

WELWYN HATFIELD BOROUGH COUNCIL
CABINET PLANNING AND PARKING PANEL – 16 JANUARY 2025
REPORT OF THE ASSISTANT DIRECTOR (PLANNING)

LOCAL PLAN EARLY ENGAGEMENT AND LOCAL DEVELOPMENT SCHEME UPDATE

1 Executive Summary

- 1.1 The current Welwyn Hatfield Local Plan 2016 - 2036 (WHLP) was adopted in October 2023. The WHLP contains Policy SP2 which commits the Council to undertake a review of the plan, to be submitted for examination no later than October 2026.
- 1.2 In September 2024, Cabinet agreed that a Local Plan (full review) is prepared and, as part of the early scoping of a new local plan, public engagement take place inviting reflections on the current opportunities, challenges and aspirations of the borough.
- 1.3 An early engagement on the new local plan took place between 23rd September 2024 and 4th November 2024, asking for reflections on the challenges and opportunities facing the borough with regard to topics on living, working, environment and movement & infrastructure. The engagement also asked for people's aspirations for the future of the borough.
- 1.4 From the responses, recurring opportunities, challenges and aspirations for the borough have been collated to produce a series of key themes. These key themes will help establish the context in which the new local plan is prepared.
- 1.5 The government published the revised National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) on 12 December 2024. The ministerial statement that accompanied the publication of the new NPPF included a requirement for all local planning authorities to produce an updated LDS within 12 weeks of the publication of the NPPF. The LDS agreed by Cabinet on 3 September has been updated (appendix C).

2 Recommendation

- 2.1 That Cabinet Planning and Parking Panel notes the outcome and summary of responses of the new local plan early engagement and recommends to Cabinet that the key themes inform the preparation of the Local Plan; and, recommends that Cabinet agrees to the Local Development Scheme being published on the Council's website and for a copy to be sent to the Secretary of State to comply with the Written Ministerial Statement of 12 December 2024.

3 Explanation

- 3.1 The current Welwyn Hatfield Local Plan was adopted in October 2023. It contains Policy SP2 which commits the Council to undertake a review of the plan, this review is to commence no later than one year after the adoption of the plan [by October 2024] and for an updated or replacement plan to be submitted for examination no later than three years after the date of adoption of the plan [by October 2026].

Engagement

- 3.2 In September 2024, Cabinet agreed to conduct a full review of the Local Plan. It was also agreed that an early engagement event be conducted to ascertain the opportunities and challenges felt by people working, living or interested in the borough based on four key themes.
- 3.3 These four themes were related to: Living, which sought to encompass '*where we live, the homes we live in, our health and well-being, and the communities we belong to*'; Working, which sought to encompass '*the economy, jobs, retail, services, investment, skills and training*'; Environment, which sought to cover '*buildings, structures, landscapes, water, green spaces and the impact of climate change*'; and Movement and Infrastructure, which sought to encompass '*travel, transport services and facilities, as well as physical, social and green infrastructure*'. The engagement event also asked for people's ambitions and aspirations for the future of Welwyn Hatfield.
- 3.4 The early engagement was hosted on a new engagement platform and supplemented with new branding. The platform and branding were utilised specifically for the new local plan and will continue to be used for future engagement. A tool called a 'digital place portrait' was also utilised for this engagement event that follows the government's focus on digitalisation of planning and offered users access to spatial data to better understand what issues are affecting the area.
- 3.5 The engagement was open for comments from stakeholders and the wider community between 23rd September 2024 and 4th November 2024. It was publicised through the Council website and the Council's official social media accounts throughout this period. The engagement platform also contained short videos about the early engagement and about what a local plan is, and an FAQ to aid knowledge about the purpose and process of a local plan was also created.
- 3.6 Two in-person drop-in events were also carried out to allow members of the public to visit, discuss and ask questions about the early engagement and the new local plan. These were run and attended by Planning Policy officers, and engagement material in the form of roller banners, business cards and paper forms were also utilised. The two drop-in events were held at The Howard Centre, Welwyn Garden City, and Hatfield Library, Hatfield, and both ran from 3pm to 7pm on a Thursday and Friday respectively. As above, these were also publicised on the Council's website and social media accounts.

Responses

- 3.7 In total, 209 contributions were made from various sources, including (but not limited to) members of the public, local community groups, local businesses and parish councils. The early engagement platform had over 1,100 visitors in 6 weeks and over 150 email subscriptions.
- 3.8 Following the closure of the early engagement event, Planning Policy Officers have reviewed all responses received and collated recurring/common responses into set themes to inform the context of the new local plan. The themes from the engagement are (in no particular order):
- Housing related - *Meeting local housing needs*
 - Climate related - *A local response to the global issue of climate change*

- Infrastructure related - *Improving facilities and services and accessibility to them*
- Health related - *Supporting active and healthy lifestyles*
- Travel related - *A borough that is better connected and is more accessible to all*
- Green Belt related - *Valuing the borough's Green Belt*
- Environment related - *Supporting and enhancing the borough's natural infrastructure*
- Employment related - *Sustaining and promoting the borough's employment and education opportunities*
- Town centre related - *Recognising the changing role and opportunities that our town centres offer*
- Community related - *Creating and maintaining community values and a sense of place*

3.9 Appendix A describes and summarises the 10 themes. It is proposed that the key themes be reported via the Local Plan consultation platform to conclude the Local Plan Early Engagement. In addition, a summary of all the responses received during the engagement are included at Appendix B. All responses are also viewable via the Local Plan engagement platform.

