

EAST HERTS COUNCIL

DISTRICT PLANNING EXECUTIVE PANEL – 17 JULY 2014

EXECUTIVE – 5 AUGUST 2014

REPORT BY EXECUTIVE MEMBER FOR STRATEGIC PLANNING  
AND TRANSPORT

BUNTINGFORD EMPLOYMENT STUDY 2014

WARD(S) AFFECTED: ALL (PRIMARILY BUNTINGFORD  
WARDS)

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**Purpose/Summary of Report**

- This report summarises the findings of the Employment Study undertaken for Buntingford and seeks agreement to use the Study to inform the preparation of the East Herts District Plan and to inform Development Management decisions.

**RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DISTRICT PLANNING EXECUTIVE  
PANEL AND EXECUTIVE: That:**

<b>(A)</b>	<b>The Buntingford Employment Study, June 2014, be supported as part of the evidence base to inform and support the East Herts District Plan and for Development Management purposes in the determination of planning applications.</b>
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**RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COUNCIL: That:**

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1.0 Background

1.1 Since 2008, the Council has commissioned and has been a partner to several studies which have assessed the quality of the district's employment land, forecast future employment needs of East Herts and Hertfordshire, and considered the strategic

employment needs of the district in relation to the emerging District Plan. The studies did not consider Buntingford in any detail, mainly due to its comparatively limited contribution in employment terms and because at the time, Buntingford was seeing little change in terms of residential growth.

- 1.2 Since the publication of the National Planning Policy Framework, Buntingford has come under considerable pressure for new residential development. It is anticipated that this is because it is the only town in East Herts that is not surrounded by Green Belt. It is therefore seen by developers as being relatively unconstrained in policy terms. As a market town it benefits from an existing employment land offer, high street with a good choice of retail opportunities and other market town services and community facilities. The town is therefore seen as a relatively sustainable location despite not having a rail connection.
- 1.3 The Council's preferred location for development is stated within the emerging East Herts District Plan, which identifies two housing allocations, to the north and south of the town for 180 and 300 homes respectively. Other sites around the town were considered but these were discounted through the sieving approach. In respect of land north and south of Hare Street this decision was challenged by the submission of two planning applications. Consequently the Council was required to make a decision on these sites in advance of the final stages of Plan preparation. As such, earlier in 2013, the Council refused two applications to the north and south of Hare Street Road for applications totalling 260 homes. A joint inquiry was held on the two sites and the Planning Inspector approved both sites. The Inspector's report highlighted the importance of local employment opportunities in his consideration of planning matters.
- 1.4 The Council has since approved development to the north of the town and is yet to determine an application for approximately 330 homes to the south of the town on the former Sainsbury's Distribution Centre site. The situation now is that 711 homes have now been approved (including previous commitments). In addition, the Council has recently refused a scheme for 56 homes at Aspenden Bridge. It is expected that the agent will appeal against this refusal. The same landowner also owns a considerable amount of land within the A10 bypass with a potential yield of 400 homes, which is being promoted through the District Plan process. A decision is also pending for an additional 180 homes to the South of Hare Street Road. Given the clear potential then that significant additional residential development

may come forward, it is important that any employment study for the town considers these potential homes as well as all existing commitments and proposed allocations.

## 2.0 Report

2.1 The Buntingford Employment Study comprises eight sections. A copy of the Executive Summary is attached at **Essential Reference 'B'** and the full Study can be accessed via the link in the Background Papers. As outlined above the Study was commissioned specifically in response to the application for redevelopment of the former Sainsbury's Distribution Depot for around 327 new homes and 1,700sqm of employment floorspace; and the current policy status of this site in the Local Plan 2007 acknowledges the potential to provide for future employment needs.

2.2 Section 1 sets the study area and objectives of the Study. The purpose of the Study is to inform the Council with relation to the following three topics:

- First, the extent of employment growth required in Buntingford in association with the growth in population generated by the recent grant of planning permissions and the future development required through the District Plan.
- Second, how and where employment growth can be delivered in the town.
- Thirdly, in relation to the former Sainsbury's Depot site (which is an allocated employment site in the current adopted Local Plan) to inform the Council with regard to:
  - The likelihood of the site being used by a single employer;
  - The adequacy of employment generating development proposed as part of the application in terms of location, quantity and quality; and
  - The likelihood that the proposed scale of development will be taken up.

