



# Developing a Decent Neighbourhood Standard

The Witton Lodge Community Association Demonstrator

May 2025



Centre for the New Midlands



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## Acknowledgements

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## Foreword

Witton Lodge Community Association (WLCA) was established by local residents to create a decent neighbourhood following the demolition of substandard housing in Perry Common, Birmingham.

Over the past three decades, WLCA has invested in the community by building and refurbishing high-quality homes and improving the social, economic, and environmental fabric of the area.

In partnership with the Centre for the New Midlands and Social Life, we commissioned this research to develop a Decent Neighbourhood Standards Framework. This framework combines evidence-based research with our 'practice into policy' approach to guide our work, future initiatives and to disseminate good practice. Our aim is to demonstrate the impact of community-led approaches in creating neighbourhoods where everyone can flourish.

We look forward in working with our partners, Centre for the New Midlands and Social Life, to develop, co-design and implement the framework as a meaningful tool to understand, evaluate and improve neighbourhood quality.

Afzal Hussain  
Chief Officer, Witton Lodge Community Association



WLCA team photo

# Executive summary

## Aims

Neighbourhoods are units of place which connect housing and communities spatially, socially and structurally. They have a profound impact on our lived reality and day to day experience. A good neighbourhood is not just aspirational, it is essential to enable communities to thrive. Yet, there is no recognised standard for what makes a “decent neighbourhood”. This absence of a baseline quality standard or framework makes it difficult to assess, improve, and advocate for the places where we live.

The Decent Neighbourhood Standard conceptualised in this research project applies the underlying principles and core themes of the Decent Homes Standard to a neighbourhood scale, expanding its scope from the closed system of individual homes to the broader open system of neighbourhoods.

Our ambition is to create a universal but adaptable standard that can be applied to new and existing neighbourhoods and communities, helping to identify local priorities, guide policy and strategic investment, and support community empowerment. This demonstrator project marks the first step in developing a Decent Neighbourhood Standard, a practical framework for evaluating and enhancing the quality of neighbourhoods.

This work is led by the Centre for the New Midlands (CNM) in collaboration with Social Life and delivered in partnership with Witton Lodge Community Association (WLCA). The project is underpinned by the belief that neighbourhoods are essential for community wellbeing, resilience, and opportunity. While we have a nationally recognised standard for decent homes, there is no comparable benchmark for the quality of the places around them. This project seeks to address that gap, to address place-based social inequalities and build on the assets of our neighbourhoods and communities.

## Methodology

The research was carried out between January and March 2025, combining desk-based research with organisational engagement and community collaboration. The methodology included:

- Comparative framework analysis of five seminal urban design and neighbourhood quality standards, and a systematic thematic analysis of constituent themes when compared against the core principles of Decent Neighbourhoods.
- Documentary analysis of WLCA strategy, operations and data dashboards and the North Birmingham context.
- Meeting observations and workshops with WLCA frontline staff, volunteers, residents, senior leaders and board members.
- A collaborative workshop with WLCA’s local community to explore perceptions of neighbourhood quality and priorities through mapping and ‘neighbourhood diagnostics’, and a practical interaction with the five urban design frameworks to understand their resonance for the local community.

## Outcomes

The report sets out an initial ‘model’ of four universal dimensions of a Decent Neighbourhood Standard:

- Neighbourhood Quality Standards
- Accountability, Influence and Stewardship
- Reducing Inequalities and Enabling Aspirations
- Securing a Sustainable Future.

This draws on the Decent Homes Standard core themes and principles, cross referenced with the five seminal urban design frameworks.

Crucial to the Decent Neighbourhood Standard is the reflection of local priorities and a sense of neighbourhood quality through community collaboration and neighbourhood diagnostics. We start from an assets based approach, rather than a deficit model, recognising and mobilising existing assets rather than focusing on needs or deficits in communities. This first pilot has tailored the universal dimensions to create a Witton Lodge Community Association Decent Neighbourhood Standard that reflects both the organisation’s strategic priorities and critical issues for the local community.

The WLCA Decent Neighbourhood Standard is the first step in a multi-year collaboration around monitoring and evaluation. The Standard highlights WLCA’s role as a community anchor organisation. It will be embedded within WLCA’s organisational planning and community development work. In the future it can be used as an impact evaluation tool: to guide strategic planning; as a framework for evaluation work; to underpin partnership development and to support local community stewardship and neighbourhood accountability.



Figure 1: The Decent Neighbourhood Standard

## Recommendations

### 1 Witton Lodge Community Association

WLCA can start to embed the Decent Neighbourhood Standard within its strategic and business planning, to enhance neighbourhood impact assessments and to guide future strategic planning. The detailed neighbourhood quality metrics and data mapping processes will be developed collaboratively with the project research team. A key part of that development will be co-design and co-creation with the local community through existing engagement forums, working with new community researchers.

### 2 Community actors and policymakers

There is a need for better neighbourhood-level data and metrics and the Decent Neighbourhood Standard can be deployed as tool to collect those. It can support and enhance policy making and implementation, investment choices, and regeneration plans.

There is an opportunity for community anchor organisations and actors, neighbourhood forums and boards to adopt the Decent Neighbourhood Standard to evaluate their impact on neighbourhoods. The Decent Neighbourhood Standard can support work with local communities to identify neighbourhood priorities, and act as the basis for neighbourhood accountability structures. It will help agencies advocate for the communities they work in.

## Collaborative research

The ongoing research project with WLCA will allow for an iterative refining of the framework through longitudinal data collection, collaborative evaluation, and place-based neighbourhood diagnostics that reflect community voices.

Developing the Decent Neighbourhood Standard through a programme of further case studies will support its ongoing testing and development and the practical application of the framework as a tool to support thriving, equitable, and resilient neighbourhoods.

Piloting and adopting the Decent Neighbourhood Standard in a range of neighbourhood types and locations will help to build a body of evidence to share learning and inform a national neighbourhood quality agenda.

Finally, working collaboratively with other institutions, agencies and researchers will strengthen our shared vision around the importance of neighbourhoods as the most appropriate frame and context for meaningful policy and design intervention to improve the quality of place, shaped by and for communities.



Witton Lodge Community Association staff and volunteers' workshop in February 2025

# 1 Introduction

Where we live is fundamental to our daily lives. Whether it is the streets we walk down, the local park where we connect with nature, the friends we meet or a library that facilitates lifelong learning, neighbourhoods define our experience of the world. A good neighbourhood should not be only aspirational and experienced by some; it is essential for all thriving communities and individuals. Yet, there is no universally recognised standard for what makes a “decent neighbourhood”.

The absence of a framework makes it difficult to assess, improve, and advocate for the places where we live. We define neighbourhood as a spatial and perceptual unit which connects housing and communities spatially and structurally, and we’re interested in understanding the quality of a neighbourhood and its impacts on communities and place-making.<sup>1</sup>

The Centre for the New Midlands (CNM), Social Life and Witton Lodge Community Association have entered a partnership to develop a Decent Neighbourhood Standard, a practical framework for evaluating and enhancing neighbourhoods. While the work developing the framework is starting with the WLCA demonstrator, it is designed to be replicable, informing policy and practice across diverse places.



Duckling Watch at the Eco Hub and Witton Lakes Credit: WLCA

<sup>1</sup> Place-making is a collaborative, participatory process that empowers communities to shape their public spaces in ways that reflect local identity, promote wellbeing, and foster social, cultural, and economic vitality. Place-making can be regarded as both a theoretical and a practical approach to planning and design that focuses on strengthening the connection between people and the places they share.

Project for Public Spaces. (n.d.). What is Placemaking? <https://www.pps.org/article/what-is-placemaking>

UN-Habitat. (2015). Global Public Space Toolkit: From Global Principles to Local Policies and Practice. Nairobi: United Nations Human Settlements Programme



Collaborative workshop with local residents in February 2025 at Perry Common Community Hall

## 1.1 About the project

CNM and Social Life carried out this research between January and March 2025. The aim of the project is to create a Decent Neighbourhood Standard, acting as an initial place-based evaluation framework for WLCA to test, refine and pilot. This will measure the impact of the Association’s work at neighbourhood level, inform the development of a strategic framework and become the starting point for a three-year plan for monitoring and development.

This project is part of CNM’s ‘Towards a Decent Neighbourhoods Standard’ research programme and builds on Social Life’s work over a decade developing and testing social sustainability frameworks with communities in different contexts, and the ‘practice into policy’ approach developed by WLCA over the last three decades.

Through this work we’re engaging with the West Midlands region across the public, private and charity sectors, with academia, and most

importantly with communities to create bottom-up case studies of what a Decent Neighbourhood Standard should look like in different places.

The WLCA Decent Neighbourhood Standard is a demonstrator project by which we can test and refine this approach in a real-world context, ensuring the Standard meets its intended aims of using data and evidence to enhance neighbourhood quality.

The demonstrator is the start of a long-term collaboration. Our collective goal is to develop a standard that is evidence-based, community-driven, and capable of inspiring lasting change in neighbourhoods in Birmingham, the West Midlands, and across the country.

## 1.2 About the project partners

### Witton Lodge Community Association



Witton Lodge Community Association (WLCA) is a Community Association and Community Landlord. The organisation was established in 1994 by residents of Perry Common, and over the decades WLCA has evolved into an active resident-led organisation dedicated to improving housing, health, employment, and community life in North Birmingham. WLCA delivers practical services to the local community while aiming to create a sense of belonging and place-identity for residents. Their work is shaped by the lived experiences of residents, staff, and volunteers, alongside best practice and academic insights.

WLCA is aiming to develop its bespoke Decent Neighbourhood Standard with its community, as a tool for neighbourhood impact assessment and strategic planning.

<https://www.wittonlodge.org.uk/>

### The Centre for the New Midlands (CNM)



Centre for the New Midlands

CNM is the only independent, not-for-profit think tank for the West Midlands. The Centre creates a space to debate and shape a better region, fostering collaboration across society, industry, and academia. With a strong track record in research spanning digital innovation, infrastructure, people and skills, and housing and communities, CNM is well positioned to drive forward the development of a Decent Neighbourhood Standard. Its ability to connect stakeholders and influence policy positions the insights from this work to contribute to shaping both local and national agenda.

<https://www.thenewmidlands.org.uk/>

### Social Life



Social Life is a social enterprise founded by the Young Foundation in 2012 to specialise in the social dynamics of places. Focused on the intersection between people and their built environment, Social Life brings deep expertise in community-led research and taking action to boost the social dimension of urban change. Social Life works across the UK and internationally. Social Life is collaborating with CNM to ensure that the Decent Neighbourhood Standard is informed by robust social insights and grounded in the lived experiences of communities. Social Life's expertise in designing qualitative and people-centred frameworks, engagement and community-focus bring an essential know-how to the programme of research.

<https://www.social-life.co/>

## 2 Conceptualising a Decent Neighbourhood Standard

### 2.1 The aim of a Decent Neighbourhood Standard

The Decent Neighbourhood Standard is an evaluative framework at the neighbourhood level which aims to support communities to thrive. It translates the core principles and spirit of the Decent Homes Standard<sup>2</sup> to the neighbourhood and community, adapted to reflect the broader determinants of quality of neighbourhood.

By establishing minimum quality standards across entire neighbourhoods, the Decent Neighbourhood Standard is designed to be universal yet adaptable, applicable to new developments and existing neighbourhoods and communities. Deploying a multi-layered methodology, it draws on established place-based principles and seminal urban design theories, but critically drawing on community insights, neighbourhood diagnostics and community collaboration to tailor the Standard to local needs and priorities.

By setting a baseline for what constitutes a decent neighbourhood and refining this in collaboration with communities, the Decent Neighbourhood Standard crucially seeks to address the accountability gap for neighbourhood quality, underpinned by the principles of social justice, using an asset based approach and seeking to address place-based social inequality.

The universal and local approach of the Standard will ensure all neighbourhoods can be brought into focus, not only the most deprived or in need of intervention, but also the 'lost middle' - neighbourhoods which hinder communities to thrive, with conditions that challenge rather than support aspirations.

