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# Reading Gaol Vision

15 March 2021



# Introduction

# Reading Gaol Bid

## Introduction

### A unique and transformational opportunity for Reading

Reading Gaol is an iconic building within the town centre and a hugely important element of Reading's heritage. Reading Borough Council, on behalf of the town's residents, sees securing the Prison as essential to ensuring the Council and the people of Reading remain the stewards and caretakers of the town's own key heritage and cultural asset.

The gaol would be a critical element of the town's heritage offer acting as a catalyst for post COVID economic growth and development with culture and heritage at its centre and could also contribute to the Council's green recovery and zero carbon agenda. The site offers the opportunity to provide a unique setting for high quality residential development, which includes an affordable housing provision so that the offer is inclusive for all communities in Reading.

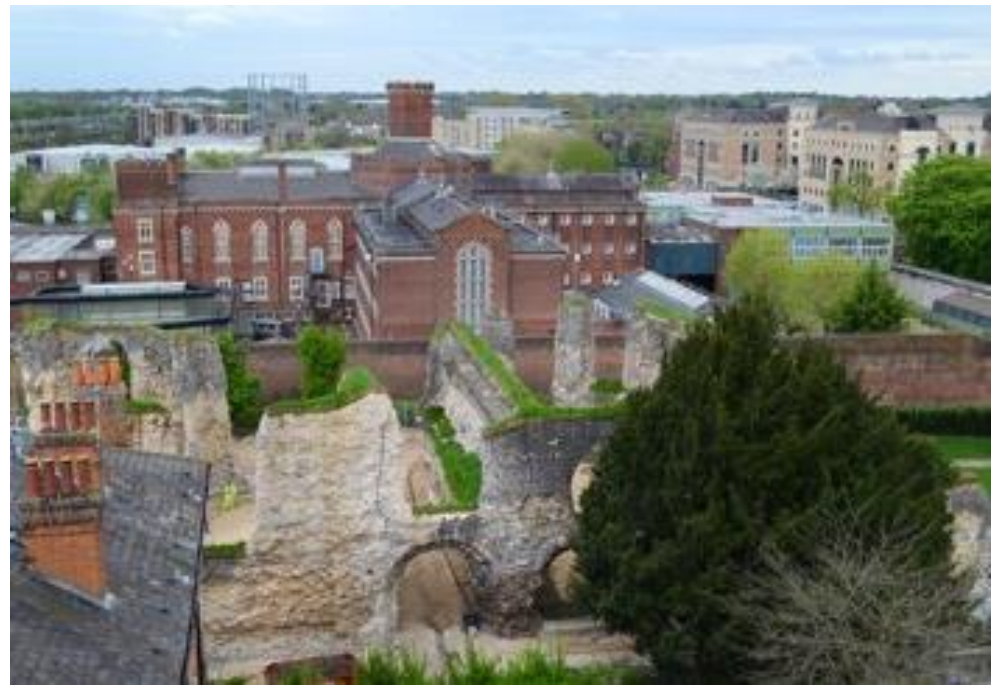
The successful transformation of the site would allow the entire Abbey Quarter area to be a beacon of culture and heritage and a destination of national importance by enhancing and showcasing Reading's tourism, heritage and cultural offer most recently amplified by the Banksy mural *Create Escape*.

The Grade II listed former Gaol site is an integral part of the Reading Abbey Scheduled Ancient Monument and its unique history is further enhanced through its role in the life of Oscar Wilde

If successful, Reading Borough Council is committed to creating a transformational development befitting the status of the site, through a major investment in culture and community assets alongside some complementary commercial uses. Since the last bid Reading Borough Council have worked with a team of consultants to redefine the vision for the site and assess the commercial opportunities on site to enhance the bid price compared with the December 2019 bid.



“a beacon of culture and heritage  
and a destination of national  
importance”





# Reading Gaol Bid

## Introduction



“an integral part of Reading’s history... leveraging historical and cultural links”

### Value to the community

A number of local community groups have a keen interest in the future of the site and are actively calling for Reading Gaol to be “saved” for use as a culture and arts hub and as a museum to commemorate Oscar Wilde.

