

Report title	Local Plan Update Report
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Department	Planning
Exempt?	No

Purpose of report:

For information

Synopsis of report:

This report provides updated information on what has been happening with regards to the Government’s Planning Reforms since the options for the review of the Local Plan were last considered by this Committee in June 2023.

In addition, the report also sets out a high-level picture of the current and future planned work streams of the Planning Policy Team up until the new plan making system is expected to commence, at the end of 2024.

1. Context and background of report

- 1.1 Members will recall that at the Planning Committee meeting held on 28th June 2023, officers sought agreement on the direction of travel for the remainder of the review of the Runnymede 2030 Local Plan, to give some certainty on the way forward to all stakeholders involved in the plan making process in Runnymede.
- 1.2 The report set out three options for resuming work on the review of the Local Plan.
 - Option 1 – sought to undertake a full review of the Local Plan under the existing planning system.
 - Option 2 – sought to undertake a partial review of the Local Plan under the existing planning system which focused solely on strengthening the adopted Runnymede 2030 Local Plan policies which addressed Climate Change issues.
 - Option 3 – sought to pause work on the Local Plan and wait for the new plan making regime to be introduced (expected to be in late 2024) and to review the Local Plan under these new arrangements.
- 1.3 Option 3 was agreed by members to be the best way forward with proceeding with the Local Plan. Members requested that a further report be brought back to Planning Committee in October/November to provide an update on the national picture relating to the planning reforms. It was also agreed that more detail around the timetable for producing different parts of the evidence base in the run up to the new plan making system being introduced would be prepared so that the Council could ‘hit the ground running’ when the new system starts.

1.4 In addition to the above, whilst option 3 was the clearly preferred and supported option, there was support from committee members with regards to the climate change objectives of option 2 and, as a result, it was agreed that the Committee would receive further information regarding:

- What would be achievable (under option 2) for a climate change review;
- Details of new/revised policy guidance that could be produced by officers in the interim period whilst the new plan making system is awaited (under option 3),

1.5 This report sets out progress with each of the above.

2. Report and, where applicable, options considered and recommended

Evolution of the Government thinking on the new plan making system

2.1 At the time of writing this report, the revised NPPF has not been published, although according to a recent update by Michael Gove MP, it is due to be published this autumn. Additionally, between 25th July and 18th October 2023, the government published a further consultation paper on the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill and its plan making reforms. The consultation asked 43 questions about the introduction of the government's "proposals to implement the parts of the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill which relate to plan making, to make plans simpler, faster to prepare and more accessible".

2.2 A key measure, which was proposed in the recent consultation paper, relates to creating a more streamlined and proportionate evidence base for Local Plans, to reduce the burden on planning authorities. The consultation paper set out that this is likely to include:

- Increased standardisation of key evidence and data;
- Freezing data or evidence at particular points of plan making;
- Streamlined, focused new style plans; and
- Support on evidence provided through gateway assessments.

2.3 This proposal has significant implications for Runnymede and the review of its Local Plan. As set out above (in para. 1.3), the Council's intention was to set out in this update report a more detailed analysis of the timetable for producing different parts of the evidence base in the run up to the new plan making system being introduced, so that the Council could 'hit the ground running' when the new system starts.

2.4 It is considered however that given the uncertainty introduced by this most recent consultation paper around the evidence needed to underpin a Local Plan, that it is not possible at the time of writing to produce the more detailed timetabling work requested by the Committee. Officers are of the view that more certainty is needed on the evidence base documents required, and further information on the proposals around 'standardisation of key evidence and data' needs to be provided. Without such information, there is risk in the Council proceeding to produce key parts of the evidence base, as money could be spent on producing evidence that would not meet the latest standardised government requirements. This could result in evidence needing to be partially or completely reproduced at an additional financial cost.

2.5 As a result of this uncertainty, officers consider that it is not possible at the current time to produce a definitive list of evidence that will be required to underpin the local plan review and the timetables for their completion. However, once there is more

certainty from the government on the evidence base documents that will be required and their likely contents, a further report will be brought back through the Planning Committee with the detailed timetabling work requested.