The Decent Neighbourhood Standard aims to set clear, evidence-based expectations for the places in which we live to create healthier, safer, and more inclusive communities that promote wellbeing, social mobility and quality of life.



Yoga at Witton Lakes Eco Hub. Credit: WLCA

<sup>2</sup> The Decent Homes Standard was introduced in 2000 by the UK government to improve social housing conditions. The standard was applied primarily to social housing, leading to significant improvements in living conditions. The Decent Homes Standard sets the minimum quality requirements for social housing in England, ensuring homes are safe, warm, and in good repair.

## 2.2 Neighbourhoods as the unit of change

A neighbourhood is a geographically bound and socially constructed space where people interact and engage with their surroundings. It is shaped by physical infrastructure, social and economic conditions, and culture. Neighbourhoods serve as a foundation for daily life, impacting on residents' wellbeing. Neighbourhood boundaries can be formal or informal, evolving in response to demographic changes, policy, and socio-economic forces as well as local geography. Their significance extends beyond physical location, encompassing architecture, collective memory, and local governance and culture.

The role and importance of neighbourhoods as a unit for change and policy intervention is continually evolving. Technological advancements,

particularly the emergence of smart cities, are beginning to enable highly detailed, data-driven insights at a local level.

Climate change has positioned neighbourhoods as key arenas for sustainable initiatives, from green infrastructure to community-led solutions. The forces of hyper-globalisation have fuelled a renewed desire for human-scale environments, emphasising hyper-localism and walkability.

At an individual level, the Covid-19 pandemic forced intimate reassessment of the places we inhabit, exposing weaknesses in infrastructure and highlighting the importance of local social connections and resilient neighbourhoods. The convergence of these factors presents a critical opportunity to rethink neighbourhoods as spaces that promote inclusivity, sustainability, and community wellbeing.



Community activities at Perry Common. Credit: WLCA



Exploring neighbourhood frameworks at a collaborative workshop, February 2025

In the current political landscape, neighbourhoods have re-emerged as critical units of change in planning and design. We have seen a flurry of research and policy launches in early 2025. The Labour government's "Plan for Neighbourhoods" (2025)<sup>3</sup> underscores a shift towards localised decision-making, allocating £1.5 billion to 75 areas across the UK to empower communities in shaping their development.

The Independent Commission on Neighbourhoods' (ICON) interim report (2025)<sup>4</sup> identifies over 600 "mission-critical" neighbourhoods requiring targeted investment to address social inequalities, stressing the necessity of a localised approach to regeneration and national mission-led programmes. Both reports quote the learnings from previous large-scale neighbourhood interventions such as the "New Deal for Communities" (2010) which demonstrates the tangible impact of local community empowerment, with significant improvements in deprived areas through engagement and long-term planning.

The "Building New Towns for the Future" interim report (2025) produced by the MHCLG New Towns Task Force<sup>5</sup> draws on lessons from previous new town programmes and asserts the importance of high-quality design, affordable housing, integrated infrastructure, and strong local governance. The proposed twelve new towns will have to consider innovative ways to develop socially sustainable neighbourhoods.

The Task Force also emphasises community engagement to create socially and environmentally resilient places, proposing mechanisms such as land value capture, harnessing the increased value of land caused by public investments, to reinvest in local amenities. The Design Council Homes Task Force launched their own Design for Neighbourhoods report<sup>6</sup> in early 2025 which focuses on the need for holistic visions for neighbourhoods, driven by a whole stock approach, better design and supporting social cohesion.

<sup>3</sup> MHCLG (2025) Plan for Neighbourhoods Prospectus: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/plan-for-neighbourhoods-prospectus-and-tools/plan-for-neighbourhoods-prospectus>

<sup>4</sup> Independent Commission on Neighbourhoods (2025) Think Neighbourhoods, Interim Report <https://www.neighbourhoodcommission.org.uk/report/interim-report-think-neighbourhoods/>

<sup>5</sup> Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (2025) Building New Towns for the Future: Interim Report. [online] London: MHCLG New Towns Task Force. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/building-new-towns-for-the-future>

<sup>6</sup> Design Council (2025) Design for Neighbourhoods. [online] Available at: [https://issuu.com/designcouncil/docs/design\\_for\\_neighbourhoods](https://issuu.com/designcouncil/docs/design_for_neighbourhoods)



Outreach with schools at Witton Lakes Eco Hub. Credit: WLCA

Neighbourhoods are also a central unit to addressing climate adaptation and wellbeing challenges. The “3°C Neighbourhood” report (2024) by CIVIC SQUARE and Dark Matter Labs<sup>7</sup>, focusing on Ladywood in Birmingham, examines the risks UK urban neighbourhoods face due to climate change, and advocates community-led adaptation strategies. Dark Matter Labs’ “Towards Multi-Capital Models” series (2025)<sup>8</sup> further explores integrating diverse forms of capital - social, environmental, and economic into financial and decision-making processes focusing on the role of neighbourhoods in systemic change. The climate and systems driven approaches are key baselines for any neighbourhood intervention.

Wider studies on housing and neighbourhood quality reveal their direct impact on wellbeing, with access to green spaces, public services, and social cohesion contributing to higher life satisfaction. The Carnegie UK “Life in the UK 2024: England”<sup>9</sup> report underscores persistent inequalities in economic and social wellbeing, suggesting that neighbourhood-focused interventions could mitigate these disparities. The 2025 paper by DEMOS “Social Capital 2025: The Hidden Wealth of Nations”<sup>10</sup> examines the role of social networks and trust in fostering economic growth and societal wellbeing.

<sup>7</sup> CIVIC SQUARE and Dark Matter Labs (2024) 3°C Neighbourhood. [online] Medium. Available at: <https://medium.com/neighbourhood-public-square/3%C2%BAc-neighbourhood-582903b050b2>

<sup>8</sup> Dark Matter Labs (2025) Towards Multi-Capital Models. [online] Provocations. Available at: <https://provocations.darkmatterlabs.org/towards-multi-capital-models-a01539e3ce1d>

<sup>9</sup> Carnegie UK (2024) Life in the UK 2024: England. [online] Carnegie UK. Available at: <https://carnegieuk.org/publication/life-in-the-uk-2024/>

<sup>10</sup> Haldane, A. and Halpern, D., 2025. Social Capital 2025: The hidden wealth of nations. Local Trust. Available at: <https://localtrust.org.uk/insights/research/social-capital-2025-the-hidden-wealth-of-nations/Demos+2>

Research conducted at Aston University in 2021<sup>11</sup> investigated the impact of housing quality and neighbourhood conditions on tenant wellbeing. The study found that neighbourhood conditions had distinct wellbeing impacts. Better access to schools, public amenities, essential shops and GP surgeries were associated with higher subjective wellbeing and were positively related to happiness and lower levels of anxiety. Community features such as safety, trust, social cohesion and a sense of belonging were all associated with higher levels of wellbeing.

Conversely, concerns over the neighbourhood were associated with lower levels of wellbeing as well as higher anxiety. Locational aspects of the neighbourhood affected wellbeing too; living in mixed tenure communities was seen as positive, while access to green outdoor spaces (from small gardens to large nature reserves) emerged as critical to wellbeing. Negative wellbeing impacts were related to traffic and pollution, lack of access to public transport, shops, schools or GP surgeries.

Although neighbourhood planning was introduced more than a decade ago through the Localism Act 2011 to empower communities in shaping their local areas, it has yet to realise its full potential in enabling broader community stewardship and planning, largely due to its highly contextual application. However, emerging findings from Reading University’s *Just Neighbourhood Project* (2024)<sup>12</sup> highlight recurring community concerns—such as social justice, safety, and wellbeing—across diverse planning processes, suggesting the universality of these fundamental priorities.

<sup>11</sup> Sacranie, H., Tian, L. and Lymer, A., 2022. VIVID Wellbeing Study: The Impact of Housing Quality and Neighbourhoods on Customer Wellbeing. Aston University. Available at: [https://www.aston.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2024-10/cpfw1\\_vivid\\_wellbeing\\_final\\_report.pdfHomepage+3](https://www.aston.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2024-10/cpfw1_vivid_wellbeing_final_report.pdfHomepage+3)

<sup>12</sup> <https://research.reading.ac.uk/justclp/just-neighbourhoods/>

<sup>13</sup> “Nimbyism assumes that the vested interests of the ‘housing haves’ triumph over the ‘housing have nots’ and this is typically often seen in community campaigning across local authorities to turn down planning support for new affordable homes developments. However this tendency and attitude is more nuanced than ‘I’ve got a house and I’m alright’. Communities know affordable housing is needed but oppose it for a range of reasons including the quality of development being poor, the houses being unattractive or the lack of the additional infrastructure and amenities to serve a growing community. It also comes down to the real affordability of those new affordable homes in a particular location or place.”

Centre for the New Midlands (2023) Affordable Housing Roundtable Report: April 2023. Birmingham: Centre for the New Midlands. Available at: <https://www.thenewmidlands.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/CNM-Affordable-Housing-Roundtable-Report-April-2023.pdf>



Picnic at Witton Lakes Eco Hub. Credit: WLCA

### 2.3 Why a Decent Neighbourhood Standard: quality accountability and addressing social inequalities

While we can generally assign the responsibility for the quality of homes to owners, builders, developers and landlords, when looking beyond buildings and homes, a Decent Neighbourhood Standard raises the question of who is ultimately accountable for the quality of our neighbourhoods. A Decent Neighbourhood Standard should provide the framework to benchmark quality of place, provide insights to organisations on their performance and impact on wider communities, and allow us to make targeted policy decisions to support communities to thrive.

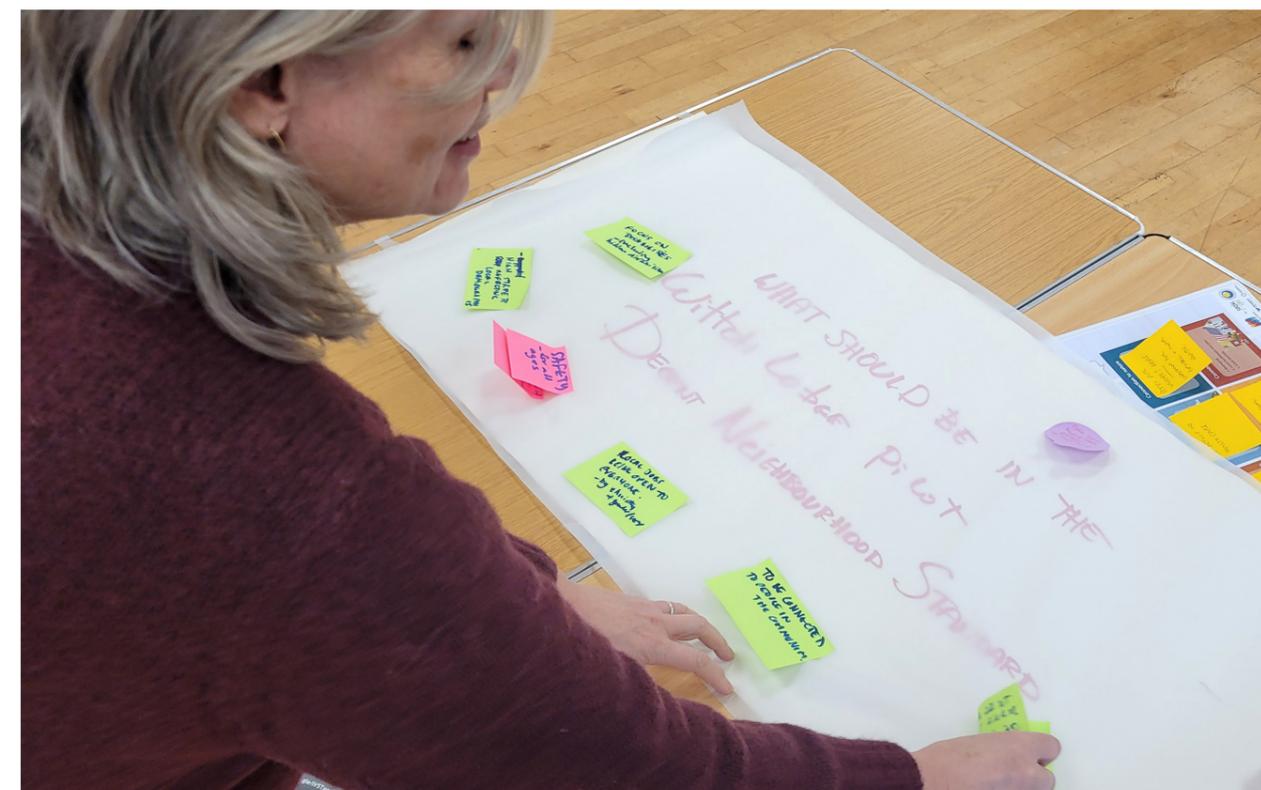
It will also incorporate environmental, ecological and biodiversity factors that contribute towards a socially-just net-zero transition. Developers, investors, the private sector, the charity sector, and civic and community groups all have a role to play, alongside local authorities, in being collectively responsible for the quality of our neighbourhoods.

