

READING BOROUGH COUNCIL

REPORT BY DIRECTOR OF ECONOMIC GROWTH AND NEIGHBOURHOOD SERVICES

TO:	HOUSING NEIGHBOURHOODS AND LEISURE COMMITTEE		
DATE:	29 JUNE 2022		
TITLE:	READING ABBEY REVEALED PROJECT EVALUATION REPORT		
LEAD COUNCILLOR:	COUNCILLOR BARNETT-WARD	PORTFOLIO:	CULTURE AND LEISURE
SERVICE:	CULTURE	WARDS:	ABBNEY (WITH BOROUGHWIDE IMPLICATIONS)
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1. PURPOSE OF REPORT AND EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1.1 The purpose of this report is to highlight the achievements and key successes of this award-winning, transformational project since the start of its delivery phase in 2016. Over the past eight years the project team, volunteers, and partners have worked closely and flexibly with stakeholders and the funders, to develop, and to successfully deliver this major heritage and culture placemaking project.

1.2 The Reading Abbey Revealed project and the creation of the Abbey Quarter is Reading's most ambitious heritage project for a decade. The Reading Abbey Quarter was created to bring together the unique, cultural heritage that exists within the former grounds of Reading Abbey. through interpretation, wayfinding, conservation, and community engagement. Notably the Quarter includes, Reading Museum, the Town Hall, Reading Gaol, St. James' Church, St Laurence's Church, the Forbury Gardens, and the remains of Reading Abbey. The Abbey Ruins and Gateway are both Grade I listed buildings and Scheduled Ancient Monuments.

1.3 The creation of the Abbey Quarter has transformed the precinct of Reading's royal abbey into a unique historical and cultural destination at the heart of Reading's cultural renaissance. The conservation project has been a catalyst for positive change, putting this internationally important monastic and royal heritage firmly on the map. This project has an impact beyond the Abbey' Quarter across Reading's wider community, galvanising a step-change in the town's attitude to its distinctive past and providing a sense of place, ongoing community engagement, cohesion and pride for its diverse and expanding population. The full Reading Abbey Revealed project evaluation report can be found in **Appendix 1**

2. RECOMMENDED ACTION

That Committee:

2.1 Notes the successes of the Reading Abbey Revealed placemaking project set out in the project evaluation report.

2.2 Agrees to the next steps for the Abbey Quarter vision and plans, set out in paragraph 4.7 to ensure the legacy of the Reading Abbey Revealed project.

3. POLICY CONTEXT

3.1 Further to Minute 86 of Policy Committee on 17 February 2014, in December 2015 the Council received confirmation that its stage 2 application to the National Lottery Heritage Lottery Fund (NLHF) for a grant of £1.7775 million towards the £3.154 million 'Reading Abbey Revealed' project was successful. The delivery of the project comprised:

- Implementation of conservation works to restore the Abbey Ruins and the Abbey Gateway (both part of a Scheduled Monument and Grade I listed), thereby safeguarding their future and enabling public access to be restored;
- Comprehensive interpretation and signage across the whole Abbey Quarter, including Reading Museum, and associated branding; and
- A linked five year programme of community engagement, educational events and activities across the heritage site.

3.2 Further to the Policy Committee on the 18th January 2016 agreeing to commit the funds to deliver the project, an update presentation of the progress to HNL committee on the 16 November 2016 and on 15 November 2017, this report focuses on summarising the key achievements of this major conservation and cultural project that ended in December 2021.

4. THE PROJECT EVALUTION SUMMARY

4.1 The project evaluation report has been written by specialist consultants and is based on:

- extensive evaluation data and visitor feedback collected by the project team
- three project review meetings with staff members in 2018, 2019, and 2021
- meetings with individual staff
- volunteer surveys collected by the project team
- group discussions with volunteers
- meetings with, and feedback from, community stakeholders.

