

## **Birmingham Friends of the Earth Consultation Response**

### **Our Future City Plan 'Shaping our City Together'**

**March 2021**

#### **5. Do you agree with the central quarters and the neighbourhoods identified? If not please provide your comments?**

We certainly support the idea of reducing the severance caused by the Middleway Ring Road and joining the surrounding inner city areas back onto the city centre. We also support strengthening neighbourhoods and mixed uses, instead of zoning and assuming a lot of vehicle movement. 'Central Birmingham' is one way to refer to this project.

However, the area identified on the map does not seem to us to have a functional nor a historical basis. There are already too many quarters. Jewellery Quarter is a well-established name. The Quarters as shown; Central, South, East and West are actually circles with no particular centres, hence they include, exclude and divide neighbourhoods. For example, Aston and Saltley are surely inner city neighbourhoods. We do not think that people will identify with these Quarters nor the names suggested for them. North, South, East and West are more like sectors of Central Birmingham and the borders between them would be just lines on the map. This would work against the sense of identity, community and belonging identified in the City of Layers and City of Centres concepts

We feel that a more rational approach would be to take actual units, such as city wards which have Ward councillors, Ward forums, Ward plans etc., and historically meaningful names, like Aston and Ladywood, not arbitrary circles. Include those wards that are physically adjacent to the existing City Centre. This would allow for real debate and ongoing participation by residents and businesses about the future of Central Birmingham. It would also encompass areas that are within cycling distance of New Street station and we consider that planning for a much higher level of cycling is essential to a sustainable Central Birmingham and to the health of its people.

It will not be possible to redevelop all the areas of manufacturing, waste recycling and other unattractive, but necessary, businesses that require low cost space. Roads, railways and canals will continue to divide the area. Hence walking and cycling routes should be put where people will actually want to go and be.

#### **6. Does our draft vision fit with your vision for Central Birmingham? If not, why not?**

BCC has declared a Climate Emergency and we want to see the Climate Emergency at the core of all plans, including this one. An acceptable vision for our city must be carbon neutral whereas this plan looks like business as usual to us. The Route to Zero Task Force has been preparing an Action Plan for the city to reach Net Zero by 2050. We'd like to see measurable actions and goals come out of the R20 task force funding, and see this linked in with the vision outlined in this plan so the spatial requirements of this should be addressed in the Future City Plan 2040. This work seems still to be done and we feel that the newly-appointed climate officers in the Council should be involved.

The plan seems to assume that property development equals economic growth and growth equals prosperity for all. We think this is an unrealistic approach which does not allow for constraints on growth such as land, air, pollution etc. We want to see a much more selective and just approach to growth that favours both equality and resource efficiency. Wealth means what everyone in our communities needs to be well, not just money for someone.

Much could be learnt from Doughnut Economics, which aims to give everyone enough but within constraints. Amsterdam has shown the way with its Amsterdam City Doughnut Plan.

Some climate warming is inevitable. We have already seen the Birmingham Tornado in 2005, then floods and heat waves. Future Birmingham should appear more “Mediterranean” with shade, shelter and coolness designed in. The North American high energy city will be the wrong model. Under the city are hills, rivers, flood plains, even a geological fault. Nature based solutions will be the most cost effective and reports have been produced about Natural Capital by city officers. The Environment Agency should be involved in plan making.

Disease transmission must now be taken into account. Crowded spaces that do not allow for social distancing and force people indoors are not what people will need in an age of viruses. Birmingham is the public health authority, so these considerations should be designed in.

The plan should be explicit that this can no longer be “Car City”; behavioural change is needed, especially in how people get around. Future Birmingham should be planned around walking, cycling and public transport as the starting point for the vision, with the rest developed around this.

There is already a problem of social segregation by ethnic backgrounds and lack of places to meet and learn about each other, a challenge of integration and community cohesion. “Culturally distinct neighbourhoods” should never suggest that a part of the city belongs to just one single ethnic group. We do not want to import the divided American city. All neighbourhoods should belong to and welcome everyone.

The vision needs to be backed up by holistic outcomes, not just financial outcomes, and always looked at from a long term perspective that takes different stakeholders into account. There also needs to be clear messaging around the impact on ordinary people. For example, job opportunities, value of their homes etc.

