

READING BOROUGH COUNCIL

REPORT BY EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF ECONOMIC GROWTH AND NEIGHBOURHOOD SERVICES

TO:	POLICY COMMITTEE		
DATE:	17 JANUARY 2022		
TITLE:	ADOPTION OF THE DESIGN GUIDE FOR SHOPFRONTS SUPPLEMENTARY PLANNING DOCUMENT		
LEAD COUNCILLOR:	COUNCILLOR PAGE	PORTFOLIO:	STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENT, PLANNING AND TRANSPORT
SERVICE:	PLANNING	WARDS:	BOROUGHWIDE
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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1 This report relates to the proposed adoption of the Design Guide for Shopfronts Supplementary Planning Document (SPD), for use in determining planning applications for development in Reading. The SPD gives further detail to supplement the policies in the Reading Borough Local Plan (adopted November 2019) to ensure that shopfronts contribute positively to the streetscene throughout the Borough.
- 1.2 A Draft Design Guide for Shopfronts SPD was approved for consultation by Policy Committee on 12th July 2021 (Minute 22 refers). Consultation took place during July to September 2021, and a total of 15 responses were received. A Statement of Consultation summarising the process and the responses is included as Appendix 1.
- 1.3 A revised version of the SPD has now been prepared, taking account of the responses received. This is included as Appendix 2. Committee is recommended to formally adopt this as part of the Council's planning policy for determining planning applications.
- 1.4 Appendices:
Appendix 1: Statement of Consultation on the Draft Design Guide to Shopfronts SPD
Appendix 2: Draft Design Guide to Shopfronts SPD (with changes tracked following consultation)

2. RECOMMENDED ACTION

- 2.1 That the results of the consultation on the Draft Design Guide to Shopfronts Supplementary Planning Document, undertaken during July to September 2021, as set out in the Consultation Statement at Appendix 1, be noted.**
- 2.2 That the Design Guide to Shopfronts SPD (Appendix 2) be adopted as a Supplementary Planning Document.**

3. POLICY CONTEXT

- 3.1 The Reading Borough Local Plan was adopted on 4th November 2019 and contains a comprehensive set of planning policies and proposed sites to manage development in Reading up to 2036. The Local Plan has ‘development plan’ status and is therefore the first consideration in determining planning applications in Reading.**
- 3.2 Some of the policies within the Local Plan require additional detail to be provided to assist with their implementation. A Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) is a type of planning policy document that provides this additional detail. An SPD cannot make policy on its own and can only provide additional detail on how policies in the Local Plan will be implemented.**
- 3.3 The Local Plan contains policy OU5: Shopfronts and Cash Machines, which is a high-level policy dealing with the matters that typically arise on proposals for shopfronts. It operates in tandem with other Local Plan policies, in particular policies**
- EN1: Protection of the Historic Environment, EN3: Enhancement of Conservation Areas and EN6: New Development in a Historic Context which ensure that developments protect and enhance the historic environment; and**
 - CC7: Design and the Public Realm, OU4: Advertisements, CR2: Design in Central Reading, CR7: Primary Frontages in Central Reading and CR8: Small Shop Units in Central Reading which ensure that developments do not have negative visual impacts.**
- 3.4 Currently, Reading does not have an adopted Design Guide to Shopfronts SPD. A new SPD would therefore be critical in delivery of the Reading Heritage High Streets Heritage Action Zone, although it will apply to shopfronts across the whole Borough. Additionally, as the nature of the high street is changing this document will provide advice for conversions of shopfronts to residential use.**
- 3.5 The Reading High Streets Heritage Action Zone (HSHAZ) programme is a heritage-led regeneration initiative from Historic England, working with local councils and the community to create economic growth and improve**

our historic high streets through physical interventions, community engagement and cultural programming. The programme is based around areas on the Oxford Road, Castle Street, Gun Street, the southern end of St Mary's Butts and Market Place. Existing shopfronts will form a major focus for improvements and this SPD will provide guidance for applicants and planning officers that will tie in with the delivery of that programme.