4.2 The aims of the project were to conserve this scheduled site and to create a new historic quarter drawing together and interpreting the former grounds of Reading Abbey as a single unified heritage site - the Abbey Quarter, while ensuring the wider community engagement and active participation through cultural activities. The significance and success of the Abbey Quarter site has been recognised through prestigious national awards, including:

- Royal Town Planning Institute 2018 South East Award for Excellence in Planning for Heritage and Culture (where the judges said they were particularly impressed by the extent that Reading's heritage is seen as a catalyst for positive change and that the Abbey Quarter is at the heart of the town's cultural renaissance)
- Shortlisted for the Royal Institute of Chartered surveyors Awards South East 2019 in the 'Building Conservation' category
- Two awards at Reading Cultural Awards 2019 - for 'Celebrating Reading's heritage' and 'Partnership in the Arts' categories
- Highly Commended at the 2020 Civic Trust AABC Conservation Awards
- Won the Planning Awards 2020 for the 'Best use of Heritage in Placemaking'. The judges were particularly impressed with Reading's use of community

participation in consultations to ensure a broad spectrum of people could participate and enjoy a new 'sense of place' within the Abbey Quarter.

- Green Flag Awards for the Forbury Gardens and Abbey Ruins October 2021. Both received special heritage awards
- 4.3. The project has grown awareness of, and pride in, the importance of Reading's history. 2021 marked the 900th anniversary of the founding of the Abbey and a large celebratory community event tied in with Water Fest was held in Forbury Gardens in June 2021. At the Abbey 900 Water Fest event, 74% of people surveyed agreed that the project had helped to increase their pride in Reading. The extensive network of interpretation panels, which are located throughout the town centre and their accompanying wayfinding system are very distinctive, usable, and well-branded, and have contributed to a growing sense of awareness and pride in the Abbey Quarter area and Reading's history.
- 4.4 Public engagement at the early stages of the project got people excited about the Abbey Ruins, the Abbey Quarter vision and Reading's wider heritage. The project has strengthened links between Reading Council departments and has confirmed the support from all elected members and key stakeholders for the protection and conservation of Reading's major heritage site.
- 4.5 Thanks to the experience and reputation of the team, the project attracted a further £1.7 million of additional external investment into the area for the delivery of cultural and heritage projects. This includes the Abbey Refectory wall restoration (2017-2018) £200,000 funding from Historic England; the Reading Place of Culture (2017 to 2021) £754,920 project with £558,400 from NLHF, Arts Council England and Historic England; and the Reading High Street Heritage Action Zone (2020 to 2024) £1.6m project with a £806,500 funding from Historic England to revitalise the historic buildings in the centre of Reading. The Abbey Quarter events and activity funding (2020-2021), with a £80,000 grant from NLHF and Historic England through their Cultural Recovery Fund programme. Arts Council England project grant of £15,000 to support specific cultural activities for the celebration of the 900th anniversary of the founding of Reading Abbey at Water Fest on the 19 June 2021.
- 4.6. The figures below highlight the key successes of the project from July 2016 to December 2021 in terms of community outreach, learning, wider participation, volunteering opportunity, skill development, training, and employability:
- A total of 350,429 people engaged in *Reading Abbey Revealed* activities
 - 45,320 people attended events in the Abbey Ruins and the Forbury Gardens.
 - 20,698 people participated in the Abbey/Museum on Wheels outreach programme
 - 131 individual volunteers were trained to support *Reading Abbey Revealed*, undertaking research, writing digital content, acting as heritage custodians, leading and supporting tours, acting as costumed interpreters, sewing costumes, helping at events, schools' sessions, outreach, and gardening
 - 4,327 school and university students, teachers, young people, and adult learners have attended schools' sessions, INSET training, Take-over days, Arts Awards, Youth Panel, and workshops
 - 219 Victorian Schoolroom sessions were held for 6,137 children and 803 adults - despite 18 months of Covid lockdown restrictions, delivered by Reading Museum
 - Since autumn 2020, 43 virtual Victorian Schoolroom sessions engaged 1,165 children and 59 adults
 - 4 new resources for schools (on abbey history, music, creative writing & dance)
 - 6 paid interns employed and trained that went on good paid position in other organisations.

