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CITY CHALLENGE: INVOLVING THE COMMUNITY IN UK URBAN POLICY?

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The decline of large parts of the major British cities has produced a range of central and local government responses. The main thrust of official Urban Policy was based on property-led regeneration and market forces (e.g. Urban Development Corporations) in the 1980s. City Challenge was a significant departure in 1991 for its emphasis on local partnership in a competition for central government support of £37.5m over 5 years. In 1991, 11 winners were chosen and a further 20 were added in 1992. The initial scheme was welcomed in allowing local government to propose programmes with a stress on quality of life issues like training, health, reduction of crime and housing improvement. The scheme has been criticised by those Urban Priority Areas whose funds have been cut to pay for the "winners" and for the selection methods, the priority given to private investors, the small areas covered by schemes and the standardisation of programmes. An emerging criticism addressed here is that the delivery of City Challenge is taking less account of the needs of the communities and will thus not have a long term impact.

INTRODUCTION: BRITISH URBAN PROBLEMS

Demographic, economic, political and social changes over the past thirty years have had a profound effect on the relative prosperity of the core areas of Britain's largest cities. Central Business Districts (CBDs) have usually retained their attractiveness for offices for information-hungry services and for upscale shopping developments. However, the surrounding zones have become characterised by a landscape dominated by derelict land and poor housing, occupied by a population with high levels of social disadvantage. There has been a wide range of processes involved in the creation of such conditions - many of them closely interconnected - but their main features can be summarised in terms of population loss, economic decline, physical decay and social disintegration (for greater detail see LAWLESS (1989), ROBSON (1988), ROBSON et al (1994)).

The loss of population from the inner areas of Britain's cities has been a clear trend since the 1960s. The inner districts of London, for example, recorded an average annual population decline of 0.8% in 1961-66, rising to a peak of 2.0% in 1971-76 and only returning to near balance in the 1980s (ROBSON 1988). At a more general level, the results of the 1991 census suggest that the major metropolitan areas lost over one third of a million people during 1981-91, while the rest of the country gained one and a half million (ROBSON 1994). Some of this loss reflects suburbanisation and counterurbanisation, another element is inter-regional migration (particularly from Northern industrial cities) and there is also the influence of lower rates of population

growth nationally - through lower levels both of natural increase and of international immigration. Where migration from the inner areas has occurred, it has been selective in terms of class, age-group, income and race, so that the residents remaining are more likely to be in the lower socio-economic groups, either very young or very old, poor and members of ethnic minorities.

The loss of jobs is both a cause and an effect of the demographic decline just summarised. It has also occurred at a more rapid rate - while inner city population levels in 1981 were 65% of their 1951 figure, the number of jobs there had fallen to 55% of the 1951 total (BEGG, MOORE & RHODES 1986). In the case of manufacturing activity, this fall has an important national component, as industrial employment has been falling since 1966 and this was especially marked in the recession of 1980-83, during which about one third of all jobs disappeared. However, there is also an intra-regional dimension with a shift of investment from the sites of early industrialisation (orientated towards canal and rail transport) towards greenfield locations with greater accessibility to motorways and airports. The relative costs of new development have also been important, with expensive city centre land being less attractive for many factories, especially if modern standards of provision of car parking and landscaping are to be achieved. The same calculation applies to parts of the service sector too, so that back-office functions and major retail developments have been located on the urban fringes, alongside the expanding clusters of local services for the growing suburban population. Although this trend has not gone so far as to produce the "Edge Cities" of the USA - even with the easing of planning controls in these sorts of areas in the early 1980s - there is real competition between out-of-town shopping and/or office parks and established CBDs for all but the highest levels of services. This raises issues about the access of inner city residents to such facilities, especially as the provision of local services to them tends to decline, but it also contributes to their rising unemployment as it has reduced the growth of jobs in city centres (and in some provincial cities actually led to an absolute decline) that might have offset the disappearance of employment in factories and their supporting services (e.g. railways). Add these forces together and it is not surprising that the highest sustained rates of unemployment in the country are overwhelmingly found in inner urban areas. GREEN (1994) shows both the considerable continuity in the list of highest unemployment rates from the 1981 to the 1991 census and the fact that 13 of the 15 top places are inner city. A different approach by WILMOTT & HUTCHINSON (1992) looked at 30 of the most deprived urban districts in Britain and calculated that they contained 26.3% of the country's unemployed in 1983 (falling to 22.6% in 1991, which may indicate some success for the policies of the 1980s).