4. THE PROPOSAL

(a) Current Position

4.1 Policy Committee approved the Draft Design Guide to Shopfronts SPD for consultation on 12th July 2021 (Minute 22 refers).

4.2 Consultation was undertaken between 30th July and 24th September 2021, a total of eight weeks. The draft SPD was placed on the Council's website, and all of the contacts on the Council's consultation list and Heritage High Street Action Zone List were written to advising them of the consultation, as well as over 900 business owners affiliated with the Reading Business Improvement District. A total of 15 written responses were received. The main points raised are summarised below.

- Widespread support for the SPD's aim and its content. Residents felt that the guidance would build resilience for high streets in times of economic uncertainty, improve the experience of the town for residents and contribute to Reading's identity as a tourist and heritage destination;
- Comments relating to the amount of detail provided with regard to materials and maintenance over time;
- The need for more language to encourage (and require, where possible) disability access, particularly for wheelchair users and the visually impaired as some respondents felt that heritage was being privileged above access;
- A number of comments that guidance for fascia design, lighting and signage were too onerous;
- The need to clarify that the guidance applies to shopfronts throughout the entire Borough, rather than just those within high streets or only historic shopfronts;
- Comments stating that the benefits of good shopfront design should be further emphasised, for both shopowners and the Borough as a whole;
- The need to clearly define terms used throughout the document, such as "traditional," "historic" and "original" while also acknowledging the positive contributions of high-quality modern shopfronts;
- Support for guidance regarding security shutters, but the need to provide further detail;
- Some comments on the further images or illustrations needed to provide clear examples of the guidance;

- Concerns that “active frontage” was not clearly defined or its benefits explained;
- Calls for more references to energy efficiency standards, climate change and sustainable design and construction requirements; and
- Comments from Historic England providing further detail regarding historic shopfronts of particular periods, a request for recognition that innovative designs can greatly contribute to the streetscene and suggestions for more clarification regarding advertisements and illumination in order to prevent requirements from being too onerous.

4.3 A full Statement of Consultation, detailing the consultation measures and the responses received, is included as Appendix 1. Proposed Council responses to each representation are also included within the Statement of Consultation.

(b) Option Proposed

4.4 Committee is recommended to adopt the revised version of the Design Guide to Shopfronts SPD as attached at Appendix 2. Once adopted, the SPD will be used to supplement the Local Plan for the determination of planning applications.

4.5 Due to the lack of an existing Design Guide to Shopfronts SPD, there is limited guidance for both applicants and planning officers in determining planning decisions, and it would be timely to adopt the document now to establish such guidance, particularly as the Council begins to deliver the Reading Heritage High Streets Action Zone programme.

4.6 The main changes that have been made to the SPD compared to the version that was consulted upon are summarised below:

- Inclusion of additional detail regarding:
 - The benefits of good shopfront design,
 - Elements of high-quality modern shopfronts,
 - Materials and maintenance,
 - Application of guidance throughout the entire Borough,
 - Security shutters,
 - Active frontages,
 - Recognition of the particular value of and traits specific to shopfronts that were previously purpose-built for other uses (i.e. chapels, banks, pubs), and
 - Definitions of terms used;
- Additional images added to illustrate points in the guidance;
- An expanded introduction;

- Some changes to the guidance for advertisements and illumination to emphasise that designs will be considered on a case-by-case basis and to avoid guidance that is unnecessarily onerous;
 - Clarification that high-quality shopfronts and innovative designs can contribute greatly to the streetscene;
 - Further emphasis on the importance of access for disabled users and elements that can increase access while preserving historic character (such as removable ramps); and
 - Detailed guidance with regard to verandahs and forward extensions, emphasising that development should retain the open character of the shop's frontage and not result in a closed space or obscure any key design or architectural features.
- 4.7 Once adopted, the SPD will be used to supplement the Local Plan in determining planning applications.