Councils' financial pressures and resource constraints highlight the importance of neighbourhood level standards for which the public sector, public-private partnerships, the private sector and community organisations can share accountability.

The final report of the APPG for the “Left Behind” Neighbourhoods’ Inquiry into Levelling Up published in October 2023 sets out a definition for the neighbourhoods identified as “left behind” who are facing multiple challenges and disadvantages.<sup>14</sup> The report describes “a basic lack of sufficiently detailed data to guide policy decisions and ensure levelling up reaches the ‘left behind’ communities it is supposed to prioritise.”

There is now both a strong political direction and the evidence base to deliver change at neighbourhood level. Social Life’s work in

communities across the UK<sup>15</sup> has demonstrated that to achieve decent neighbourhoods, we have to safeguard the social and environmental assets of local areas, meet the needs of residents in different circumstances including people with the least power and security, and raise our collective game to make better decisions about the balance between social, environmental and economic trade-offs. A Decent Neighbourhood Standard can be the mechanism for providing that baseline data, at a neighbourhood level, and thus to help inform funding and policy decisions.



Collaborative workshop adapting the Decent Neighbourhood Standard model with Witton Lodge Community Association

<sup>14</sup> “The APPG uses ‘left behind’ to describe a particular set of local authority wards: those facing the dual disadvantage of high levels of deprivation and community need, and low levels of investment and resources. These are neighbourhoods ranked in the ten per cent most deprived on both the Community Needs Index and the Index of Multiple Deprivation. ‘Left behind’ communities face multiple challenges that limit their opportunities compared to other places. They have worse socioeconomic outcomes than the English average - as well as other, equally deprived areas”

All-Party Parliamentary Group for ‘left behind’ neighbourhoods, 2023. A Neighbourhood Strategy for National Renewal. Available at: <https://www.appg-leftbehindneighbourhoods.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/A-Neighbourhood-Strategy-for-National-Renewal.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> Social Life (2025) Learning from Regeneration: [https://www.social-life.co/blog/post/learning\\_from\\_regeneration/](https://www.social-life.co/blog/post/learning_from_regeneration/)

## 2.4 Developing a Decent Neighbourhood Standard

### 2.4.1 From Decent Homes to Decent Neighbourhoods

There is a crucial distinction between a home and a neighbourhood. A home functions as a closed system, where resources such as energy, water, and household finances are managed within a defined environment. In contrast, a neighbourhood operates as an open system of systems, interconnected with broader economic, social, and environmental networks.

For example, unlike a household budget, which is relatively fixed and self-contained, a neighbourhood's economy is dynamic, influenced by external factors such as employment opportunities, infrastructure investment, and community engagement. This highlights the complexity of neighbourhood development. In the home, individual family units (of various types and forms) live their lives privately and autonomously. Neighbourhoods are collective in nature, encouraging communal ties and interaction.

Any attempts to improve the quality of neighbourhoods requires a systems-based approach that considers the flow of resources, people, relationships and opportunities beyond individual homes. The standard also considers the agents of change such as local communities, grassroots organisations and civic groups, anchor organisations and institutions and public local authorities who will be responsible for upholding it.

The Decent Homes Standard was introduced in 2000 by the UK government to improve social housing conditions. The standard was applied primarily to social housing, leading to significant improvements in living conditions. It sets the minimum quality requirements for social housing in England, and ensures homes are safe, warm, and in good repair.

The standard encompasses the following criteria:

- **Fitness for Habitation:** Homes must be free from serious health and safety hazards under the Housing Health and Safety Rating System.
- **Reasonable State of Repair:** Key building components (e.g. roofs, walls, windows) and services (e.g. plumbing, heating) must not be old and in poor condition.
- **Modern Facilities and Services:** Homes should have adequate kitchens (under 20 years old) and bathrooms (under 30 years old), suitable layouts, and sound insulation.
- **Thermal Comfort:** Properties must have efficient heating and effective insulation to ensure warmth and energy efficiency.

The Decent Homes Standard is being extended to cover the private rented sector through upcoming legislation<sup>16</sup>, aiming to ensure that all rented homes meet basic living conditions. This expansion is set to create greater accountability of landlords and provide stronger protections for tenants.

The Decent Homes Standard guidelines set out how the delivery of Decent Homes originally sat within part of wider policies and strategies for neighbourhoods, regeneration and mixed communities. While the policy detail has evolved, those connections remain relevant to current thinking about housing and neighbourhoods.

“Delivering decent homes is a commitment in the National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal and has a key role to play in narrowing the gap between deprived neighbourhoods and the rest of the country. Delivery needs to be part of a holistic approach to regeneration which is about more than just ‘bricks and mortar’ and which makes the right linkages to wider regeneration objectives such as improving health and education outcomes, renewing failing housing markets, tackling poverty and delivering mixed sustainable communities” (Decent Homes Standard, 2006, pg. 8).<sup>17</sup>

Some of the defining characteristics of communities set out by the Decent Homes Standard guide included having “good quality housing in attractive environments with access to good local schools and retail or leisure facilities and other services such as health; a mix of housing size, type and tenure; strong local economies which contribute to strong regional economies; good connections to employment opportunities through neighbourhood design, transport and job access services; providing access to other economic and social opportunities for all residents, enhancing their life chances; high quality housing and neighbourhood management; low levels of crime and providing support services for vulnerable people and families at risk.” (Decent Homes Standard, 2006, pg.9).

Looking to the future, and addressing the need to adapt to climate change, another home quality standard iteration ‘The Future Homes Standard (FHS)’ is expected to be implemented in 2025.

The FHS will also play a crucial role in shaping housing quality by setting ambitious energy efficiency and carbon reduction targets for new homes. The aim of this new standard will be to ensure that new-build properties are net-zero ready, incorporating low-carbon heating and high-performance insulation, aligning with broader government objectives for sustainability and climate resilience.

The Decent Neighbourhood Standard takes as its starting point both the spirit of accountability, and some of the same core categories as the Decent Homes Standard, and aspirations of the Future Homes Standard, evolved to capture neighbourhood-level social, environmental, economic and spatial challenges. Table 1 sets out an initial comparative mapping of some of the key principles and themes of the Decent Homes Standard. This was then used to inform a systematic thematic analysis of seminal neighbourhood frameworks, summarised in Section 2.4.2 below.

| DHS Starting Elements | Mapped Decent Homes Standard                                     | Mapped Selected Frameworks  | Emerging Decent Neighbourhood Standard  |
|-----------------------|--|---|---|
| Focus                 | Focus on household   | Focus on Community  | Focus on Community  |
| Accountability        | Clear and tenure specific  | Aspirational and evaluative   | Ambiguous - accountability vacuum at neighbourhood level  |
| Component Parts       | Specified and quantifiable                                       | Diverse and non-comparable  | Non-specified and diverse Neighbourhoods layered over time<br>Diverse aspects need to be up-to-date and fit for purpose             |
| Safety                | Removal of hazards to occupants                                  | Perceptions of safety and minimum provision                           | Safety is key - reducing crime, removing physical hazards, identifying social risk and addressing community needs                   |
| Health and Wellbeing  | Tangible metrics - e.g. fire risk, intangible - tenant wellbeing | Nuances and complex understanding of wellbeing core to each framework | Tangible and Intangible metrics<br>Multitude of drivers from air quality and clear water to community wellbeing and social cohesion |
| Net Zero              | Future Homes Standards and housing quality standards             | Mix of representations, focus on climate, resilience and nature       | Net Zero Neighbourhoods<br>Need to integrate different standards more broadly   |

Table 1: Decent Homes, Selected frameworks and Decent Neighbourhood: Mapping

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/guide-to-the-renters-rights-bill/guide-to-the-renters-rights-bill>

<sup>17</sup> Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) (2006) A Decent Home: Definition and guidance for implementation - June 2006 update. London: DCLG. Available at: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a79ce6ded915d0e3c5bf98f/A\\_Decent\\_Home\\_-\\_Definition\\_and\\_guidance.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a79ce6ded915d0e3c5bf98f/A_Decent_Home_-_Definition_and_guidance.pdf)

## 2.4.2 Analysis of key frameworks

In developing further the Decent Neighbourhood Standard model we looked at five frameworks employed at neighbourhood level from tools for evolution and monitoring to delivery, namely:

- Design for Social Sustainability, Social Life<sup>18</sup>
- 15/ 20 Minute City, developed by Carlos Moreno<sup>19</sup>
- Place Standard, Our Place and Scottish Government<sup>20</sup>
- Inclusive Growth Framework, West Midlands Combined Authority<sup>21</sup>
- Quality of Life Framework, QoLF<sup>22</sup>

The frameworks were selected based on analysis of best practice, picking a mix of frameworks which were relevant to the demonstrator project at Witton Lodge Community Association. Each of the frameworks had a specific focus from the perceptual views of residents; availability and proximity of key infrastructure; standard of place; economic resilience and quality of life. (For more detail on the 5 framework analysis please see Appendix C).

The spatial dimension of neighbourhoods emerged strongly from the 15-minute city framework and the Place Standard Tool, informing the neighbourhood quality and accountability priorities of the Decent Neighbourhood Standard. The frameworks emphasised the need to monitor community assets, social and physical infrastructure, building upon the starting question of reasonable state of repair the Decent Homes Standard tackled with, but expanding the logic to derive at a reasonable state of infrastructure provision and suitability.

Similarly, alongside the WMCA Inclusive Growth and Design for Social Sustainability, the frameworks brought out the spirit of the Decent Homes Standard as a mandated standard, by highlighting the importance of governance and institutional lenses. At neighbourhood level, enforceability shifts and issues of influence, accountability and partnerships become more pronounced, leading to the development of this priority within the Decent Neighbourhood Standard.

Finally, the social dimension of neighbourhoods, perceptual views and needs, were essential to each of the examined frameworks, emphasising the definition of neighbourhoods around communities as much as spatial characteristics. The importance of understanding feelings of belonging, safety, community cohesion and future aspirations were all essential elements. This led the Decent Neighbourhood Standard to expand beyond the more narrow and quantifiable bounds of a technical standard, to consider this an essential priority at neighbourhood level.