**7. Do you think we have identified all of the key challenges and opportunities for the Central Birmingham area over the next 20 years? If not, please provide your comments.**

It is good that Climate Change is mentioned prominently, with the plan stating that “[net zero] aspiration needs to be embedded in everything that we do”. This is a major point that is good to have been brought in but it really, really needs to be acted on at all levels.

In the section on economic change, it needs to be recognised that the Council faces huge issues with lack of resources and struggles to manage large projects and day to day issues. The Council needs to shift from firefighting to strategic thinking and it needs resources to do that

We think tackling inequality is very important to the future of the city and therefore it is vital to consider the impact of new developments on existing residents, especially in lower-income/deprived areas. Public safety should also be considered when thinking about how streets and green spaces are lit and this can be designed in a way that is strategic in terms of energy efficiency and priority areas.

In light of the threat of pandemic diseases, there may be a long term reluctance to be indoors and confined with others. People feel safer outdoors; hence shopping malls, department stores and cinemas will be much less attractive. We should go back to traditional streets, gardens, squares, not mega-buildings.

A wide range of daily activities has moved, and will likely stay online and this has a large scale impact on the location and demand for space in Central Birmingham, and the roads and public transport to and from. Past trends may have stalled and no decisions should be made on them.

Living in towns, villages and the countryside has become more attractive and people can now work from home, not being recalled to office with the “sudden death of 9 to 5”. All the reasons that people have left central Birmingham will not be reversed quickly.

Central Birmingham is 4 degrees celsius warmer than the surrounding countryside and there is more warming to come. In addition, excessive rainfall increases the risk of flooding to property on the flood plain of the River Rea. We have raised this in our response to the proposed “Rea Valley Quarter”.

High Speed Rail is also a threat, pushing up property prices so that residents cannot afford to buy a home or to start a business. A more expensive city is not necessarily a better one.

Property of all kinds may already be in oversupply; office blocks, department stores, shopping malls, city apartments. A very substantial breathing space on new developments may be needed from 2021.

Air travel may have peaked due to the pandemic. It should be restrained anyway, since flying is inherently high energy and high carbon. Oil is a dense energy medium that is difficult to replace. International travel is not generally a human need, more of a luxury. More realistic pricing and taxation of aviation would restrain demand sharply. If people stay in Birmingham or the UK then they spend more here and support local businesses and jobs. The Council’s investment in the Airport is distorting their judgements about it, we fear.

#### **8. Have we identified all of the principles that should shape our future city?**

The principles as listed are sound and we certainly agree with thriving neighbourhoods and local living, since many inner areas are sadly run down. However as we say elsewhere, there are major challenges before these principles can be achieved.

The aspiration to be a green leader is positive, but a lot of work is needed to bring Birmingham to the forefront compared to other cities (BFoE has provided extensive feedback on this, as available on our website).

Connections planned are positive in various ways, but improvements to public transport, especially buses, are needed. Opportunities to improve have already been taken and must be progressed.

Pride in Brum is important as Birmingham can be quite a self-deprecating city and there are opportunities to bring local communities into this, e.g. pride in local parks and green spaces, through friends of the park groups.

#### **9. Do the goals and actions outlined in the City of Centres support better connected, sustainable and thriving neighbourhoods? How would you improve this City Theme?**

Yes we agree with this approach to build back and improve surviving local centres. 15 Minute Neighbourhoods is a good model and Paris and other cities are using it. This can reduce the demand to move, and especially to drive, and take forward changes we have seen during the pandemic. People are wanting to walk and cycle more and use local facilities. This may mean that the City Centre itself has a reduced role, relatively and perhaps absolutely.

‘Liveable’ should include things like toilets, adequate street lighting, benches to rest on, effective bus shelters and cycle shelters, recycling facilities. A city for people, not cars

This all implies listening and consulting with bodies such as residents forums, ward forums, traders associations and stakeholder groups, so that people feel that they are worth contributing to. We have all spent too much time fighting off unwanted changes. A better built environment will require management and maintenance.

“Strengthen(ing) planning policy to maintain affordably priced living space and (...) ensur(ing) a range of housing types that meet all needs and aspirations” is very important.

Low Traffic Neighbourhoods with 20mph speed limits are something we very much support. Cycling routes should be based on where cyclists want to go, learning from existing routes.

Food growing is a welcome addition. People in inner areas generally lack access to allotments. These can be smaller than previous plot sizes and food growing can be linked to the recycling of organic wastes in a circular economy approach.

