

WELWYN HATFIELD BOROUGH COUNCIL
CABINET – 9 FEBRUARY 2021

Recommendation from the Cabinet Planning and Parking Panel on 14 January 2021:-

111. LOCAL PLAN - ANNUAL MONITORING REPORT

Members considered the report of the Corporate Director (Public Protection, Planning and Governance) on the Local Plan – Annual Monitoring Report. It was noted that the Annual Monitoring Report (AMR) serves a number of purposes, including; reporting upon the amount of development that has taken place in the Borough during the year, assessing whether this development meets targets across a number of indicators and setting out expectations for future development in the Borough. In addition, it also reports on progress against the Local Development Scheme, which sets out when and how the Council will produce new planning documents and policies and includes progress on the Council's efforts under 'duty to cooperate' with other public authorities.

The 2019/20 AMR covered the period from 1st April 2019 to 31st March 2020. While the AMR may also refer to development and changes since the 31st March 2020, the 2020/21 AMR reported on these in more detail.

The AMR provides considerable information on what is happening in the Borough not just in terms of housing but services such as health and wellbeing.

The following key points were noted:

- The AMR reports on 36 planning indicators.
- The Borough's population grew at an estimated rate of 0.2% (Welwyn Garden City), which was an increase to just over 123,000; slightly lower than Hertfordshire as a whole (0.4%).
- The Council's annual retail survey was undertaken during October/December 2020 – the Town Centre vacancy had increased to 8.6% compared to last year of 4.1%. Some large units became vacant during the year which contributed to the increase. In Hatfield Town Centre the vacancy also increased to 16.5% from 13.8% last year. Part of the vacancy in Hatfield has been due to the redevelopment at 1-9 Town Centre.
- The new library has opened in White Lion Square but another large unit had become vacant.
- Last year saw 673 net new housing units having been completed. A total of 69 new affordable homes were brought to the market which accounted for 10.3% of total net dwellings completed.

- In terms of student flats – 94% were completed; providing 272 self-contained dwellings.
- The average dwelling density for new dwelling completed in 2019/20, saw an increase – rising to 74.7 dwellings per hectare (dph) compared with 50 dph in 2018/19. Most of these were student self-contained studios and had a high net density. If these had been excluded the average density would have fallen to 42. dph for the year.
- The Borough has continued to see a net loss of employment floorspace totally - 5,903m² in 2019/20. Another notable B2 loss in 2019/20 was at the Entech House site in Woolmer Green, which is being redeveloped for housing.
- The number of claimants of job seekers allowance saw a 0.3% increase to 2.0% in March 2020 (from 1.7% in March 2019). The impact of Covid-19 had led to an increase of claimants in the Borough to 4.5% in October 2020.
- The minimum annual local housing need was calculated using the Standard Methodology, under which the housing need figure for WHB is 875 dwellings per annum, resulting in a housing land supply of 2.58 years. This is below the national five year requirement until the Draft Local Plan is adopted. The Borough is unlikely to be able to meet this requirement.

A comment was made on the 1,590 planning plots that have planning permission but have not been constructed. If these were built the Council would have two and half years supply of homes immediately.

A Member sought clarification on the discrepancy of data relating to Council Tax. It has been noted that there has been 671 net dwelling completions, with 693 gross completions. The Council Tax base has increased by 700 and this irregularity has been raised with Richard Baker, Head of Resources who has advised that they are not one-to-one equivalent. The Council Tax base utilises portioned number for other bands (an example of the band range was provided); there has been a significant proportion of the 671 dwellings that are made up of smaller flats/studios, which are in the lower band. The tax base suggests that there has been over 800; thus increasing the net dwellings within the Borough, yet the net completions say 671. The Head of Planning explained that he has been in correspondence with Richard Baker to resolve this issue. Members were advised that Planning obtains data from the County Council, generally from building control records, once it has been completed and received a sign off permission. The Council Tax work is associated with preliminary work on predicating the income the Council is likely to receive from houses. The Head of Planning will work with Head of Resources (Richard Baker) to reconcile the numbers but Planning can only defend the numbers that are provided within the AMR.

The Member further stated that the 700 figure that he had quoted was for last year and this has generated a significant amount of monies. The predication for next year being over 800. There has been some liaison with Council Tax on their records of completion, it was noted that they have less dwellings than Planning on record for the year. Accounting periods can also have an impact on data. It was agreed that the Head of Resources and Head of Planning investigate this discrepancy.