(c) Other Options Considered

- 4.8 The main alternative option to consider is to not proceed with an SPD at the current time.
- 4.9 However, this would fail to provide applicants and planning officers with specific guidance for shopfronts, which affects both the quality of planning applications received and the determination of planning applications. This would miss an opportunity make the policy context much clearer for those Reading shop owners applying for planning permission, and would fail to provide additional guidance in implementing the HSHAZ programme.

5. CONTRIBUTION TO STRATEGIC AIMS

- 5.1 Adoption of the SPD will guide future development in a way that will contribute to achieving the Council's priorities as set out in the Corporate Plan (2021-2022)¹. It will help with "keeping Reading's environment clean, green and safe" by ensuring that the effects of development on the wider environment are controlled and will also help with creating an "inclusive economy" by enabling improvements to existing shops and the establishment of new high-quality shopfronts that contribute to the growth and success of the town.

6. ENVIRONMENTAL AND CLIMATE IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 The Sustainability Appraisal of the Pre-Submission Draft Local Plan examined the effects of the Local Plan, including the policies on shopfronts, against a range of environmental objectives. No significant detrimental effects on these environmental objectives were identified. Policies on climate change and sustainable design that apply to various forms of development are also set out in the Sustainable Design and Construction SPD. Additionally, the Design Guide to Shopfronts SPD

¹ <https://www.reading.gov.uk/council/policies-finance-and-legal-information/corporate-plan/council-corporate-plan-2021-to-2022/#themes>

emphasises the use of sustainable materials as well as retention and restoration of existing elements to minimise environmental impact.

7. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND INFORMATION

7.1 The Council's consultation process for planning policy, as set out in the Statement of Community Involvement (adopted March 2014), is that the widest and most intensive community involvement should take place at the earliest possible stage, to allow the community a genuine chance to influence the document. Therefore, significant and wide-ranging community involvement exercises took place during development of the new Local Plan. This established support for the policies and the draft SPD simply outlines details for implementation.

7.2 Community involvement on the Draft Design Guide to Shopfronts SPD took place between 30th July and 24th September 2021, a period of eight weeks. Paragraph 4.3 of this report summarises the consultation process already undertaken, and this is set out in more detail in the Statement of Consultation in Appendix 1. The community involvement stages were undertaken in line with the Statement of Community Involvement (adopted March 2014).

8. EQUALITY ASSESSMENT

8.1 The Sustainability Appraisal of the Pre-Submission Draft Local Plan incorporated the requirement to carry out a screening stage of an Equality Impact Assessment. A full Sustainability Appraisal that examines the effects of each policy relating to shopfronts has already been completed as part of the Local Plan, and therefore additional Equality Impact Assessment is not required. It is not expected that there will be any significant adverse impacts on specific groups due to any of the protected characteristics.

9. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

9.1 Regulation 12 and 13 of the Town and Country Planning (Local Planning) (England) Regulations 2012 set out the requirements for undertaking consultation on Supplementary Planning Documents. Regulation 14 sets out the requirements for adoption. The production of and consultation on the SPD are in compliance with the requirements under the Regulations. Once the SPD is adopted by the Council, it will hold weight in the determination of planning applications for development in the Borough.

10 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

10.1 The work undertaken on drafting the documents and the expenditure on community engagement has been funded from existing budgets.

10.2 The SPD does not contain any proposals that would have additional financial implications for the Council.

Value for Money (VFM)

- 10.3 The preparation of a new SPD will ensure that development is appropriately guided and that significant effects are minimised. Production of the SPD, in line with legislation, national policy and best practice, therefore represents good value for money.

Risk Assessment

- 10.4 There are no direct financial risks associated with the report.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

- The Town and Country Planning (Local Planning) (England) Regulations 2012
- Adopted Local Plan, November 2019
- National Planning Policy Framework, February 2019