

READING BOROUGH LOCAL PLAN EXAMINATION NOTE ON IMPLICATIONS OF NOT DELIVERING A NEW SECONDARY SCHOOL BY 2021

On 11th June 2018, Reading Borough Council's Policy Committee resolved to undertake work to provide a new secondary school on a site at Richfield Avenue by 2021. In discussions on Issue 1 for the Reading Local Plan, the Inspector asked for additional information on this proposal, including the Policy Committee report and minutes (now on the Examination List reference EC018) and a note on the implications for the Local Plan of the school not having been delivered by 2021. This brief note addresses the latter point.

Paragraph 4.2 of the Policy Committee report notes that, by 2021, the secondary school system in Reading will be short by 836 places, rising to close to 1,000 places in 2025-26. This forms the background to the need for a new school.

However, the report (paragraphs 4.6-4.8) also notes that there are other measures being undertaken to help to provide capacity. It notes that seven bulge classes will be required in September 2019 and a further six bulge classes in 2020, which it is considered can largely be met within existing accommodation, albeit with potential for some extra space to be needed towards 2025. It is also expected that Chiltern Edge school, in Oxfordshire, will provide two additional forms of entry by 2019. The new school is therefore only part of the approach.

The Policy Committee report also addresses the question of possible delays in delivery of the new secondary school at Richfield Avenue in paragraph 4.51 as follows:

“A Project delivery programme is to be developed in detail but will need to include a strategy for contingency should a new school not be delivered by September 2021. Consideration will need to be given for either a phased occupation of the school as in 2021 there will be intake from Year 7 only, or the provision of temporary accommodation, preferably on site. The Council, along with the ESFA will prefer to avoid temporary accommodation where possible but a funding request may be required based on pupil demand, programme and timing of ESFA approval/ funding.”

Ultimately, should the school in this location not be capable of delivery, the Council will need to consider alternative sites in order to discharge its duty to provide sufficient secondary school places. There is a clear preference for a site in close proximity to the town centre, where much of the need arises. There has been some site assessment work feeding into the selection of the preferred site, and this would need to be reconsidered. It should be noted that the Local Plan Housing Trajectory includes an allowance for a reduction in housing delivery should a site be identified that is currently expected to provide housing. Policy OU1 anticipates and allows for this possibility, and each of the three town centre Major Opportunity Areas, containing most of the town centre's developable land, contains a reference to education being a potential part of the mix of land uses. It is therefore considered that the Local Plan is sufficiently flexible to accommodate a requirement for an alternative site.