Decentralised energy grids to support locally sourced renewable energy is good; however burning rubbish has no place in a zero carbon city and it must not displace reduce, reuse, repair, recycling, composting to reduce materials usage and keep carbon out of the air. Real sources of renewable energy are solar, wind, air, ground and water heat. Energy storage is going to be important to make fluctuating renewable sources meet demand.

### **10. Do the goals and actions outlined in the City of Growth for All support growth, investment and development for all of our communities? How would you improve this City Theme?**

In 2020 there was a huge move online which has yet to be understood in terms of the demand for physical space. It may be a gain for efficiency and productivity showing that growth does not have to mean more, if we “do more with less”.

In terms of the Major Development Sites plus 8 Central Renewal Areas with potential for significant change, we think you may be overestimating the demand for new living/working space in Central Birmingham. Past trends in population should not be projected upward. Trends of international migration, overseas students and even birth rates have changed.

The UK population's growth rate from mid-2018 to mid-2019, at 0.5%, was slower than any year since mid-2004. Overview of the UK population: January 2021 ONS

By 2040 we have to approach a zero carbon city. That will not be compatible with some kinds of growth. What do you consider as overdevelopment?

The discovery that many people can work from home much of the time and buy most of what they need online has major importance for where people want to spend their time and the demand for physical space in cities. There will be strong competition from living and working from outside the city. Consultation with local property experts and architects about actual demand might be worthwhile. There may be a conflict between the desire for “inward investment” and “major developments” pricing out home-grown businesses. Birmingham could end up with a lot of empty floor space that big business no longer wants. Boom and bust.

Land space is limited/fixed. Some kinds of property development will force out other uses. Development must not lose scarce green space. People want to be outdoors in streets, squares, gardens, and not inside malls etc.

We doubt if people will want to live in high rise buildings, since fear of being trapped has increased the traditional British desire for ordinary houses in a street. Many tower blocks were demolished in Central Birmingham, because people did not like them. Some of the questions being asked are how to escape in case of fire? How to keep away from others in event of a disease outbreak? What if the lifts fail? Will children fall? Will your bike fit in the lift? Can you afford service charges? Wind tunnel effects, robbing heat, or overheating through solar gain. Shading effect of tall buildings putting everything at ground level into shade. In this pandemic, people have valued gardens, pets, bicycles and other things that high rise living may not offer.

Density can be achieved closer to the ground. We think that height limits on buildings are needed. Please research what other cities are doing.

Parked and moving cars have taken up a lot of land space, so fewer cars will release space on the ground. High rise buildings allowed for roads and parking lots but we don't want that in the Future City.

We do not believe in the numerous roof gardens illustrated. Plants grow best on the ground, where soil, water and maintenance can be provided. The weight of roof gardens requires the whole structure to be much stronger which would take a lot of steel and concrete.

Roofs are needed for solar pv panels, a very relevant technology in the city, and renewable energy is notably missing from the plan. Ground source heat will be most easily utilised in low rise, low density developments.

Economic success for individuals and families has a lot to do with education and skills, so this aspect is vital. Invest in people, not just new property/buildings.

### **11. Do the goals and actions outlined in the City of Nature support green, healthy and active communities? How would you improve this City Theme?**

We agree with all these measures to promote nature, but we fear that they will be secondary to other objectives. In addition, the locations and time frames have not been identified. How will the council do this while maintaining and investing in existing green spaces that are sometimes neglected already? We need to see real commitments and clear actions. Things can be done now to upgrade our existing green spaces and money should be ring fenced to maintain and improve parks, just as it is for roads.

We need more robust planning policies to reflect council aspirations for green spaces and places for nature, despite pressure from developers. We recommend pushing back against developers who buy up community spaces rather than encourage their use by communities.

### **12. Do the goals and actions outlined in the City of Layers support the promotion of our unique identity diverse cultures and history in our City? How would you improve this City Theme?**

Heritage assets need protecting from being sold off or destroyed but heritage buildings may be in conflict with energy efficiency and carbon reduction. We cannot save every old building.

Covid-19 has impacted the arts community and small businesses significantly and money needs to go into building this back up. Big ideas that will cost a lot of money are not necessarily the best way forward when local low cost ideas would celebrate local areas.

