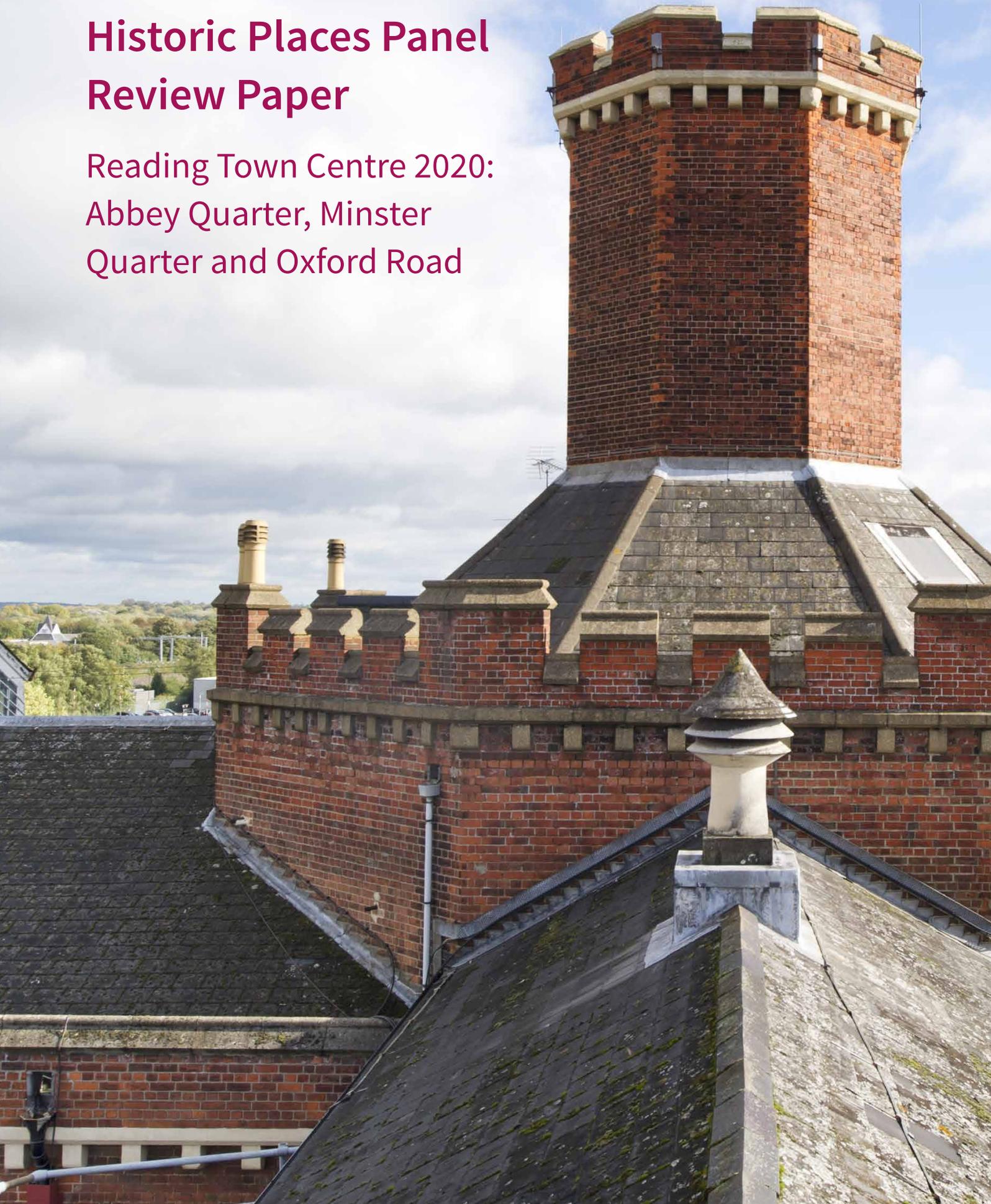




Historic England

Historic Places Panel Review Paper

Reading Town Centre 2020:
Abbey Quarter, Minster
Quarter and Oxford Road





Contents

- 1. Introduction 2**
 - Key questions for the panel 3
 - Other questions 4
- 2. Initial Observations 5**
- 3. The Abbey Ruins and Prison area 7**
- 4. The Castle Street/St Mary Butts Conservations Area 9**
- 5. Oxford Road from the Inner Distribution Road (IDR) in the east to the Reading West Railway Bridge 11**
- 6. Other Matters 13**
 - The Heritage Action Zone.....13
 - Reading Economic Forum: 2050 Vision.....13
 - The Lido.....14
- 7. Conclusions and Recommendations 15**
- 8. Recommendations..... 17**