The “Save Reading Gaol” campaign recognises the prison as an integral part of Reading’s history and believes that once developed it would attract enhanced tourism to Reading by leveraging its historical and cultural links. A “hug” of the Gaol was undertaken on 13 October 2019 by approximately 1,000 people in the rain to demonstrate the community’s desire to achieve these aims.

### A bid that represents the views of our stakeholders

Reading Borough Council are committed to delivering a scheme that places the community’s needs front and centre in the development plans.

The team have undertaken a targeted engagement process including hosting a ‘Reading Gaol Summit’ in February 2021 to gather views from local interest groups to define the ambition for the site and uncover new opportunities for the site activation and facilities. RBC also have the support of both local MPs for their ambitions to purchase the gaol in order to regenerate the site on behalf of Reading’s residents.

# Reading Gaol Vision

## Summary



### **Inclusive Economic Growth**

The site has the potential to deliver a number of uses enabling economic growth for the town including cultural spaces, incubation space for local entrepreneurs and new businesses and commercial space. In response to the pandemic, the proposals seek to deliver an inclusive recovery in which the benefits from growth and development of the town are shared widely.



### **Placemaking**

The site has the ability create a new cultural destination within Reading which links to the historic Abbey Quarter, and which would support the vitality of the town centre with the creation of a new visitor destination.



### **Regeneration**

The site is currently derelict and the proposed scheme design will reopen the site to the public and regenerate the site knitting it together with the adjacent developments and assets.



### **Housing Delivery**

The site will deliver a unique residential offer within Reading which includes an element of affordable housing supporting the council's ambitions for inclusive growth.



### **Green Recovery**

As a beacon of sustainability, the repurposed historic buildings and new buildings will use the latest technology to ensure energy efficiency and where possible, energy generation. New open spaces and a car free environment further supports the Council's ambitions to be carbon neutral by 2030.



### **Culture and Heritage**

Creating a new cultural hub and positioning the Abbey Quarter as a beacon of culture and heritage, an exemplar of high quality, sustainable design and a destination of national importance. The proposals will embrace and harness the diversity of cultures and communities that Reading possesses in abundance.

*“This is once in a lifetime opportunity to deliver a unique culture and heritage hub for Reading. We firmly believe a successful bid by the Council would be a game changer. A catalyst for further investment in Reading, a key driver in our recovery from Covid and the creation of a site of local, regional and national significance in the heart of our town and in our historic Abbey Quarter.”*

Cllr Jason Brock, Leader, Reading Borough Council

# Reading Gaol Vision

## Introduction

### Benefits to Council Led Long-Term Stewardship

There are many benefits – economic, social and environmental – associated with the Council acquiring and regenerating this site. If developed successfully with the right ‘drivers’ it would be a significant asset to Reading. Those drivers are based on a cultural and heritage lead regeneration of the site; maximising the site’s potential but securing commercial value as an ‘enabler’ to deliver its future:



#### Heritage

The site holds great historic value and sociological heritage. The opportunity is to layer in the complex history, unearthing the hidden archaeology and to explore how those narratives can be presented through new technologies such as AI to bring history to life.



#### Accessibility and Equality

A Council-led vision and approach to delivery will ensure the community’s needs will be front and centre in the development plans



#### Location

Reading Gaol sits at a crucial cornerstone to the Abbey Quarter heritage district and so has wider placemaking value. Thousands of new homes will be brought forward in the surrounding area during the Local Plan period and this development would provide an opportunity to create new open space to support this housing and businesses. The site has some river frontage which creates additional cultural and place making value. The Gaol, situated within the central area of the town, will support the vitality and overall offer of the town centre increasing footfall and supporting the retail and leisure offer



#### Culture

The cultural value of the site holds great potential as a magnetic hub, drawing together Reading’s many cultural organisations. The site could provide new platforms for cultural presentation and programming. The Oscar Wilde connection makes the site of significant interest to those interested in him as an author and to the LGBTQ+ community.