- 2.6 In terms of the government's proposed arrangements for introducing the new plan making system, the recent consultation paper sets out more detail. In the first instance, it is proposed that expert plan making support is provided to a first, small cohort of around ten 'front runner' authorities to prepare new-style local plans. The intention is for these 'front runners' to start planning from autumn 2024 and for them to provide learning and best practice for other authorities.
- 2.7 The remaining authorities are proposed to be ranked chronologically by the date that they have most recently adopted a plan, and each group (of 25 authorities) allocated a 6-month plan making commencement window, within which plan making should start. It is not clear from the consultation material however whether those authorities with the oldest local plans would be prioritised or those with the newest. The consultation paper sets out that the government is proposing to extend transitional protections for authorities who are included in a later phase of plan making, to offer them continued protection from speculative development. This additional protection is welcomed. However, officers are nevertheless concerned that without knowing how many authorities might be intending to prepare a Local Plan under the new plan making arrangements, or who will be prioritised under the proposed phasing arrangements, there is a risk that this roll-out could significantly delay plan making in some areas (including Runnymede potentially).
- 2.8 Due to this ambiguity, following discussion with the Chairman of the Planning Committee, it is intended to put the Council forward as a front runner authority to minimise any potential delays to plan preparation, although being selected as a front runner authority cannot be guaranteed as the number of front runner Authorities is limited to 10. In the recent consultation document, the Government has stated that in terms of applications to be a front runner authority, *'it is likely that priority will be given to authorities with the most up to date plans. We intend to take this approach to help incentivise those with a recent record of plan-making to come forward and drive successful plan delivery in the first cohort'*.
- 2.9 A further area, where the recent consultation paper provided more certainty was around the proposals for the introduction of a Project Initiation Document (PID). The consultation paper describes how the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill (LURB) removes the requirement to prepare a Statement of Community Involvement (SCI).¹ Instead, the government proposes to use two key levers to drive improvements to the quality of engagement during the plan making process, and to allow authorities to better express their ambitions around engagement and consultation:
- Authorities will need to outline their overall ambitions and approach to engagement and consultation through their Project Initiation Document. This might include the approaches to be used (including the use of digital engagement tools), what early engagement is planned, and the resources and skills required to deliver this; and,
 - The Project Initiation Document should form the basis for discussion at the first gateway checkpoint (to recap, three mandatory gateway checks overseen by the Planning inspectorate or other approved bodies are to occur during plan

¹ A Statement of Community Involvement (SCI) is a document which sets out how and when the Council will consult with, and involve the community and other stakeholders, in the production of the Local Plan and other planning policy documents and in the planning application process.

making to check that a local authority's plan making activities remain on the right track). Through the first gateway assessment, the implementation of the approaches set out in the PID would be subject to independent oversight.

- 2.10 The government wants to encourage planning authorities to be ambitious when it comes to outlining their overall ambitions to approaching engagement and consultation. For example, the Project Initiation Document may include how a planning authority intends to connect with groups who have traditionally had low levels of engagement, and how the use of hybrid approaches to engagement might contribute to overcoming this.
- 2.11 To support planning authorities in scoping out ambitious approaches to engaging communities, tailored to their context, the government is proposing to launch a digital toolkit, which can be used by planning authorities to support engagement. In addition, the government intends to develop new guidance on community engagement, setting out best practice examples, and guiding principles for involving the community in the local plan process.
- 2.12 The government sets out that early participation with communities should occur prior to the 30-month plan making period commencing and the findings from this early engagement should inform the Project Initiation Document, providing an important opportunity for planning authorities to test how the community would wish to be engaged in the process. The outputs of such questions could feed into the ambitions and overall approaches to consultation during the 30-month plan making timeframe, which the planning authority would be expected to include.
- 2.13 Based on the guidance now provided around the role and likely contents of a Project Initiation Document, in January 2024, officers are proposing to:
 - Commence work analysing the different elements of the community, and other key stakeholders who would need to be engaged with during Plan preparation
 - Analyse previous consultation responses and other relevant data to identify hard to reach groups;
 - Commence discussions with the Community Planning Panel (which is well attended by Residents Associations across the Borough) and other organisations who represent hard to reach groups to explore how the community would wish to be engaged in the process.
- 2.14 The above research and engagement would help officers then sketch out early ideas for an up-to-date engagement plan for discussion with Members, which would feed into the Project Initiation Document (being mindful that any proposals may need to be sense checked once the government has published its guidance on community engagement).
- 2.15 In addition to the above, work continues on the following activities within the Planning Policy Team:
 - Working to produce a Design Code for the borough. This will include working collaboratively with Members, local communities and other stakeholders. At the time of writing, the tender documents are being prepared. Procurement is to commence by the end of October. The Design Code Project will be subject to detailed timetabling once a consultant has been appointed, but this project is expected to take approximately 1 year;