1. Introduction

- 1.1 Unlike many of the towns visited by the Historic Places Panel, Reading faces challenges of managing growth rather than economic decline and, critically, of making this economic success work to benefit both its existing and future communities. Growth has placed new pressures of intensification on the quality of the built environment and the benefits have not been delivered evenly. Reading currently has two wards that fall within the top 10% of the most deprived areas of England.
- 1.2 Reading is however identified as the United Kingdom's second best-performing city in the Demos-PwC Good Growth for City Index (2017) after Oxford. It has become the centre of a vibrant tech focused economy and identified as the number one location for digital business in the UK (Tech Nation 2018). It is a large university town within the Thames Valley National Character Area, and is located just 37 miles from London, with excellent transport links.
- 1.3 To meet growth predictions Reading's Local Plan sets out the need for c. 16,000 new homes for the period up to 2036, mostly on previously developed land, of which 8,000 are to be focused in the town centre. This planned growth will place considerable pressure on the existing social infrastructure and the historic townscape. How this can be delivered whilst securing a high quality, sustainable and attractive environment that promotes health, economic vitality and its heritage assets is a key challenge.
- 1.4 First settled from around the 6th century at a crossing point on the Rivers Kennet and Thames, Reading has a rich historic environment with the Anglo-Saxon and medieval street patterns still apparent in the plan-form of the town. The town centre was beautified in the late 18th century, and the arrival of railways in the 1830s heralded a rapid commercial expansion. This has created well defined character areas. The best recognised of these as 'historic' is the Abbey Quarter which encompasses the scheduled remains of the 12th century Abbey Precinct, the grade II listed prison, by Sir George Gilbert Scott, the recently restored Abbey Gatehouse with its historic associations to Jane Austen and the Town Hall and Museum (Grade II listed, designed by Alfred Waterhouse). A centre of brick and tile manufacturing since the medieval period, the town's robust commercial architecture and civic buildings continue to reflect a sense of civic pride and heritage.
- 1.5 The recent redevelopment and expansion of the railway station, completed in 2015, has delivered five new platforms, enhanced public realm and greatly improved the sense of arrival in Reading.
- 1.6 There has been considerable office development since the 1960's, which has not always been sympathetic to the townscape. Expansion of the Oracle Shopping Centre has opened up the riverside but the traditional commercial areas, including the Market Street Conservation Area and the St Mary Butts/Castle Street Conservation Area, centred around its grade I church, now feel transitional as commercial activity has moved away from traditional shopping streets. While some of the more recent developments have seen an improvement in design quality, much is poor quality and does not reflect the character of the town or its former self-esteem. A number of budget hotel chains have produced bulky over-scaled buildings that not only threaten the character of the town but also illustrate the danger of relying solely on commuter and business growth.
- 1.7 The Inner Distribution Road (the IDR), which opened in the late 1960's (but was not completed until 1989) has had a markedly negative impact. Severing communities from the traditional town centre, it is today a barrier to pedestrian access, public amenity and health. Reading's town centre area also suffers from a lack of accessible green-space, which is particularly notable in the west of the town centre. There is therefore a desperate need to promote the creation of a healthy and attractive environment with less emphasis on car transport.
- 1.8 Historic England (HE) became closely engaged with Reading at a strategic level in 2015, when training was sought and given to members of the very proactive Conservation Area Advisory Committee, which advises on all 15 conservation areas and related conservation issues in the town. HE has been providing specific advice on the Abbey and Prison, and has offered grants for research and conservation works to preserve the Refectory Wall and Abbey Gatehouse. Detailed comments were



provided in respect of the Local Plan Examination. At the time of the visit the London and South East Team were engaging with discussions on High Street Heritage Action Zone funding and how this can best address the aims of making Reading's heritage an engine for sustainable growth.

- 1.9 Of particular concern is the Oxford Road west of the IDR, which lies within the Russell Street/ Castle Hill Conservation Area, placed on Historic England's Heritage at Risk Register in 2018. The Conservation Area Advisory Committee has proposed inclusion of a further half-mile stretch of the Oxford Road in a draft reappraisal, which is shortly to be progressed to public consultation. This area is also being considered for a High Street Heritage Action Zone, which would help focus public funding on regeneration.
- 1.10 The Council also faces an immediate issue in respect of the future of the Prison Site, which is currently being marketed by the Ministry of Justice (MOJ) and for which they intended to bid.

Key questions for the panel

- 1.11 The Panel was asked to consider a number of issues affecting three specific areas. In particular: The Abbey Ruins and Reading Prison, The Castle Street and St Mary Butts Conservation Area, and the Oxford Road both within the Russell Street/Castle Hill Conservation Area and the remaining half-mile stretch to the West Railway Bridge.

- 1.12 The Panel was asked the following questions:

The Abbey Ruins and Reading Prison area:

- 1.13 The Council needed the Panel's advice on how to:
- Best ensure that whoever purchases the Prison sustains the significance of its architecture, contribution to the municipal history of this part of Reading, and its historic associations, particularly with Oscar Wilde;
 - Ensure future development of the Prison site preserves or better reveals the abbey's significance; and
 - Secure the use of a part of the Prison site as a cultural/arts hub to serve Reading's community.
- 1.14 The Panel was also asked to recommend measures to draw the success of the increased business investment in the Abbey Quarter into the town centre as a whole.

The Castle Street/St Mary Butts Conservations Area:

- 1.15 With regard to this area the Panel was asked to consider in particular:
- How the Council can deliver improvements to the public realm and accessibility in this small conservation area in the newly developing Minster Quarter, where considerable housing and retail growth are planned.
 - How the harmful impacts on the historic environment of proposals for three tall buildings for residential use over the Broad Street Mall can be mitigated and, where possible, deliver enhancement to the historic environment.

Oxford Road

- 1.16 The Panel's advice was sought on suitable management measures along the Oxford Road within the conservation area, and for their opinion on the suitability of designating the whole half-mile stretch from the IDR in the east to the Reading West Railway Bridge.
- 1.17 The Oxford Road is part of the proposed High Street Heritage Action Zone. The Panel were asked to suggest how the Council can best work with local residents and shopkeepers to identify and deliver enhancements and linked cultural events that provide sustainable longer-term benefits.