#### Co-Design & Engagement

The Council will be able to use the meanwhile activation of the site to conduct extensive engagement with the borough’s creative industries, exploring the facilities and amenities that will become part of the final cultural hub and site-wide activation



#### External Investment Opportunities

As the local authority, Reading Borough Council will be able to leverage their leadership support for a new cultural hub to strengthen grant proposals and other funding applications to entities such as National Heritage Lottery Fund, Historic England and Arts Council England.

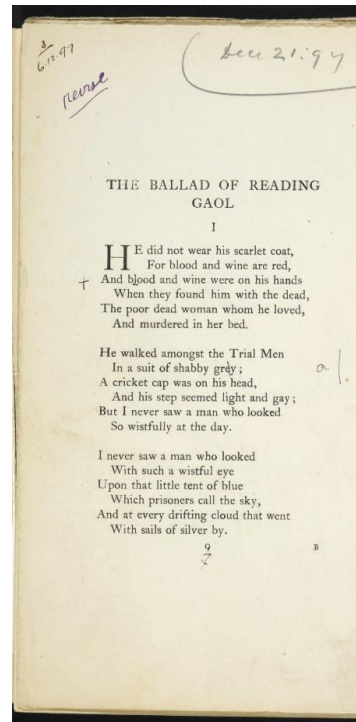


# Reading Gaol Vision

## Local Context – Celebrating Heritage

The historic value of the site is well known and recognised, from the Abbey Ruins as a Scheduled Ancient Monument to the Grade II listed Reading Gaol, with narratives and artefacts spanning the centuries from King Henry I's construction of the great royal Abbey to the eventual use of the site as the prison.

The site also holds great sociological heritage as well, most notably with the association with Oscar Wilde, serving as a landmark for key issues such as prison reform, literature and the LGBTQ+ community and queer narratives. The opportunity for the site is to layer in the palimpsest of history, linking through from the Abbey to the Gaol and creating permeable connections the bring the two elements together and complete the Abbey Quarter. With an abundance of material and content, the site could unearth the hidden archaeology and assets through interpretation vs excavation and to explore how those narratives can be presented through new technologies such as AI to bring history to life.





# Reading Gaol Vision

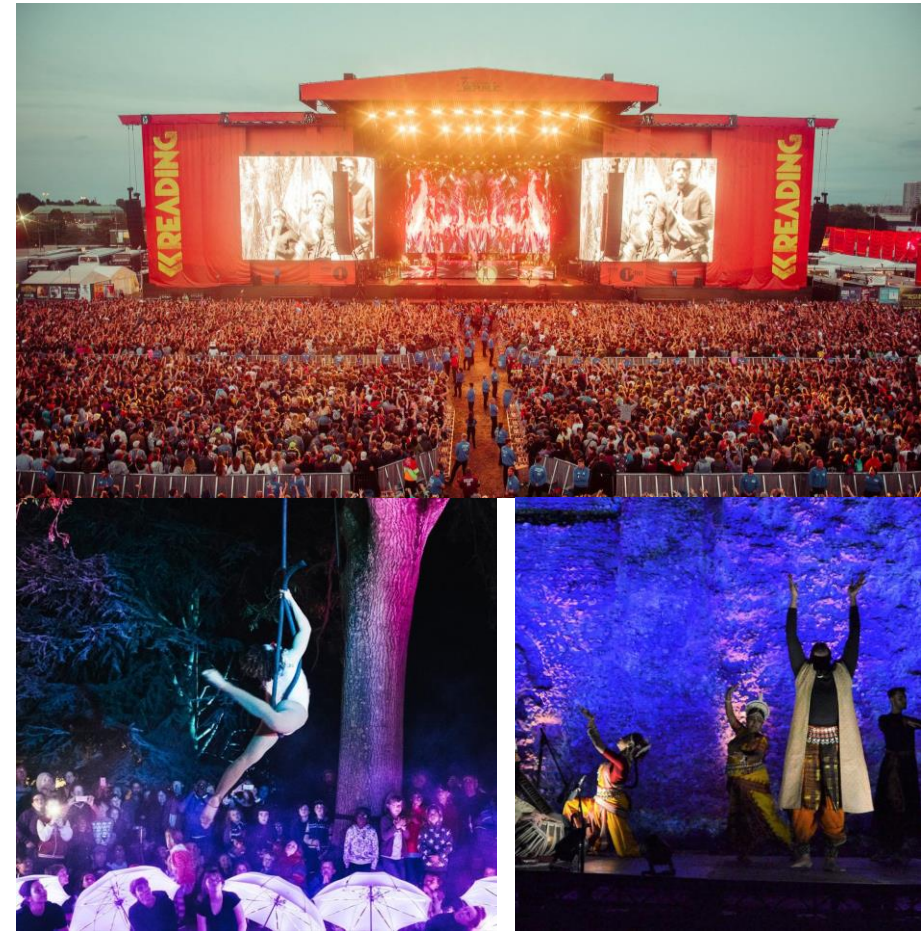
## Local Context – Emerging Cultural Hub