The exodus of people and jobs has produced a landscape of physical decay in many cities. Empty factories, unused wharves, closed shops and abandoned houses are left to rot - a process often speeded up by vandalism - and there is little interest in finding new uses. Old sites of economic activity are often cramped into the wrong place and very expensive to convert to current standards (especially if there has been industrial pollution). The transport infrastructure is often poor and sometimes

an actual barrier to contemporary methods. Private landlords lack the confidence to invest in significant improvement to commercial or residential premises and the reduction in public housebuilding over the past fifteen years has actually been more marked in inner urban areas. The result is that over the period 1977-90 housebuilding rates have fallen by 70% in Inner London, 53% in the deprived urban areas of the West Midlands and 47% in the North West, compared with the English average of 48%, while rates of homelessness in 1991 were actually 7 times (Manchester), 4 times (Islington; in London) and 3 times (Hackney, Lambeth; both in London) the national average (WILMOTT & HUTCHINSON 1992).

The processes of social change in inner city areas also contain a strong component of national trends in respect of the decline of the nuclear family unit, the increase in crime (especially related to drugs) and a questioning of the traditional structures of authority, like the police, the church and school teachers. What is noticeable, though, is the combination of higher levels of most dimensions of social disadvantage in the inner city. Single person households and single parent families are more common - 33% of children in Inner London and in Liverpool came from such families in 1991. For this and other reasons there is greater dependence on government benefits like income support (which applied to 25% of the adult population in 1989-91 in the deprived urban areas studied by WILMOTT & HUTCHINSON (1992), compared with the English average of 14%). Standardised mortality rates and infant mortality rates are higher, while educational achievement by young people is lower - ATKINSON (1994) shows that 87% of 8 year olds had a reading age lower than their actual age in two inner city wards in Birmingham, while the wider study by OFSTED (1993) indicated that achievement at 16 years old in GCSE examinations at disadvantaged schools was between one-third and one-twelfth of the national average. Many of the institutions that held the old community together - especially those that emanated from stable employment - have gone and there is little chance of recreating them. This has left a population whose quality of life is severely limited by their concern about violent crime (very important to 79% of inner city residents sampled by ROBSON et al (1994)), the quality of health care (74%), the cost of living (72%), non-violent crime (67%), the quality of housing (64%), the quality of welfare services (62%), what the area looks like (61%) and their employment prospects (59%).

Taken together, the processes of inner city decline in Britain have been stronger than in most other European countries, but rarely as extreme as in American examples like Detroit or Baltimore. It is also important to note that a contributory factor was the large scale of urban redevelopment after 1945 that created many public housing estates, either in the inner areas or on the city's outskirts, which provided better social conditions than in the slums that had been demolished. However, it became very clear during the 1980s that these estates suffered from a number of design faults. People living on them were very much affected by rising unemployment as unskilled and semi-skilled jobs disappeared and, more generally, many of the features of social disintegration noted above have begun to appear here too. This means that while the term "inner city" is often used to refer to the areas of

Victorian industrial development that surround the CBD, recent urban policy initiatives (like Estate Action and City Challenge) have included some of these areas of social housing, regardless of whether they are close to the CBD or not (for a fuller discussion of the term "inner city" see KEITH & ROGERS (1991)).

URBAN POLICY IN ENGLAND

The problems just described have attracted increasing attention from local and national politicians in recent years - especially when some of the tensions generate riots or public disturbances on the scale of Toxteth (Liverpool) and Brixton (London) in 1981, or Handsworth (Birmingham) and Broadwater Farm (London) in 1985. Depending on your definition, annual expenditure on urban policies from central government runs at between £2 and £4 billion and over 50 programmes involving central government departments can be identified (Audit Commission 1989; ROBSON et al. 1994). Although there is a great deal of similarity in terms of the issues and the policies between the various parts of the United Kingdom, I shall limit the discussion here to the urban policies developed in England, as the constitutional arrangements for Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales mean that even apparently identical policies are implemented in different ways. Furthermore, City Challenge, the focal point of this paper, only operates in England.