Other questions

- 1.18 The Town has struggled to secure standards of design in new development that support its wider vision, something that has had an impact on its reputation as a liveable place beyond being a commuter town and regional retail destination.
- The Panel's advice was sought on the wider measures and opportunities that would help enhance the historic environment to boost visitor numbers, address the risk to heritage assets, and promote an inclusive, attractive and sustainable future.



2. Initial Observations

- 2.1 Panel members were impressed with the quality of the heritage resource and opportunity for positive place-making in Reading. The improvements to the station and the quality of the townscape exceeded expectations. While certain areas were undermined by unsympathetically designed and bulky new development the town revealed a great deal of architectural interest.
- 2.2 The Council opened the visit by welcoming the Panel and setting out the wider context of challenges, achievements and opportunities that Reading faces as a rapidly growing and economically successful town. The Panel was given a detailed introduction to the strategic vision for the town by the Planning Department, led by Giorgio Framalico. He explained the Council has just published its Local Plan (2019), which sets out its planning policies and priorities for the town up to 2036. Not only does this set out a raft of policies to boost economic and social welfare, it also sets out the Council's aspirations for development, including the future cultural and commercial use of the redundant grade II listed prison building and its wider site. The Local Plan also promotes ambitious new policies to promote a positive strategy for heritage.
- 2.3 The Panel applauds the publication of the Local Plan, which has been achieved during a period of austerity that severely affected budgets and the Council's capacity to deliver services. Reading now faces the challenge of implementing it while delivering further cuts.
- 2.4 The Panel learned that Reading UK CIC, a private sector led partnership working with the public sector had been established in 2007 to improve growth and enhance opportunities for those who live, work or visit the town. Working with Barton Wilmore and the University to deliver the Reading 2050 Vision, the partnership have focused on the opportunities for smart technology to promote economic and social welfare, reduce the City's carbon footprint and deliver sustainable transport and access.
- 2.5 The town boasts a strong voluntary sector, which included the CAAC and the Civic Society. Reading has also established a Central Business Improvement District (BID), which generates over £5million investment in retail, offices and hospitality. The BID is now facing a widespread retail challenge through on-line purchasing and needs to consider how parts of the town centre can be repurposed to support the quality of life. Reading has also received a Purple Flag Award for its night time-economy three years in a row. It is now establishing an Abbey Quarter Business Improvement District.
- 2.6 In 2018 the Council produced a Development Framework for the Minster Quarter (2018), which will see a number of buildings and structures across a large area demolished and redeveloped, including the site of the 1960s/70s Civic Quarter, the and 1980s Magistrate's Court and the Police Station. New development may include three residential buildings from 5 to 22 storeys (above the existing Broad Street Mall shopping centre) providing 493 homes. This would have a considerable impact on the Russell Street/Castle Hill Conservation Area (an area that was placed on Historic England's Heritage at Risk Register in 2018) and the St Mary Butts/Castle Street Conservation Area. These include the grade I Minster Church of St Mary's, and an exceptional cluster of historic buildings at the corner of St Mary Butts and along Castle Street but that has suffered from poor footfall.
- 2.7 Despite budget reductions, recent years have seen considerable investment in the historic environment and public realm. Historic England has supported the renovation of the Abbey Ruins (alongside a NLHF grant of £2.7m) and engaged in a number of projects including the restoration of the Abbey Gatehouse and archaeological investigations in the Prison site to inform future plans. The town had also received a grant of £550,000 from the NLHF/ACE towards arts, culture and heritage.
- 2.8 Reading had also applied for funding under the High Street Heritage Action Zone program and has developed a bid which could see four years of targeted grant funding to help address risk and boost economic, cultural, and social welfare through engagement and enhancement of heritage. This would focus on the commercial areas of three conservation areas currently at risk or becoming transitional following the opening of the Oracle Shopping Centre, which has created a strong pull on footfall to the south of the traditional town centre.



- 2.9 The Civic Society and CAAC gave a presentation setting out their role in preserving Reading's heritage and shaping its future. The pressure for tall buildings alongside the finer historic grain was of concern, and they highlighted the design challenge that growth presented. The CAAC expressed concern that they were witnessing the undermining of social cohesion with increasing numbers of Homes of Multiple Occupation (HMO's), and anti-social behaviour, including drug dealing and prostitution along the historic Oxford Road. They were keen to encourage ideas that would address not only local impacts but also the wider townscape and the potential for wider conservation area designation throughout the town centre.
- 2.10 The Panel wondered what the University's role was in the town, as it did not appear to feature highly in plans. While discussions had taken place about accommodation and commercial aspirations, it was acknowledged that there was greater opportunity to be explored and particularly in respect of promoting graduate retention.
- 2.11 The Panel was surprised to learn that conservation advice was dealt with on a part time consultancy basis (only one day a week) and that despite the planning department's achievements in plan-making they were clearly under-resourced to tackle the design challenges that Reading faces. A key theme therefore was the need for Reading to secure a properly resourced design and conservation team working to a clear set of strategic goals.
- 2.12 The Panel recognises that Reading Council has achieved much, and the dynamism of the economy is impressive. It is pleased to note the town's recognition that heritage is an important part of its future, but there are clearly many challenges and opportunities that need to be addressed if the considerable potential of the town is to be realised. Some members were surprised that Reading was a unitary town and not a city and encouraged the Council to persevere with its aspirations to achieve City Council status.
- 2.13 During the visit the Panel undertook a series of tours to inform its advice and some members had the opportunity to attend an evening meeting of the Reading Economic Forum.
- 2.14 The evening meal took place in the beautifully restored and updated grade II listed Lido which clearly demonstrated the positive impact that heritage assets can have on the wider surroundings.

