

New Runnymede Local Plan

Draft SWOT Analysis



The baseline information and evidence which the Council has gathered to date has informed the following objective assessment of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats/challenges (SWOT) that are relevant to the area which a new Runnymede Local Plan will cover. This has helped identify Runnymede's key spatial priorities, which will, in turn, inform the new Local Plan's vision, objectives and policy requirements.

The SWOT analysis may change and evolve once feedback from the scoping consultation is taken into account.

Strengths

- Overall, Runnymede offers an attractive living environment with a strong identity.
- Relatively affluent area with most neighbourhoods in the least deprived category nationally.
- Relatively resilient local economy, despite a number of market shocks over recent years, with generally high employment, earnings, productivity and economic output.
- Skilled workforce and sustained business investment in some sectors – economically active population likely to outpace Surrey and UK averages.
- Established strength in the information and communications sector, and emerging 'createch'¹ sector.
- Strategic location near London, with good road, rail, and Heathrow connectivity in the main.
- Strong education offer, including high-performing schools, colleges and Royal Holloway University of London.
- Wide range of leisure, tourism and recreation assets, such as Thorpe Park, Savill Garden, Virginia Water Lake, Runnymede Meadows and Pleasure Grounds, River Thames.
- Rich and diverse natural environment with locally, nationally and internationally important habitats and ecological connectivity with the wider Thames Valley.
- Rich historic and cultural landscape, including wide range of locally, nationally and internationally significant heritage assets.
- Declining carbon footprint and generally improving air quality (despite localised issues).
- Generally good quality and well-valued parks and open spaces providing a range of play and leisure options, and community facilities meeting the needs of various groups.

¹ 'Createch' is where creativity meets technology – it combines creative sectors like film, with the technology sector, and is an area of growth for the UK (as identified in the [UK Modern Industrial Strategy](#)).

- Active and well-organised community groups, including neighbourhood planning forums.
- Runnymede's air quality is generally good and improving (but affected by localised exceedances associated with road traffic and strategic transport infrastructure).

Weaknesses

- Significant development constraints from Green Belt and flood risk.
- Severe housing affordability issues (both house prices and rents) and limited land supply (reflecting wider regional trends).
- Mismatch between housing supply and need leads to issues such as overcrowding and unsuitable housing.
- High unmet demand for diverse housing mix and types, particularly smaller homes and affordable housing to rent.
- Shortfall in accessible/adaptable homes for those with disabilities or whose health deteriorates over time, and ongoing need for specialist accommodation.
- Rising levels of homelessness reflecting wider regional affordability and housing pressures, leading to increased reliance on temporary accommodation.
- Pockets of deprivation with poorer health, education and employment outcomes.
- Uneven economic outcomes across some groups and areas, with strain caused by cost of living and unemployment.
- Weakened office market (accelerated by the pandemic and permitted development rights), has reduced town centre competitiveness.
- Longer-term trends of decline in habitat quality across some sites – particularly floodplain meadows and wetlands (though stabilising in places).
- Heavy reliance on car travel and use of strategic road network, contributing to congestion, localised environmental pollution, and emissions (transport is Runnymede's largest source of emissions).
- Limited public transport connectivity in some areas relative to others, particularly radial links (including to Heathrow airport).
- Some watercourses are below 'good ecological status' - impacted by artificial medication, nutrient enrichment and urbanisation - including the River Thames.
- Moderate increases in crime relative to wider area, concentrated in urban areas and key service locations, has affected perceptions of safety.
- Council housing stock not yet fully meeting national standards – ongoing investment to achieve full compliance and tenant satisfaction.
- Community and public service infrastructure capacity constraints in some parts of Runnymede.
- Features some parks and open spaces of poor/average quality - require ongoing improvement and investment.
- Slowing progress on emissions reduction, with transport and housing dominant sources.

Opportunities

- Respond to demographic change by delivering a more balance housing mix, including specialist, and accessible/adaptable homes.