2.3 Section 2 sets the wider strategic context within which planning for employment provision in Buntingford needs to be set. While Buntingford is well-connected by road for a freestanding town, the focus for employment development in this part of Hertfordshire and the adjacent area of Essex is on the A1(M) or the M11 corridors. A number of previous studies confirm this. Within East Herts the focus of commercial development activity is in the District's larger settlements of Bishop's Stortford, Hertford and

Ware. All these settlements have better road and rail connectivity than Buntingford. However, Buntingford provides a vital service centre for a large rural hinterland and is therefore locally important in terms of its employment offer.

- 2.4 Section 3 identifies the existing business and employment base of Buntingford and how this has changed over time. The business base in Buntingford is largely comprised of small businesses (employing less than 10 people). These are mainly within the service sector. However, it is worth noting that the larger employers based at Buntingford Business Park lie just outside the study area boundary. They have nonetheless been taken into account through the study. There are approximately 355 separate enterprises in Buntingford, which is an increase of 71 since 2008 (284). The Study questions whether it would be possible to broaden the business base of the town as it grows.
- 2.5 An analysis of employment in Buntingford over time shows that prior to 2005 employment levels were relatively stable with more than 2,000 people working in the town. The biggest decrease occurred in 2005 which coincided with the closure of the Sainsbury's Depot in 2004. Since 2008 there has been another smaller decrease suggesting the economic downturn had an impact. It should be noted however, that other than these two decreases employment levels have remained stable. This could reflect the stable demographic of the town discussed in more detail in paragraphs 2.7 to 2.9 below.
- 2.6 In terms of those who work full and part-time, Buntingford has a significantly higher level of part-time employment than the benchmark (45% compared to 35% at District, County and regional level). This may be associated with higher levels of education, retail and health jobs present in the town, which traditionally employ high levels of part-time staff.
- 2.7 Section 4 presents the existing demographic profile of the town and focuses on the characteristics of the economically active population. This helps to inform answers to the questions '*how many people in Buntingford are in work or seeking work, what type of jobs do they do and where do they work?*' This is important when examining the scale of likely population growth associated with the development of new homes in Buntingford.
- 2.8 Buntingford's population (5,400) has hardly grown in the decade to March 2011 – an addition of only 160 people since the 2001 Census (5240). This level and proportion is much smaller than

seen across the rest of the District. However, there has been a considerable shift in the age profile of residents. This reflects the national trend but may also reflect the appeal of the town to those who are moving house following retirement. This may also reflect a stable or un-dynamic population with ageing cohorts of family households resident in the town. It could also be that the town is increasingly attractive to older families or be due to house prices making it less affordable for young families.

- 2.9 A high proportion (74%) of residents of working age are economically active, which is consistent with the District generally. It is interesting to note that 7% of residents over 65 are also economically active. The overall conclusion to be drawn from the analysis of economic activity is that it would appear that a high proportion of those who live in Buntingford, and would want to work, are able to find employment. This does not necessarily mean that the work they have is precisely what they want in terms of hours, location, pay or other attributes; but it does not suggest a fundamental problem in terms of access to jobs in Buntingford. The greatest issues in terms of the quality of jobs is likely to be in those who would wish to work full time rather than part-time, or those who would rather work locally than further afield.
- 2.10 In terms of the balance of workforce and jobs in the town, there is at present no up-to-date information on the extent to which jobs in Buntingford are filled by people who live outside the town, or the extent that people who live in Buntingford work outside of the town. This data will become available in due course when the 2011 Census Flow data are published. However, based on existing available information, it can be assumed that there is an estimated 1,420 jobs in Buntingford and 2,675 people who live in Buntingford who are in work. Of these, 755 people live and work in Buntingford (a self-containment ratio of 27%), 1,920 people travel out of Buntingford to work elsewhere and 540 people are employed by local employers plus 216 people can be classed as working from home. Therefore, some 880 people from outside Buntingford travel into the town to work, resulting in a net commuting outflow of 1,040 from the town.
- 2.11 In interpreting travel to work patterns it is relevant to note that East Herts District as a whole has a low level of self-containment, with East Herts being, in many senses, the rural hinterland of the major employment centres in the A1(M) and M11 corridors and in north and central London.