3. The Abbey Ruins and Prison area

- 3.1 The Council recently completed a £3.15m restoration of the Abbey Ruins, with £2.7m support from National Lottery Heritage Fund (and additional support from Historic England on associated research), which has created many opportunities for that area of the town. It is seen to be the centre of Reading's revived interest in its heritage within its local communities.
- 3.2 The Prison sits directly next to (and partially on top of) the Abbey Ruins, and closed in 2013. At the time of the visit it remained in the ownership of the Ministry of Justice (MOJ), which is marketing it for disposal and seeking bids for a limited period. Reading Prison is a grade II building at risk, and as the entire area lies within the scheduled area of the Abbey, it has proven difficult to dispose of for development. HE has provided pre-application advice to the MOJ in respect of the associated sale of the Prison and the potential approach to the wider site.
- 3.3 The Prison is a particular point of interest for Reading's cultural institutions and community, who seek to secure it as a permanent home for an arts and cultural hub. In addition to its association with the Abbey and Henry I, Reading Prison or "Gaol" is internationally recognised for its association with the imprisonment of Oscar Wilde and thereby the international struggle for LGBTQ equality. Tony Page, Deputy Leader of the Council and Lead Member for Strategic Environment, Planning and Transport, set out the aims of the Council and some of the challenges in bringing the site into beneficial use. At the time of the visit, the Council was bidding to the MOJ to acquire the site to identify appropriate partners and facilitate a community led strategy. A recent petition collected around 2,000 signatures in support of this idea, and 'group hug' around the Prison secured around a thousand participants on a rainy October day.
- 3.4 Businesses in the Abbey Quarter area have recently voted to create a new Abbey Quarter Business Improvement District 2019-24. The new BID proposes to, among other outcomes, deliver improvements in public realm and regenerate the Kennet.
- 3.5 The Panel noted the adjacent restored Abbey Ruins were well presented and maintained, although unsurprisingly quiet given the cold weather. However, they recognised connections to and from the town were not necessarily clear or accessible, and the entrance to the Prison alongside the IDR and its separation from the Abbey Ruins, River Kennet and Civic Quarter created a barrier. Notwithstanding the significance of the Prison as a walled site, the Panel felt that either removing unlisted elements of the wall or creating designed 'breaches' or 'portals' to enable permeability to the town would have obvious benefits in securing the viability of the site and in achieving broader connectivity.
- 3.6 Within the Prison the chilling significance of the main building was immediately apparent. Many of the accumulated ancillary structures are however of modest interest, and while some of the secondary structures and spaces contribute to the understanding of the site there is still considerable scope for change and enhancement.
- 3.7 Internally, the Prison is austere but atmospheric, and the presence of Oscar Wilde's cell produced a palpable sense of awe. Despite the constraints of the plan-form sympathetic conversion that retains significance and creates viability was felt to be eminently feasible. The Panel observed that the cellular structure around a communal core in the Gilbert Scott building offered a plan that would suit a number of uses. The University seemed to be an obvious partner to the Panel and the concept of a technical innovation centre alongside ideas for "pocket living", a hotel and a business hub were also discussed.
- 3.8 The potential conservation deficit of -£250k for residential use raised the question of whether the Prison was an asset or a liability, but the Panel advised that the challenge is to create value more broadly through the re-use of the site. To achieve this any reuse needs to secure and exploit its historic and cultural significance, and there are a number of potential uses and precedents that should be explored. The Panel felt that the Council's concept of a cultural hub and the future of the wider site needed to be developed with consideration of the broader strategic needs of the town,



including the aspirations for a theatre. Making connections to the Kennet Riverside as well as the Abbey Ruins would help secure more viability by creating attractive riverside links.

- 3.9 Based on investigation, preservation in situ for archaeology was considered the most viable way of approaching the wider site rather than full excavation, which would be expensive and potentially more harmful. The Panel observed that the heritage and planning constraints on the site would to a great extent define the scale and scope of development in the wider area, but suggested temporary and meanwhile uses could facilitate a phased approach that would help test viability for certain options while maintaining public interest. The Panel expressed strong support for the Council to have control of the strategy for the future of the Prison and for it to engage with partners with the capacity to develop a sympathetic and viable set of options.
- 3.10 Given the tight timescale for the disposal process for the site the Panel agreed to write in advance of this report setting out their key advice for the Prison site.

