

WELWYN HATFIELD BOROUGH COUNCIL
CABINET PLANNING AND PARKING PANEL – 10TH MARCH 2022
REPORT OF THE HEAD OF PLANNING

LOCAL PLAN – ANNUAL MONITORING REPORT 2020/21

1 Executive Summary

- 1.1 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.
- 1.2 The 2020/21 AMR covers the period from 1st April 2020 to 31st March 2021. While the AMR may also refer to development and changes since the 31st March 2021, the 2021/22 AMR will report on these in more detail.

2 Recommendation(s)

- 2.1 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 authority to agree any minor alterations to finalise the AMR, following consultation with the Executive Member for Environment, Planning, Estates and Development.

3 Background

- 3.1 In line with previous Annual Monitoring reports, the 2020/21 AMR reports on development progress set out in the Draft Local Plan monitoring framework. The AMR is set out over nine chapters. Chapter 1 is contextual and sets out key information about the borough and its people. Chapter 2 covers the Council's forward 'plan-making' duties, while Chapter 3 examines the effectiveness of the current District Plan. Chapters 4-8 cover the amount and quality of new development being built in the borough and how the borough's population and places are performing, whilst Chapter 9 deals with specific major and mixed-use development sites proposed for allocation in the Local Plan.

4 Explanation

- 4.1 The key conclusions from the AMR are summarised on pages 4 and 5 of the report, the most notable of these include:
- The Office for National Statistics (ONS) mid-year estimates showed the borough's population grew at an estimated rate of 0.7% during the year, increasing to 123,893 persons in the mid-2020 estimate. This estimated level of growth for Welwyn Hatfield Borough was slightly higher than seen in the

previous two years, and just above countywide growth for Hertfordshire, which was 0.5%. The results of the 2021 Census will confirm the borough's population when they are published.

- The Council's success at appeal improved during the year with 19% of appeals being allowed compared with 28% in 2019/20. This was also lower than the national average of 25%.
- Retail vacancy rates in both Welwyn Garden City and Hatfield Town Centres increased further this year. In Welwyn Garden City, vacant frontage length increased to 9.9% in 2021 from 8.6% in 2020. In the years prior to 2020, vacancy had been fluctuating around 3-4%. Although some large previously vacant units were filled (the former Post Office as well as a unit at the entrance to the Howards Centre), more became newly vacant, driving this increase. In terms of the *number* of vacant units, this increased by one during the year – to 12 vacant units (or 7.1%). In Hatfield Town Centre vacant frontage also increased, to 21.7% from 16.5% in the 2020 survey. In terms of the number of vacant units, this increased to 18 units (or 14.9%) from 14 units (11.6%) in 2020. Three of the newly vacant units were previously banks. However, part of the vacancy in Hatfield is due to the redevelopment at 1-9 Town Centre.
- In 2020/21, there were 352 net new housing units completed. Note that this figure is lower than that reported in the recent Local Plan reports to CPPP as it includes the -41 demolitions at Minster House. The replacement dwellings will be recorded in the year/s of completion as 90 dwellings, as the losses have already been accounted for (the overall net total at the site is 49 dwellings). The Local Plan figures included the net total of 49 dwellings in the forecast year of completion rather than splitting out the demolitions.
- The majority (76%) of homes completed during the year were flats, while houses made up the remaining 24% of completions. Flats have accounted for a higher proportion of completions in the last couple of years, partly due to a high number of office to residential conversions through permitted development rights.
- The 352 net dwelling completions included 48 new affordable homes (13.6% of total net completions). Of the sites that delivered completions in 2020/21, 7 sites were for above the 10+ dwelling threshold to provide affordable housing. Five of these sites have already - or will - deliver the level of affordable housing required. At one of these sites, which is still under construction, the affordable element will be delivered next year, while at another the affordable element was already delivered as part of the wider scheme. There were two sites which completed which did not deliver any affordable housing; one of which was granted through the prior approval process which does not allow the Council to secure affordable housing, while the other was a scheme for sheltered housing which did not include affordable.
- National Planning Practice Guidance states that the 'number of homes required' for the calculation of the five year housing land supply is the housing requirement in Local Plans. However, as the borough's new Local Plan is still under examination and the most recent adopted housing requirement figure is more than five years old, the minimum annual local

housing need figure should be used. The minimum annual local housing need is calculated using the Standard Methodology – under which the housing need figure for Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council for 2021/22 is 878 dwellings per annum (which is slightly higher than the 875 required in 2020/21. As the Council has only delivered 63% of the housing target over the last three years (as measured by the Housing Delivery Test) a 20% buffer is again required to be added to the five year requirement. In addition, an action plan will need to be produced to identify reasons for under delivery as well as setting out measures to improve future delivery. Against a standard methodology of 878 dwellings, the Council has a housing land supply of 2.46 years. Whilst this is below the national 5-year requirement, until the Draft Local Plan is adopted, the borough is unlikely to be able to meet this requirement.