## 2.5 The four dimensions of a Decent Neighbourhood Standard

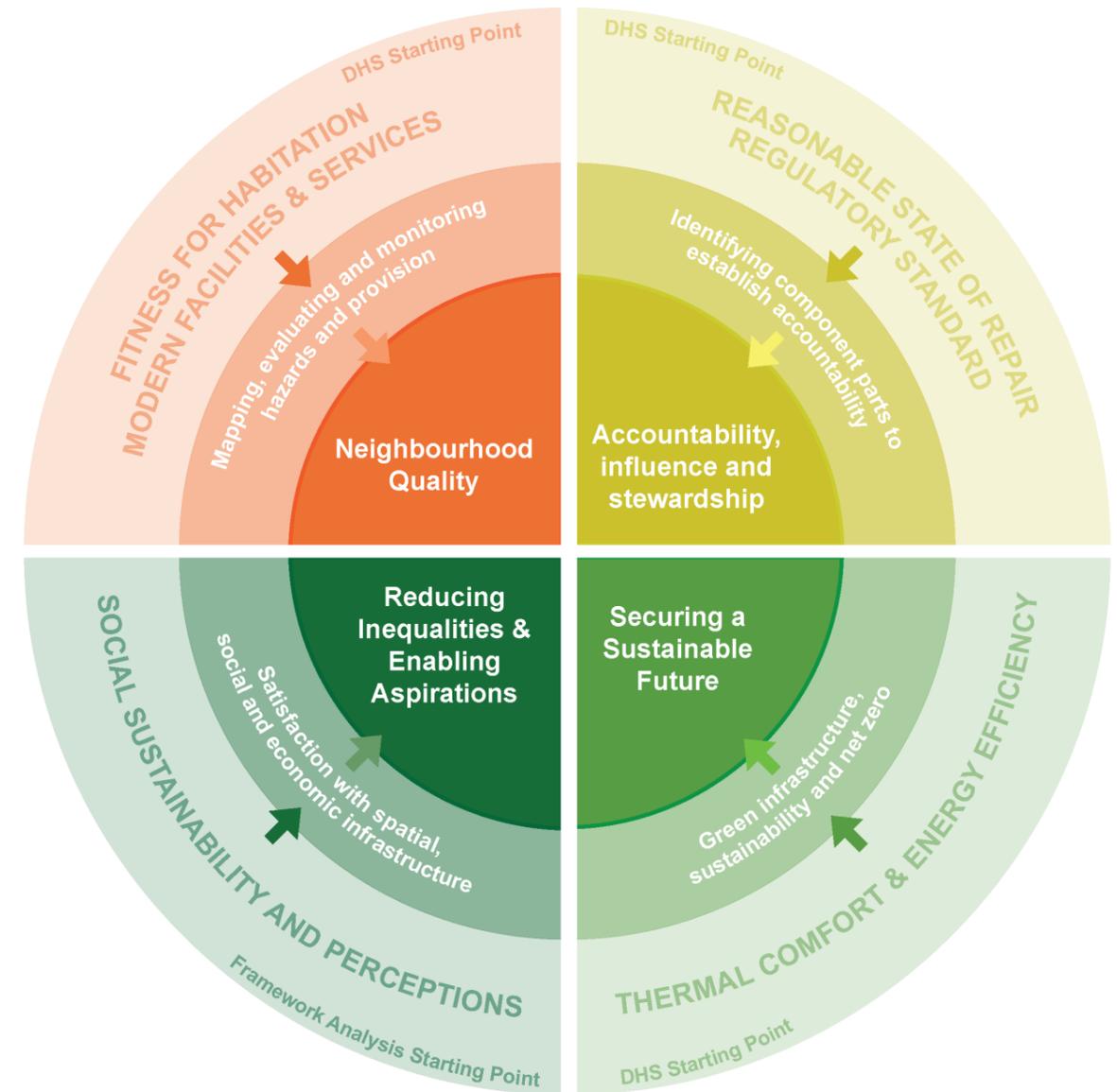


Figure 2: The Decent Neighbourhood Standard Universal Dimensions, translation from Decent Homes Standard and framework analysis to emergent model

<sup>18</sup> Social Life (2011) Design for Social Sustainability: A framework for creating thriving new communities. London: Social Life. Available at: [https://www.social-life.co/publication/design\\_for\\_social\\_sustainability/](https://www.social-life.co/publication/design_for_social_sustainability/)

<sup>19</sup> Moreno, C. (2020) The 15-Minute City: A new urban model. Paris: Mairie de Paris. Available at: <https://www.paris.fr/pages/le-paris-des-quarts-d-heure-15820>

<sup>20</sup> Scottish Government, NHS Health Scotland and Architecture & Design Scotland (2015) Place Standard Tool: How good is our place? Edinburgh: Scottish Government. Available at: <https://www.placestandard.scot/>

<sup>21</sup> West Midlands Combined Authority (2020) Inclusive Growth Framework: Making inclusive growth real in the West Midlands. Birmingham: WMCA. Available at: <https://www.wmca.org.uk/media/4052/inclusive-growth-framework.pdf>

<sup>22</sup> Quality of Life Foundation (2021) The Quality of Life Framework. London: Quality of Life Foundation. Available at: <https://www.qolf.org>

### Neighbourhood Quality Standards

The Decent Neighbourhood Standard extends the Decent Homes Standard principle of neighbourhoods free from hazards and enabling modern facilities and services to the neighbourhood level. Neighbourhood quality standards are the baseline of understanding the living conditions in a neighbourhood. This includes measures to reduce crime and anti-social behaviour and to improve public safety; reduce environmental risks like flooding and pollution; and create healthy living environments with access to green spaces, and robust social infrastructure.

### Reducing Inequalities and Enabling Aspirations

A decent neighbourhood must provide essential amenities and infrastructure that enable economic and social mobility, and support social capital, feelings of belonging, wellbeing and resilience, underpinned by perceptual data and the needs of residents. The Decent Neighbourhood Standard ensures monitoring of access to education, employment, digital connectivity, and transport links—key factors in addressing systemic inequalities and supporting inclusive local economies. It also captures local social relationships and the quality of relationships between groups, which are key elements of wellbeing and resilience.

### Accountability, Influence and Stewardship

The Decent Neighbourhood Standard translates the regulatory spirit of the Decent Homes Standard and its principle of good repair into ensuring that neighbourhood infrastructure such as roads, public spaces, and local amenities and social infrastructure are well-maintained and fit for purpose. This requires clear governance structures that promote community stewardship and accountability. There is a critical role for community anchor organisations, neighbourhood forums and/or boards to support communities to take ownership of their neighbourhood.

### Securing a Sustainable Future

The Decent Neighbourhood Standard takes a wider environmental approach, embedding green infrastructure, sustainable transport and net-zero policies to create climate-resilient communities. The forward-looking dimension ensures sustainability at a neighbourhood scale.

Each of these categories require the adoption of data measurement metrics, drawing on both existing and new qualitative and quantitative data, to ensure that this evidence align with the lived experiences of residents. This approach ensures that both tangible infrastructure and intangible aspects of community life are accounted for in the standard.

## 3 The Witton Lodge Community Association Decent Neighbourhood Demonstrator

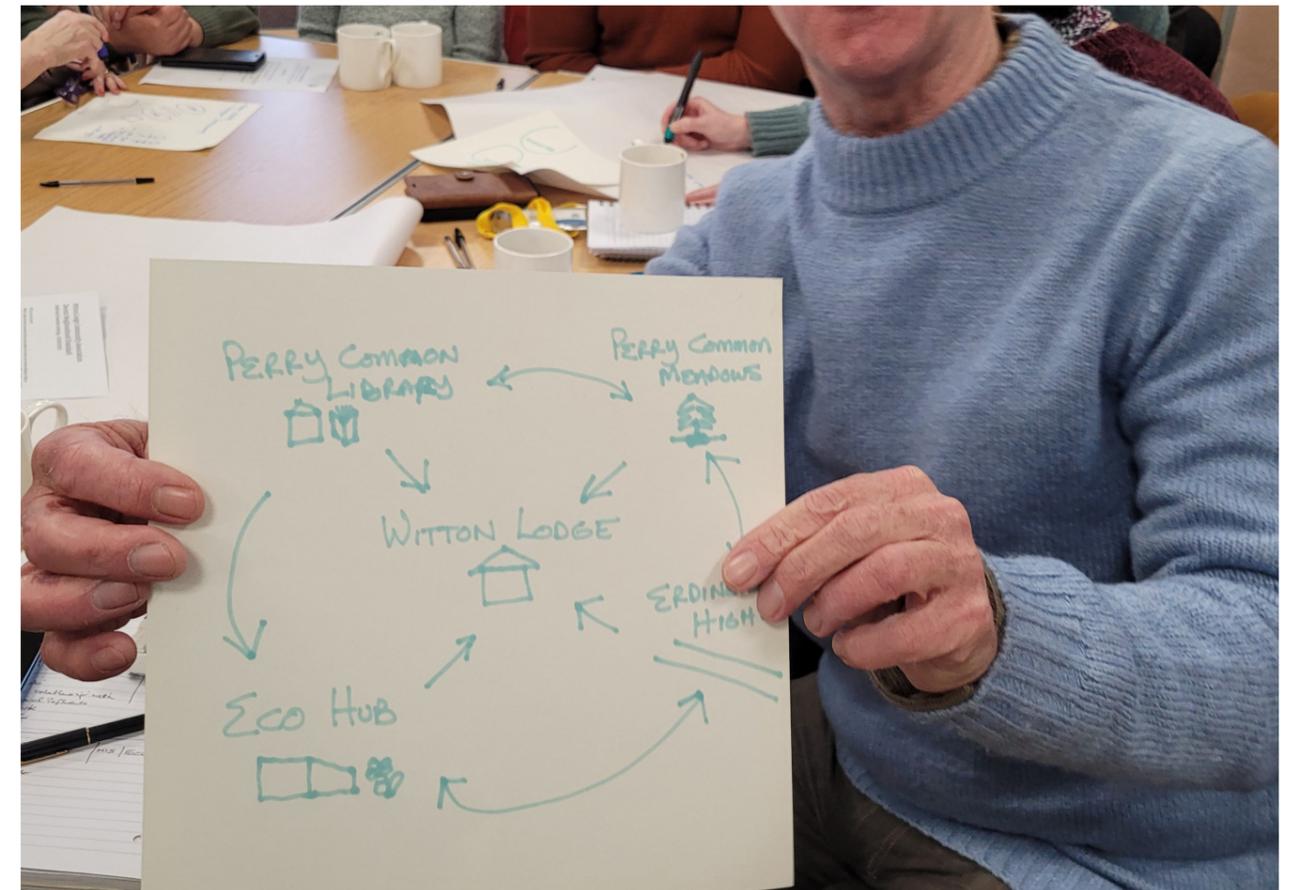
### 3.1 About Witton Lodge Community Association

WLCA was formed in 1994 by a group of residents. From its inception, WLCA has evolved from a community-led housing organisation managing and building housing, to their role as a community anchor organisation aiming to create vibrant and thriving places for people.

In the first year of operation, WLCA invested £333,000 in community-led initiatives, with a focus on environmental sustainability, health and

wellbeing, and employment; areas of focus that residents identified as their priorities.

For nearly two decades (1994-2012), WLCA operated without permanent staff, relying on volunteers and external commissions to deliver services. Today, WLCA employs over 40 people, reflecting the increasing demand for services and the organisation's evolving role in the community.



Witton Lodge Community Association through the eyes of staff and volunteers, workshop in February 2025

### 3.2 Why a Witton Lodge Community Association Decent Neighbourhood Standard

Witton Lodge Community Association (WLCA) is an ideal first demonstrator for the Decent Neighbourhood Standard because of its community-based structure and ethos. As an organisation it tries to bridge the gap between local needs and policy, offering practical services while fostering community ownership and social cohesion.

Its resident-led model is rooted in strong participatory governance and place-based leadership, with initiatives spanning housing, health, employment, and community wellbeing. WLCA works in both Perry Common and Erdington, a range of semi-urban and urban contexts, with diverse geographical and demographic profiles.

WLCA's commitment to innovation and continuous learning makes it a compelling demonstrator of a decent neighbourhood. The Decent Neighbourhoods Standard will systematically measure impact at the neighbourhood level, set clear goals, and enable organisations to reflect on past and future actions. WLCA are interested in adopting a Decent Neighbourhood Standard, capturing and demonstrating impact to shape their future strategic priorities and reinforce a community-led approach.

#### Research Context

The Decent Neighbourhood Standard Demonstrator at Witton Lodge Community builds on past research by the University of Birmingham<sup>23</sup> highlighting the significant impact of WLCA's community-led approach which provided a valuable starting point.

