

**Rea Valley Urban Quarter Draft SPD**  
**A response from Birmingham Friends of the Earth**

**1. SPD Vision and Big Moves**

We welcome the overall strategy, and support the proposal to open up the River Rea so that it will become a valuable amenity for people and a vital and enhanced corridor for wildlife.

BCC recently passed a Climate Emergency Motion which will hopefully give rise to a raft of new policies, guidance and targets to reduce carbon emissions. With this in mind, the SPD should ensure that developments are carbon neutral aiming for zero carbon emissions both in construction and operation. Provision of renewable energy should be integrated into all the developments at the design stage to enable zero emissions from heating. Solar and ground source heat pumps should be viable and hydro electric may also be possible.

As transport is the largest single source of carbon emissions, the design and facilities should prioritise walking, cycling and public transport by making these modes convenient, safe and pleasant.

Digbeth and Deritend High Street form the north eastern boundary of the plan area. However we believe this boundary should be extended northwards to include buildings and land along the northern side of Digbeth / Deritend High Street. This would enable Digbeth/Deritend High Street to be developed as a major axis with improvements along both sides of the road.

We would also suggest that the plan area is extended northwards along the banks of the River Rea as far as the railway viaduct. The measures proposed for opening up the River Rea could then be continued to the north of the High Street, where the river runs adjacent to land currently used as a car park next to the Custard Factory.

The proposed Park Link from Highgate Park to the Smithfield Development will be a valuable asset and could be developed as a wildlife corridor. Special treatment could be considered where the Park Link intersects the River Rea so that the potential for creating a new wildlife corridor is maximised.

Tree planting on other roads in the Masterplan area will add to the amenity of the area and introduce a cooling effect which will make the area more liveable, particularly in view of the hotter summers which are predicted in the future.

Hedgerow planting along certain roads could be used to screen traffic and pollution from pedestrians and buildings.

**Principles**

**2. Connectivity Principle:**

We strongly support priority being given to walking, cycling and public transport.

We particularly support the proposal for the pedestrian and cycle priority Park Link, the pedestrian and cycle route along the River Rea and additional pedestrian and cycle only bridges over the river. When planning pedestrian and cycle routes, the steep hill up to Highgate should be taken into account so that routes follow contours if possible.

We would also suggest that cycle and pedestrian routes are lit at night.

Parts of the Masterplan area are remote from current bus routes, so we support the establishment of a new bus route running through the centre of the Masterplan area along Macdonald Street , South Rea Street and Bissell Street which form part of an advisory cycle route from the National Cycle Network Route 5 to Digbeth, is currently a high speed rat run which is intimidating for cyclists and pedestrians alike. We hope that measures can be applied to this and other similar long, straight roads in the area to make them safer for pedestrians and cyclists. Macdonald Street is another high speed rat run.

Safe and secure cycle storage should be designed into all new residential developments proposed for the area. Secure cycle parking should be placed at convenient locations for all public facilities and businesses.

We would also suggest that minimal parking provision for residential areas, or zero parking provision for some developments, should be considered to encourage use of alternative modes. There are examples of new residential developments with zero parking in many cities across the UK. We feel that all of the above measures will together, be crucial in reducing air pollution and cutting carbon emissions.

### **3. Resilience Principle**

We strongly support the proposal to break open the River Rea from its culverted channel and allow it the freedom to flow so that it assumes a more sinuous and natural course. This will make the area more attractive and benefit the environment in a number of ways. However, we think that the notional 35m zone to accommodate a less restrained river course may need to be wider to accommodate the extreme rain events which are forecast to increase in intensity and frequency in future as a result of climate change.

The temptation to build too close to the river to maximise development space should be resisted. We note that the EA indicative flood mapping shows that Flood Zone 3 extends to at least 150 - 200m either side of the present day course of the river within the Masterplan area. Therefore the 35 m-wide zone for the river may have to be much wider.

Redevelopment will provide an opportunity to reduce run off rates and reduce the potential for flooding. SUDS must be deployed in new developments unless there is a really good reason for not doing so, following the SUDS hierarchy. Filter strips, retention ponds, green roofs, rainwater harvesting, porous paving and soakaways are all measures which may be deployed. Some of these measures such as retention ponds will also have benefits for biodiversity. Measures which benefit biodiversity should be prioritised where possible.

The EA must ensure that drainage measures for the proposed developments and modifications made to the river must result in a reduced flood risk.

Given the potential for ground contamination from current and historic industrial land use, there is a risk of contaminants being mobilised and entering the river during and after construction. Control measures should be in place to prevent this happening.

### **4. Design:**

Buildings of quality and heritage buildings should be retained and refurbished and insulated to a high standard, rather than be demolished. Local materials should be used in construction wherever possible and their carbon footprint assessed.

In terms of the mix of housing, a good proportion of affordable housing for rent and for first time buyers should be included.

Locations for buildings higher than 15 stories should be in accordance with the council's planning policy on tall buildings. This policy has clear guidelines in determining acceptable locations. For instance tall buildings are deemed appropriate for the 'Central Ridge' area of the city but are generally not considered appropriate outside this zone or in conservation areas.

We do not believe 10+ storey high buildings should be built along Digbeth High Street as this will not be in keeping with the heritage buildings on the northern side of the road which falls within a conservation area. We believe that tall buildings are generally not appropriate for the Masterplan area.

## **5. Distinctive Neighbourhoods**

We support the approach of distinctive neighbourhoods within the Masterplan area. The different neighbourhoods are of a more manageable scale compared to the large size of the total Masterplan area, and each will have its own character. This will help to create an environment which is more amenable to walking and cycling and should lead to healthier, more cohesive communities with a greater sense of community identity.

## **6. Delivery**

We support the partnership approach proposed. We would also like to emphasise that the EA will have a critical role to play in the development of the area, given the flood risk issues and the implications river 'remodelling' will have for flood risk.

Martin Stride  
Birmingham Friends of the Earth