

WELWYN HATFIELD BOROUGH COUNCIL
CABINET – 3 NOVEMBER 2020

Recommendation from the Cabinet Planning and Parking Panel on 17 November 2020:-

100. LOCAL PLAN - OBJECTIVE ASSESSMENT OF NEED AND FINAL SITE SELECTION

Members received a presentation from the Head of Planning. This set out what the Local Plan has to do and the legal requirements. The submitted version included provision for 12,000 homes, but the Inspector is concerned this does not meet the Objectively Assessed Need (OAN). In January, members received a report from officers that would deliver just under 16,000 in accordance with the OAN at that time. This was debated and Members ultimately selected additional sites totalling 14,011 homes for public consultation. Tonight's report takes account of this consultation, the Inspector's interim report and additional site information.

The consultation received around 770 comments. These were well split between agreeing or disputing legal compliance and soundness. Site PB1 received the most (88) representations.

The report records that 2121 completions have taken place, with 961 commitments (not the 1141 shown in the report) and an estimate of 1402 windfall. There are also some new assumptions on capacity on some sites.

The Inspector's interim report says that the Council should align its housing and economic strategies. The Inspector's OAN is 16,000 but he recognises that this may fall as a result of 2018-based household projections, though a substantially lower figure wouldn't meet national policy. He proposes two possible courses of action; (i) to propose additional sites to try to meet the OAN; or (ii) withdraw the plan. A number of deadlines set out are contained in the report. If these are not met, he will determine that the Plan is unsound.

Recommendation 1: Determination of Objectively Assessed Need (OAN)

Members need to identify an appropriate precise figure including annual rate for the period 2016-2036. Usually this is one definitive figure but the ONS has published multiple projections. Best practice guidance does not specify how this should be addressed. The Head of Planning set out a number of projections and consequent figures:

- i) Turley Associates Five Year Alternative Projection: 715 homes/year = 14,300
- ii) ONS 10 Year Projection: 690 homes/year = 13,800
- iii) ONS 2 year principal projection: 507 homes/year = 10,140

The current standard methodology = 875 homes/year. The proposed standard methodology (still in draft format and subject to consultation) = 667 homes/year

Recommendation 2: Selection of Sites

Members consider whether to change the proposed 14,011 homes selected for consultation in January based on consultation responses, the Inspector's interim report and new site information. This new figure of 13,277 homes does not include sites proposed for removal and assumes 2,000 at the Wheat Quarter and 250 at Biopark. It also removes 700 homes at Birchall Garden Suburb South and 160 at PB1 East of Potters Bar.

Whatever is decided at this meeting, the Head of Planning will write to the Inspector with an agreed OAN figure. Sites selected will be considered by Cabinet and then Full Council, and then those selected will be presented as a request to the Inspector as main modifications.

The Head of Planning set out a number of risks: Judicial challenge, the plan being declared unsound, the lack of a 5 Year Land Supply, continued difficulty in resisting applications on employment land and Green Belt, speculative applications, planning by appeal and costs, Government instructing another body to prepare a plan.

In respect of Recommendation 1, the Objectively Assessed Need (OAN), the panel raised and discussed the following points:

- How windfall had been calculated and why it wasn't higher. The Head of Planning replied that the more detailed work is done, the more likely that these numbers will be moved to be against specific sites, e.g. Biopark or the Wheat Quarter. Also, the recent Article 4 Direction along with the proposed future ones will restrict windfall numbers.
- A lower OAN will mean lower numbers of social housing. Homes will continue to be unaffordable.
- 2014 might have been a high anomaly instead of 2016 being a low anomaly as Turley suggest.
- It is important to get the right balance and ensure that any figure can be justified.
- All members have been inundated with different analyses of the OAN. Developers generally favour a higher figure, whereas residents generally favour a lower figure. The Government hasn't yet confirmed the shift of development towards the north, so any draft figures have no weight. The standard methodology is not good for the borough.
- The surroundings of Welwyn Hatfield are attractive to people living in London so there will always be demand for housing.
- There is a need for housing but we shouldn't bow to government pressure. We shouldn't satisfy the Government at the expense of residents. We should protect the Garden City and not overload infrastructure.
- Where is our vision? That should determine the number of homes. Affordability will not change no matter how many homes are built.
- The flow of people to the South East may reduce under Government rebalancing but there is pressure on the South East to build more as people want to live here.
- Why are we not going with a lower number in line with soundings from Government on a revised standard methodology? The Head of Planning replied that officers will advocate whatever members decide and a case can be made for the ten-year projection. If a new standard methodology is adopted, there may be scope for officers to discuss this with the Inspector.
- It is convenient to blame the Government for a decision. The Inspector has made it clear that less than 16,000 homes won't meet the national need. These