Key recommendations from the past study suggest that strengthening partnerships with local organisations, such as the Lakeside Family Centre, and fostering collaboration between residents, service providers, and the Police could

help address pressing concerns like anti-social behaviour, neighbourhood safety and traffic calming. Enhancing community communication through a mix of digital platforms, notice boards, and printed materials would increase awareness of local events.

The research recommends consulting residents on the introduction of meeting points and shared spaces to support relationships. There is a limited scope to the research, however, as it is only presenting a perspective of community life and neighbourhood conditions in North Birmingham, without establishing a framework or an ongoing monitoring and evaluating process.

The research context and insights have informed our approach and guided our focus. We have started further engagement with WLCA staff, volunteers and residents to inform WLCA's development and delivery of the Decent Neighbourhood Standard.

We want to take this further in phase two in which we will develop the evaluation and monitoring processes underpinning the standard. We want to ensure a Decent Neighbourhood Standard is grounded in local experiences, responsive to community needs, and scalable across similar neighbourhoods.

<sup>23</sup> Internal report to WLCA by the Centre for Urban and Regional Studies, the research was conducted in 2017 with community researchers in the local area.



Residential properties managed by Witton Lodge Community Association Credit: WLCA

## 4 Our approach

This research project took a four-stage approach.

### Stage 1: Neighbourhood framework mapping

A desk-based rapid assessment reviewed five seminal place-shaping frameworks (as described in Section 2.4.2. above) selected because of their global and regional impact and relevance to the project. The selected frameworks were cross referenced with the Decent Homes and then Decent Neighbourhoods themes and categories, and staff and community insights from the meetings and collaborative workshops with WMCA.

### Stage 2: Organisational document analysis

Desk-based analysis of strategy, policy and monitoring documents to provide a deeper insight into the organisation. These documents were coded and mapped against the Decent Homes Standard framework, as well as the 5 key neighbourhood frameworks.



Witton Lodge Community Association staff and volunteers map organisational values, February 2025

### Stage 3: Leadership, staff and community engagement

Findings from Stage 1 informed the initial structure of a WLCA Decent Neighbourhood Standard. Organisational insights were gathered through meetings with WLCA leadership, frontline management, and community representatives, providing an overview of key interventions, impacts, and strategic priorities. Community and stakeholder workshops explored emerging themes and started to refine the universal dimensions for a more targeted analysis.

Stage 3 of the research deployed ‘Neighbourhood Diagnostics’ questions as a core element of the Decent Neighbourhood Standard methodology. These questions focused on community and organisational co-design, allowing residents to identify priorities, define minimum quality standards for their neighbourhood, and highlight existing or potential hazards. These questions included:

- How would you define your neighbourhood?
- What makes you want to move to a neighbourhood?
- What makes you want to stay in a neighbourhood?
- What makes you want to leave a neighbourhood?

Appendix B provides a detailed analytical overview of each of the diagnostic questions based on our engagement with WLCA.

| Date       | Activity                                    | Summary  |
|------------|---|--|
| 03.02.2025 | Witton Lodge Staff and Stakeholder Workshop | Using interactive activities to map key neighbourhood features, identify community engagement, and discuss WLCA's values and measures of success.  |
| 05.02.2025 | Workshop with senior leadership trustees    | Roundtable with WLCA senior leadership and trustees explored the organisation's operations, strategic direction, partnerships, and approaches to measuring community impact.   |
| 14.02.2025 | North Birmingham Economic Recovery Board    | Observed North Birmingham Economic Recovery Board, in which WLCA plays a key part. The standing meeting focused on strategies to address ongoing economic challenges in the region, particularly in the wake of the pandemic.                                  |
| 27.02.2025 | Community Engagement Workshop               | Interactive community workshop and an online survey to capture residents' perspectives on their neighbourhoods. The workshop explored community members' views on the key frameworks explored, as well as the key minimum qualities of a decent neighbourhood. |

### Stage 4: Evaluation and reporting

This report presents this synthesis of the work undertaken between January and March 2025. This will be followed by a longer-term research strategy for monitoring, co-designing metrics, testing and refining the demonstrator WLCA Decent Neighbourhood Standard, while conducting other Decent Neighbourhood Standards case study and demonstrator projects.

# 5 The Witton Lodge Community Association Decent Neighbourhood Standard

## 5.1 Witton Lodge Decent Neighbourhood Demonstrator overview

The Demonstrator adapts the universal dimensions of our emerging Decent Neighbourhood Standard model to the local community needs and priorities of Witton Lodge Community Association (WLCA). The WLCA Demonstrator is made up of four quadrants, each addressing the key dimensions of a decent neighbourhood - quality, community, accountability and future resilience. These can serve as both an evaluative and monitoring tool, as well as a strategic planning tool.

Each of the dimensions informs the others and collectively they set the standard for a decent neighbourhood. Each (or any) of the dimensions can serve as the starting point of an iterative and collaborative process to explore and inform neighbourhood quality.

This standard will support WLCA to evaluate the quality of, and impacts on, different neighbourhoods in which they operate, allowing better planning to meet specific needs in each area. Accordingly, the dimensions align with WLCA governance and operations, which means they can be incorporated into existing work streams.



Figure 3: WLCA Decent Neighbourhood Standard Demonstrator

### Dimension 1

#### Establishing a baseline and monitoring neighbourhood quality

This dimension looks to evaluate the qualities of the neighbourhoods in which WLCA operate, from Perry Common to Erdington High Street. It relies on existing data and links to the emerging data and monitoring stream of work WLCA are developing. The dimension is concerned with collecting data on health, homes, crime and transport at hyper-local level and comparing across neighbourhoods, wider Birmingham and city region to identify gaps, good practices and key needs.

An entry point for this dimension will be a data audit of available hyper-local data, mapping of geographies of local neighbourhoods and establishing specific needs which are informed by the data. Data collection practices within WLCA will be aligned with the wider set available data, locally, regionally and nationally, as well as establishing context specific questions. It will include a baseline assessment of the quality of the neighbourhood against key metrics (see Appendix B and C for what has emerged already in our conversations with residents) specific to WLCA.

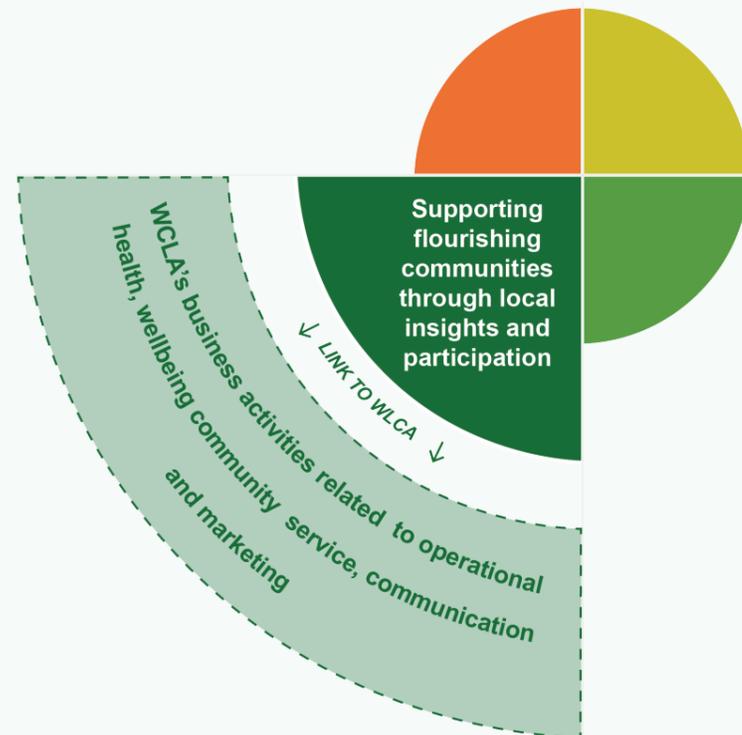


## Dimension 2

### Supporting flourishing communities through local insights and participation

This dimension introduces the human, social and perceptual elements of the work WLCA conducts. It is focused on establishing an understanding of residents' and community needs, aspirations and perceptions. The dimension links to the wider idea of a decent neighbourhood where inequalities should be reduced, opportunities created, aspirations encouraged, and social capital and resilience supported. Dimension 2 will be concerned with the social networks, assets and infrastructure across the neighbourhood areas.

An entry point for this dimension will be a social impact assessment, developing qualitative data collection capturing the experiences of WLCA residents and the communities it supports. Community Dynamics predictive data (a methodology developed by Social Life) can illuminate the perceptual context in which WLCA operates and allow for comparison with local data. It could involve long-term engagement with community researchers, enabling WLCA to demonstrate impact, collect community insights and deliver qualitative foresight while supporting residents voice and opportunities. The methodology developed for this project around 'Neighbourhood Diagnostics' will be further developed as a formal community insights research tool to complement Community Dynamics and focus these on perceptions of neighbourhood specifically.

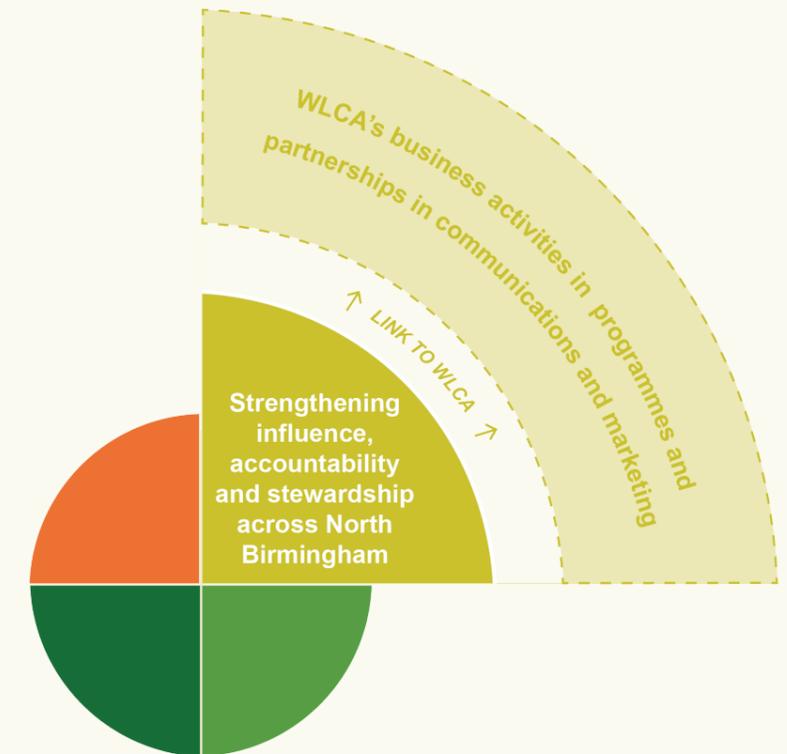


## Dimension 3

### Strengthening influence, accountability and stewardship across North Birmingham

This dimension looks at the system of neighbourhoods in North Birmingham in which WLCA operates. It is concerned with the role of WLCA as an anchor institution in the community and the relationships between key organisations in North Birmingham. It will provide a way of monitoring duplication or gaps in delivery at neighbourhood level.

An entry point for this dimension will be a strategic mapping of key zones of influence within which WLCA has direct and indirect impact, auditing accountability structures, stewardship arrangements and opportunities for residents to have agency in both highlighting critical issues for local communities, and in the improvements in the quality of their neighbourhoods.



**Dimension 4**

**Achieving sustainable and inclusive development**

This dimension looks to the future. For WLCA it is centred on aligning their strategic planning and actions to deliver sustainable development, climate and nature-friendly neighbourhoods and inclusive growth. It looks at the standards around organisation strategy and delivery within the organisation and matches the strategic direction of the organisation to the needs of the neighbourhood.

A starting point for this dimension will be a best practice audit, evaluating effectiveness of programmes and activities against the other dimensions, and inclusive and sustainable growth objectives.



