

New Runnymede Local Plan



Topic Area 4: Contributing to Sustainable Economic Growth

Background

- 5.1 The Runnymede area is generally prosperous and is home to a variety of businesses. Its locational advantages and good connectivity, combined with its skills base and high-quality environment, makes it an attractive location to do business, offering quick access to Heathrow Airport (by car) as well as Central London.
- 5.2 It has a strong presence in the knowledge-based economy and is home to several leading research establishments, including the UK Government's Animal and Health Plant Agency and Royal Holloway, University of London. The Runnymede area is also home to the UK and European headquarters of several world-renowned technology companies that are at the forefront of innovation including Samsung, Toshiba, Gartner, and VMware. In 2021, Netflix committed to a long-term investment in Longcross Studios, which is set to see a major expansion in media production in coming years.
- 5.3 Sectors which show growth in the Runnymede area include human health and social work; information and communications; as well as arts, entertainment and recreation; with the professional, scientific and technical activities and construction sectors the largest sectors by count. The [UK Competitiveness Index for 2023](#) has the Runnymede area ranked ninth out of all local authority areas, the only area outside of London to fall within the top ten.
- 5.4 The Runnymede 2030 Local Plan identifies several Strategic Employment Areas (SEAs), which are areas that are protected by existing Local Plan policies to remain in employment use, and which are the focus for additional employment development, whether this be for offices, industrial or warehousing uses. SEAs can be found at The Causeway and Pine Trees Business Park in Egham, Weybridge and Bourne Business Park/Waterside Trading Estate in Addlestone, Hillswood Business Park in Chertsey, Thorpe Industrial Estate and Longcross Park. These areas, and other relevant baseline information, is presented in the Runnymede Place Portrait¹.
- 5.5 Retail development and main town centre uses include retail, leisure, entertainment facilities, arts, office, culture and tourism development and are concentrated in a network of centres across the Runnymede area – mainly Addlestone, Chertsey and Egham town centres. The existing Local Plan focuses additional retail, leisure and entertainment development in these main town centres. More local facilities are found at Englefield Green, Ottershaw, Virginia Water and Woodham and New Haw centres. Each centre fulfils a different but complementary role.

¹ Available here: www.runnymede.gov.uk/runnymede-digital-place-portrait

- 5.6 Leisure uses outside these centres include Thorpe Park, Savill Gardens, Runnymede Meadows, Windsor Great Park and Virginia Water Lake, and various golf courses and other public open spaces. The Runnymede Place Portrait provides more details.

What has changed since the 2030 Local Plan?

- 5.7 National changes to the Use Classes Order, made in September 2020, allow uses such as offices, shops, cafes and various other uses to be included within an overall 'E' Use Class. This means that these uses can change from one E use class to another, under what is known as 'permitted development', without having to apply for full planning permission. A 'Prior Approval' application for certain classes of permitted development is instead subject to a far less stringent set of decision-making criteria.
- 5.8 Our monitoring records show that Runnymede has been particularly impacted by these new rights, resulting in a loss of office floorspace, including in our SEAs and in close proximity to town centre locations (particularly Egham and Chertsey). Monitoring records also indicate that areas outside our town centres are unlikely to return to being significant office locations in the future.
- 5.9 Evidence shows that the type of employment space that we use, and the way that we use it, has changed post-Brexit and Covid-19. There has been a significant increase in hybrid working with people working far more frequently from home than was previously the case. This change has impacted on our town centres, and this, together with more internet shopping, has resulted in real changes to the way that these centres function and are used. Evidence suggests overall demand for office floorspace continues to fall, and when / where there is still demand, this is for high-quality space.
- 5.10 The new NPPF allows for the location and extent of town centres and primary shopping areas (where retail development should be concentrated) to be set out within a centre hierarchy policy. The new NDMPs place greater emphasis on enabling a wider mix of uses to address the general oversupply of retail floorspace, and create opportunities for more residential accommodation.
- 5.11 Since the adoption of the 2030 Local Plan, Addlestone town centre has seen the development of Addlestone One and at Egham town centre the Magna Square development, both of which offer an extended range of retail and leisure facilities with additional housing. The wayfinding infrastructure of all three town centres is also being significantly improved, to help support the development of these areas by improving legibility.

What we think is in scope

- 5.12 In accordance with the NPPF, there is an opportunity for the new Local Plan to set out a clear economic vision and strategy for the Runnymede area, which takes a positive, proactive and realistic approach to encouraging sustainable economic growth, having regard to the [National Industrial Strategy](#) and any other relevant strategies for economic development, including that of the emerging Spatial Development Strategy for the sub-region. This should take account of local business needs and wider opportunities for growth.
- 5.13 The new Local Plan can then allocate employment and mixed-use sites to implement this vision and strategy, and meet identified needs over the plan period, within the context of a modern, green economy.

