

New Runnymede Local Plan



Topic Area 1: A Strategy for Growth

The role of a spatial strategy

- 2.1 Runnymede is a popular place to live and work due to the quality of its natural environment, good accessibility to transport networks, and attractive towns and villages. This means many people currently live and work in the area, and would like to move to the area in the future.
- 2.2 The purpose of the planning system is to contribute to the achievement of sustainable development, including the provision of homes, offices, retail development and supporting infrastructure. A key role of local plans is to ensure that this 'development growth' comes forward in the right places at the right time, and at the right standard, to meet a broad spectrum of future needs, incomes and circumstances. To ensure this growth is delivered sustainably, local plans must balance issues such as Green Belt, nature protection, flood risk and other constraints as well as ensuring accessibility to community facilities and public services.
- 2.3 The new Local Plan spatial strategy will need to achieve this balance. It will respond to key questions about what types of development will be delivered and where, how much development there will be, and when development is expected to come forward. As well as a spatial strategy, the new Local Plan will need to set out policies for the minimum amount of development to be provided, land allocations and broad locations for growth for a period of no less than 10 years from the point of adoption of the Plan.

Some key considerations

- 2.4 The Runnymede area is relatively small – its main town centres are Addlestone, Chertsey, and Egham, containing a mix of housing, commercial development and the main retail and indoor leisure destinations in the area. These areas, along with Longcross Garden Village, are the focus for development in the existing 2030 Local Plan.
- 2.5 The smaller urban areas of Englefield Green, Ottershaw, Virginia Water, Woodham and New Haw are classed as 'local centres' and are less of a focus for growth in the existing Local Plan, along with the village of Thorpe. The existing Local Plan did not recognise Thorpe as a 'centre' given its lack of any discernible commercial core.
- 2.6 These urban areas are surrounded by land designated as Green Belt, which includes the small settled area of Lyne, as well as other pockets of development. The five purposes of the Green Belt are set out below:

Green Belt serves five purposes:

- a) to check the unrestricted sprawl of large built-up areas;
- b) to prevent neighbouring towns merging into one another;
- c) to assist in safeguarding the countryside from encroachment;
- d) to preserve the setting and special character of historic towns; and
- e) to assist in urban regeneration, by encouraging the recycling of derelict and other urban land.

- 2.7 Green Belt land accounts for 74% of Runnymede's total land area. Many types of development in the Green Belt are restricted – which means that available land for development is limited in the Runnymede area unless Green Belt boundaries are altered.
- 2.8 In addition, areas in the east of the Runnymede area are also at a higher risk of flooding from the River Thames and its tributaries, which is likely to restrict how much development can come forward in these areas.
- 2.9 Whilst lying outside of Runnymede, the Thames Basin Heaths Special Protection Area is designated for its nature conservation value, especially due to its heathlands and ground nesting bird species. Whilst this habitat designation does not restrict development in Runnymede, mitigation in the form of additional land for recreation is required to offset impacts to it, and this additional land will need to be found and in the right places.
- 2.10 These constraints are mapped and further details are provided in the Runnymede Digital Place Portrait¹.

What has changed since the 2030 Local Plan?

- 2.11 The latest National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) makes it clear that all local authorities should meet their housing, economic and other development needs in full through their local plans, unless there are exceptional reasons why this is not possible. This means that difficult choices will have to be made on where development should come forward in the future, whilst continuing to balance this growth against the need to protect and enhance the area's natural environment and heritage in a sustainable way.
- 2.12 The Government is committed to significantly boosting the supply of new homes, with local authorities expected to identify enough land for the short, medium and where possible, long term. Since adoption of the Runnymede 2030 Local Plan, there has been a significant change in the number of new homes that the government has calculated should be built in Runnymede: from 500 to 640 homes per year. This equates to 6,400 total dwellings for a 10-year plan period, increasing to 9,600 over a 15-year plan period.
- 2.13 In addition to this, evidence on the need for commercial development indicates that around 10.2ha to 11.1ha of land is required to meet the area's needs for offices, industry and warehousing/logistics over a 10-year plan period, increasing to around 15.3ha to 16.7ha over a 15-year plan period.