**5.2 Developing the WLCA Decent Neighbourhood Standard Demonstrator**

The Decent Neighbourhood Standard WLCA Demonstrator’s dimensions are underpinned by our understanding of the operational activities and strategic direction of the Association, our interviews, conversations and data collection, as well as review of best practice frameworks and documentation. We have presented those in detail in the Appendices.

Here we have drawn out the key findings and how they inform the next steps in developing the standard.

**5.2.1 Establishing a baseline and monitoring neighbourhood quality**

Central to the Decent Neighbourhood Standard demonstrator for WLCA is establishing a robust baseline that integrates existing internal and external data sources, local quality standards, and new primary data collection. This baseline will help WLCA to identify community needs, assess their areas of influence, and evaluate neighbourhood conditions against established benchmarks of quality.

**What we found out about neighbourhood quality and data practices**

WLCA has started to consolidate its data collection practices. A strong example of an existing data source is demographic data. This provides a deeper understanding of the make-up of the community and what types of services WLCA should develop. Currently, data from those that directly engage with WLCA is being collected and analysed through PowerBI. This quantitative data can be used to triangulate findings from the staff and volunteer workshop underlining that those that work with WLCA have a deep understanding of the make-up of their local community.

*“Our health work has been very innovative, it is keeping up with what’s happening now and where the trends are going relying on the data we collect. We understand the issues and then aim to be creative” - WLCA stakeholder*

In our workshops participants identified a diverse population served by WLCA, with a significant presence of older adults. While the majority of residents are white British, WLCA also engages with Black, Asian, and minority ethnic groups, as well as other key demographics such as unemployed individuals, single parents, disabled residents, and vulnerable households.

Moreover, demographic data capture can also highlight who is not served by WLCA’s current programmes and services. Our sessions with staff, stakeholders and community revealed limited engagement with specific demographic groups, including pre-school children, young adults aged 18-25, and some faith communities.



Collecting data at community events Credit: WLCA

### How we see the standard developing

The focus of this dimension on hard data collection to measure indicators of neighbourhood quality and enable medium to long-term monitoring. It poses key questions about geographical boundaries and aims to establish minimum service and facility standards required for a decent living environment.

This dimension builds most closely on the learnings from the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) Inclusive Growth Framework and the Place Standard Tool (see Appendix C). The WMCA's framework metrics can be adapted to hyper-local level to develop minimum standards. Similarly, the Place Standard tool framework provides a methodology for qualifying diverse urban design elements in a systematic way. The reviewed 15 and 20-minute neighbourhood frameworks demonstrate that clear metrics on proximity and need can also be established.

Existing data collected by WLCA can be complemented by regional and national datasets, providing a more comprehensive understanding of neighbourhood conditions. From experience, we know that national and regional data sets often are hard to translate at hyper-local and neighbourhood level. Combining these sources with WLCA's internal data will enhance their capacity to monitor impact, identify gaps, and inform future strategic decisions. At this stage, we have identified the following research and data mapping priorities for WLCA to consider:

- Mapping and understanding geographical neighbourhoods for impact assessment, allowing for comparability and strategic prioritisation.
- Understanding crime and safety across the areas in which WLCA operates.
- Detailed mapping of demographics of service users and understanding gaps.
- Hyper local mapping of proximities and availability of social infrastructure, physical assets, green and blue spaces, quality of urban realm and accessibility.

- Understanding existing data assets which WLCA already has.

Data sources will include, amongst others:

- National and Regional Data Sets - Office for National Statistics (ONS), West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA), local authority databases.
- Health and Crime Data - Public Health England, NHS data, police reports, crime statistics.
- Education and Employment Metrics - School attainment records, employment rates, access to training.
- Infrastructure and Accessibility - Walking distances to key services (e.g., GP, schools, retail, transport), broadband connectivity, green space access.

#### Recommendations:

- 1 Conduct a baseline assessment of neighbourhood quality to understand current neighbourhood conditions, identify areas of influence, and measure needs against established quality standards.
- 2 Integrating internal organisational data with relevant regional and national datasets to create a more robust evidence base for monitoring and evaluation of neighbourhood impacts as well as decision-making.
- 3 Develop a monitoring framework based on the Decent Neighbourhood Standard, supporting strategic planning and improving accountability across all service areas,
- 4 Ongoing monitoring and data collection as part of long-term Decent Neighbourhood Standard evaluation will need to include both quantitative and qualitative insights to track both long-term neighbourhood impacts and emerging community needs.

### 5.2.2 Supporting flourishing communities through local insights and participation

This dimension focuses on understanding residents, their needs, wants, and perceptions in to co-create a flourishing neighbourhood. The dimension informs the strategic direction of WLCA and ensures that community voice remains central to shaping organisational strategy.

#### What we found out about WLCA's communities

CNM and Social Life undertook stakeholder workshops and a community consultation to shape our understanding of community priorities. Workshops used interactive group activities and facilitated discussions to explore WLCA's work and its impact on the local neighbourhood. Participants were asked to draw or map key features of their neighbourhood, identify who engages with WLCA, and highlight community landmarks. A new research protocol was developed for this project which was a 'neighbourhood diagnostics' approach, centred around understanding what the key components of a decent neighbourhood for people are.

Findings from this research revealed two contrasting themes:

- A positive perception across the system of neighbourhood, in which WLCA operates, rooted in community connections and local amenities.
- And a negative one focused on safety concerns and environmental maintenance.

While many respondents expressed pride in their local spaces and the sense of community fostered through events and shared facilities, others highlighted issues related to crime, neglect, and a lack of investment.

### Social connections

Social relationships emerged as the most significant factor influencing residents' attachment to their neighbourhood. WLCA's community spaces and events play a vital role in fostering these connections. Staff mentioned the multicultural nature of their team and strong volunteer engagement as a strength, allowing them to better connect with the communities they support.

#### ***"I very much appreciate Witton Lodge volunteers at Perry Common Library" - Community Member***

The staff and volunteer workshop underlined WLCA's role in supporting residents, facilitating new social connections and acting as a trusted community engager. "We change people's lives" was a repeated impact statement reported by staff and volunteers, indicating high pride in the work that they do. Participants in the workshop reported the value of their services can be demonstrated by observing positive change in service users, monitoring that change through individual assessments and a data-driven approach.

Crucially, residents and stakeholders underlined the trusted reputation of the WLCA citing word-of-mouth recommendations and positive public feedback can be viewed as evidence of WLCA's influence. Participants suggested that repeat service use and ongoing engagement with WLCA's programmes reflect community trust and the long-term effectiveness of the organisation's work. This positions the WLCA as a key facilitator of neighbourhood improvements that have community support and can create lasting benefits for people.

### Community safety

Whilst the 2017 University of Birmingham internal WLCA study found that 80% of residents surveyed reported feeling safe in their community, concerns around parking, dog fouling, anti-social behaviour, and vandalism remain prevalent. One resident voiced a clear plea to “sort out crime, fly tipping (shops) and make space safe”. Workshop participants noted that some safety concerns were shaped as much by negative perceptions as by direct experience, sharing “I hear many comments that people no longer want to go to Erdington. Hopefully perceptions will soon change”. Although initiatives such as Operation Fearless<sup>24</sup> in Erdington are working to reshape both crime levels and perceptions of safety, these issues continue to be a concern within the community.

### Local amenities

Access to shops, schools, healthcare, and communal spaces emerged as a priority for residents and significantly impacts perceptions of neighbourhood quality. The participants identified several key physical assets from which WLCA already operates. The core assets were seen as the Perry Common Hall and Erdington High Street Hub (reported at the workshops to be attracting all ages), Eco Hub (perceptually engaging an older demographic) and the soon to open Erdington Baths Enterprise Hub. Other key assets identified over which Witton Lodge doesn't have direct control, but where volunteers and staff engage regularly, were Witton Lakes and Perry Common Meadows (catering for all ages) and Perry Common Library (reported at the workshops to cater for older demographics). Overall, these local amenities were reported to improve neighbourhood quality.

### Economic factors

The availability of affordable housing and local employment opportunities is critical to supporting residents' long-term wellbeing and reducing inequalities. Many residents described their

decision to live in a neighbourhood as being driven by “mostly necessity”, reflecting the reality that economic and social factors often force people to accept neighbourhood conditions out of practical need. However, participants also highlighted how economic and social factors frequently lead residents to engage with services and amenities beyond their immediate area.

### How we see the standard developing

The dimension **Supporting flourishing communities through local insights and participation** captures resident experiences and community dynamics to provide a deeper understanding of neighbourhood quality and community wellbeing beyond traditional hard data. While statistics on crime, infrastructure, and economic performance offer valuable insights, they do not fully reflect how people feel about where they live, their trust in local institutions, or their sense of belonging.

This dimension aligns most closely with the Social Life's Design for Social Sustainability and the Quality of Life Foundation frameworks and builds on the methodologies employed for understanding perceptual dimensions and needs in a community. (See Appendix C)

We need to understand how residents perceive and experience their environment. This goes beyond physical infrastructure to include social interactions, cultural identity, and emotional connections to place. Deploying the Decent Neighbourhoods Standard 'Neighbourhoods Diagnostics' research tool will help identify strengths, challenges, and opportunities within neighbourhoods, to inform the development of locally relevant policies and interventions.

At this stage we believe priorities for WLCA are:

- Further understand communities' perceptions, specifically on issues around safety and security, social cohesion, wellbeing and resilience and economic opportunity.

interpretation of data and strategic decision making. This can be achieved by employing methodologies such as Community Dynamics.

### Community Dynamics

Community Dynamics<sup>25</sup> is a methodology developed by Social Life that maps data that predicts how people are likely to feel about where they live. It complements the data commonly used by local agencies - information about deprivation, crime, public health - with data that tells us how people experience everyday life in local neighbourhoods. By incorporating Community Dynamics Data, resident surveys, and long-term, co-designed qualitative research, this dimension embeds people-centred perspective on neighbourhood quality.

A key component of this process is benchmarking findings against national perceptual surveys, such as those measuring community cohesion, safety, and participation levels. This allows for a comparative analysis between different neighbourhoods and ensures that local insights align with broader regional and national trends. By establishing longitudinal benchmarks, this framework enables continuous monitoring of satisfaction, trust, and civic engagement, ensuring that interventions are both effective and responsive to evolving community needs.

- Consider an asset-based approach or frame, understanding the social and community assets (tangible and intangible) across different demographics to better leverage influence and impact.
- Understand what the gaps are in mutual support systems in their neighbourhoods.
- Develop internal practices to capture experiences through qualitative data.
- Capitalise on the strength of resident-led leadership, strong volunteer networks and engaged customers to develop a long-term approach to community data gathering.

### Recommendations:

- 5 Baseline social impact assessment: Develop and carry out a large-scale survey to gather insights on how residents experience and think about their neighbourhood.
- 6 Social Infrastructure: Map social infrastructure, local assets and support systems through community-led exercises to strengthen evidence base (drawing on survey data from social impact assessment).
- 7 Develop long-term community-led data collection processes: Establish ongoing methods to gather perceptual and qualitative data to capture residents' experiences and insights to feed into the Standard. Train residents to work as researchers and to feed into the design and analysis of research.
- 8 Engage a core group of trustees, volunteers and residents to steer, support and interpret the perceptual data emerging.
- 9 Align processes in this dimension with the data collection processes in Dimension 1: Neighbourhood Quality to enable

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.westmidlands.police.uk/police-forces/west-midlands-police/areas/campaigns/campaigns/operation-fearless/>

<sup>25</sup> Social Life (2019) Understanding Local Areas: [https://www.social-life.co/publication/understanding\\_local\\_areas/](https://www.social-life.co/publication/understanding_local_areas/)

**5.2.3 Strengthening influence, accountability and stewardship across North Birmingham**

This dimension evaluates the accountability and stewardship structures that are essential to ensure a Decent Neighbourhood Standard, looking at the wider system and networks while adopting an actor-network theory approach.

