

CHAPTER 1 OVERVIEW

Introduction

In June 1992, world leaders gathered in Rio de Janeiro for the *Earth Summit*. Some far-reaching decisions were taken there about the need to change the way that we use the earth's resources. One of the points agreed was that many of the world's environmental problems – and their solutions – have roots in local activities. For this reason local authorities and their communities have a special and important role to play.

Reading Borough Council has long been committed to the improvement of the town's environment. The air that we breathe, the water that we drink, and the condition of the land are central to the quality of our lives. They are rightly of growing importance to all. While progress has removed many of the pollution problems, such as wintertime smogs, that historically affected the town, new problems have been created for us to tackle.

What is a State of the Environment Report?

A State of the Environment Report is a collection of a wide range of facts and figures on the local environment on a variety of issues. It forms a snapshot of the town and identifies key areas of concern, as well as important areas of work for the future.

The purpose of producing such a report is to provide the first comprehensive picture of the town's environment, and to identify concerns and potential problems in the town that the council and others need to tackle. The report is designed to help council members and officers, as well as other organisations and local people, who might benefit from an overview of the trends and conditions of the environment. It will also help develop an understanding of the various influences that promote environmental change and will provide a valuable tool if we are to record our progress in achieving real environmental improvement in Reading.

Figure 1.1 indicates the location and administrative boundaries of Reading Borough Council.

Objectives of the report

- To provide a comprehensive statement on the environment in Reading
- To establish a baseline of information to measure change in the future
- To identify gaps in information
- To help ensure services are delivered in sustainable ways
- To enlist the support of other bodies in protecting the environment
- To help prioritise action on the environment
- To continue to raise public awareness of environmental issues
- To be a source document for education and research

Methodology

Each environmental factor has been analysed from a local perspective. Data have, wherever possible, been analysed according to accepted national or international standards. Issues such as transport and energy are, however, more difficult to assess since there are few standards or key parameters to gauge environmental change. The approach here has been to identify their known or probable environmental impacts and to assess current trends.

The State of the Environment Report brings together many sources of published and unpublished information about Reading's environment and has attempted to provide a qualitative and quantitative assessment of the town. It is limited in some subject areas by a lack of information, whilst in other areas an abundance of raw data does allow for full analysis or interpretation. The report will be updated as regularly as possible, and will be valuable in measuring changes that take place in future years, in bidding for resources to help tackle environmental problems and in helping people who live or work in Reading to be better informed about their town and the pressures on the local environment.

In writing the report several areas have been discovered where the council holds limited information. The report, therefore, identifies these shortfalls in data or information for future action to enable additional information to be included in an updated version. A summary is appended.

Local Agenda 21 - The Council's Wider Environmental Initiative

In 1991, the council produced an environmental strategy to promote environmental awareness both within the organisation itself and across the town. Over the years this has grown and is now part of a much wider objective of identifying environmental challenges and working towards improving local environmental quality. This process is being implemented right across Europe and is called *Agenda 21*, an action plan for the 21st century. It is a long-term programme for local authorities and communities to contribute to wider concerns including social and economic factors. The key aim of the process is to promote a sustainable way of living and working which requires us all to cultivate a more sensitive approach to the environment.

The umbrella phrase primarily used to describe this process is "sustainable development" and the most common definition of it is - "*Development which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.*" (Brundland Commission 1987).

As an integral part of this process the council is committed to producing the State of the Environment Report. This will help decision making and will provide a comprehensive package of environmental facts for members of the community who would like access to this kind of information. In addition, the council is working with both local communities and business, and assessing how its own management can contribute towards improving the local quality of life

For further information on the *Agenda 21* project in Reading and details on how to become involved in the process, call or write to Mark Hillyer at the address below:

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The Future

It is hoped that this report will encourage readers to think about the environment, the use that they make of natural resources and the impact their lives have on the local environment. We all enjoy the many benefits of modern life, but they will only be preserved for future generations if we can adopt a sustainable way of life. This is not just something for governments to pass laws about or for local authorities to enforce. Every one of us can contribute to this through the

small decisions we make every day – for example, reducing the journeys we make and thinking how we make them, the recycling of waste and the re-use of packaging. This is the first step in a long process to realise the constraints in which we live and to minimise long term and irreplaceable damage to the environment, so that our children will then have the benefit of an improved quality of life and the opportunities to make choices for themselves about how to live their lives.

As mentioned previously, it is intended that the State of the Environment report will be updated as regularly as possible. We would, therefore, welcome your comments on this, or your ideas for ways in which we could improve the environment of the town or make more efficient and effective use of natural resources. A number of suggestions were received during the public consultation period and many of these have been embodied in the revised document. Others, such the inclusion of a section in each chapter outlining opportunities for sustaining and enhancing the issues discussed, will be looked at in detail at the time of the next review.

Development is also proceeding on the inclusion of sustainability indicators. These allow for the measurement and monitoring of progress towards sustainable development. Useful indicators are those that mean something to the public and show the connections between economic, social and environmental goals. A successful set will generally contain some, which allow for comparisons with the work of other communities, as well as those which measure local trends and priorities.

Any suggestions should be submitted to:

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