

**Official Welcome by Deputy Leader, Cllr Paul Tilsley, Birmingham City Council
Developing Birmingham's Digital District – What can we learn from the
experiences of other European Cities.**

Wednesday 14 October 2009 – Fazeley Studios

Arrival: 9:15

Speech: 9:35-9:45 (10 minutes)

Ladies and gentlemen, I am delighted to welcome you here today. I would particularly like to extend a warm welcome to our European colleagues that have joined us for this collaborative workshop which will enable us to share ideas and generate valuable feedback as Birmingham starts its journey on developing its digital districts of the future. At a European level this seminar is also particularly fitting, given that 2009 has been designated European Year of Creativity and Innovation.

First though, I'd like to journey back in time through two centuries where Birmingham was the pioneer and powerhouse of the industrial revolution. It established itself as a major manufacturing centre - the 'city of a thousand trades'. After decades of industrial pre-eminence, the city has had to address the huge challenges in the decline of manufacturing. To this end the region has embarked on an impressive transition to achieve an 85% service based economy and a city recognised as a leading financial and business hub.

It is now fast establishing itself as a 'city of a 1000 digital trades'. Fazeley Studios, where we are today, lies at the heart of Birmingham's creative and digital media quarter – an industry sector that alone turns over £2billion and is home to a host of award winning digital media companies and independent television production companies - who use the latest technology to create and distribute their content around the globe.

Several years ago, I recognised the importance of digital technologies and their role in the 21st century knowledge society. I was instrumental in setting up the Digital Birmingham partnership to drive forward the city's commitment to establishing

Birmingham as a leading digital city in 2010. The partnership which now comprises over 40 organisations including BBC, Cisco, Microsoft, Vodafone, Virgin Media and BT shares the common purpose of driving through the benefits of digital technology and promoting the city as a destination for inward investment and businesses of the future.

It is significant to note that Birmingham is home to the largest metropolitan council in Europe with a workforce of 55,000 and serves a population in excess of one million people. Over 100,000 students pass through the doors of the city's 3 main universities and colleges, many of which will become the next generation of digital pioneers ready to move change forward. It is second only in size to London, but second to none in its vision of creating a global digital city that enhances the quality of life of its citizens and provides the right environment for businesses to succeed in the digital economy.

Birmingham is already making a distinctive contribution to the culture and economy of the UK in a digital age. It is an exciting and vibrant place that has world class conference facilities such as the National Exhibition Centre and the International Conference Centre and is a place shared with over 30 million annual visitors who come to enjoy the attractions, and cultural activities of a truly diverse global city.

So from a leading municipality of the 19th century providing essential services to our citizens - in those days water, sewerage and gas, it continues to invest in its infrastructure.

Birmingham is spending over £500million over 10 years in the biggest transformation programme unrivalled anywhere in the UK. It has invested in one of the boldest 21st Century regeneration plans that include areas such as Eastside Quarter, the Big City Plan developments that lays the foundations for the next 20 years, New Street Station and the new public Library of Birmingham, set to be the hub of the region's knowledge economyin all some £20billion investment.

I am delighted to report that an annual survey of 500 of Europe's largest companies published by Cushman and Wakefield, named Birmingham as the best performing city this year moving up seven places to be named as the 14th best European city for business. This is recognition of our achievements in this city even during a period of recession which has hit our city and the whole region very heavily.

However communications is a key factor influencing inward investment and whether a city is ready for business. I do not want to see our city falling behind in this essential piece of infrastructure for business in the 21st century.

Birmingham has always been a key centre for communication. Firstly it was the canals, then trains, then cars with our position at the junction of the motorway network. Our challenge now is Birmingham's position in telecommunications, the highway of the future

The Digital Britain report has set out the plans for an active industrial policy to accelerate the digital revolution. It has offered a vision of new digital networks that could help propel our country to leadership in the creative industries.

So as a city how do we turn this vision into reality and what is the role of the municipality in making that happen.

Birmingham is already very well served by 2nd generation broadband with the two main suppliers - BT and Virgin Media offering what our National Government defines as broadband connection - that is a connection rate of up to 2 megabits per second. And I know they are working hard to increase these maximum offered speeds. However we do not as a city have an affordable retail offering of 3rd generation broadband - that is - fibre to the premises providing potentially unlimited speeds of connection both up and down the line.

In many cases our businesses are making do with relatively slow connection which I believe can limit their ability to operate in the global market place we now face. This is like trying to provide your services to the world when you only have a single lane dirt track to your factory - what we need are modern highways for our telecommunications. This why I have initiated our digital districts programme to challenge the market place and bring 21st century telecommunications to the city

I must admit we were disappointed by the Digital Britain's report in its lack of financial commitment to establishing next generation access in our cities. However we are working within the framework of that report to create local solutions through our Digital Districts initiative. As part of this we will work closely with the national group INCA, the Independent Networks Cooperative Association to share expertise and demonstrate the demand for and benefits of fast connection. We have also established an agreement at city region level to cooperate with our neighbouring Local Authorities to create common standards and approaches to Next Generation Access.

I feel this is the point to emphasise the importance of European cooperation and learning from each other. Yes of course Birmingham is in competition with its neighbours in the UK and Europe for inward investment and economic growth. But we recognise here in Birmingham that there is a much bigger challenge and we are operating in a global market place competing with the North America and the Far East, South Korea, Japan and Singapore who have already invested heavily in the next generation of connection.

For this reason Birmingham will continue to be an enthusiastic contributor to European projects, the Eurocities network and exchanges like today. We are committed to sharing our experience and expertise with our sister cities in Europe and trust today is just the starting point for collaboration with Berlin and Barcelona - and yes even with cities that don't start with a B.

Looking at the programme I am sure you will have a valuable workshop. You will learn more about our plans for a digital district from Chris Price in a moment.

I look forward to hearing about the outcomes of today. We will use that knowledge to continue to develop the use of digital technologies in this city to grow our economy, to support our aims for carbon reduction and the environment, to transform our public services and to bring benefits to our citizens and communities

Thank you