- Production of climate change guidance documents to support the policies in the Runnymede 2030 Local Plan and encourage developers to build to higher standards to help reach net zero targets. See paragraph 2.23 for more information on this point.
- Carrying out a Call for Sites (starting on 1st April 2024 and running for 1 month) and updating the Council's Strategic Land Availability Assessment, aiming for publication in September 2024;
- Updating the Strategic Flood Risk Assessment for the Borough. Amongst other things, this update will ensure that the functional floodplain in Runnymede is up to date with the latest Government definition. The target for the completion of this work is Spring 2024 but this is reliant to a degree on getting more certainty around the River Thames Scheme and modelling data from the Environment Agency;
- Supporting the Climate Change team where necessary and where capacity allows. Currently, an officer in the Planning Policy Team is leading on the production of an Electric Vehicle Strategy for the Borough. It is anticipated that this strategy will be adopted, subject to committee approval by the end of 2023. Another officer is leading on the production of a Climate Change Action Plan for the borough (due to be adopted, subject to committee approval, by the end of the financial year);
- Finalising existing Supplementary Planning Documents which will support the current Runnymede 2030 Local Plan (relating to Environmental Protection and Gypsies and Travellers). Aiming for completion by summer 2024.
- Finalising an update to the 2017 Open Space Study. Completion estimated by the end of 2023, subject to receiving the required mapping information from the GIS team.
- An updated piece of work to explore whether the removal of permitted development relating to the conversion of offices to residential accommodation in parts of the Strategic Employment Areas is justified using an Article 4 direction. Work is underway to produce a justification report for this work and the Article 4's would then need to be 'confirmed' and 'made', and then a year would need to pass before they came into effect.
- Infrastructure Baseline. A refresh will need to take place of this work and it is anticipated that this will be completed by the Autumn of 2024.

2.16 It is proposed that officers bring a further report back to the Planning Committee when the evidence requirements for the new plan making system are clear, as well as clarification being provided by the government in terms of when plan making can commence in Runnymede. At this stage, production of more detailed timetabling work for the review of the Local Plan would be possible.

What would be achievable (under option 2) for a climate change review of the Local Plan

2.17 In terms of climate change and what is achievable under option 2, (see bullet point one of para. 1.4 above), officers have undertaken further work to investigate the scope that a partial review could cover in more detail. This additional work has included:

1. A review of the policies in the adopted Runnymede 2030 Local Plan to consider whether there are potential opportunities to strengthen existing planning policies as part of a partial climate change review; and,
2. Consideration of what a climate change review is likely to mean in terms of introducing stricter build standards on developers for new build homes coming forward in the Borough.