- 5.14 Our latest Economic Development Needs Assessment² identifies the need to protect existing and deliver additional employment floorspace over the Plan period. Given the Green Belt constraints that exist, our view is that as far as possible we need to seek to protect Runnymede's key employment sites (such as our SEAs) from being lost to other uses such as housing. It is important that existing employment locations are given the opportunity to attract investment, expand and adapt to meet future needs.
- 5.15 In addition, the loss of key employment premises can lead to fewer long-term jobs and increase out-commuting or relocation, harming the local economy and denying opportunities to regenerate employment areas for commercial activity which could help to facilitate a modern economy.
- 5.16 The Council has agreed to make an Article 4 Direction to remove permitted development rights which allow for the change of use from commercial activity to residential in our Strategic Employment Areas. The Article 4 Direction will come into effect in February 2027.
- 5.17 There may also be opportunities to allocate smaller, less strategic employment sites which make a valuable contribution to Runnymede's economy, and to protect them from being lost to other uses.
- 5.18 Even if our existing employment sites are protected, there is a need for around 19,000 – 24,000sqm of new office space, 1,700-4,200sqm of industrial floorspace and 16,000 – 17,000sqm of warehousing/logistics floorspace over a 10-year period. There may also be demand for additional floorspace to deliver warehouse-like facilities like data centres, which are identified by central government as being essential to support sectors that benefit from data processing and storage services. The NPPF requires local planning authorities to consider the need for this type of development when setting local policies.
- 5.19 The NPPF also sets out how Plans should promote the long-term vitality and viability of town centres. They should be informed by a strategy for town centres to ensure that the full range of potential needs and opportunities for development is considered (and to broaden the mix of uses, including residential uses).
- 5.20 Plans should also define a hierarchy of centres, including the extent of town centres and primary shopping areas, and allocate a range of suitable sites to meet the scale and type of 'main town centre uses' needed over the plan period.
- 5.21 Early evidence from our Retail Study³ indicates that our towns, traditional high streets and shopping centres have been and continue to be challenged by falling market demand, rising occupancy costs and increased competition from online and out-of-centre shopping. These trends were accelerated and compounded by the Covid-19 pandemic.
- 5.22 As a result, over a 10-year plan period, based on projected population growth, there is no need to identify and allocate new sites for retail or leisure development, as growth in these uses are most likely to be accommodated within existing or refurbished units in Runnymede's town centres or near transport nodes. Any development proposals for main town centre uses should continue to be directed to the existing network of centres. Sequentially, we should look to sites within our town centres first, and only if none are available look to sites on the edge of our town centres and lastly out of centre.

² Available here: www.runnymede.gov.uk/planning-policy/2030-local-plan-review-evidence-base-documents/7

³ Available at: www.runnymede.gov.uk/planning-policy/2030-local-plan-review-evidence-base-documents/3

5.23 In terms of retail and leisure provision in our town centres, the key message from our evidence and national planning policy is that we need to support diversification: we need to plan for alternative uses such as residential provision, education, and health facilities which are positive in terms of drawing footfall and enhancing the vitality of centres. We also need to consider options for redevelopment and continued investment to improve the quality of centres.

What we think is out of scope

5.24 The new Local Plan should not repeat policy requirements set out in NDMPs in the latest NPPF. Therefore, areas considered to be out of scope include:

- Setting policies for a sequential and impact test for main town centre uses proposed outside of designated town centres.
- Policies which control the introduction of new hot food takeaways in locations within walking distance of schools, and where there is evidence that a concentration of such uses is having an adverse impact on health, pollution and anti-social behaviour. These issues are now addressed sufficiently in NDMPs in the NPPF.

The following questions are set out in the response form⁴:

Q15. Do you agree with what the Council believes is in scope and which a new Local Plan could address to contribute towards a sustainable local economy? If not, please explain why.

Q16. Do you agree with what the Council believes is in scope and which a new Local Plan could address to ensure the vitality of Runnymede's town centres? If not, please explain why.

Q17. Do you agree with what the Council believes is out of scope for these matters? If not, please explain why.

Q18. In addition to protecting our Strategic Employment Areas, are there any other employment sites/areas that you think the Council should consider protecting? If so, please provide details, and why you think that they need to be retained.

Q19. Given the changing nature of town centres and the future challenges that they face, do you have any suggestions that could inform a strategy/vision for Runnymede's town centres, which could in turn inform the next Local Plan?

⁴ Available at: www.runnymede.gov.uk/local-plan/scoping