numbers won't concrete over the borough. A figure needs to focus on local and national need and be justified.

- The new standard methodology is just a draft and is still subject to change. The Plan being thrown out is a big risk.
- An increased figure means sites previously proposed for removal being added back in. Which Green Belt sites should go back in?
- High harm sites in the Green Belt should stay out.
- Unplanned development through a rejected Local Plan is nobody's vision for the borough and a figure needs to be a justified one.

It was moved by Councillor T.Kingsbury and seconded by Councillor D.Richardson.

(8 voting FOR, 2 voting AGAINST, 1 ABSTENTION) (CARRIED)

That the Panel recommends that an OAN of 690 homes per year equivalent to 13,800 homes over the plan period 2016-2036 based on the ten-year projection is identified.

The Head of Planning clarified that he would write to the Inspector with the agreed OAN figure.

Recommendation 2 – Selection of site to meet OAN.

Head of Planning reiterated introductory points advising that the strategy can deliver 13,277 dwellings.

- The 13,277 dwellings which the current strategy could achieve is not far from the OAN as agreed.
- Members note that PB1 could be safeguarded.
- Urban areas are in danger of being overburdened with not enough infrastructure or open space. Cannot assume brownfield sites can take an increasing number of dwellings.
- Concerns were raised regarding the scale of development on the Wheat Quarter. The Head of Planning clarified that the assumptions for this site are based upon pre-application discussions and a reasonable assumption for what this site could deliver dependant on the planning application process. Further information received through the development management process may lead to a different view on numbers.
- Members noted that the Wheat Quarter site will be discussed at Development Management Committee and it is important not to prejudge that discussion.
- Brownfield sites need to be maximised to protect the Green Belt but there is a need for infrastructure to meet demand.
- More infrastructure will be required on Broadwater Road to meet demand, given the scale of development.
- The Inspector's Report notes the imbalance of distribution, particularly around the villages. Taking sites out of the villages would not adhere to comments made by the Inspector.
- Members note that there is a need to reach a decision on this Plan, at this stage there is little scope to significantly change the strategy.
- Concerns raised regarding loss of dwellings at Birchall Garden Suburb may mean school is not delivered. Need to work with developers to make sure vital facilities (such as school and doctors surgeries) are delivered.
- Need to be aware of sustainable methods of transport are evolving – electric car use means there will need to be provision in town centre developments for parking.
- More development is needed in villages, many are unaffordable but have railway stations, primary schools etc.

It was moved by Councillor T.Kingsbury and seconded by Councillor D.Richardson.

(5 voting FOR, 0 voting AGAINST, 6 ABSTENTIONS) (CARRIED)

That the Panel recommends that a strategy is put forward for 13,277 dwellings plus allocating site PB1 for safeguarding.

The Head of Planning clarified that this is to be presented to Cabinet on the 19th November and Full Council on the 23rd November.

RESOLVED:

- (1) That the Panel agrees an OAN figure of 13,800 based on the ten-year projection. The Head of Planning will inform the Inspector of this decision.
- (2) That the Panel recommends to the Cabinet and to Council that the strategy is put forward for 13,277 dwellings; with site PB1 allocated for safeguarding.