- Expand and diversify affordable housing delivery, including through Council-led development.
- Modernise housing stock through active investment programme (including decarbonisation) and improve access to sustainable housing solutions.
- Reduce emissions through prioritising sustainable transport and active travel modes; directing growth to accessible locations; and improving energy efficiency of development.
- Support transition to low-carbon and renewable energy and improved energy security through appropriate land-use policies.
- Contributing to nature recovery (including by supporting the Surrey Local Nature Recovery Strategy), habitat restoration, tree planting, and Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG), particularly along Thames corridor and through improvements to and expansions of Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace (SANG), which in turn improves climate and flood risk resilience.
- Prioritise regeneration/intensification of brownfield land in urban areas, particularly its centres, to support housing delivery, contribute to centre vitality, and reduce Green Belt pressure.
- Deliver housing and supporting infrastructure through Longcross Garden Village, which has now secured outline planning permission.
- Transition town centres to mixed-use/multi-functional, more resilient destinations, which evolve with changing consumer behaviour.
- Leverage proximity to Heathrow and Thames Valley corridor to achieve sustainable economic growth and skills development.
- Support sector growth - particularly createch and innovation sectors – and strengthen tourism, hospitality and visitor economy (e.g. by building on wayfinding programme).
- Develop and nurture coordination between West Surrey institutions (e.g. RHUL and Surrey University) and sector clusters (e.g. TV studios) to support knowledge transfer, employment and innovation.
- Support a modal shift towards sustainable transport and active travel, as well as electric vehicles, by improving infrastructure and connectivity e.g. through the Runnymede Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan and Local Street Improvement Programme.
- Work with infrastructure providers to identify capacity issues and secure the necessary funding, including through developer contributions and grant funding, to improve capacity.
- Benefit from the River Thames Scheme (RTS) – through flood mitigation, green and active infrastructure, and leisure and recreation.
- Enhance lower quality open spaces, and outdoor sports and recreation provision, to meet needs.
- Protect employment space via Article 4 Direction (coming into force in 2027).

Threats / challenges

- Predicting demographic change and planning to meet the wide-ranging needs of e.g. an ageing population, diverse groups, and evolving household make-up.
- Demand and need for affordable housing is outstripping supply, coupled with the increasingly limited capacity of housing associations to deliver the affordable homes; and viability pressures facing the sector.
- Worsening affordability, which could lead to further displacement and homelessness.

- Growth in Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs) in some areas of Runnymede can be beneficial, but high concentrations of HMOs can also have negative impacts on residents and visitors in these areas.
- Uncertainty in higher education sector affects ability to project future housing demand.
- Increased propensity to commute amongst university students places pressure on road network.
- Rise of working from home and hybrid working impacts office demand and disperses economic activity away from town centres towards suburbs.
- Accommodating growing demand for logistics/warehousing could place pressure on road network.
- Potential expansion at Heathrow could lead to increased noise pollution, congestion and additional demand for housing/employment floorspace which haven't yet been accounted for.
- Financial pressures on Council services due to funding constraints, servicing demographic change and rising demand (e.g. for temporary accommodation).
- Development and health increasingly impacted by climate change including through flood risk, heat island effect, water availability and quality, increased storm activity and wildfires.
- Constraints from 'dry islands' (areas surrounded by land at high risk of flooding) limiting development in some areas.
- Growing pressure on infrastructure to accommodate growth (including from Grey Belt development).
- Balancing development viability pressures (affected by rising construction costs) and level of developer contributions required to secure supporting infrastructure.
- Limited capacity of existing SANG to avoid development impacts on the Special Protection Area.
- Changing consumer habits impacting vacancy rates in Runnymede's centres and high streets.
- Significant future shortfall in water resources in the South East supply area – pressure from population growth, climate change and increased demand.
- Ongoing pressure on Green Belt land due to shortage of available sites in the urban area, compounded by introduction of grey belt designation.
- Loss of employment floorspace due to expanded permitted development rights, impacting the local economy.
- Plan-making in an uncertain policy and legislation landscape (e.g. due to planning and housing reform), whilst in a period of local government reorganisation, with added complexity in conforming to an emerging Spatial Development Strategy.
- Ongoing car dependence leading to increasing congestion and pollution.
- Challenges in achieving local and national net zero targets without increased pace of change.