The cultural value of the site holds great potential as a magnetic hub, drawing together the existing programming and activity of Reading's many cultural organisations, three of which hold National Portfolio Organisation status with Arts Council England.

There currently is no natural 'hub' for Reading's arts and culture and the strength of the borough's cultural infrastructure is very much in the sum of its parts. The site could provide new platforms for cultural presentation and programming – providing new performance and rehearsal spaces for local cultural organisations and accessible outdoor entertainment that has the potential to showcase local talent to national and international visitors as part of the wider destination offer.

The potential of success already evidenced in the widely acclaimed 'Inside' programme delivered on site in 2016 by cultural producer Artangel, attended by over 50,000 visitors and drawing in a significant international attendance.



# Reading Gaol Vision

## Local Context – Strategically Located



The Reading Gaol sits as a crucial cornerstone to the Abbey Quarter heritage district. The Reading Abbey Quarter was created to bring together the unique, cultural heritage that exists within the former grounds of Reading Abbey, once one of Europe's largest royal monasteries located on the banks of the River Kennet.

Lying at the heart of Reading, the Abbey Quarter includes Reading Museum, the Town Hall, St. James' Church, St Laurence's Church, the Forbury Gardens, and the remains of Reading Abbey that celebrates its 900th anniversary this year. The Abbey Quarter is also home to many of Reading's leading businesses as the Abbey Quarter Business Improvement District, launched in 2019 as a private-sector

led Business Improvement District aimed at creating a world-class business environment with a national profile of unique character and excellence in which to live and work.

The BID has become a promoter and destination marketer for Reading's historic assets, to celebrate the quarter's cultural and historic significance. The BID has implemented a 1% levy on the district that can be leveraged to improve the public realm throughout the district, enhance the waterways and green spaces, support an event programme that will animate the district and deliver an investment in safety, recycling and district stewardship and will play a key role in the redevelopment of the Reading Gaol.