Most reviews of contemporary urban policy (e.g. ATKINSON & MOON 1994; LAWLESS 1989; ROBSON 1988) start with the relatively modest schemes aimed at improving housing and education (especially for ethnic minority pupils) that were introduced in the late 1960s. The essentially social character of central government involvement continued in the 1970s with the creation of the Community Development Programme and the steady expansion of the Urban Programme scheme run by the Home Office. This latter scheme was enhanced in 1978 to include more economic and infrastructural projects and, since its transfer to the Department of the Environment, has become one of the major ways in which local government can bid for additional funding to supplement their local tax income. As the activities of the Urban Programme have extended, so there has been increasing spatial targeting, with the designation of 57 local government districts as Urban Priority Areas (UPAs), largely on the basis of a composite index of deprivation derived from six variables in the 1981 Census of Population.

The election of Mrs Thatcher's Conservative Party in 1979 changed the political context for policy formulation. In place of the stress on tackling the social consequences of inner city disadvantage came an emphasis on reducing the role of the state and its replacement by the free market. Although many of the policies of the 1970s continued in some form, these new approaches found an early expression with the introduction of Enterprise Zones (free from local taxation and some planning restrictions) and the creation of the first two Urban Development Corporations (UDCs) in London Docklands and Merseyside. Both these initial UDCs and those

added in 1987-88 shared the strategy of property-led regeneration, in which the expenditure of public money was aimed at the establishment of the right conditions for the private sector to invest profitably. This strategy removed the role of local government as a planning authority and thus most mechanisms for democratic community involvement in investment decisions. It also relied heavily on the theory of trickle-down, in which the investment of some £30 million each year by a typical provincial UDC would create jobs locally through construction work and the new businesses attracted into the area (on a scale assumed to be at least three times the value of the public investment). As UDCs increased their expenditure, so the share allocated to the Urban Programme fell - in 1984-85 the Urban Programme received £376 million and the UDCs, £108 million, but by 1990-91 these figures were about £240 million and £500 million respectively.

While some of their achievements in terms of improving derelict land have been impressive, there have been plenty of criticisms of the UDCs - especially the London one (BROWNHILL 1993) - in terms of their interest in large-scale projects, their limited employment impact and the lack of democratic accountability or community involvement (Centre for Local Economic Strategies 1992; IMRIE & THOMAS 1993; National Audit Office 1990, 1993; ROBINSON et al. 1993). They can also be seen as part of the more general process of centralising political power as the removal of local government planning controls in UDC areas has been matched by the abolition of metropolitan authorities in seven conurbations and the increased dependence of local authorities on central government for money (as the share of their income from central government rose from 50% to 80% during the 1980s). While this has usually been justified in terms of establishing better control over public finances and reducing local bureaucracy, it has also had the effect of reducing or removing the power of Labour-run authorities and strengthening the position of the Conservative national government.

CITY CHALLENGE

Following the replacement of Mrs Thatcher as Prime Minister and the return of Mr Heseltine to the Department of the Environment, there appeared to be a significant departure in urban policy with the launch of City Challenge in 1991. This programme placed great stress on the idea of partnership, not only between central and local government, and between the private and public sectors, but also between policy makers and the local community. Even if this element was only a matter of presentation, City Challenge was undoubtedly novel in the sense that the 57 UPAs had to compete with each other to secure a limited amount of public funding over a short period (£37.5m each over 5 years). UPAs that were not selected would continue to have access to funds under the Urban Programme but only after the "winners' allocation" had been made. In 1991 15 of the UPAs were invited to submit proposals for the regeneration of part of their area, with this sort of funding as the

basis for further investment by private investors and other public bodies (including the Structural Funds of the European Union where appropriate). In marked contrast to the general thrust of urban policy in the 1980s, local authorities were given a leading role in the preparation of these proposals, though the degree to which they involved the local community was carefully checked as part of the final judgement on bids. 11 bids were chosen after a frantic period of preparing proposals (including one from three districts encouraged by the Department of the Environment to collaborate in the Deame Valley) and a further competition, open to all UPAs, was held in 1992, when 20 more authorities were supported (see Table 1 for the authorities concerned and Figure 1 for their locations). No further competitions have been held due to reductions in the urban budget and the phasing out of the Urban Programme as a whole.