4. The Castle Street/St Mary Butts Conservations Area

- 4.1 A small conservation area adjacent to the newly emerging Minster Quarter (Hosier Street) area in the heart of Reading, this is focused on the grade I Minster Church of St Mary in St Mary's Butts and its Churchyard and the adjacent cross roads. The original Saxon centre of Reading, the area also encompasses some of the oldest commercial and domestic buildings in the town dating from the sixteenth century.
- 4.2 The area was of particular concern due to the potential impact of the proposed regeneration of the Minster Quarter and the proposals for three tall buildings (up to twenty-two storeys) above a refurbished Broad Street Shopping Mall, which would have a marked impact on the setting of heritage assets over a wide area.
- 4.3 The Panel approached the church through the narrow streets from the Market Square and were struck by how the sense of enclosure and intimacy opened out around the church, and how this provided a wide and attractive area of green space in the largely urban townscape. The Panel quickly noted however how the busy highway, alongside bus and coach stops, quickly undermined the pedestrian experience. The importance of the churchyard and the needs of connectivity deserved a coordinated scheme to improve the pedestrian experience and connections to the rest of the town. The Panel was pleased to note the Council has aspirations for improvements but recommend these need to be more ambitious and aimed at resolving the wider issues of connectivity throughout the area.
- 4.4 The Panel noted that Reading has a tall buildings strategy (2008), which has informed the Minster Quarter Planning Framework (2018) a Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) and Local Plan. However, the way it responded to the setting of the heritage of the Castle Street/St. Mary's Butts and Russell Street/Castle Hill Conservation Areas, directly opposite the Inner Distribution Road (IDR) to its west, was a cause for concern. How this newly developing area with its tall buildings and new infrastructure can contribute positively to the heritage around it, even allowing for a high quality of design, was clearly challenging.
- 4.5 While the Planning Framework does make clear the importance of the wider townscape and the need for further analysis, it still sets a maximum threshold of 20 storeys above podium level above the shopping centre with descending height towards the Minster Church of St Mary Butts. How these towers would appear in oblique views needs to be carefully considered, and there is a danger this could result in the towers being seen as a solid wall of development in certain views. The Panel was very concerned that the proposed design would cause significant harm to the setting of heritage assets and the townscape. There appeared to be no clear justification for the scale or form of the development, and tall buildings must be predicated on the very highest standards of design with very clear public benefits.
- 4.6 The Panel raised specific concern over the proposal to reflect the checkerboard flint-work in the new towers and questioned whether this would really be of the design quality Reading must demand. Overall the Panel was concerned that the wider infrastructure, such as green space, schools etc. to support the scale of development was also not being considered. If new development is going to support a greener, sustainable town then the Council must ensure that developers contribute to accessible public space and the wider vision for an improved environment.
- 4.7 The SPD also includes a proposal to cover over a significant stretch of the canyon-like IDR, reconnecting the west of the town to the centre. The panel supported this idea and considered such an approach feasible and highly beneficial. This would help reconnect the communities and provide substantial areas of public green space. The principal challenge would be cost and such an approach might be phased with priority given to connections to the south of the Oxford Road Bridge. The



delivery of this would need to be factored into development costs within the town in order to build sufficient funds.

- 4.8 West of the Grade II listed 17th century Sun Inn, the north side of Castle Street to the Broad Street Mall presented a more fragmented townscape with the Magistrates Court and Police Station and the site of the former Civic Centre. This is a large area with opportunities to deliver better public space and improved pedestrian access. The existing, rather unusual brutalist landscape comprises of the former terraces and undercroft of the now demolished buildings, and has been used for informal community gardens for growing vegetables, creating an interesting reclamation of urban green space. The Panel learned that there have been a number of discussions over the years to relocate the theatre and advises that it will be important to consider whether its viability might change should the aim of greening the IDR be achieved.
- 4.9 A number of Panel members felt that the theatre should be retained in the redevelopment of the area and that aspects of the surviving brutalist landscape could be potentially integrated into future proposals.

5. Oxford Road from the Inner Distribution Road (IDR) in the east to the Reading West Railway Bridge

- 5.1 The Panel immediately recognised the harm and severance caused by the IDR, and Russell Street/ Castle Hill Conservation Area takes in a large area to the west of it. The Panel were asked to consider the merits of extending conservation area protection to the Reading West Railway Bridge and what measures might be employed to tackle risk.
- 5.2 While the Oxford Road demonstrated a vibrant and busy multi-cultural environment with characterful shops and pockets of activity the road also felt cluttered and beset by parking and traffic. Although fragmented in places, the quality of the predominantly C19th historic building stock was immediately apparent and included excellent, if poorly maintained, terraces of late Georgian and Victorian housing, shops, churches and a board school, many of which were listed or buildings of townscape merit.
- 5.3 The north side of Oxford Road suffered from greater fragmentation, and any extension of the conservation area would need to be selective in encompassing key groups and buildings. However, both sides of the road exhibited listed buildings and buildings of townscape merit which would support the extension. The Panel advises that this would create a better policy framework to steer new development but must be supported by the staff resources to implement it and address the obviously declining condition.
- 5.4 The problems faced along Oxford Road were ones familiar to the Panel, but the relative wealth of Reading made the extent of the problems startling. This reinforced the need to secure more even distribution of wealth and resources through the town. A lack of management and enforcement had created problems of a poorly degraded building stock and issues with anti-social behaviour. Many of the shopfronts and forecourts had been lost, altered or were in a condition that undermined the character and significance of the conservation area.
- 5.5 The Tall Buildings Strategy (2008) identified a western cluster, which identified part of the conservation area as suitable for tall buildings. The Panel clearly recognized the challenges of scale and design that this could present, and while it was seen that development was needed to help pay for improvements there were concerns that the impacts could further entrench these polarities in wealth. The Panel stressed the need for new development to support wider economic and social objectives for the town centre.
- 5.6 The Panel visited the LifeSpring Church at the Pavilion (the former Gaumont Cinema), which provided a community café, hireable space, training and drop in activities for diverse and disadvantaged communities. The Panel heard from community representatives how HMOs had driven social fragmentation due to the lack of affordable housing, leading to crime and antisocial behaviour. The narrow streets, traffic dominance and perceptions of crime created barriers to accessing leisure, entertainment, green space and educational resources. There were concerns that the planned growth would not address these issues but further polarize communities.
- 5.7 The Panel applauds the efforts of the church and volunteers, and the CAAC. The area is ripe for regeneration but in a way that respects its history as an area which has always welcomed Reading's migrant populations into the town. The area retains those positive aspects of a rich and diverse community but the Panel urges the Council to break the cycle of decline that has set in. Clearly enforcement was absent, and cross-service focused enforcement by the Council could be used (as elsewhere) to target HMOs. If tied to a broader program of enhancement and public realm works



delivered through a High Street Heritage Action Zone¹ it would be possible to create an attractive and healthier environment that benefitted the whole of Reading.