4.7 The next steps of the legacy of this project:

- To ensure that the key learnings and recommendations of this project are disseminated for good practice to colleagues and the wider heritage and placemaking sector.
- To continue to work with conservation specialists to ensure the Scheduled site is protected and preserved for the future, through the production and delivery of a new Conservation and Management Plan.
- To work with the specialist consultants Bowles Green to finalise the outline Business and Marketing Plan to sustainably optimise potential income generation and increased promotion and awareness of the Abbey Quarter heritage site.
- To work closely with finance partners and colleagues to explore the Abbey Quarter management and ongoing conservation plan is integrated in the Council's S106 funding programme.
- To work closely with internal and external partners to develop the public activities programme, promote the site, and investigate tourism opportunities
- To work closely with funding bodies to investigate future funding opportunities to work towards the financial and environmental sustainability of this heritage site
- To ensure the Abbey Quarter continues to integrate with current projects such as the High Street Heritage Action Zone and the large scale developments in the town centre area.
- To ensure the vision for the Reading Gaol site is integrated with the wider Abbey Quarter vision and interpretation
- To ensure that the Abbey Quarter and its sustainability is part of the wider emerging Cultural and Council strategies and plans

5. CONTRIBUTION TO STRATEGIC AIMS

5.1 The Reading Abbey Revealed and the Abbey Quarter contribute to the Corporate Plan themes, for example:

Healthy environment

- The conservation of the Abbey Ruins has protected and improved this important Scheduled site, making this major green space in the heart of Reading, accessible for residents and visitors to freely enjoy.

Thriving Communities

- Abbey on Wheels has been both a highlight and a model for outreach for the project. Now Museum on Wheels, it is continuing to reach new audiences in various locations such as local festivals, libraries and community centres, to get people excited about Reading's heritage. It has also introduced the Abbey and museums to new partner organisations to reach more under-represented audiences. Good examples of partnership working, includes the storytelling project with Brighter Futures for Children and looked after children on a creative writing to produce a children's book about Reading Abbey in May 2019. The work with the Youth Panel, that the team set up in 2018 to engage young people in activities, programmes and projects at the Abbey Ruins and to involve them in decision making. As part of the Abbey 900 celebrations in 2021, the project team worked with the local organisation, No. 5 Young People who support young people with their mental health, where seven Young Ambassadors devised and led two activities for local people to take part in on the day, inspired by both the history of the Abbey and the need to create a greater awareness of mental health.
- In 2020 Reading Museum worked closely with three schools to organise schools' workshops to prepare pupils for a collaborative Diwali and Odissi Dance

performance, which took place and was filmed in the Abbey Ruins, see https://youtu.be/BaW2Jy_4J4o.

Inclusive economy

- The project has initiated a new collaboration with Reading UK CIC, through the Reading Tourism Group which is now promoting the Abbey Quarter as a key part of their destination offer. The Abbey Quarter is also an Ambassador of the 'Great West Way' initiative, 125-mile touring route between London and Bristol. These has both raised the profile of Abbey Quarter further and encourage even more partnership working between regional venues.

5.3 The Reading Abbey Revealed project has developed the Abbey Quarter which contributes to realising the following strategic plans for Reading's culture and heritage:

5.3.1 **The 2050 Vision:** an ambitious description of what Reading can be: a smart and sustainable city, a green tech city, a city of rivers and parks, a city of culture and diversity Reading's rich heritage and strong cultural base becomes a fundamental part of the city's make-up. Reading in 2050 is a cultural destination in its own right as well as providing a great lifestyle for our current and future communities.

5.3.2 **Reading's Culture and Heritage Strategy (2015-2030):** By 2030, Reading will be recognised as a centre of creativity with a reputation for cultural and heritage excellence at a regional, national and international level with increased engagement across the town.

5.3.3 **Reading Local Plan (2019-2036):** support the aspirations for Reading as a dynamic, inclusive community of the 21st Century including heritage. Relevant policies include enhancement of conservation areas (EN3), new development in a historic context (EN6) and The Abbey Quarter (CR15). In the pre-amble at para 4.2.2 states:
'Protecting Reading's heritage assets contributes to a sense of place, and doing so can contribute to other important planning goals. Investment in heritage and culture, in turn, generates more spending in the local economy. For example, previous investment in publicly owned heritage assets within the Abbey Quarter, like the Forbury Gardens and Simeon Monument, has created an attractive environment for high-quality commercial investment including Forbury Square and Forbury Hotel. A vibrant historic environment also contributes to town centre vitality, sustainable transport, residential development, good design and the natural environment. Heritage assets can be a positive force for regeneration. New development can be beneficial to heritage assets through providing or encouraging new uses or better revealing their significance'.