In many ways the early reaction to City Challenge was favourable. The idea that there should be open competition for public funds and the actual selection processes were certainly the subjects of criticisms (discussed below). However, these were generally outweighed - especially in the areas where bids were approved and it appeared rather like winning on the National Lottery - by the welcome for a "bottom up" approach that allowed local government to propose programmes with emphases on education & training, health, reduction of crime, housing improvement, and environmental enhancement in areas untouched by the large scale property investments of the 1980s (see BONSHEK 1992, and BOOTH & GREEN 1993, for early assessments). The types of area included in the regeneration bids do vary considerably - from ex-mining wasteland through 1960s social housing estates to sub-regional commercial nodes - but, in practice, the degree of local specificity of the schemes in the bids was somewhat limited by the guidance - both formal and informal - provided by the Department. Hence most of the City Challenge authorities have plans to improve public housing stock by selling part of it to private investors or Housing Associations, many have taken the hint that there should be assistance to ethnic minorities wherever relevant and the arrangements for managing the programme have become remarkably similar.

The process of convergence has continued since then as the Department of the Environment has increasingly recaptured some of the initial independence given to local authorities. This is most evident in the ways in which expenditure is evaluated and controlled as City Challenge authorities are subject to considerable scrutiny - especially in relation to the specification of measurable outputs from projects and the degree of private sector leverage that is being achieved. However, this is more evident to those working for the authorities than to the general public who still generally regard the whole process as a way of getting extra money from the government.