- 2.18 This work, which would need to be supported by a comprehensive viability assessment to ensure that the costs of any additional measures/ standards introduced would not be prohibitively expensive and affect housing delivery, concluded that existing policies covering issues such as sustainable construction and design, renewable/ low carbon energy, sustainable transport and active travel, flood risk, and green infrastructure could be strengthened, and that in addition there is potential to introduce several new policies to strengthen the Plan's stance on Climate Change.
- 2.19 In terms of considering the impacts that any amended policies are likely to have, from previous discussions with Members, it is understood that it is hoped that such tightened standards would help ensure that any dwellings delivered over the remainder of the Plan period are required to be designed to net zero standards (or similar). However, SD1 of the adopted Local Plan sets out that over the plan period, 7,920 net additional units are expected to be delivered. This is approx. 5% higher than the boroughwide housing target of 7,507 (with both figures being expressed as minimums). 3,398 net additional dwellings have already been completed since the start of the Plan period in 2015. A further 2,159 net additional units have secured planning consent and remain extant. Some of these are under construction. In total, this accounts for 70% of the total housing delivery expected to occur over the plan period. On top of this, additional dwellings including at the Nexus site in Egham, the Field Nursery in Ottershaw and Barbara Clarke House in Englefield Green also benefit from resolutions to grant planning permission. There are also a number of live planning applications under consideration which propose housing at the time of writing. Most notably, this includes 1700 units at the Longcross Garden Village (700 of which are expected to be delivered during the plan period). Such applications are likely to be determined in advance of a partially reviewed local plan with strengthened climate change policies being adopted (during the course of 2026).
- 2.20 A remaining 965 potential units on the allocated sites have not got planning consent, a live planning application or a resolution to grant planning consent at the time of writing. It is difficult to predict how many of these units may be consented by 2026, but it is expected that this number would have reduced. A further 46 windfall units a year from small sites are expected to be approved over the last 4 years of the plan period (184 units in total). Overall therefore, even if a climate change review was carried out, by the time that an amended local plan was adopted, only approximately 4 years of the plan period is likely to remain, and the bulk of the housing expected to be delivered over the plan period is expected to have been consented by this point. As the vast majority of the housing would already have been approved, the impact of such a review is likely to be significantly limited.
- 2.21 Given the significant cost involved in producing a climate change review of the Local Plan, the anticipated difficulties in meeting the proposed milestones for submission (June 2025) and adoption (December 2026) proposed for the existing plan making system, the fact that from Autumn 2024 the Planning Policy team would also in all likelihood be resourcing the full review of the Local Plan which would put a significant strain on staffing, and due to the limited influence that the climate change review is likely to have before the fully reviewed Local Plan comes into force, it is considered that this is an option which should not be explored any further.

Details of new/revised policy guidance that could be produced by officers in the interim period whilst the new plan making system is awaited (under option 3)

- 2.22 As members may be aware, officers are currently in the process of finalising the evidence base on climate change that will underpin the next iteration of the Local Plan. Land Use Consultants (LUC) have led on the production of the Climate Change Study, with assistance from Aether and the Centre for Sustainable Energy (CSE). The various parts of the evidence base which are currently in the latter stages of development are listed as follows:
- **Task 1: Emission Pathways Report** – the report models two scenarios – a ‘business as usual’ emissions pathway to 2050 showing the likely impacts of already ‘locked-in’ decarbonisation actions; and an alternative ‘emissions reduction trajectory’ which illustrates the possible impacts of alternative, stronger actions, including societal changes. This trajectory demonstrates the scale of action/intervention required to reach net zero emissions in Runnymede and helps justify the introduction of stronger climate change planning policies.
 - **Tasks 2 & 3: Low Carbon Development and Sustainable Design Principles** – the report identifies policy options to help ensure the revised Local Plan better supports the transition to a low carbon Runnymede (as per NPPF requirements). The report draws on best practice case studies from other local authorities and references the latest standards and metrics. It provides policy options covering low/zero carbon buildings, renewable/low carbon energy generation, embodied carbon, the performance gap, and sustainable travel. It also includes a section on what measures could be taken to strengthen implementation of existing Local Plan policy in the interim period until a revised Local Plan is adopted.
 - **Task 4: Renewable Energy Assessment** – the NPPF states that Local Plans should consider identifying suitable areas for renewable and low carbon energy sources, and supporting infrastructure, where this would help secure their development (para 155(c)). This report goes some way to achieve this, identifying the ‘technical’ potential of various technologies being deployed in the Borough, including wind, solar, heat pumps and heat networks. The report also considers factors such as grid connection which may affect the extent to which these technologies can be deployed.
 - **Task 5: Climate Change Adaptation** – the report identifies the likely future climatic conditions that will be experienced in Runnymede and identifies ways the Local Plan policies can be strengthened (or new policies introduced) to better adapt the built environment to the changing climate. Policy options cover flood risk reduction, overheating, water resource management, supporting nature recovery and resilience, green infrastructure and carbon sequestration.