A Member highlighted the issue of health and wellbeing; although not always updated as regularly as other items but he felt that it was important to comment on

the disparity of Hatfield Central and Sherrards wards. Members are aware of the difference between Hatfield Central and Peartree on deprivation. He felt that more needs to be done to close the deficiency gap and bring these areas in line with others within the Borough for the future. It was felt that it required greater investigation. This item to be taken to Council for debate. Concern was expressed in terms of how deprivation figures exclude students, which gives a fabricated indication of numbers.

A Member sought clarification on the windfall numbers within the report. He referred to the completion number of 671 dwelling cited within the report, as being 100% windfall. In the last few years the numbers have been around 400 – 550; post completion of sites. Going forward the figure within the Local Plan is 215 (149 has been mentioned) how do we reconcile? He raised the concern of presenting such a low number to the Inspector and the issues around use of urban sites; these sites can be precarious to develop and developments are being favoured for green belt sites. Also how robustly is the Council informing the Inspector of what is happening at present? The Officer explained that the Inspector has commented that once a local authority has an adopted plan the windfall numbers tend to drop off quickly and the allocated sites tend to come forward. Our submitted figure has gone up and compared to other local authorities it is higher. There is a consultation on the windfall assessment and there will be a hearing session on this on 24 February. The Inspector has commented that our figure is high and we will have to work hard to justify the figure already submitted. From previous experience and looking at past trends you do see windfall decreasing rapidly once the Plan has been adopted. Some of windfall sites are of a type which could have been allocated in the Local Plan but this has been associated with timing of the sites. It was suggest that Officers look at past trends (previous local plans) and at other local authorities to see why those windfalls drop off rapidly. Is it because there is hunger to develop green field sites, as urban sites can sometimes be difficult to develop? By having put forward a low windfall figure you may be discouraging development of urban sites. The Officer explained that they will look at past trends, which they have done in the past and also take into account the source of supply and the type of sites that come forward and compare these with what has been coming forward. The Officers will continue to monitor the situation and sites.

Concern was expressed in respect of the health statistics, in terms of the diagnosis rate. The data referred to the number of people who have been to see their GP and have been diagnosed but there may be a certain percentage for whatever reason that may not have been diagnosed because they have not been to see their GP or have ignored symptoms, therefore not being accounted for within the statistics. The data is taken from the NHS monitored figures. Planning will look at this and provide a response at a later date.

A question was raised on renewable energy, as to why small schemes such as solar panel feed in-tariff and other grants cannot be accounted for. The figures seemed low on renewable energy data; could we encourage more, as we move forward? It was clarified that most of renewable energy small projects fall within the permitted development and therefore not always captured for the data. The Council uses planning application information and if it is not captured within the application stage it is not replicated in the data. Officers will look at this next year to see what other

sources of data can be developed to capture the figures. The Member indicated that she would like to see the number increasing.

A Members raised a question on S106 funds and whether it would be feasible for Ward Councillors to put forward ideas for projects that they feel are needed within their ward. Members can do this through the Local Plan process, via the infrastructure delivery plan, which we believe may be required within the proposed development. If the Member advises Planning, the Officers can contact the appropriate body to consider the suggestion and take the necessary steps. The other route is to put forward the idea at the planning application stage when Members are asked to comment on the application and projects can be identified and if feasible, request for S106 monies for the suggested project can be made. What is not appropriate is for Members to put forward a project and request funds. For the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) mechanism, there is a tariff for sqm of development and funds can be utilised as the local authority requires, it is more flexible e.g. new school or distribute to wards for community facilities and Members can decide on which projects they wish to allocate the levies. For very small project there is the possibility of obtaining funds from the parish, borough or county councils, as there can be small pockets of resource available.

RESOLVED

That the Cabinet Planning and Parking Panel recommends to Cabinet that the AMR be approved for publication, and that the Head of Planning be given delegated powers to agree any minor alterations to finalise the AMR following consultation with the Executive Member for Environment and Planning.

Please see link below for the report and appendix submitted to Cabinet Planning and Parking Panel on 14 January 2021:

<https://democracy.welhat.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=266&MIId=1180&Ver=4>