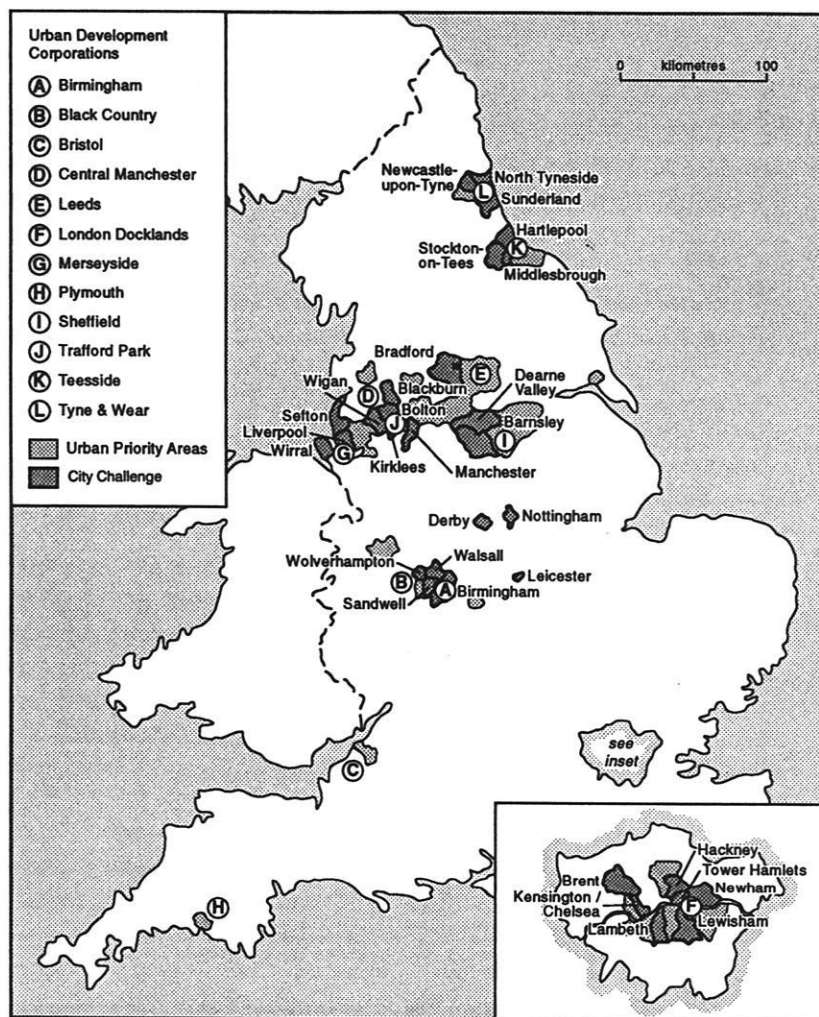
TABLE 1: CITY CHALLENGE AUTHORITIES

<u>Authority</u>	<u>Deprivation Ranking</u>	<u>Successful Round</u>
Hackney	1	2
Newham	2	2
Tower Hamlets	3	1
Lambeth	4	2
Brent	8	2
Manchester	11	1
Leicester	12	2
Wolverhampton	13	1
Birmingham	14	2
Liverpool	14	1
Lewisham	16	1
Kensington & Chelsea	17	2
Sandwell	19	2
Nottingham	20	1
Blackburn	21	2
Middlesbrough	23	1
Bradford	26	1
Kirkless	31	2
Walsall	34	2
Hartlepool	35	2
Bolton	36	2
Newcastle	37	1
Sunderland	38	2
Derby	41	2
Stockton	46	2
Wiral	48	1
Sefton	50	2
Wigan	53	2
North Tyneside	54	2
Barnsley	55	2
Dearne Valley*		1

* Joint bid by Rotherham, Barnsley and Doncaster

Source: Corrected from ATKINSON & MOON 1994

Figure 1 Urban Priority Areas, Urban Development Corporations and City Challenge Areas in England, 1994



AN INTERIM EVALUATION

City Challenge undoubtedly unleashed a great deal of the energy and will available to tackle urban decline in those areas that were successful and that is likely to be important, even though the actual amount of additional money is very small. Although the first round winners - known as the pacemaker authorities - have now

only been in operation for two and a half years and would thus be regarded as not yet ready for serious evaluation, they are also halfway through their limited life and so devoting an increasing amount of time to considering their "exit strategy". This gives an opportunity to reflect on what has been achieved so far and how far it will be possible to continue the most valuable new practices. Since only the pacemaker authorities have actually produced an annual report at the time of writing, this will be based on impression rather than any kind of formal evaluation of official returns or evidence.

There are a number of criticisms of City Challenge that date back to its original conception. The 23 UPAs whose public funds were going to be reduced, even before the recent cutbacks, in order to pay for the "winners" have obvious grounds for objecting to the idea of a competition between those authorities that the government has already recognised as disadvantaged. The fact that the list of "winners" excludes 5 of the 10 most deprived areas (including places like Haringey and Islington in London, and the city of Bristol) makes the point very clearly. It has also been suggested that the allocation of £7.5 million p.a. to each the selected authorities should have been adjusted to take account of the size or intensity of their problems (ATKINSON & MOON 1994). There have also been complaints from those local authorities who are faced with very similar problems but are outside the current list of priority areas. This is a continuing concern as the 57 UPAs were based largely on data from the 1981 Census and were manifestly out of date at the time of the first round, let alone today (though the use of statistics from the 1991 Census to redefine the areas for future funding is likely to be problematic as the "missing" 1.5 million people are most likely to have come from inner city locations).

The second set of issues related to the initial selection revolves around the definition of the areas for regeneration. Even without considering the whole question of whether "area-based" approaches can contribute to the solution of problems that are socially produced, there must be serious doubts about the ability of regeneration schemes in relatively small areas to have much broader impact. A typical city challenge area covers 400 to 500 ha and contains 40-60,000 residents, so any hopes of improving conditions in the rest of the district must depend heavily on a form of the "trickle-down" that has not yet appeared in the case of much larger UDC schemes. This problem is all the more evident in the large number of City Challenge areas which are essentially residential, as attempts there to address problems of unemployment through training or other schemes immediately require additional partnerships to be formed with employers outside the area. This kind of reservation has been expressed in a different way by those who point out that the areas actually selected may not have any functional unity. Obviously it is difficult in urban areas to have target areas that correspond exactly to the local labour market, but many City Challenge areas also fail to correspond to health authority boundaries or school catchment zones. Furthermore, the residents of the area may well identify themselves as members of different - and even opposed - communities. This can pose major problems in light of the stress on partnership with the community within

City Challenge, and in some cases was created at the outset by the authority effectively gerrymandering the designated area, so as to include a zone with particularly bad housing problems, or another which would boost the ethnic minority population.

In a sense these issues about selection and the areas are history and attention should now shift to what has been happening since those decisions were taken. There can be no doubt that a great deal of regeneration activity is now underway in City Challenge areas and the first large investments of the pacemaker authorities are already open for business. Once the first annual reports for the second round authorities are available it will be possible to provide at least a quantitative summary. Alongside these physical achievements, however, are three trends that may not be reported but which raise concern about the long term success of the City Challenge approach - private sector dominance, central government control and a loss of community involvement.