- 5.8 The Panel noted that the parking, relatively narrow pavements and focus on the road bridge meant cyclists were driven to use the narrow pavement. The possibility of improving the public realm and encouraging sustainable transport would help reduce congestion and benefit both health and activity, which would discourage anti-social behaviour. Addressing forecourts and the general condition of these would also improve perceptions of safety and improve footfall to local business. The Panel advise that the area and Reading in general would appear to benefit from investment in cycle and 'quiet ways' to promote healthy lifestyles and reduce car dependency.

1 Heritage Action Zones are initiatives to create economic growth and improve quality of life in places through Historic England working in partnerships with local people and partners, including local authorities to breathe new life into old places that are rich in heritage both through grant funding and sharing our knowledge, resources and skills. The High Streets Heritage Action Zones are part of the government's ongoing work to help high streets through the Future High Streets Fund. This scheme's funding includes £92 million of Government funding for High Streets Heritage Action Zones and £3 million from the National Lottery Heritage Fund to support a cultural programme to engage people in the life and history of their high street.

6. Other Matters

The Heritage Action Zone

- 6.1 In addition to the potential for the Oxford Road high street the Panel also had the opportunity to consider how the proposed High Street Heritage Action Zone bid (if successful) could help secure Reading's Heritage as a driver in its future vision. The proposed application area links initiatives across three areas from the Oxford Road high street to St Mary Butts and Castle Street, and key buildings at risk in the Market Place. An important focus of the scheme is to address risk and vacancy, through developing their appeal as characterful areas. One key group is the grade II listed, 26/27 Market Place, in shared ownership with a small shopping centre and offices (Bristol and West Arcade). Despite planning permission, the buildings have remained vacant, boarded-up and in poor condition.
- 6.2 The Panel recommends a concerted focus to target the vacant properties through the use of incentives and enforcement and urges the Council to work with HE to this end. These could combine enforcement via S215, Urgent Works Notices etc. supplemented by grant aid for repairs, exploring the potential for phased and meantime uses to promote activity and encourage a long-term solution. The identification of key projects driven by the HAZ stakeholders could help secure wider buy in and create early wins.
- 6.3 The Panel noted that the resources for enforcement and dedicated officer time could be of enormous benefit. The issue of staff resources and access to skills was clearly holding the town back on many levels.
- 6.4 The Panel strongly support the idea of a High Street Heritage Action Zone but one that targets not only individual key properties and retail premises but also the public realm. There will also need to be an on-going commitment to management to secure the legacy of this funding.

Reading Economic Forum: 2050 Vision

- 6.5 Some members of the Panel attended an evening event that focused on innovation, cultural uses for the prison site, urban rooms and how to embrace green technology to promote health and wellbeing.
- 6.6 Those who attended were impressed by the diversity of presentations and ideas and there were clearly opportunities from potential partners that should be seized in delivering a coherent and beneficial vision for the town. A number of the presentations were challenging and clearly set out the hurdles that must be overcome to secure a sustainable future.
- 6.7 One third of jobs in Reading are in IT and unsurprisingly this places a reliance on technological solutions. As one panellist noted, technology is only as good as the purpose to which it was applied and needs to support physical interventions if health, welfare and access to social infrastructure are to be improved.
- 6.8 A key point was that without strong leadership and the immediate implementation of policies, the vision for a cleaner, greener, attractive town with wealth and essential amenities delivered evenly across all communities would not be achieved. Reading was described as a string of pearls without the string and it was essential to create the infrastructure to connect these and allow people to access them.
- 6.9 The University could be a key place-making partner, and it has been running exciting design projects that have looked at the Hexagon and other areas of the town. The University's development of a 3D city model and CAD imaging in partnership with Reading UK, alongside physical models could potentially support understanding of both urban form and new design, and shape strategies for the town. The Council should embrace this opportunity and really engage with the University to support the clearly stretched planning department. Beyond this, university accommodation in town could help break down social barriers and support broader economic and cultural activity.



- 6.10 Another aspect of interest was that the University had built and exhibited a timber pavilion/urban room earlier that year on Campus and their presentation highlighted how ‘pop-up’ buildings could inspire debate. The erection of this within the town as part of the HAZ project community engagement programme could help promote debate in design. It could for instance be re-erected outside the station to promote an annual design event.

The Lido

- 6.11 The Panel attended an evening meal and were welcomed by the Leader of the Council, Jason Brock, at the refurbished grade II listed Lido, which sits within an area of new mixed-use redevelopment to the south of the town.
- 6.12 The Panel were extremely impressed with the quality of the refurbishment and pleased to note that this had helped convince the Council of the benefits of using heritage assets as a catalyst for regeneration. Given the number of assets in the town and the opportunities for this approach to be promoted through the proposed HAZ, the Panel encourage the Council to identify key buildings that present opportunities for refurbishment.

