. The Economy (2)

- Business start up & long-term survival an issue
- Weaker national and international connections
- Productivity gap (relating to skills and enterprise)



## 3. The Housing Market - geography

- east-west split, tendency towards spatial polarisation
- east appears to have high transience - 25% annual turnover in some streets
- part of an 'isolate' housing market limiting movements within inner Walsall
- west of Pargeter Street turnover is low - 8% or less
- Part of broader 'Motorway' housing market



Slides from the evening's presentation

### Negative aspects:

- "Academic progression and aspirations to go onto college or training need urgently addressing."
- "There is very little for any young person to do in Birchills, very little sport and leisure opportunities and nowhere to go in the evening."
- "Young people are lacking aspirations but it's no surprise, there has been promise after promise but very little actually come from it."
- "Need to follow up on working within schools and using mentors, to see how many apprenticeships are in place in the borough, working with local employers to try and grow the number of apprenticeships... or it is a return to hollow promises."
- "Too many promises and no consistent long-term action."

### 2. and 3. Economy and Housing

#### Positive aspects:

- "The quality of accommodation needs improving and unemployment, aspirations and image need significant improvement."
- "I'm afraid that there is a real perception of business flight from the area. {discussed what the stats show}. Perception that employment opportunities are becoming less and less."

### Negative aspects:

- "The big employers have moved out over the last ten years and the same number of jobs have not been replaced, people have to travel further now to reach jobs, but it's about having the skills and aspirations to do this."

### 4. and 5. Place and Access

#### Negative aspects:

- "The park just does not come across as having any well managed public space or buildings that the community can use, it's more of a no go area after dark."
- "Access {cars parking} is a real problem, you have just got to realise that people still need and want to use their cars, car parking is a real problem in the area, the streets were just not designed for it. It puts off business too."



# TABLE 2



## Discussion 2 – “Where next for Birchills?”

### Themes

1. Design/Delivery Vision for major development sites
2. Stock condition interventions – eco retrofit?
3. Community Capacity – skills/resources

### 1. Design/Delivery Vision

- Use the canal as a ‘Golden Thread’ to unite all the major development sites – by making new connections to the water/canal front
- “Caparo – a quick win would be to allow development and then use things like S106 to invest in other schemes in the area.”
- “Got an opportunity to use funding coming in to encourage wider community benefit within different parts of Birchills. {But how far is this really possible using S106?}
- “The pressure on developers to build types of housing, affordable housing quotas is a real problem. Having a more ‘open’ approach would encourage people to develop sooner...rather than forcing affordable housing onto a site.”
- “What about a youth village concept, mixing sites for sport, sorts, leisure and children’s services; building on existing resources like Sure Start etc.” Run possibly by a Youth TMO-like organisation?
- “There needs to be some type of entrepreneurial space within the area, perhaps at the college, or even in the community.”
- Provision of integrated affordable housing must be an objective across the development sites.
- Reedswood Park could host a new series of events to make the most of this hidden gem as a venue/destination for not only Birchills but for the whole of Walsall!
- Local people have to benefit from the start of this process as well as be involved in the design of new developments that will have an inevitable impact – good and bad on their area.
- Green infrastructure – planting trees to improve perceptions and how you feel walking/cycling/driving around Birchills
- The ability for an individual/young family to stay and grow in the area should be a priority – i.e. those who live in apartments near town should see Birchills as a good place/neighbourhood to invest in a family house/larger home. Put down roots!



Slides from the evening's presentation

## 2. Stock Condition Interventions – eco retrofit?

- "Got an opportunity to use funding coming in to encourage wider community benefit within different parts of Birchills. {But is this really possible using S106?}"
- "What about opening out some of the streets, there's a feeling of being hemmed in, creating spaces amongst the terrace housing for green-space and car parking"... response: "But where would you do this?"
- "Retrofitting some of the buildings could offer employment opportunities."
- Energy efficiency needs explaining more to the residents and businesses – as it is currently not an immediate concern for them.

## 3. Community Capacity – skills/resources

- "Need to do more work on engaging the local community on what they want, in the design and future development of schemes to build a sense of local ownership."
- "What about a youth panel for Birchills, to discuss the use of open spaces, perhaps even local buildings that have been transferred to local groups, what about a youth quarter / youth village designed and led by local groups and young people?"
- "Money still needs to be invested in community engagement, rather than build and they will come, it needs a sense of getting local buy-in."
- "There should be a pocket of money put aside for local interaction and local capacity building of groups to get involved in local development."
- "The TMO works in this way (getting buy-in) because people feel it is something they can influence and that it belongs to them."
- "Time and again we have talked about changing places like Burrows Street, and nothing then happens, local people need to see results."
- "Release buildings, community centres to kick start local activity...are there any buildings in the park (Reedswood) where we can do this?"