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

- 2.14 National Decision-Making Policies (NDMPs) also now set out the principle of development within and outside of ‘settlements’. Within settlements, development will generally be approved (if certain criteria are met), and in the case of Runnymede, development outside of settlements will be subject to Green Belt policy. Work is underway to understand which settlements in Runnymede will meet the NPPF’s new definitions, and what this means for the Green Belt land around both our larger and smaller settlement areas.
- 2.15 In terms of Green Belt policy, the new NPPF sets out how Green Belt boundaries can be altered through Local Plans where alterations would enable development of land around railway stations, or where exceptional circumstances can be demonstrated. These circumstances include when a local authority is unable to meet its identified need for development in full, having examined all other reasonable options for doing so, which includes making as much use as possible of brownfield land, optimising the density of development, and considering whether sufficient suitable sites can be identified outside of the Green Belt.
- 2.16 The latest NPPF also includes a new definition of Grey Belt – see the box below – which will have implications for the new Local Plan.

The NPPF defines the “Grey Belt” as:

“For the purposes of plan-making and decision-making, “grey belt” is defined as land in the Green Belt comprising previously developed land and/or any other land that, in either case, does not strongly contribute to any of purposes (a), (b), or (d) in policy GB2”.

These purposes include:

- (a) to check the unrestricted sprawl of large built-up areas
- (b) to prevent neighbouring towns merging into one another
- (d) to preserve the setting and special character of historic towns

This means that unless land **strongly contributes to one of these three purposes**, it may now be classed as **Grey Belt**, opening it up to possible development.

Policies relating to areas or assets of particular importance, such as Sites of Special Scientific Interest, Local Green Space, National Parks and heritage assets, would potentially provide a strong reason for refusing or restricting development of Grey Belt land.

- 2.17 The emphasis of national planning policy is now very much that authorities should meet their development needs in full through sustainable patterns of development, and if necessary, where urban areas cannot achieve this, release land from the Green Belt where this approach is fully evidenced and justified. Any proposed release should be done in a way which prioritises previously developed land within the Green Belt first, then other Grey Belt land which is not previously developed, and finally other stronger-performing areas of Green Belt. Green Belt boundaries can also be altered where this would enable the sustainable development of land around stations.

What we think is in scope

- 2.18 The main issues we think are likely to frame the approach to the spatial strategy can be summarised as follows:

- Accessibility of potential development locations to day-to-day services and facilities by walking/cycling and public transport and whether less accessible locations can be made accessible by walking/cycling and public transport;
- Whether land around stations is available for development (whether in an urban or Green Belt location);
- The performance of Green Belt and potential identification of Grey Belt;
- How much development can be accommodated within the boundaries of the areas which are defined as settlements.
- Extent and severity of risk of flooding (as well as other environmental constraints);
- Availability and location of land to mitigate impacts to the Thames Basin Heaths Special Protection Area.
- Capacity of local and wider infrastructure to absorb or grow to accommodate development. This includes the local road network, M25, M3 and walking, cycling and public transport.
- The options available to expand existing settlements in a sustainable way, and/or the ability of the borough to accommodate a new settlement.