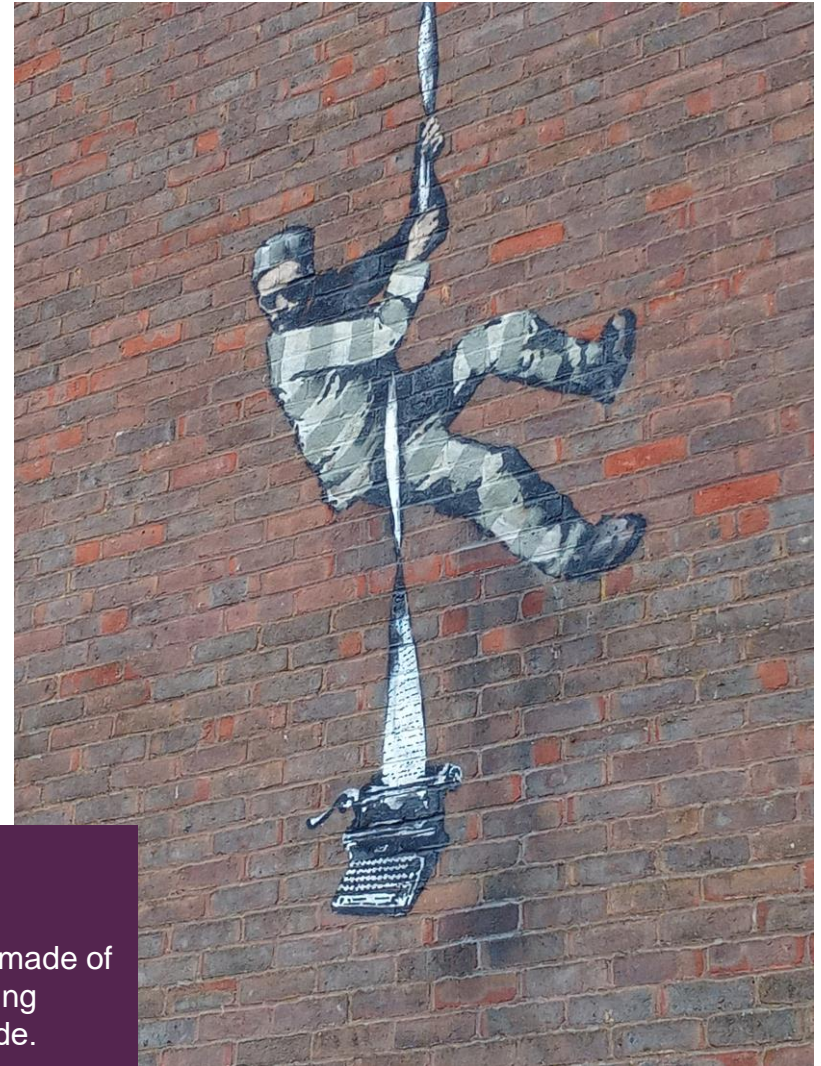
# Reading Gaol Vision

Create Escape (2021), Banksy



## Create Escape (2021), Banksy

Depicts an inmate escaping down the side of the wall on a rope made of bedsheets tied to a typewriter, possibly referencing one of Reading Gaol's most famous inmates, the poet and playwright Oscar Wilde.





# Reading Gaol Vision

## Strategic Alignment – Reading Vision for 2050



The Vision for Reading Gaol has been developed to align and support the Reading Vision for 2050's aspirations. Here is how the site can deliver on the Vision 2050 aspirations:

### A City of Culture & Diversity

- Addressing inequality through investment in infrastructure, amenity and access; includes the creative industries & cultural sector recovery post-pandemic
- Creating new spaces for diverse communities and cultures
- Adding accessible rehearsal and development space for local cultural organisations
- Working with artists in residence to engage with communities and capture contemporary narratives around place and belonging

### A City of Rivers & Parks

- Creating permeable public realm with flexible infrastructure to allow for activation and programming
- Extending the Abbey Quarter green necklace from Forbury Gardens across to the Gaol site
- Reconnecting the site to the River Kennet and activating the waterfront

### A City of Smart Tech

- Provide affordable creative (tech) workspace for start-ups and SMEs
- Aligning to Reading UK's ambition to develop innovation hub
- Creating an early-career pipeline for new graduates
- Unlocking the 'hidden' archaeology and heritage of the site through technology

# Reading Gaol Vision

## Strategic Alignment – Culture & Heritage Strategy 2030



As a landmark cultural asset within the town centre, the Reading Gaol culture hub can drive the delivery of the council's Culture and Heritage Strategy – especially as a platform to support post-pandemic economic recovery. Here is how the site can deliver on the Culture & Heritage Strategy key areas of focus:

### Identity

- Celebrating Reading's diverse communities and giving a platform to diverse voices within the site
- Celebrating what makes Reading's culture and heritage sector unique and promoting that destination offer to a wider national and international audience

### Opportunity

- Creating new, affordable creative work and rehearsal and development space for local cultural organisations
- Create event and meeting space to showcase performances and exhibitions
- Private/public sector partnership opportunities

### Heritage

- Making hidden/buried history visible through design and technology
- Developing a heritage visitor pavilion / facility that serves as a platform for heritage interpretation in partnership with local heritage organisations
- Inviting creative practitioners to interpret historic narratives in creative ways (installations, exhibitions, literature, film, etc)