# TABLE 3



Table 3 discussions in motion

## Discussion 1 – “What does Birchills offer as a place to live, work & invest?”

### Round Table Participants:

Grace Manning-Marsh – Facilitator, URBED  
Jonathan Breeze – CLES  
Terry Edis, Burrowes Street TMO  
Dianne Platt, Walsall College  
Marie Brindle, WATMOS  
Pauline Churcher, Resident  
Alan Watts, Regen. Manager at WHG  
Sam Mills, Green Space Management, Walsall Council  
Mike Hew, Caldmore Housing Association

### What attracts people to live in the area?

- Family ties
- Community
- Close to the town centre
- Cheap properties
- Affordable homes
- Close to the Motorway
- The canal - although it is underused
- The Park
- Cheap housing near the town centre

### What detracts people from living in the area?

- Antisocial behaviour
- Poor environment
- Unattractive environment
- Delivery of environmental services is poor
- The area looks a mess
- There is a lack of quality accommodation
- Lack of places to go
- No activities for children
- No community heart
- There is a poor perception of the area
- Poor gateways to the area
- A lack of 3rd sector organisations
- There is a skills gap and a lack of awareness of what the college offers
- There has been a massive deterioration in the area in the last 30 years

### What attracts people to work and invest in the area?

- Close to the town centre
- The motorway
- Public transport
- The park - although it was felt this was a missed opportunity
  - Lack of amenities
  - Lack of signage
  - Lack of access points
  - Lack of parking



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## Discussion 2 – “Where next for Birchills?”

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What detracts people from working and investing in the area?

- The motorway
- The appearance
- Lack of quality work units
- Lack of facilities- e.g. cafes- servicing
- Employment sites
- Lack of incentives to locate businesses

Other issues raised;

- There is an overlap in the different types of tenures and sense of ownership and pride of their homes and areas. The cooperative style (RSL) residents have a sense of ownership similar to owner occupied properties- however some private rental residents have less pride in their area.
- The clean up of 5 ways roundabout could help to promote pride in the area and have knock on positive effects.
- There are massive issues with congestion at the road junctions
- Planning plays a massive part in where businesses/ homes can be located- there needs to be more flexibility from the planners
- There should be incentives for reviving manufacturing
- More emphasis needs to be placed on improving Reedswood park- the park has slowly declined since the football teams moved out (Sunday league) after the changing rooms were burnt down and not replaced
- There is a lack of parking for people visiting the park
- The nearest cinema is located in Willenhall
- It may be better to take out the poorest housing instead of retrofitting it

Development site ideas:

- Reedswood Site;
  - o Should be used for employment land
  - o Small scale specialist manufacturing
- Former Golf Course
  - o Aspirational housing linked to the Caparo site
  - o Leisure facility/ returned to golf course if the Caparo site is developed as housing
- Caparo Site
  - o Linking to the golf course site
  - o Linking of other sites to power housing from employment
- Birch Street Site
  - o A sport and leisure complex - with bowling and a cinema and appropriate parking for the site
  - o Possibilities of water sports & restaurants
  - o Ice skating rink
  - o Link the forge museum to the site
- Cable Drive Site
  - o Need to be very careful with this site as it could become an island cut off from other areas if it is developed as residential land
  - o An opportunity for self contained elderly residential homes
  - o Employment land
- Depot Site
  - o Employment land.
- 5 Ways roundabout
  - o This could be created in to a new heart of Birchills- with local shops and facilities
- Burrows Street
  - o The creation of a small health centre at the top of Burrows Street

# TABLE 4

## Discussion 1 – “What does Birchills offer as a place to live, work & invest?”

### Round Table Participants:

Charlie Baker – Facilitator, URBED  
Aftab Nawaz, Pakistani & Muslim Welfare Association (PMWA)  
Donovan Bailey, Area Manager  
Emma Seagal, Walsall Council  
Mandy Findlay, Energy Efficiency, Walsall Council  
Hillary Hastings, Surestart  
Changis Raja, Resident

### Good Aspects:

- ‘Walk-ability’ and proximity to town centre is especially good for those not using the car.
- Employment is available within walking distance, e.g. at the bakery and hospital.
- Birch street area has “nice greenery”
- “Green Lane Park” is regarded as a crucial resource for the women of the area as “they won’t use Reedswood as it does not feel safe”.
- On housing condition one attendee pointed out that his mum was very happy - she could drink the water and didn’t freeze in winter and that was all she needed!
- Taxi driving is a very popular occupation through necessity as well as choice
- The strategic road network has both good and bad impacts - it helps sustain local employers but does enables jobs to go to people from outside the area. It does give scope for skilled people to live here and commute across the West Midlands.