- 2.19 In line with national planning policy, we think that our initial approach should be to focus development within our main urban areas and other smaller centres. We will need to consider intensification of our urban areas, to increase density in areas with high levels of connectivity, and optimise the use of allocated sites.
- 2.20 We will also need to consider other sustainably located previously developed land that exists outside of our urban areas as well as potential areas of Grey Belt land, and possibly Green Belt including land in the Green Belt around stations.
- 2.21 The overall spatial strategy in the new Local Plan covering the Runnymede area will need to define the role of each settlement within the area, and define settlement boundaries. The identification of settlement areas will also be required to ensure clarity when applying NDMPs on the principle of development within and outside of settlements. The capacity of each to meet identified housing, economic and other development needs will also need to be determined. We will be producing settlement hierarchy evidence to get a better understanding of the role and characteristics of Runnymede's settlements, and to help assess their capacity to accommodate development needs.
- 2.22 At this stage, we don't know how much development will be directed to any area in Runnymede, as further evidence is required to assess the suitability and appropriateness of locations. This is something that will be consulted on in future stages of plan-making.
- 2.23 A first stage of determining land availability is undertaking a search for sites, which is known as a 'Call for Sites'. As part of this consultation, we are inviting developers, landowners and other interested parties to put forward sites which they think might have potential for future development. These sites will feed into the Council's Housing/ Economic Development Land Supply document (known as the Strategic Land Availability Assessment or 'SLAA'). These sites will then be assessed in detail to decide if they could potentially become site allocations in the new local plan. The Call for Sites exercise also enables landowners to propose sites that present opportunities for delivery of biodiversity net gain (BNG), Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace (SANG), Local Green Space (LGS) or other significant infrastructure such as renewable energy/ flood defences etc. Further information about the SLAA, Call for Sites and LGS can be found at: www.runnymede.gov.uk/local-plan/call-sites. Greater detail about BNG can be found in Topic Area 2 'Climate Resilience and Nature' below.

- 2.24 It is important to stress that the inclusion of a site and/ or building in the SLAA **does not** mean that it will definitely be included in the Local Plan. As set out above, it only means that its suitability will be assessed in more detail as part of the plan-making process.
- 2.25 Runnymede has previously undertaken two Borough-wide Green Belt reviews which were used to support the 2030 Local Plan. However, given the changes to national planning policy on Green Belt and the introduction of Grey Belt, these reviews are no longer considered up to date and further review(s) are required. Runnymede is currently undertaking a Green Belt review jointly with Elmbridge and Spelthorne Borough Councils. The review will also be used to identify any potential Grey Belt land.
- 2.26 The results of the Green/Grey Belt Review will help to inform the choices the new Local Plan covering the Runnymede area will need to make in terms of the overall spatial strategy and the role of each settlement area.
- 2.27 We also think that the new Local Plan should cover a period of 10 years from the point of adoption of the Plan. Whilst this reflects the minimum period set out in the new NPPF, we think this shorter period is more appropriate for our area than a 15-year period: identifying deliverable and developable sites over a 10-year period is more realistic given the constraints on Runnymede's land supply, and allows for flexibility and adaptability given the changing nature of our local authority and our locally-specific issues as we merge to become West Surrey Council. National legislation still requires us to review our Local Plan every five years, regardless of the plan period.

What we think is out of scope

- 2.28 The 2030 Local Plan contains a number of detailed policies for determining planning applications within Runnymede's Green Belt. These are now largely superseded by the NDMPs in the NPPF, and as such these matters are considered to be out of scope. This would mean that policies in the existing Local Plan which manage: the development of extensions and alterations to and replacement buildings; re-use of buildings; outdoor sport and recreation; infilling or redevelopment of previously developed land; engineering operations and change of use of land in the Green Belt would not feature in the new Local Plan.

The following questions are set out in the response form²:

- Q1.** Do you agree that the new Local Plan should cover a period of 10 years from the point of adoption of the Plan? If not, please explain why a different time period would be more appropriate.
- Q2.** Do you have any views on where development should be directed in the Runnymede area, and how places should evolve to meet our identified development needs in full?
- Q3.** Do you agree with what the Council believes is in scope for this matter and which a new Local Plan should address? If not, please explain why.
- Q4.** Do you agree with what the Council believes is out of scope for this matter? If not, please explain why.

² Available at: www.runnymede.gov.uk/local-plan/scoping