# Vision

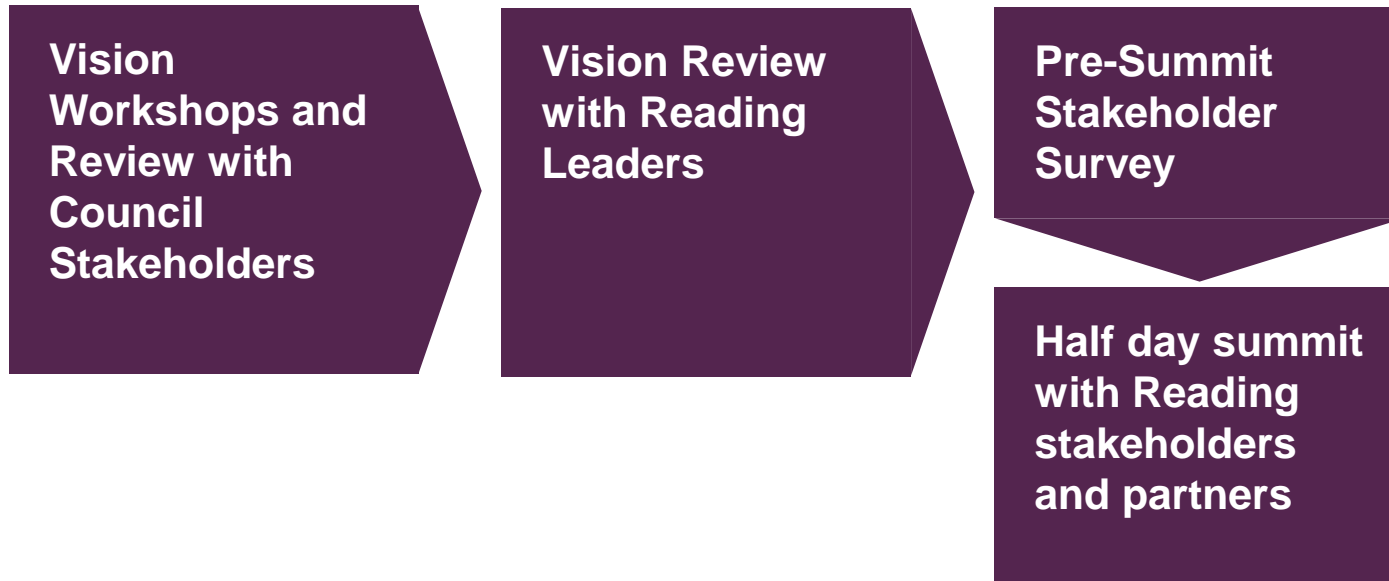


# Reading Gaol Vision

## Stakeholder Insights – 2021 Consultation Overview



Over the past five weeks, the team have undertaken a targeted engagement process to define the ambition for the site and uncover new opportunities for the site activation and facilities. The main milestones of the process are summarised below and detailed insights follow:



# Reading Gaol Vision

## Stakeholder Insights - **Challenges Identified by Stakeholders**



The following challenges were identified by stakeholders within the pre-Summit surveys and during the Summit breakout discussions. The list is not exhaustive but seeks to highlight common sentiments.

**Geographically  
Dispersed Town**

**Accessibility to all  
Diverse and Inclusive  
Audiences**

**Lacks Distinct Identity  
(neither London or  
Oxford)**

**Affordability of  
Workspace**

**Collective Messaging  
(Cultural, Tourism) Still  
Limited**

**Hidden Archaeology**

# Reading Gaol Vision

## Stakeholder Insights - Opportunities Identified by Stakeholders



The following opportunities were identified by stakeholders within the pre-Summit surveys and during the Summit breakout discussions.