2.23 The above studies are due to be completed in a final draft form by the end of October. Following discussions with the Chairman of the Planning Committee and the Chairman of the Climate Change Working Party, it is proposed that the outputs of the Climate Change Study part 2 (which will form a significant portion of the climate change evidence base that will underpin the local plan) will be presented to members at the Climate Change Working Party on 22nd November. Members of the Planning Committee are encouraged to attend this meeting alongside the members of the Climate Change Working Party, alongside any other interested members. At this meeting, based on recommendations from the Climate Change Study, options for additional guidance that could be produced will be discussed, and officers will use steer from Members to start producing further guidance. This work is likely to take place between December 2023 and June 2024.

3. Policy framework implications

3.1 The Runnymede 2030 Local Plan (2015-2030) was adopted in July 2020. The Local Plan indicates at paragraph 5.19 that the Council will begin a review of the Plan immediately and complete it within 5 years. However, this undertaking is not a Plan

policy. Nor is it a policy for early review, as the NPPF requires all plans to be reviewed within 5 years. Not starting a review until the new planning system comes in will not render the plan out-of-date. On the contrary, under the new system, the Government is proposing that the Plan would be deemed to be up to date until at least 15th January 2028 i.e., the 5-year period from the date of adoption plus any period of delay and an additional 30 months taken from the commencement of plan making if the Council is held back from starting plan making by the government due to their proposed phasing arrangements.

4 Resource implications/Value for Money

- 4.1 The Planning Policy team has an annual budget to carry out planning policy work associated with both Local Plan preparation and the production of other planning policy documents. During the Local Plan Review process, spend will be closely monitored.

5. Legal implications

- 5.1 The main legislation that sets out the process for the preparation of Local Plans can be found in [Part 2 of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004](#) as amended and the [Town and Country Planning \(Local Planning\) \(England\) Regulations 2012](#) as amended (see also para. 3.1 above).

6. Equality implications

- 6.1 The Council has a Public Sector Duty under the Equalities Act 2020 to have due regard to the need to:
- a) Eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment or victimisation;
 - b) Advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a Protected Characteristic and persons who do not share it;
 - c) Foster good relations between those who share a relevant characteristic and persons who do not share those characteristics;

in relation to the 9 'Protected Characteristics' stated within the Act.

- 6.2 An Equality Impact Assessment will be undertaken for the new Local Plan as a whole and equalities considerations associated with each Local Plan policy robustly assessed.

7. Environmental/Sustainability/Biodiversity implications

- 7.1 The review of the Local Plan will strengthen the policies relating to Climate Change set out in the adopted Local Plan, including creating a strong, well-considered network of green and blue corridors and spaces, supporting adaption and resilience to climate change, helping to halt the loss of, and improving biodiversity, and contributing to the health and wellbeing of our communities.
- 7.2 In addition, as part of the production of the review of the Local Plan, a Sustainability/ Strategic Environment Appraisal (SA/SEA) will be produced at each stage in the process. The SA/SEA document will ensure that environmental/ economic and social issues are taken into account throughout the production of the Plan Text.

8. Other implications (where applicable)

- 8.1 None

9. Timetable for Implementation

9.1 Not applicable.

10. Background papers

[DLUHC Consultation Paper: Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill: consultation on implementation of plan-making reforms, 25th July 2023.](#)