At the outset, City Challenge was seen as involving a partnership between the private sector, the public sector (especially in the form of local government) and the community. Taken together, these three trends suggest that the operation of City Challenge is redistributing the power within that partnership. The increasing importance of the private sector reflects the way in which public funds are distributed in order to lever in private investors. Just as with the UDCs, there is a requirement that the City Challenge component of a programme attracts private funding, usually worth at least twice as much. There is thus considerable pressure to tackle those parts of the City Challenge strategy that are most likely to interest the private sector, so you will often find that housing redevelopment has started with the areas that are the most commercially attractive rather than those in greatest need, or that training facilities have been redesigned with priority given to generating income rather than meeting local requirements.

The second dimension of change in the initial partnership has been the increasing control over the process exercised by central government, in the form of the Department of the Environment. In some ways this should have been apparent from the start, as it was this Department and its Secretary of State who made the selection of the winning bids and so redistributed Urban Programme money. However, the degree of their financial scrutiny of spending on City Challenge schemes has been remarkable and led to threats to some of the pacemaker authorities about the withdrawal of their future funds. This has had two important consequences. First, the formal evaluation of City Challenge projects places great stress on achieving "value for money" in obtaining the outputs initially specified. The adoption of the accountant's language is no coincidence and leaves little room for the justification of an item of expenditure as "community benefit". Secondly, the degree of detail required of the five-year financial plan of an authority can make it extremely difficult for City Challenge to retain flexibility and so respond to new community needs.

The third set of issues is fundamental both in establishing whether City Challenge represents a genuine return to the community orientation of the first urban policies and in forecasting the likely longer term effects of this approach. The identification of the community as a partner in the initial bid was an important step, not just because it was meant to make sure that regeneration was relevant to people's needs and holistic in tackling the various dimensions of urban deprivation at once, but also because it challenged the prevailing notion of partnership. The way in which partnership had been introduced to urban policy was heavily dependent on the model of joint financial involvement by the public and private sectors that was thought to typify the great American success stories in cities like Baltimore and Boston. Inviting the community to share in the decision making without having a direct financial commitment broke with that framework by giving power without investment and directly challenged the ability of local councillors to represent the views of the people that they were supposed to represent (MACFARLANE 1993). The early evidence is that community representatives (other than local councillors) make up only 25-33% of the members of the Boards governing City Challenge and may well not be as able to attend meetings - due to lack of access to transport or child care facilities - or influence decisions - reflecting their lack of experience - as other members. Community influence on City Challenge programmes after the initial consultation period has thus been limited at a formal level. The situation is unlikely to improve given the pressure on the officials responsible for delivering the increasingly rigid set of projects (even if they had received the training necessary to consult informally). This represents a wasted opportunity not only in terms of establishing community ownership of particular schemes and thus their long term viability, but also in relation to the effective delivery of programmes. When consultation with the community actually occurs it is usually confined to training and social issues, but there is plenty of scope for community influence on the planning of other initiatives, and possibly a direct role for community groups in their actual delivery. These are the ways in which the initiative created by City Challenge will become self-sustaining.

CONCLUSION

Britain faces enormous economic, environmental, social and political problems in the heart of its major cities. A great range of policy initiatives - many of them beyond the scope of this brief summary - have been introduced in order to tackle them and there is evidence of some success in improving conditions (ROBSON 1994). There has also been a great deal of wasted money and the imposition of solutions on the people who are meant to benefit from urban regeneration.

The introduction of City Challenge represented an opportunity to learn from the failures of the past and develop an approach that involved genuine partnership at a local level. There are a number of limitations to its potential beneficial impact that stem from the initial selection process, but the barriers to long term success appear

to be growing as the original idea of a partnership between the private sector, the public sector and the community is not working out in practice. The concern expressed here is that the genuine involvement of the community in City Challenge is not some kind of idealistic bonus, but rather an integral part of the whole process of long term regeneration. Without serious consideration of the ways in which community involvement is treated as part of the process of urban regeneration instead of being a passing outcome, the City Challenge approach will have the same limited impact on English inner cities as the community approaches of the 1960s.

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