**Affordable Creative  
Workspace**

**Space to Celebrate  
Diverse Communities**

**Day / Night Activation**

**Green Space / River  
Kennet Connections**

**Visitor Destination  
with International  
Appeal**

**Heritage Interpretation**

**Live / Work Offer**

**Independent F&B –  
Street Food,  
Breweries**

**Meanwhile Use**

**(Cultural) Innovation  
Hub / Creative Tech  
Space**

**Missing Piece of  
Abbey Quarter**

**Performance/  
Rehearsal Space**



# Reading Gaol Vision

## Strategic Aims



Refining the key ambitions for the site into strategic aims:

**Creating  
Affordable  
Cultural  
Industries  
Workspaces**

**Drawing People  
'Behind the Wall'  
Through  
Programming:  
Events, Markets  
and Pop-ups**

**Creating a  
Visitor  
Destination with  
International  
Appeal**

**Developing a  
New Community  
Hub for Reading's  
Diverse  
Population**

**Celebrating the  
History and  
Heritage of the  
Site**

**Vision:  
Reading Gaol: Transforming heritage  
through our extraordinary communities**

## **Transforming Reading Gaol**

Creating an extended public space from Forbury Gardens into the Gaol site and serving as a focal point for individuals and communities.

## Transforming Reading Gaol

Inviting Reading's diverse audiences to engage with the Gaol site and its historic narratives – inviting discourse, residencies and programming that explores the issues experienced by marginalised communities.



## Transforming Reading Gaol

Recognising the significant history and impact the Gaol has had on the community whilst reclaiming that narrative and transforming the site into a platform for new narratives in literature, performance and cultural production.

## **Transforming Reading Gaol**

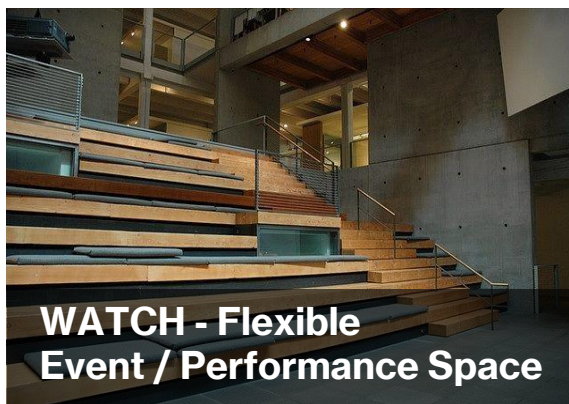
Delivering multi-layered hub for cultural production and presentation providing new spaces for Reading's creative industries and further opening access to Reading's cultural programming.

# Reading Gaol Vision

## Vision as Cultural Use



## How will the vision be applied across the site's uses?



# Reading Gaol Vision

## Cultural Use Overlay - Overview

LIVE High quality sustainable new homes including affordable homes as an enabling development'



WATCH the summer film festival

MEET in the Gaol lobby

DISCOVER hidden archaeology in the public realm design



**Reading**  
Borough Council  
Working better with you

VISIT the new exhibition at the heritage centre

WORK in the creative innovation hub

EAT at the street food market



# Reading Gaol Vision

Pop-up enabled space for theatre, dance, music, cinema and outdoor exhibitions





# Reading Gaol Vision

Pop-up enabled space for theatre, dance, music, cinema and outdoor exhibitions





# Reading Gaol Vision

Creative innovation hub hosting affordable workspaces, events, workshops and exhibitions led by resident cultural organisations



# Reading Gaol Vision

Digitally-enabled heritage centre featuring exhibitions unearthing the hidden archaeology of the site, the history of the Gaol and contemporary narratives around prison reform, LGBTQ+ issues created by artists-in-residence





# Reading Gaol Vision

Rooftop café or bar that allows visitors to peek over the wall





# Reading Gaol Vision

Framing the entrance into the site as a gateway moment that draws visitors 'behind the walls'





# Reading Gaol Vision

Creating permeability into the site and enlivening the prison wall as canvas for commissions and murals





# Reading Gaol Vision

Flexible public realm that can support programming, events, markets and other activation





# Reading Gaol Vision

Landmark public artwork with sightlines from  
Forbury Gardens and from site gateway





# Reading Gaol Vision

New residential quarter offering high quality energy efficient homes including new affordable homes.





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