We must be doing practical projects now, as opposed to everything later. For our wellbeing we will need things to happen in the next 12 months. Build back simple!

### **13. Do the goals and actions outlined in the City of Connections support people-centred places and active travel within neighbourhoods? How would you improve this City Theme?**

Our response to the Birmingham Transport Plan was generally in favour, (see BFOE website). Movement is a cost, so we might be better off with less movement, not more.

2020 saw a dramatic change to people's transport behaviour. Working and shopping from home has had a major uplift that may well be permanent, continuing trends to travel less that were occurring before the Covid-19 (e.g. in National Travel Survey). People are moving out of Birmingham and accessing paid work online.

We have opposed schemes to widen the radial roads (Moseley Road, Dudley Road and Coventry Road) to 'relieve congestion' by Sprint, Metro bus and cycle lanes. Justifications may have gone and future traffic levels and demand on public transport are currently unknown.

“Upgrading the Ring Road” should not be needed when traffic levels fall as the Birmingham Transport Plan envisages. It is over engineered and used to be used for racing cars (Superprix).

International travel has been strongly deterred and may not recover, if further disease fear pandemics to come and more realistic taxation of aviation to reflect its carbon emissions.

Some cities are looking at free public transport as a way to get people out of cars and we propose that Birmingham looks at this option and how it could be realised.

Transport should be in the form of networks connecting the centres with each other directly, not necessarily through ‘Central Birmingham’.

We support the suggestions outlined in the plan but we need concrete examples. As it stands, everything is quite vague and overarching. For example, when looking at walking and cycling infrastructure, you also need to think about details like improved lighting as mentioned earlier in our response.

Affordable and integrated pricing structures for public transport services has not been mentioned and this is something we would really like to see. People will drive if it is the cheapest option, the London model works well and could be replicated here.

**14. Do the goals and actions outlined in the City of Knowledge, Technology and Innovation support a diverse set of innovative, digital and knowledge centres supporting the growth of our city and offering opportunities to our young people? How would you improve this City Theme?**

The approach is generally welcome, but there are some trends to consider.

Universities have expanded hugely in recent decades but now face constraints such as home study, Brexit and disease fears, with fewer student ‘customers’. Universities already have a lot of expensive property to maintain from falling incomes. The re-valuing of non-graduate “essential workers” who can make or repair things, or look after people is happening and is vital. The emphasis will be on practical skills and employability via apprenticeships and we may find there is an oversupply of graduates with economic contraction and artificial intelligence impacting on number and location of knowledge jobs.

All technological solutions need to be equitably distributed. Technology is important but it’s not going to give us everything we need. There is also a major digital skills gaps and this needs to be taken into account e.g. affordability of broadband and digital devices

In terms of public engagement, there needs to be a broad spectrum of options, so it is accessible to everyone, encouraging a just transition that takes everyone into account

We wonder whether technology can be used to increase transparency, ensuring that people know about and understand the changes that are happening across the city. For example letting people know about new cycling routes.

Low tech operations may still add value and sustain employment. If existing businesses are forced out there will be a loss. Cheap rents are a vital asset for creative startups.

We would like to see more detail worked up on how Green Jobs will be created as there are lots of opportunities. Recycling waste items for example, instead of incinerating them.

**22. Do you feel that the information provided has enabled you to make an informed comment on the proposals?**

This is an online consultation and we wonder how the council is making the consultation process more inclusive and accessible. We would also like to know how the council will improve their outreach and take information to people in their communities.

Council processes are not always easy to follow and stay up to date with, how will the council make these more accessible and increase transparency across the board. In the same vein, this information should be available in a variety of different languages.

Other questions we have are:

How are you going to engage the community? How are you going to do these things & when?

How will the council work with community groups and voluntary organisations to make use of existing knowledge?

How are the council going to take a fresh and imaginative approach to public engagement and education? Communication needs to be visual and accessible.

Finally, There is a disconnect between the general public and this consultation. This consultation has come at the wrong time, when people are currently living from day to day during Covid.

**24. How would you like to be engaged on the Draft Central Birmingham Framework in the future?**

We would very much like to remain engaged as a critical friend to the Council.

**25. Do you have any further comments to make on the document?**

Please ease up on using the word Brummie, as in “Brummie urban forest” and “Brummie based businesses”. A London plan would not refer to a Cockney forest and Cockney businesses.