

Examination into the Reading Borough Local Plan Partial Update

Council's Opening Statement

11 November 2025

We are pleased to have this opportunity to open the Stage 1 hearings as part of the examination into the soundness and legal compliance of the Reading Borough Local Plan Partial Update. We would like to welcome the Inspector, Joanna Gilbert, to Reading, albeit virtually at this stage, as well as welcome the other participants in these hearings as well as any members of the public or other interested parties viewing these proceedings.

Reading's existing Local Plan was adopted in November 2019 and contains a comprehensive set of policies and proposals to manage development over its plan period to 2036. We conducted a review of this plan in March 2023, within the five-year period required by law, and this identified a need to undertake a partial update of the plan, covering around half of the plan's policies. The need for an update was primarily driven by changes to how policies around housing need and provision are approached, but there were also a number of other updates highlighted by the review as being necessary. As we have progressed, some further areas for update have been brought within the scope, often as a result of consultation.

After a call for sites exercise between April and June 2023, the plan progressed to a Consultation on Scope and Content (under Regulation 18 of the Town and Country Planning (Local Planning) (England) Regulations 2012) which took place between November 2023 and January 2024. Taking account of the results of this consultation and other considerations such as emerging evidence, a draft Local Plan Partial Update was prepared. This was subject to consultation under Regulation 19 in November and December 2024, and was submitted to the Secretary of State on 9th May 2025.

We have sought to keep the scope of this partial update to those changes we consider are necessary. We have avoided trying to perfect or tweak policies that are already in place and are functioning as intended and have sought to keep the update to those policies and aspects of the plan where we feel that amendments are genuinely required. The approach has been to seek to be proportionate both in terms of the scope of the update and the assembly of the evidence base, in the interests of getting updated policies in place in a timely manner, and allowing us to plan for an increase in the number of much-needed homes that Reading is able to provide.

It is worth, when considering the Partial Update, being mindful of the geography of Reading. 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 parks and recreational open spaces, but it does not even cover the whole of the Reading urban area. Whilst the population of the Borough was 174,000 at the 2021 Census, there are an additional 97,000 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, Reading's 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.

Despite this constrained geography, Reading has a strong track record of promoting economic growth and securing housing delivery. Reading has consistently exceeded its housing targets, and according to the housing trajectory in the last Annual Monitoring Report, we were on course to exceed our current Local Plan housing provision figure by around 2,700 homes in total over the plan period to 2036. We recognise that Reading should continue to do what it can to deliver new homes to meet increased needs, and this Partial Update continues to do so by delivering not only our own calculated need to meet new homes but also the outcome of the standard method incorporating the 35% uplift for the largest cities and urban centres as calculated at the point of submission of the plan. The challenge will be to continue a strong delivery of homes without compromising what makes Reading a great place to live.

Reading also takes very seriously its responsibilities in delivering sustainable development, particularly since the Council declared a Climate Emergency in February 2019. As part of this, the Council seeks the highest achievable standards of energy performance and sustainable design in new development in its area, in line with its Climate Emergency Strategy, and many of the updates to the Local Plan seek to ensure that this remains the case. It is the Council's firm belief that this can be achieved without undermining housing delivery.

There are of course many other important areas and priorities for update that this process has needed to address, which we will no doubt touch on as the examination progresses.

In summary, we believe that the Partial Update to the Local Plan will continue to achieve sustainable development in Reading and succeed in accommodating all of Reading's main 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.