### Bad Aspects:

- “Private landlords will let anyone in” and they “never do any maintenance”.
- The Asian community is primarily Pakistani/Kashmiri and have lived here since the 50’s and 60’s. Mirpuri too.

Many were displaced by the building of a dam there.

- Dalkeith street was mentioned as “a bit low quality”, but few of the people living there are in a financial position to invest in improvements.
- Schools - 6 primaries although 1 is “one of the worst performers in the area” and “another 3 aren’t good”.
- Hilary from Surestart says there is a low baseline entering schools.
- The loss of Caparo was seen as having a very bad impact on Birchills.

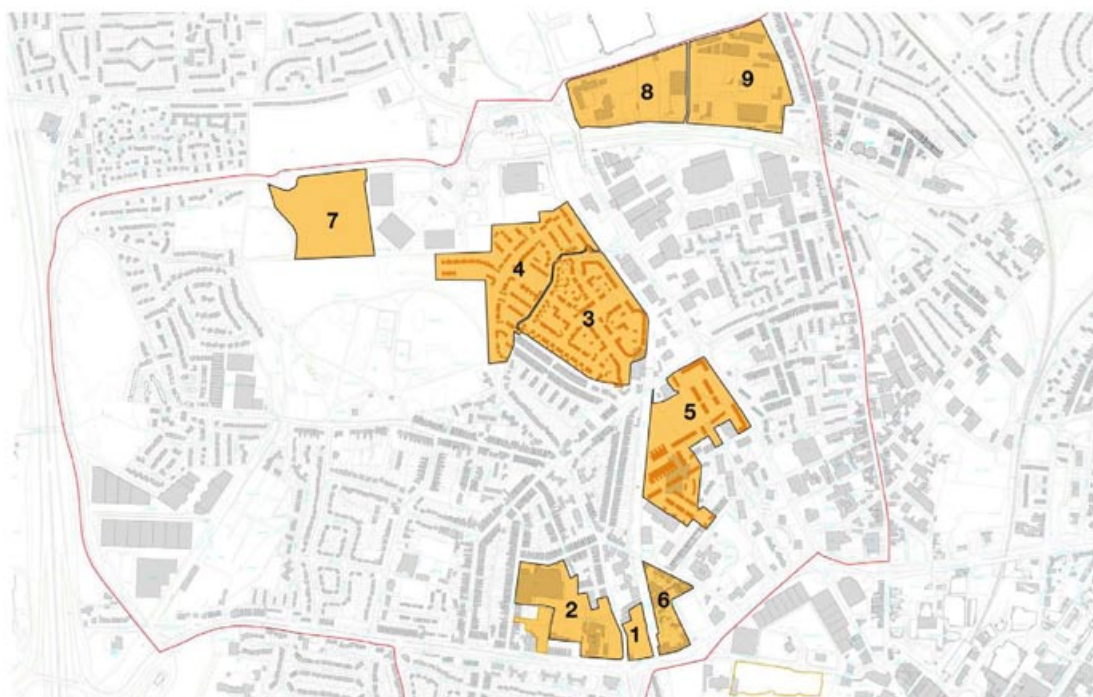
## Discussion 2 – “Where next for Birchills?”

- It was felt that more community cohesion between the communities encircling the park was needed.
- In addition any new development next to the park should interact with the green space to encourage natural surveillance and a safer park for all users.
- A clear need for some actual realisable projects to be proposed for Birchills was called for by many around the table.
- People have been consulted on plans and proposals before without much happening, so action is needed to win back community confidence.
- Mandy Findlay suggested there was CESP funding potentially available for energy efficiency investment in homes.
- Support from several people for a community retrofit project – URBED are looking at this in a parallel study and will apply our knowledge to Birchills in the light of Rider Levett Bucknall’s stock condition survey when available.
- Limited knowledge of educational opportunities means people lack the information to further their training, skills and job prospects.
- Courses for skills training need to be free or affordable if the most excluded are to have much prospect of accessing them.



Table 4 mapping issues

#### 4. The Place - 'Live' planning areas



Possible areas of change from the evening's presentation





St. Andrew's church

## NEXT STEPS

We will be holding 2 further public consultations on:  
Thursday 21st October 2010 at Bentley Lane School and  
Friday 22nd October at Burrowes St. TMO, followed by the  
Mosque & Birch Street School. The purpose will be to show  
possible scenarios for the future of Birchills based on the  
issues raised from this and other discussions. It will be an  
opportunity for all to voice their views on the ideas and  
possibilities raised so far. After the consultation has finished  
the feedback will be analysed and all comments noted.

The final Strategic Framework plan will then be prepared  
and approved by Birchills PRG at the end of 2010 and then  
endorsed by WHG and the Council thereafter. The Strategic  
Regeneration Framework will help to inform planning and  
promote quality development in Birchills in the years to come.



Ash Walk



Canal towpath and working boat yard