7. Conclusions and Recommendations

- 7.1 The Historic Places Panel visit to Reading was fascinating and offered a very contrasting set of issues to the Panel's recent visit to Grimsby, the Isle of Wight and many other towns and cities visited where the problems stem from lack of economic growth. Reading is economically very successful and has built a strong reputation for digital and tech industries. However, while it is subject to exceptional levels of investment this has driven demand for new homes, and new development. Ensuring that this success translates into real benefits for Reading and its vision for a green, prosperous, attractive, and liveable town is a challenge that should not be underestimated.
- 7.2 As a relatively small Unitary Authority, Reading has understandably struggled to implement a coordinated vision with a planning regime that delivers the type and quality of growth and infrastructure that the town needs. However, the Panel were struck with the quality of Reading's historic environment and the opportunities this could create to underpin the town's identity and support social, economic and cultural activity.
- 7.3 The recent completion of the Local Plan will help greatly but there is still much that needs to be done. The legacy of post-war infrastructure, quality of design and the social problems along Oxford Road need to be addressed as soon as possible if Reading is to achieve its 2050 Vision. The Panel described Reading as a town that needed to think like a city.
- 7.4 The Panel's key observation was the need for Reading to make its prosperity benefit everybody. The problems of poor new design, a lack of green space, heavy traffic and vacant and dilapidated historic buildings signalled that Reading must develop a properly resourced planning department with the skills and specialist advice to drive up design quality to address these issues. There are ways to support this with external resources such as South East Design Review and Public Practice (a not-for-profit social enterprise who build capacity in public sector organisation and their ability to proactively plan to create high quality places) but this must support sufficient front-end staff. The Panel recognise the funding challenges but feel that investment in sufficient staff will pay for itself through improving planning outcomes, driving up the reputation of the town and by securing appropriate CIL and S106 contributions.
- 7.5 The severe lack of enforcement and the social problems driven by HMOs witnessed along the Oxford Road were of enormous concern to the Panel. The use of statutory powers such as S215 notices and Article 4 Directions could be extremely effectively used alongside planning and heritage controls. The proposed HSHAZ scheme could be an appropriate vehicle to establish how this can support a wider programme of intervention.
- 7.6 The Panel strongly support the Council's aspiration to roof over the IDR adjacent to the Oxford Road Bridge to reconnect communities and provide vital green space. The Council need to ensure that all new development contributes to stitching the townscape back together and ensure that CIL contributions reflect the aspirations for Reading and the true impact new development.
- 7.7 The Panel feel that to deliver the vision of a green sustainable City, the Council should take a "car last" policy supported by an integrated transport and public realm strategy, which looks at the opportunities to create new quiet routes, cycle ways and encourages health and wellbeing through physical activity.
- 7.8 With the Council planning for upwards of 8000 homes within the town centre the Panel ask whether there is sufficient social infrastructure for this, including green space and public realm. Building high-density tall development with the minimum of public and private space may entrench social divisions and promote the image of Reading merely as a dormitory town to London.
- 7.9 The Panel felt that the Council should seek to secure the role of developing a strategic vision for the prison site, which could support aspirations to open up the town to Abbey Gardens and the Kennet Riverside. At present it was unclear what is meant by "cultural hub" and the Panel expressed the view that the Council must develop a clear, credible strategic plan for the site that is interwoven with the 2050 Vision.



7.10 The Prison is a grade II listed building and the site scheduled for the archaeological interest of the Abbey remains. The Council adopted a Development Framework for Reading Gaol in 2015 to provide initial research on the site and outline a development framework for the future use and development of the site. It would be advantageous for the Council to now work with key partners, including Historic England, the Civic Society, the University and Reading UK etc. to review this brief. This will need to give particular consideration to the need to find a use for the building and its curtilage that both conserves and reveals its significance and to understand how the need to conserve the site's archaeological interest will affect proposals for any additional development within the enclosure.

8. Recommendations

Overarching Issues

1. To deliver its vision the Council must demand excellent design quality that delivers sufficient green space and amenity to deliver an inclusive, attractive and healthy environment.
2. The Council was congratulated on completion of the Local Plan, which strengthened policy and received enthusiastic support. However, it was very clear that the Council planning department is under-resourced for the scale of change anticipated, particularly in urban design skills. The Council must seek to provide a properly resourced planning team which will harness the volunteer capacity of the Civic Society and CAAC and enable future community consultation. This will in turn create wealth through driving up developer expectations and ability to seek contributions that deliver sustainable development.

There are also external resources available such as South East Design Review and Public Practice, but to derive value from these there must be sufficient front-end staff.
3. The Council should adopt a car last strategy, and implement the 2050 vision on green infrastructure by ensuring that all new developments and business contribute appropriately to the effort.
4. Reading should adopt a city mind-set by developing a vision of itself as a place where civic pride and a qualitative approach to planning drive its popularity as a place to live, visit and do business. A strong planning department will help deliver this vision and social, cultural and economic growth.
5. The Council must develop a wider public realm strategy where new development should contribute to providing accessible green spaces and civic public spaces. The Panel felt strongly that the decking over the IDR in the west to create park space and improved accessibility to the town should be a key strategic goal to which new development should contribute. The focused use of S106 and CIL funding from new development will be important in achieving delivery of these benefits but will require a strong negotiating position.
6. Commercial streets such as Broad Street and Friar Street include fine Victorian terraces that give Reading a sense of gravitas that supports its drive and ambition. This townscape is worthy of conservation area protection.
7. The University is developing architectural models of the town and resources for analysis and education, but is an underutilized ally. As a major stakeholder in the town it could, in partnership, augment the Council's own resources by providing 3D modelling of the townscape, transport analysis and sustainable architecture and infrastructure projects. This would, for instance allow better implementation of the Tall Buildings Strategy by allowing impacts on the setting of heritage assets to be more thoroughly appreciated.