**What we found out**

WLCA holds a key position in the area as a community-led anchor organisation with the capacity to influence policy and decision-making. It is well placed to take forward this aspect of the Decent Neighbourhood Standard. Its involvement in initiatives like the North Birmingham Economic Recovery Board demonstrates its ability to coalesce stakeholders and bridge local community needs with broader policy agendas, fostering accountability across stakeholders.

***“We have some wonderful partnerships, built on relationships. There is value there. Witton Lodge is different in these relationships – when we’ve asked people to describe WLCA it is the warmth of people, opposite to a faceless organisation.” - WLCA Stakeholder***

WLCA plays an important role in facilitating collaboration between residents, local authorities, and service providers, which can contribute to increased trust, transparency, and accountability. This approach has the potential to support more inclusive and sustainable neighbourhood development. The organisation’s resident-led model of leadership forms the basis for its strong local connections. We observed that some staff and senior leaders who had previously been residents or service users had later transitioned into roles as employees or trustees.

WLCA’s strategic documents indicate a clear engagement and ambition to influence the broader context within which they operate. In Figure 4 we have depicted how we see this evolve. From their original base in Perry Common, WLCA has now expanded its work with another natural cluster forming around Erdington High Street. In the workshops and engagement with staff we heard a distinct differentiation between the specific drivers of change and neighbourhood quality characteristics in the two areas. WLCA delivers different services, at various levels of delivery, some of which capture the whole of North Birmingham. This potentially might mask some more hyper-local needs.

Perry Common and Erdington are the first neighbourhoods that the Demonstrator will focus on. However, they should be seen within the wider constellation of neighbourhoods within which WLCA operates (Figure 4). Implementing the standard will allow WLCA to understand its localities better and compare their influence on an operational level. This will help it to better understand its influence within the wider geographies.

**How we see the standard developing**

Effective governance, an intrinsic feature of the Decent Neighbourhood Standard, requires clear structures of accountability, ensuring that those responsible for maintaining neighbourhood standards can be held to account by the communities they serve. This dimension also assesses how community anchor organisations, such as WLCA, can strengthen their role as active stewards of their neighbourhoods.

This dimension builds on the learnings from Social Life’s Design for Social Sustainability voice and influence dimension, including elements such as trust and responsiveness of agencies as well as the Quality of Life framework’s connected communities.

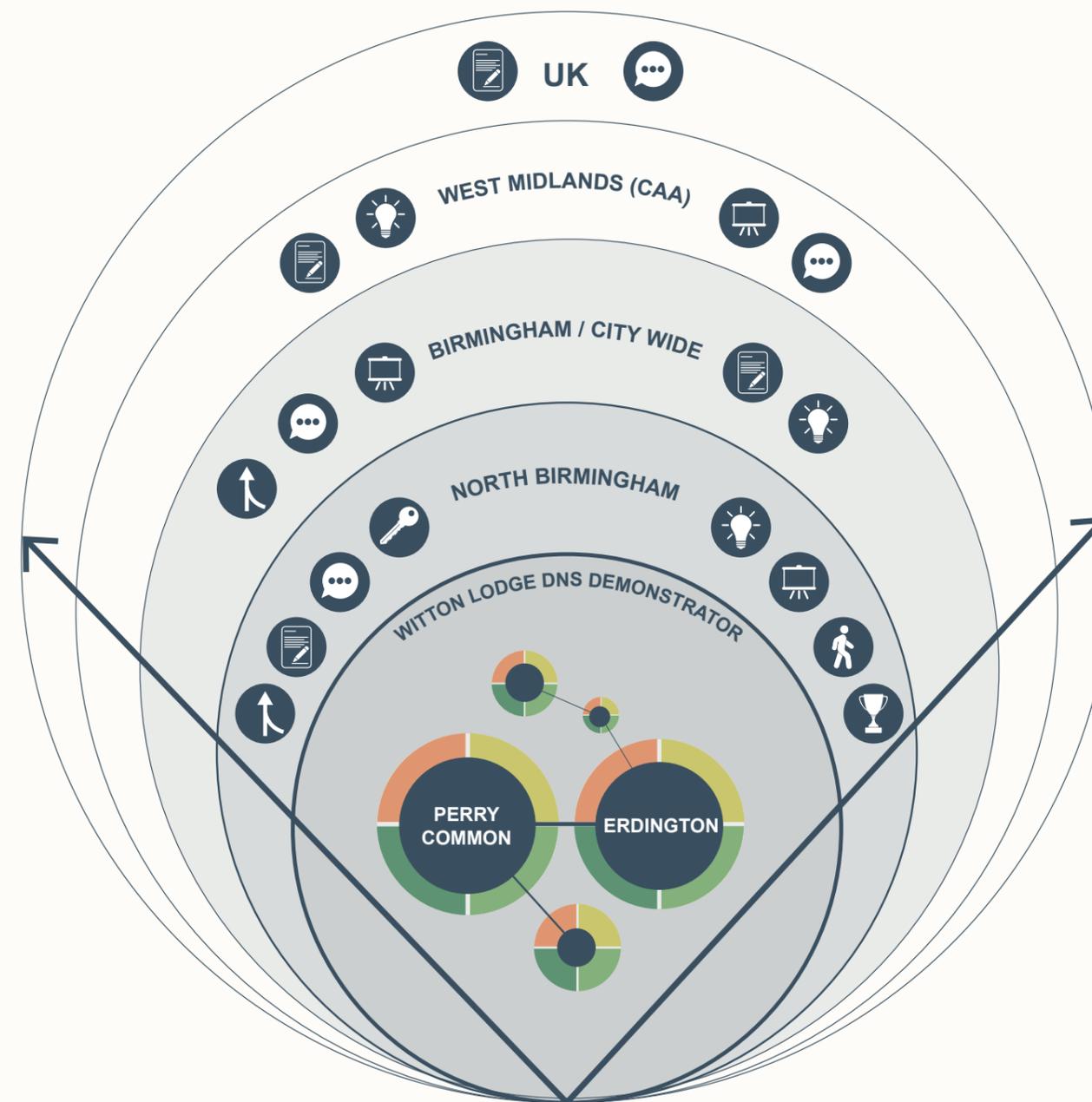


Figure 4: WLCA Decent Neighbourhood Demonstrator mapped against the WLCA Strategic Plan zones of influence.

**Recommendations:**

- 10 Mapping WLCA's role as a community anchor, its spheres of community influence, ability to impact and stewardship.
- 11 Understanding how best WLCA can use its position as a community anchor to identify specific, local challenges, issues or gaps in neighbourhood services.
- 12 In trying to address the issues and gaps, evaluating what are the existing structures of accountability at the neighbourhood level. (This may include the development of metric tools to assess how different actors impact neighbourhood quality over time.)
- 13 Driving forward local advocacy that WLCA already provides, to drive improvements to neighbourhood services, infrastructure, and housing quality.
- 14 Promoting models of community-led change and governance, such as WLCA's role as a community anchor organisation within a neighbourhood or neighbourhoods.

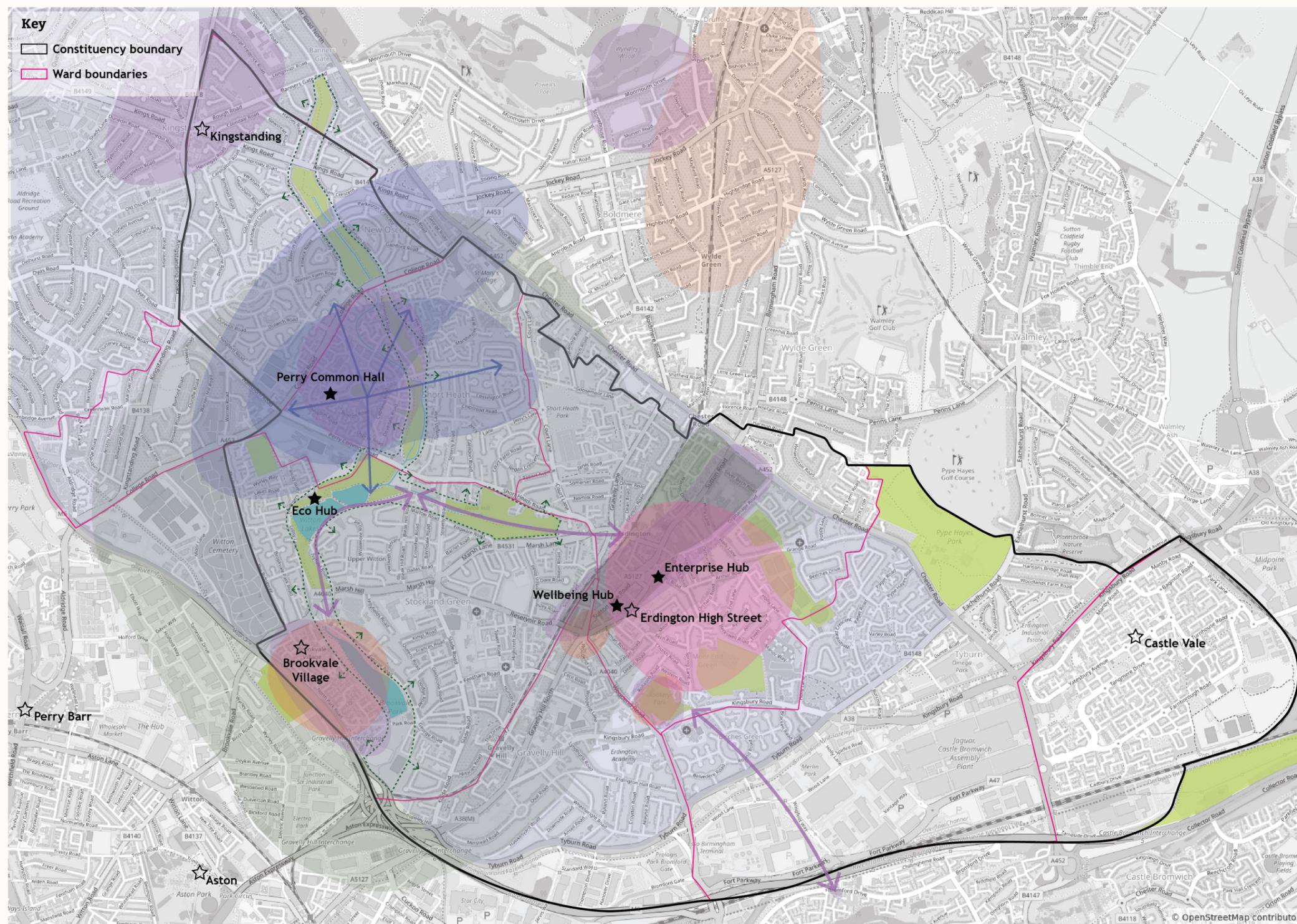


Figure 5. Composite mapping of participants' perceived boundaries of neighbourhoods in North Birmingham. The Erdington constituency and local ward boundaries are overlaid, demonstrating the need to further define neighbourhood boundaries. Areas which WLCA serves such as Wyley Birch and Kingstanding might be outside of formal governance boundaries yet have strong social connections with the core areas of delivery.

### 5.2.4 Achieving sustainable and inclusive development

This dimension focuses on how WLCA would deploy the Decent Neighbourhood Standard for its future sustainability, strategic planning and development, including around an asset management and inclusive growth strategy.

#### What we found out

WLCA's core areas of control and responsibility revolve around assets and their management, as well as strategic planning for future growth. The Association is focused on aligning its priorities with the needs of the local community, ensuring that key areas such as housing, employment, health, environment, and community life drive decision-making. WLCA is committed to addressing several key priorities as embedded in its Strategic Plan, including inclusive growth, neighbourhood regeneration, and sustainability. As part of this vision, strategic planning is essential for fostering growth that is inclusive and forward-facing, particularly regarding young people, digital access, and environmental sustainability.

