

**Local Plan Examination
Council's Opening Statement
25th September 2018**

We are pleased to have this opportunity to open the Examination into the soundness and legal compliance of the Reading Borough Local Plan and associated Proposals Map. The Local Plan is a comprehensive set of policies and proposals to manage development over the plan period to 2036, and will replace the three existing development plan documents. This examination is the culmination of more than three years of evidence gathering, consultation and co-operation in preparing the Local Plan, which we aim to demonstrate is sound, legally compliant and complies with the duty to co-operate.

The content of the Local Plan is dictated by the geography of Reading. As has been referred to within the evidence, Reading Borough itself is very limited in scale, the seventh smallest local authority in the South East by area. Not only is it almost entirely urban in nature, with those undeveloped areas within the Borough largely either at risk of flooding or making up formal parks and open spaces, but it does not even cover the whole of the Reading urban area. Whilst the population of the Borough is estimated at 163,000, there are an additional 90,000 people living in Reading's immediate urban area but in the adjoining authorities of Wokingham and West Berkshire, in what are, to all intents and purposes, suburbs. This is not to mention the much wider area beyond, which looks to Reading as its main centre for higher order services and employment.

This geographical situation has meant that, irrespective of the legal duty to co-operate, local plan making in Reading has always needed to rely on significant amounts of cross-boundary working. There is a long history of such co-operation across the local area as well as Berkshire as a whole, encompassing frequent and regular discussions, evidence gathering, and joint plans. We hope it will become clear that this plan has emerged very much from that background.

Another consequence of the geography of the Borough is that development relies to a great extent on the availability of previously developed land, which generally accounts for more than 90% of all development. This has a great influence on plan-making, as our plans need to rely on sites which are often small in size, fragmented in terms of ownership, and the availability of which can be difficult to predict, particularly over the long-term. Potential development sites are often in existing uses, and may well have potential contamination from historic activities. Large, greenfield urban extensions which meet many of their infrastructure needs on-site are no longer a significant option within Reading's boundaries.

Reading's economy is strong, capitalising on its good transport links, skilled workforce and its high quality of life. It is the main centre of Berkshire, which makes the highest contribution to the national economy per head outside London, as measured by Gross Value Added. It is a key location for business services, ICT and pharmaceuticals, among other sectors. The centre of Reading is one of the top-ranked shopping centres in the UK, and draws trade from a wide, and generally affluent, area. As a result, there is strong interest in continued development across Reading, and this is expected to continue. This economic success brings opportunities, but also challenges, in particular the lack of affordability of housing. Overall economic success also masks some significant pockets of deprivation, in particular in South Reading and parts of West Reading,

with education, skills and training being one of the greatest deprivation concerns in those areas.

Whilst Reading's reputation is perhaps more as a modern business centre than a town with great historic significance, this is somewhat unjust. Reading has a long and important history, from its Saxon origins, through the importance of its medieval abbey, its Civil War role and its Georgian and Victorian expansion. There are real efforts underway to make more of Reading's history, and the Local Plan forms part of that. The natural environment is also threaded throughout urban Reading, with significant habitats and landscapes that require protection and enhancement.

Despite the limitations referred to earlier, Reading Borough Council remains committed to meeting its development needs within its own boundaries wherever it can. We believe that the Council has a longstanding reputation for strongly promoting economic growth, where it can be sustainably achieved, and a major part of this is enabling the development which is essential to achieving such growth. Over the first ten year period of the Core Strategy, 2006-2016, the housing targets for that period were exceeded, despite that ten year period including several years of recession. The Council has long recognised the importance of provision of housing in supporting economic growth, and particularly prioritises affordable housing, in recognition of the significant difficulties many of our population have in affording to live in the area.

The Local Plan draws together all of these, and other, considerations, to formulate a set of policies that will allow Reading to continue to grow and prosper, with the benefits of economic success felt by all, and which retains those features which make the strongest contribution to Reading's character and quality of life. Where the housing needs are not met in full, there has been substantial co-operation with neighbouring authorities which has led to a Memorandum of Understanding on how they will be met, and mechanisms within the Local Plan for monitoring that provision.

Anyone who has browsed through the evidence list will be aware that the Council has submitted a substantial amount of written evidence. Whilst this was intended to be of assistance to the Inspector in assessing the Local Plan, we have also tried to have as much of this evidence base available during consultation periods as possible, to ensure that the reasons for certain policy approaches are as transparent for all parties as they can be. We will be referring to the written evidence throughout. On some matters, we may have little to add to our written evidence.

In summary, we believe that the Local Plan will achieve sustainable development in Reading and succeed in accommodating virtually all of Reading's assessed development needs over the plan period, whilst protecting, preserving and enhancing those aspects that make Reading a successful place to live and work. We are therefore pleased to open this Examination and look forward to a constructive discussion.