

WELWYN HATFIELD BOROUGH COUNCIL
CABINET PLANNING AND PARKING PANEL – 14TH JANUARY 2021
REPORT OF THE CORPORATE DIRECTOR (PUBLIC PROTECTION, PLANNING AND GOVERNANCE)

LOCAL PLAN – ANNUAL MONITORING REPORT

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 polices and includes progress on the Council's efforts under 'duty to cooperate' with other public authorities.
- 1.2 The 2019/20 AMR covers 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 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 powers to agree any minor alterations to finalise the AMR following consultation with the Executive Member for Environment and Planning.

3 Background

- 3.1 In line with previous Annual Monitoring reports, the 2019/20 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 mid-year estimates showed the borough's population grew at an estimated rate of 0.2% during the year, increasing to just over 123,000. Estimated population growth in Welwyn Hatfield has been

low over the last two years, and this year saw slightly lower growth than for Hertfordshire as a whole (0.4%).

- The Council's success at appeal slightly improved during the year with 28% of appeals being allowed compared with 31% in 2018/19. However, this was still just slightly higher than the national average of 25%.
- Vacancy rates increased in five centres and declined in four. The annual retail survey was undertaken later than usual in 2020 (October/December) due to the coronavirus restrictions earlier in the year. In Welwyn Garden City Town Centre, vacancy increased to 8.6% from 4.1% in 2019, meanwhile in Hatfield vacant floor space increased to 16.5% from 13.8% last year. Vacancy in town centres is measured by frontage length – and increases in both town centres was largely a result of a small number of larger units becoming vacant. Part of the vacancy in Hatfield is due to the redevelopment at 1-9 Town Centre. Vacancy at the out-of-centre Galleria increased further this year (to 22.4% from 13.3% in 2019, which followed an increase from 7.1% in 2018).
- During the year 673 net new housing units have been completed. The council is still working to agree a revised housing target as the inspector indicated at the stage 2 hearing sessions that the Draft Local Plan target was unsound.
- A total of 74 new affordable homes were brought to the market during the year, accounting for 10.3% of total net C3 dwelling completions. This was slightly lower than the average for the plan period to date (13.1%).
- The vast majority of new build dwellings completed during the year (99%) were on Previously Developed Land (PDL). In 2017 the Government introduced requirements for each local authority to produce a Brownfield Land Register at least once each year, listing all PDL sites in their area which are considered to be suitable for development. Since the first register was introduced in 2017, 30 sites included on previous versions of the register have since completed amounting to 951 dwellings.
- The average dwelling density for new dwellings completed in 2019/20, saw a significant increase – rising to 74.7 dwellings per hectare (dph) (compared with 50dph in 2018/19 and 22dph in 2017/18). Dwelling density is calculated by dividing the number of gross completions (excluding conversions) by the total development area of all sites. A high proportion of studios and flats, which accounted for 94% of gross completions this year was behind the increase in density. In particular, there were 272 student completions at the Comet in Hatfield, which were self-contained studios and had a very high net density. If these are excluded average density falls to 42.1 dph for the year.
- 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 is 875 dwellings per annum,

resulting in a housing land supply of 2.58 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.

- The borough has continued to see a net loss of employment floorspace, totalling -5,903m² in 2019/20. B1a office use saw a floorspace loss of -5,900m². There were notable losses of B2 floorspace this year, largely a result of the residential redevelopment of the former Ratcliff Tail Lift site in Welwyn Garden City (a Draft Local Plan allocation), for which the demolition was recorded this year. Another notable B2 loss in 2019/20 was at the Entech House site in Woolmer Green, which is being redeveloped for housing.
- In other measures of the borough's economy, 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). Looking at the change since the end of the monitoring year – to give some indication of the impact that COVID-19 has had - the number of job seekers allowance claimants in the borough had since increased to 4.5% in October 2020. The wards of Peartree and Welham Green saw the largest increases between March 2020 and October 2020 with JSA claimants increasing to 8.1% from 4.5% in Peartree and to 4.9% from 1.3% in Welham Green.

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 new Local Plan.
- 7.3 Paragraph 11d of the 2018 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.

Name of author	Lucy Palmer
Title	Senior Planner and Data Analysis Officer
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Appendices: Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council – Annual Monitoring Report 2019/20