6. ENVIRONMENTAL AND CLIMATE IMPLICATIONS

6.1 The purpose of this report is to highlight the keys successes of the evaluation report of this major Reading Abbey Revealed conservation project which has no climate or negative environmental implications. The project's positive impact is to ensure the ongoing conservation of the Scheduled Abbey site, including innovative techniques such as soft capping on the Ruins that adapt and protect this nationally important heritage from the impacts of climate change. The project also looks holistically at the Abbey Quarter with the Forbury Gardens to develop and maintain an attractive green space in the built-up town centre for everyone to enjoy as mentioned in the Local Plan.

7. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND INFORMATION

- 7.1 Section 138 of the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 places a duty on local authorities to involve local representatives when carrying out "any of its functions" by providing information, consulting or "involving in another way".
- 7.2 The success of the project has been grounded in extensive public consultation and support throughout the development stage to the delivery of the project over a period of seven years. Building on the consultation for the Activity Plan (where over 1,150 people responded to an online consultation survey), a series of events and open days, hard hat conservation tours, accessible talks, community outreach through Abbey on Wheels (now Museum on Wheels), interpretation testing and positive publicity all created an early groundswell of local support for the conservation and re-opening of the Abbey Ruins.
- 7.3 Staff and volunteers undertook extensive public consultation - testing interpretation panels, themes, imagery and text with 103 members of the public and school groups. Staff gathered feedback on panel size, text size, colours and contrast, the balance of text and images, and usability of the map and trail. Care was also taken to ensure that the interpretation of a Christian building was as accessible as possible to people of other faiths and none.
- 7.4 In 2021 as part of the Reading Abbey 900th anniversary celebrations, a public online consultation campaign was launched inviting residents to choose from six potential sculptures, based on figures from the Abbey's illustrious post-dissolution past to carve a new head-stop on the Abbey Gateway. The choice of Abbot Hugh Faringdon was unequivocal with 361 votes out of a total 867. Comments from voters choosing Hugh Faringdon stated their choice would contribute to 'righting the wrongs of the past' and that the last Abbot of Reading needed 'recognition'.
- 7.5 Festivals, events, and volunteer-led tours will continue to engage visitors with the heritage of the Abbey Ruins into the future, as will the continuing Museum on Wheels outreach programme - a real legacy of *Reading Abbey Revealed*.

8. EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT

- 8.1 Under the Equality Act 2010, Section 149, a public authority must, in the exercise of its functions, have due regard to the need to—
- eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct that is prohibited by or under this Act;
 - advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it;
 - foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it.
- 8.2 The project's clear objectives through activity and interpretation has demonstrated a proactive approach to being inclusive, providing opportunities for enjoyment, learning and participation for all residents and visitors regardless of ethnic origin, social background or financial means. The project has raised the profile of Reading's historic centre, providing a powerful symbol of civic pride and identity for the town. Improved and more accessible site and interpretation have enabled anyone who wishes to, to enjoy and understand the important and multi-layered heritage of the Abbey Quarter. This report has no differential impact on racial groups; gender; people with disabilities; people of a particular sexual orientation; people due to their age; people due to their religious belief; and the Armed Forces community.

9. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

9.1 There is no legal implication arising from this report.

10. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

10.1 No financial implications arise from this report. Future project developments in the Abbey Quarter site would be subject to existing budgets, capital and revenue business cases and funding approval. In the event of future project developments in the Abbey Quarter being subject to procurement these will be considered at the time in line with the Councils contract procedure rules and relevant procurement legislation and any future grants will be considered at the time in line with any relevant legislation in respect of grants.

11. BACKGROUND PAPERS

11.1 There are none.