There is already a strong neighbourhoods focus embedded in WLCA's Strategic plan<sup>26</sup>:

***“Stabilise and transform neighbourhoods; by creating high quality homes, community facilities and local parks, with neighbourhood services that local people need and are proud of.”***

***“Build local networks, infrastructure, and relationships; that promote good health, improved well-being, and enhanced community resilience.”***

***“Support action on fuel poverty and climate change by implementing a programme of investment and retrofitting our homes and facilities.”***

Staff across the organisation valued WLCA's willingness to take risks, pilot new initiatives and invest in long-term community benefits. A key strength was seen in the organisational structure, resident-led governance and non-siloed working. They also appreciated that WLCA's strategy is rooted in consultation and a deep understanding of local issues and felt that WLCA should continue to emphasise and focus on lived experience and holistic community development. However, some areas which require strengthening are aligning long-term strategic direction to short-term engagement and delivery of services and contracts.

Engagement with staff and volunteers through this project revealed that there is appetite to take responsibility for improving local areas by addressing issues like empty properties and fuel poverty. Housing is still a priority, but focus has shifted from community-led building to managing and taking over existing empty homes. Asset management is a key element over which WLCA exercises control allowing it to lead by example.

#### How we see the dimension developing

This dimension assesses how WLCA's Decent Neighbourhood Standard aligns with Net Zero commitments, good governance practices, and long-term business and strategic planning. It ensures that neighbourhood development is not only socially and economically sustainable but also contributes to climate resilience and environmental sustainability. By embedding Net Zero and inclusive growth principles, the WLCA Decent Neighbourhood Standard can support neighbourhoods towards low-carbon, energy-efficient, and environmentally responsible futures.

The dimension builds on all the examined frameworks (see Appendix C) but aligns most closely with the metrics of 'environmental resilience' in the WMCA Inclusive Growth framework, connections to the 'nature' dimension in the Quality of Life framework, as well as the 'adaptability and resilience' dimension of the Design for Social Sustainability.

#### Strategic planning for sustainable neighbourhood impact

To ensure long-term success, WLCA can choose to move from a focus on programmes based on available funding opportunities to being more strategic in its activities, aligning its business plans to neighbourhood needs while maximising impact. This requires a theory of change approach, linking interventions to measurable outcomes in social, economic, and environmental sustainability.

WLCA's business planning should integrate climate and nature resilience, ensuring that all activities contribute to sustainable regeneration. In this way Net Zero and sustainability goals are embedded into governance structures, operational models, and funding strategies.

By integrating Net Zero principles, governance best practices, and strategic planning, the WLCA Decent Neighbourhood Standard ensures that neighbourhoods are resilient, sustainable, and adaptable to future challenges.

#### Operational and strategic approaches to change

To drive real change, organisations need to work both on the ground and at strategic level, testing out new approaches and building on what works, and can be scaled. This includes thinking carefully about how they're governed, how they attract investment, and how they measure their impact.

WLCA is in a strong position as a community-led organisation to test and refine community-based approaches such as through community-led housing, volunteer-driven regeneration projects, and local asset management strategies.

#### Recommendations:

- 15 Deploying the WLCA Decent Neighbourhood Standard provides a framework to align with Net Zero goals embedding sustainability and resilience into neighbourhood quality improvement and development.
- 16 WLCA can clearly embed sustainability into both strategic governance and strategic planning. For example, through an asset-based development strategy which would leverage WLCA's community-led housing model to create sustainable neighbourhoods where local people have a stake in decision-making and place-shaping. Neighbourhood retrofit initiatives are an example of future activities WLCA could undertake.

<sup>26</sup> WLCA Strategic Plan available: <https://wittonlodge.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/WLCA-Strategic-Plan.pdf>

## 6 Conclusion

### 6.1 A new Decent Neighbourhood Standard to support communities to thrive

The Decent Neighbourhood Standard translates the principles of the Decent Homes Standard beyond individual dwellings to the wider neighbourhood context. Existing frameworks for neighbourhood design tend to be aspirational rather than implementable, often lacking mechanisms for governance and accountability.

The Decent Neighbourhood Standard aims to fill this gap by defining a clear baseline, ensuring that every community meets minimum conditions that support sustainable, thriving neighbourhoods. It takes a pragmatic approach, combining:

- A deductive or top-down thematic mapping of core neighbourhood quality themes and metrics and identifying systemic gaps.
- An inductive or bottom-up community co-design which integrates lived experiences, neighbourhood diagnostics and local community insights and priorities.
- Universal place-based accountability based on the principles of equity and addressing social inequalities which is focused on ensuring that a decent quality of neighbourhood supports a decent quality of life for everyone.

The Decent Neighbourhood Standard is strategically segmented into four priority dimensions:

#### Dimension 1. Neighbourhood Quality Standards:

The neighbourhood meets minimum quality standards regarding improving public safety, limiting environmental risks and creating healthy living environments.

#### Dimension 2. Reducing Inequalities and Enabling Aspirations:

The neighbourhood provides essential amenities and infrastructure that enable economic and social mobility, and support social cohesion, social capital, wellbeing and resilience, underpinned by residents' perceptual data.

#### Dimension 3. Accountability, Influence and Stewardship:

The neighbourhood infrastructure is well maintained and fit for purpose, supported by robust governance arrangements.

#### Dimension 4. Securing a Sustainable Future:

The neighbourhood has embedded green infrastructure, sustainable transport and net-zero policies to create climate-resilient communities driven by future-facing organisations.

Each priority incorporates mechanisms for evaluation, adaptable to the evolving needs of neighbourhoods, ensuring that the Decent Neighbourhood Standard is both practical and implementable.

### 6.2 The next phase for the WLCA Decent Neighbourhood Standard demonstrator

The Decent Neighbourhood Standard offers a focused framework to help WLCA better understand the specific needs of the diverse neighbourhoods it serves, prioritise interventions based on need, strengthen links to regional policy and resource allocation, and align with national policy imperatives.

This report marks the first, critical step in applying the Decent Neighbourhood Standard to WLCA's operations and testing the adaptability of the framework.

#### Priority 1

##### Establishing a baseline and monitoring neighbourhood quality

By establishing a baseline of the neighbourhoods in which WLCA operates, the organisation can make more informed strategic decisions and drive long-term improvements.

- **Findings:** WLCA has begun consolidating its data collection practices.
- **Next Steps:** WLCA would benefit from conducting a more systematic baseline assessment of neighbourhood quality, integrating internal data with relevant regional and national datasets, developing a monitoring framework aligned to the Decent Neighbourhood Standard, and embedding ongoing monitoring and data collection as part of long-term evaluation efforts.

#### Priority 2

##### Supporting flourishing communities through local insights and participation

Understanding residents' needs, aspirations, and perceptions is key to building thriving communities.

- **Findings:** Communities have a positive perception of their neighbourhoods rooted in community connections and local amenities, but have concerns around safety and environmental maintenance.
- **Next Steps:** WLCA should consider conducting a baseline social impact assessment and social infrastructure mapping, establishing long-term community-led data collection processes, forming a community-led steering group to interpret perceptual data, and aligning these efforts with the data frameworks outlined in Priority 1. There is an opportunity here to work with community members as researchers, with appropriate training and support.

### Priority 3

#### Strengthening influence, accountability and stewardship across North Birmingham

Strategic mapping of WLCA's zones of influence will strengthen its leadership role across North Birmingham.

- **Findings:** WLCA holds a unique position as a community-led anchor organisation with capacity to influence local policy and decision-making.
- **Next Steps:** WLCA should map its role as a community anchor, explore how to leverage this position for greater impact, evaluate existing structures of neighbourhood accountability, drive forward local advocacy, and promote its model of community-led change and governance regionally and nationally.

### Priority 4

#### Achieving sustainable and inclusive development

Embedding sustainability and inclusive growth in strategic planning is crucial for WLCA's future impact.

- **Findings:** WLCA's Strategic Plan reflects strong commitments to inclusive growth, neighbourhood regeneration, and sustainability.
- **Next Steps:** WLCA should align its strategies with Net Zero goals, and embed sustainability principles into both strategic governance and strategic planning.

Deploying the Decent Neighbourhood Standard, WLCA can steer local priorities, strengthen community cohesion, and influence the development of centres and hubs as key zones of influence. This would provide a clear avenue to capture qualitative and experiential data from residents and customers, enabling WLCA to evidence and build upon their connections with local people.

The Standard provides a framework for measuring and capturing neighbourhood impacts, helping WLCA advocate for investment in areas such as modern facilities, economic infrastructure, and sustainability initiatives.

CNM and Social Life are working with WLCA on the next phase of the Decent Neighbourhoods Standard Demonstrator. We look forward to deepening our collaborative approach, embedding co-design and local insights and working closely with WLCA, its partners and its community.



Perry Chocobow Swannet at Perry Common Community Hall

## 6.3 Towards a Decent Neighbourhood Standard

Neighbourhoods are complex inter-related social, economic and cultural systems, often spatially overlapping with one another. When they are the focus of interventions, those are often politically or contextually driven, initiatives are seldom developed or replicated in an organic manner.

The current government and industry focus on housing delivery, New Towns, Planning Reform and Devolution at national and regional level risks forgetting that ultimately it is at neighbourhood level that impacts on communities are most keenly felt.

There are clear priorities that communities want from their neighbourhoods. People want their neighbourhood to be well-maintained, be in good proximity to key social and economic infrastructure and to feel safe and at home. They want to be able to co-create the future of their neighbourhood, feel pride in place and develop long-lasting relationships with people and the area. Most importantly, neighbourhoods need to underpin good health and quality of life for their residents, tackling health and social inequalities.

The Decent Neighbourhood Standard can be the tool to enable comprehensive diagnostics of neighbourhoods, establish accountability gaps and provide a way forward for complicated policy decisions. Establishing clear and comparable baselines can avoid short-term, politically driven targets and develop a long-term focus on improving hyper-local areas.

## 6.4 Future directions

This report reflects our thinking around the development of a Decent Neighbourhood Standard, setting out an emerging logic model, with high level themes and dimensions which will be further developed into more detailed evaluative tools, mapping data metrics and research methodologies within each of the dimensions. We hope to do this collaboratively and iteratively, building an evidence base of tested demonstrator cases studies of different types of neighbourhoods with different types of organisations.

Future questions to be explored include:

- Who owns a Decent Neighbourhood Standard and what are the accountability processes embedded in the standard?
- What are the evidenced and standardised minimum requirements for quality-of-life underpinning each of the dimensions of the Decent Neighbourhood Standard?
- How can the Decent Neighbourhood Standard enable the interplay between porous and overlapping neighbourhood boundaries, while maintaining robust accountability structures?

As we move into the next phase of this research, we will be contemplating these questions as we deepen and expand the evidence base, testing the practical application of the Decent Neighbourhood Standard, and continuing to co-develop the Standard as a collaborative, and policy-relevant tool for driving more equitable, inclusive and sustainable neighbourhoods.

Witton Lodge Community Association (WLCA) is a Community Association and Community Landlord. The organisation was established in 1994 by residents of Perry Common, and over the decades WLCA has evolved into an active resident-led organisation dedicated to improving housing, health, employment, and community life in North Birmingham. WLCA delivers practical services to the local community while aiming to create a sense of belonging and place-identity for residents.

[www.wittonlodge.org.uk](http://www.wittonlodge.org.uk)

The Centre for the New Midlands (CNM) is the only independent, not-for-profit think tank for the West Midlands. The Centre creates a space to debate and shape better region, fostering collaboration across society, industry, and academia. CNM has a strong track record in research spanning digital innovation, infrastructure, people and skills, and housing and communities.

[www.thenewmidlands.org.uk](http://www.thenewmidlands.org.uk)

Social Life is an independent research organisation created by the Young Foundation in 2012, to become a specialist centre of research and innovation about the social life of communities. Our work is about understanding how peoples' day-to-day experience of local places is shaped by the built environment - housing, public spaces, parks and local high streets - and how change, through regeneration, new development or small improvements to public spaces, affects the social fabric, opportunities and wellbeing of local areas.

[www.social-life.co](http://www.social-life.co)

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