- From 1st September 2020, amendments to the planning use classes came into place, and a new class E use - covering Commercial, Business and Services, was introduced. The new class E use incorporates the previous B1 use class as well as some former retail and service uses. The borough continued to see a net loss of employment floorspace, totalling -2,274m² in 2020/21. The new use Eg(i) replaces the former B1a office use, of which there was a floorspace loss of -2,073m². B1a/Eg(i) losses largely resulted from office to residential conversions - including Fountain House in Welwyn Garden City Town Centre as well as 87 Great North Road in Hatfield. The losses were partially offset by some gains in B1a/Eg(i) floorspace, including an extension to a site at Sopers Road in Cuffley, as well as at the Entech House redevelopment in Woolmer Green (the loss in B2 floorspace at this site was recorded last year).
- The significant loss of office floor space that has arisen through permitted development (PD) rights has resulted in Article 4 Directions being developed for four of the key employment areas in the borough. The Article 4 Direction in relation to office to residential conversions took effect from 12 October 2020 and means that planning permission is once again required for change of use from office to residential in these areas. Similarly, demolition of commercial buildings and replacement with blocks of flats/single dwelling houses, also again requires planning permission in the four employment areas. The Article 4 direction for which came into effect at the start of February 2022.
- Data from the ONS for the number of claimants of Job Seekers Allowance/Universal Credit shows that the rate of claimants in Welwyn Hatfield Borough had more than doubled in March 2021 at 4.7% from 1.9% in March 2020. This rate has since been steadily declining from April 2021, although remained some way above the pre-pandemic level, at 3.3% in December 2021.

Implications

5 Legal Implication(s)

- 5.1 The Council has a statutory requirement under the Town and Country Planning (Local Planning) (England) Regulations 2012 to publish an 'authority monitoring report' every year. This is required to contain information on various measures,

including how the Council has complied with the statutory Duty to Cooperate and the borough's current housing land supply position.

6 Financial Implication(s)

6.1 There are no financial implications arising as a direct result of producing the AMR.

7 Risk Management Implications

7.1 The AMR forms part of the Council's evidence base and is an important record of development progress within the borough. There are no risk implications in publishing the AMR, indeed there would be risks in not publishing it as the Council would be less able to robustly defend unsuitable planning applications.

7.2 There are risks associated with no longer having a five year land supply for housing and the weight that can be given to policies in both the existing and Draft Local Plan.

7.3 Paragraph 11d of the July 2021 NPPF makes it clear that in such circumstances the policies in the existing Local Plan should be considered to be out of date and that the presumption in favour of sustainable development should apply. This means that permission should be granted unless the policies in the NPPF that protect areas or assets of particular importance provide a clear reason for refusal or the adverse impacts of doing so would significantly outweigh the benefits when assessed against the policies in the NPPF as a whole.

8 Security & Terrorism Implication(s)

8.1 There are no security and terrorism implications as a direct result of producing the AMR.

9 Procurement Implication(s)

9.1 There are no procurement implications arising as a direct result of producing the AMR.

10 Climate Change Implication(s)

10.1 The AMR has an important role in monitoring the environmental impacts of development on the borough, including in terms of climate change.

11 Policy Implication(s)

11.1 Whilst the AMR reports directly on both existing and emerging Council policies, it has limited policy implications at present. This is because it follows the submission of the Local Plan for examination.

12 Link to Corporate Priorities

12.1 The findings of the AMR are linked to all five of the Council's corporate priorities, but with particular links to Priority 2 (protect and enhance the environment), Priority 3 (meet the borough's housing needs) and Priority 4 (help build a strong local economy).

13 Equality and Diversity

13.1 An Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) has not been carried out, as the AMR does not include any proposals in its own right.

14 Health and Wellbeing

14.1 There are no health and wellbeing implications arising as a result of publishing the AMR.

15 Human Resources

15.1 There are no human resources implications arising as a result of publishing the AMR.

16 Communications and Engagement

16.1 There are no communications and engagement implications arising as a result of publishing the AMR.

Appendices:

Appendix 1 – Annual Monitoring Report 2020/21