3.10 The exercise was limited to ascertain the opportunities and challenges, and it should be recognised there is potential to be conflict between some themes. Addressing some of the opportunities/challenges may fall outside the scope of the Local Plan or may require collaboration with other stakeholders/service providers. There may also be other considerations/priorities which emerge during the course of the Local Plan process.

3.11 It is through the preparation of the Local Plan that the council, with the community, will identify the strategic priorities for the development and use of land in the borough. In doing so, there will need to be regard to national policies and advice. The formal plan making stages for the Local Plan are set out in the Local Development Scheme (LDS).

Local Plan Timetable

3.12 A Local Development Scheme (LDS) is the timetable to produce a Local Plan. A timetable for the preparation of a new local plan was agreed by Cabinet on 3 September 2024 and is on the website. The government published the revised National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) on 12 December 2024. The framework sets out the government's planning policies for England and how these are expected to be applied.

3.13 The ministerial statement that accompanied the publication of the new NPPF included a requirement for all local planning authorities to produce an updated LDS within 12 weeks of the publication of the NPPF (no later than 6 March 2025). Once updated the LDS is to be made publicly available, a copy is to be sent to the Ministry via email, and certain key information be recorded by filling out a form.

3.14 The LDS agreed by Cabinet on 3 September has been updated (appendix C), the

extent of the updates are limited e.g. references to the updated LDS taking effect from February 2025 in several places and confirmation that the Local Plan Early Engagement in Autumn 2024 has taken place. The overall timetable for the preparation of the Local Plan remains unaltered.

4 Legal Implication(s)

- 4.1 The current legal framework for the preparation of Local Plans is set out in the Planning & Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 (PCPA) and associated regulations (as amended). Under regulation 10A of The Town and Country Planning (Local Planning) (England) Regulations 2012 (as amended), local planning authorities must review their Local Plans within five years of the adoption date. However, as stated the adoption of the WHLP includes a commitment to an early review.
- 4.2 The adopted Welwyn Hatfield Local Plan 2016 – 2036 forms part of the statutory Development Plan for the Borough. Section 38(6) of the PCPA states that planning applications must be determined in accordance with the Development Plan unless material considerations indicate otherwise. Any progress on a new Local Plan does not affect its Development Plan status and the current Local Plan is the starting point for consideration of planning applications in Welwyn Hatfield. Emerging policies in any new Plan may become a material consideration as they progress through the system. However, the material weight an emerging plan may be given is typically proportionate to how far it has progressed.
- 4.3 The complete early engagement is prior to the formal consultation on a new Local Plan. The themes assist in providing the context for the preparation of the Local Plan

5 Financial Implication(s)

- 5.1 There are no financial implications relating to the recommendations of this report. The financial implications of the early engagement has been met through existing budgets.

6 Risk Management Implications

- 6.1 There are no anticipated risk management implications from publishing the emerging themes following the collation of comments received during the early engagement exercise.

7 Security & Terrorism Implication(s)

- 7.1 There are no security and terrorism implications as a direct result of producing the Local Plan

8 Procurement Implication(s)

- 8.1 There are no procurement implications arising from this report.

9 Climate Change Implication(s)

- 9.1 The emerging themes from the early engagement event has revealed that many stakeholders and the wider community believe that climate change is a challenge/issue for the borough. A new Local Plan provides an opportunity to address the matter of climate change.

10 Policy Implications

- 10.1 There are no policy implications directly arising from the recommendations of this report and the completed Local Plan early engagement. The new Local Plan will include policies for development in the borough that will be subject to formal consultation and be required to be consistent with national planning policy.

11 Human Resources Implications

- 11.1 The Planning Policy team has the responsibility to service, support and facilitate the Council's plan-making activity. The publication of a document detailing the emerging themes following the previously agreed early engagement exercise will be done entirely by Planning Policy officers during normal working hours.

12 Link to Corporate Priorities

- 12.1 The subject of this report is linked to the Council's agreed Corporate Priorities including running an effective council and creating opportunities for our communities.

13 Equalities and Diversity

- 13.1 The report does not propose changes to existing Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council service-related policies or the development of new service-related policies. Accordingly, an Equalities Impact Assessment has not been completed.

Appendices:

Appendix A Key Themes

Appendix B Responses to new Local Plan early engagement exercise

Appendix C Local Development Scheme (LDS) February 2025