The possibility of rerunning the Urban Room initiative to develop an interest in architecture and design should also be explored.



The Abbey Ruins and Reading Prison

8. The Council should seek to secure the role of developing the strategic vision for the Prison and its site via a community-led strategy that goes far beyond the slightly vague notion of a “cultural hub”. This should be tied in to wider aspirations for connections to the Abbey Gardens, and interwoven with the 2050 vision.

9. The Council need to enable the implementation of this vision by reviewing the adopted Development Framework . The building is listed and the site scheduled and considerable analysis of the archaeology has been undertaken. It would be advantageous for the Council to work with key partners, including Historic England, the Civic Society and the University to draft a brief which develops a range of viable options based on a comprehensive assessment of significance which goes beyond the ‘official’ listing and scheduling descriptions.

10. The Abbey Grounds would benefit from improved connectivity to the town centre. It was not apparent whether tech interpretation and themed heritage trails were available to access additional information and way-finding. For a town that supports extensive tech business it is important to use this to benefit the wider environment.

11. The site and ancillary buildings should be used for meanwhile/cultural/community uses during the development of the longer term uses. Taking a phased approach could assist in identifying and establishing a sustainable long term future for the site.

12. The town centre strategy should deliver high quality improvements to the public realm throughout the Abbey Quarter, guide users to the historic sites, offices, hotels and residential areas and address confusion between pedestrian and motor vehicles. In spite of clear evidence of investment in high quality materials there were evident areas of vehicle and motorist conflict throughout this area.

13. Market Square priorities should seek to address risk through targeting vacant buildings.

The Castle Street/St Mary Butts Conservation Area:

14. St Mary’s Church and churchyard are an outstanding local landmark and an important green space, but the busy road network and the presence of buses and shelters sever pedestrian connections and obscure the sense of the place. The conservation area therefore needs to benefit from an integrated transport and public realm strategy that should be a key target for the Council and BID.

15. Castle Street (particularly on its south side) presents a fine collection of historic buildings. Any new development on the north side of the street and beyond needs to respond to this quality and reintroduce the sense of an active street.

The Castle Street/St Mary Butts Conservation Area:

16. Contemporary and post-war architecture in and adjacent to Reading's conservation areas has not been of high quality and has harmed their significance. In developing conservation area management guidance and in the determination of planning applications, the Council must consider impacts on setting.

 17. The impact of the proposed redevelopment of the Broad Street Mall was of considerable concern as there was no clear indication that this could be delivered without harm to the townscape. The Council needs to consider whether the tall buildings approach applied was sufficiently robust and demand a scheme which demonstrates not only the highest standards of design and significant public benefits but also minimises any harm to the townscape. The Panel considered that the idea of a tall budget hotel building employing a checkerboard cladding to mitigate visual harm was deeply unconvincing.

 18. The brutalist landscape that has remained from the demolition of the Civic Centre and the repurposing of the Hexagon public realm as a garden space had created an atmospheric environment. Any redevelopment of the former Civic Centre site should consider its significance, the potential to repurpose key elements and address the poor provision of publicly accessible green-space. This could be an opportunity to improve accessibility and mesh with the ambition to cover over the IDR.
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The half-mile stretch of the Oxford Road from the IDR in the east to the Reading West Railway bridge: Russell Street/Castle Hill Conservation Area

19. The Panel saw that conservation area status had not prevented the severe erosion of its character and harm to community cohesion. The use of planning policy and enforcement using statutory powers to tackle issues such as HMOs is vital if the issues which contributed the "at risk" status of the conservation area are to be addressed. The Council with Historic England is urged to establish how this might be done through the proposed High Street HAZ, and create targeted capacity to tackle this issue. The Panel recommend taking a wider regulatory approach to enforcement including heritage as one of a set of issues that need to be addressed.

 20. The impact of the busy Oxford Road on pedestrian amenity is marked. The provision of cycle lane and public realm improvements, quiet ways tied to works to target front yards and forecourts would have a beneficial impact on both, encouraging the popularity of the street as a local high street but also on sustainable transport and health and wellbeing.

The introduction of pocket parks, green infrastructure and planting would help alleviate the impact of the Oxford Road's traffic and create a more welcoming, community-focused high street area.

 21. The proposal to create park space through covering over part of the IDR is strongly supported (see overarching issues). This could beneficially tie into improved pedestrian and cycle routes that would help reconnect the town, promoting economic vitality as well as health and wellbeing.
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Historic England's Historic Places Panel provides expertise to help local authorities, development agencies and other to engage in major regeneration of historic towns and cities. The Members who attended the visit to Reading on the 14th and 15th of November 2019 were:

Peter Studdert, Chair

Jane Dann

Michael Hayes CBE

Julian Hill

John Lord

Rosemarie MacQueen MBE

Geoff Rich (day 1)

Chris Smith

David Ubaka

Katie Wray