

CityPark4Brum
Objection to Planning Application 2022/09643/PA

In contrast to its leafy suburbs, Birmingham suffers from a severe lack of green space at its centre. And with the city centre population almost trebling since the turn of the century, the green space deficit for city residents and visitors alike is getting even worse. However, when the Wholesale Markets site at Smithfield, the size of over 20 football pitches, was vacated back in 2015, suddenly there was an opportunity to address this issue once and for all. The resulting CityPark4Brum campaign for a large park at Smithfield caught the imagination of the public, with thousands of people (current count is over 11,300 signatures) recognising a once-in-a-generation opportunity to create a large green oasis on public land in the heart of our city. However eight years later, it is clear that the green space revealed in this planning application is not what supporters campaigned for. The proposed park at Smithfield occupies barely 5% of the site (no bigger than Cathedral Square) and is poorly connected to other open space areas on the site, being enclosed on all four sides. Although the area that includes the proposed park is not part of the first phase of the application (Detailed Area), we do not believe that a city park for Birmingham can be achieved without the first phase including a substantial amount of green space. This is particularly important given the lack of green space in the later phases, for which outline planning permission has also been requested (Outline Area). Therefore CityPark4Brum is objecting to this Hybrid Planning Application. We have three specific objections, as outlined below:

1. Inadequate Consultation – In January 2019, having understood and recognised the importance of the park campaign, council leader Ian Ward publicly announced CityPark4Brum as a stakeholder in the planning for Smithfield (link <https://civico.net/birmingham/4580>, 47-51 minutes). CityPark4Brum is also identified as one of two key stakeholders in the Design and Access Statement (DAS) section of the planning application (Volume 2, Section 3.1, page 23). However, even though Lendlease was announced as the council development partner in January 2019, no meetings with CityPark4Brum took place until July and August last year (these are mentioned in DAS, Volume 2, Section 3.1, page 23). Furthermore, the most important point is that there is no mention of any feedback or outcomes from our interactions with Lendlease anywhere in the application. As well as our meetings with Lendlease, we also provided input at several public consultations (for responses to LPA engagement, see DAS, Volume 2, Section 3.7, pages 34 – 51; for responses to public consultation, see DAS, Volume 2, Section 3.8, pages 52 – 53). However, what we do note is that a site visit to a small park in London took place in November 2021 without our involvement (see DAS, Volume 2, Section 3.79, page 41). As a result, what we see in the outline application is essentially the same park as the one sketched out in the 2016 council Masterplan, which itself only came about as a result of our initial campaign. We can only conclude that our role as a key stakeholder in contributing to the amazing green space opportunity at Smithfield, backed by thousands of campaign supporters, has been ignored in this planning application.
2. Open and Green Space Design – The open and green space has poor connectivity throughout the whole site. Not only is the proposed park located at the far end of the development, it is not on the sightline from St Martin’s church, reinforcing its disconnection from the city centre, both visually, physically and psychologically. It

will feel like a semi-private space, if it is even discovered at all by visitors to the city centre. Furthermore, there are potential bottlenecks from Festival Square, including those leading to the park, which could be dangerous and unsafe when large events are held. These concerns are compounded by the lack of priority given to green space design throughout the Hybrid Planning Application. For example, we note that the park is to be installed piecemeal over two subsequent planning application phases (see DAS, Volume 2, Section 8.2, page 209). What should have happened is that detailed plans for the park, Festival Square and all other green and open spaces throughout the site should have been considered first, in their entirety, and all at the same time. With the correct landscaping in place, appropriate built infrastructure would then have followed.

3. Non-compliance with BCC Policies – In 2022, BCC released its City of Nature Plan (<https://naturallybirmingham.org/birmingham-city-of-nature-delivery-framework/>) which clearly highlighted the importance of urban green space to physical health and wellbeing, as well as the clear link between the paucity of green space in the city centre and high levels of multiple deprivation. Indeed its environmental justice map (<https://naturallybirmingham.org/environmental-justice/>) shows the Bordesley and Highgate Ward, where Smithfield is located, as severely lacking in green space. Surely Smithfield presents a one-off opportunity to address this issue head-on – after all, where else is up to 40 acres of publicly owned land available in the city centre? However, we see no mention or consideration of the council’s approved City of Nature Plan in the planning application and no mention of the requirement for 2 hectares of new public open space for every 1000 residents in new developments, as stipulated in the council’s own supplementary planning document: Public Open space in New Residential Development (https://www.birmingham.gov.uk/downloads/download/212/public_open_space_in_new_residential_development_supplementary_planning_document). The omission of these considerations is a serious issue, as this application does not just concern Phase 1 but the Hybrid Planning Application for the whole site, which will contain 3000 new homes.

Opportunity for a new approach:

Before this planning application is taken any further, we would like to see a pause and a proper consultation with key green and open space stakeholders in the city, including other representatives such as the Birmingham Open Spaces Forum. We suggest that the consultation and revised plan for Smithfield should be framed around the following points:

- Make green and open space a priority for Smithfield – abandon the current piecemeal approach and consider it all first and in its entirety across the whole site. Other large urban development projects in UK cities have adopted similar strategies successfully, e.g. Mayfield in Manchester and QE Olympic Park in London. Buildings and infrastructure should be fitted to the open and green space, not the other way around.
- Build on the success of Smithfield as a venue for 2022 Commonwealth Games and Birmingham Pride. Create a flexible area of open and green space at the centre of the site without bottlenecks, a focal point where large crowds at open air events can assemble and dissipate safely.

- Realise the significant economic benefits that green space in the city centre could yield. Assigning at least 25% of the site to green space would not only attract more visitors to the city centre but hugely increase the economic value of the surrounding development. Given the proximity to national rail and coach transport hubs and the new HS2 station, providing a new city centre park would be a significant addition to Birmingham's portfolio of attractions. The current scheme offers nothing extra to what the city has with regards to attracting visitors or large events. The provision of a park is an economic investment, not a sacrifice.
- Take a new approach to open space design by improving interconnectivity. Despite being very close to one another, Centenary Square and City Centre Gardens are poorly connected. In the current plan, the same problem will surely arise at Smithfield with the similarly sized Festival Square blocked off from the proposed park (i.e. with buildings placed in zones 3.2 and 2.1). Instead, be imaginative and place transformative green space at the heart of Smithfield, resulting in green vistas throughout the site, for example up from Digbeth coach station and down from St Martin's church.

Summary:

Our campaign started long before the pandemic came upon us, but was already recognising local access to green space as important to all our citizens. Since 2020, the first hand evidence backed up by a huge body of research linking access to green space and public health has catapulted this essential component of wellbeing to the fore. The council's City of Nature Plan recognises the significant inequalities that exist in our city. This is a unique opportunity for Birmingham to be visionary, brave and bold, in keeping with its civic forebears - let's create a green legacy at the historic site of Smithfield in the heart of Birmingham, one that surely matches the aspirations of its people.