- 2.12 Section 4 also considers how the anticipated growth in population in the town will affect workforce and employment. There is no formula that says for a given economically active population there should be a certain number of jobs, but there is a general acceptance that it is good to encourage opportunities for people to work where they live and this is particularly important for lower income, lower skill groups and who wish to work part-time.
- 2.13 In addition to the 711 new homes already approved there are a potential 963 new homes that are yet to be determined, expected to appeal or are anticipated through future applications. If all these dwellings came forward this would take the number of new homes planned up to around 1,674 new homes. The Study uses several scenarios to determine the likely level of economically active population based on possible combinations of development. For example:
- Scenario A – assumes only those schemes currently approved are built (711 homes)
  - Scenario B – assumes the schemes that are currently approved are built plus the Sainsbury's depot site (711+ 327 = 1,038 homes)
  - Scenario C – assumes the schemes that are currently approved are built plus all current applications either pending or refused (711 + 327 Sainsbury's + 180 South of Hare Street Road + 56 Aspenden Bridge = 1,274 homes)
  - Scenario D – assumes Scenario C plus potential sites put forward by developers through the plan-making process (1,274 + 400 = 1,674)
- 2.14 These scenarios are important to inform the debate, not just of how many homes should be built in Buntingford, but the parallel consideration of how many jobs it would be desirable to secure in the town. By calculating the proportion of the new population who may be self-employed or working from home it is possible to calculate the proportion of those who are economically active and would need to find work, either locally or outside the town (estimated between 690 and 1,624 including self-employed and home workers). This informs the number of jobs and therefore the requirement of employment land. However, it should be noted that the issue of how much employment land is required also has to be rooted in the reality of how many and what type of employers can be attracted to Buntingford, and how many of these need B Class business space.

- 2.15 Section 5 analyses the existing centres of employment in Buntingford, past trends in development of employment floorspace and the current supply of employment land. This analysis indicates that there are relatively low vacancy levels in existing units but some of these are growing unsuitable for modern businesses and are not in the best location (with the exception of the Buntingford Business Park and the former Sainsbury's Depot site). An examination of the potential of the existing employment land in the town reveals that there are opportunities to create between approximately 660 to 930 jobs (including part-time) depending upon whether it was possible to bring forward land at Watermill Industrial estate. However, this would not match the increased demand from new development.
- 2.16 Section 6 looks more broadly at the potential to attract new B Class development to the town given its location and wider patterns of demand and supply. The Study suggests that new employment floorspace should be able to accommodate small to medium enterprises and that improvements are necessary in terms of broadband technology to attract and retain businesses. This chapter also examines the case for release of all or part of the Sainsbury's Depot site for development other than employment uses, and assesses the contribution that the Fairview Homes proposals would make to job creation. The Study estimates that the Fairview proposal of 1.2 ha of employment land could create employment potential for approximately 63 full time jobs or 75 jobs in total (subject to the amount of office floorspace provided). The care home element of the proposal could create a further 50 full time jobs or 60 jobs in total – a total of between 113 and 135 jobs).
- 2.17 The Study confirms that it is unlikely that the site would be attractive to a large single user. The consultants therefore conclude that at least part of the site should be released for other uses. Demand has remained strong in the town throughout the recession and of all the sites, the Sainsbury's Depot site is well suited to employment development and has the potential to be developed in a different format and hence complement development on land at Buntingford Business Park.
- 2.18 Section 7 explores how much of the Sainsbury's Depot site should be retained for employment and related uses; the scale and type of uses that could be accommodated and how this would fit with the wider availability of sites in Buntingford. The consultant generated two further scenarios built upon the employment potential of all the existing employment sites (from

Section 5) and the current Fairview proposal of 1.2 ha. The consultant then looked at how much additional land would be needed to accommodate the anticipated increase in employed population arising from Scenarios B and C (see paragraph 2.13 above).

- 2.19 If 2 ha of land were retained for employment uses at the Sainsbury's Depot site this would provide enough employment potential for 1,094 jobs – enough for Scenario B (1,007 additional employed population). A retention of 3 ha of land for employment uses would provide enough employment potential for 1,305 jobs – enough for Scenario C (1,236 additional employed population). These calculations would require all the employment potential at existing employment areas being delivered. The small amount of employment potential in excess of anticipated employed population is necessary in case the more constrained sites at the existing employment land sites are not developed or do not reach their potential. For example, if lower employment densities are achieved or no development occurs. Both scenarios indicate that if 3 ha of employment land at the Sainsbury's Depot site were retained and if the existing employment sites reached their employment potential there would still not be sufficient additional job potential to meet the anticipated increased employed population arising from Scenario D – if all permissions, current applications and potential applications came forward.
- 2.20 In terms of the Fairview Homes proposal, the Study suggests that the 1.2 ha of employment land currently proposed would only meet the demand for floorspace in Buntingford in the near future and provide only a modest boost to employment in the town. To provide choice and flexibility, the Study recommends that the Council look to retain more than 1.2 ha of employment land at the Sainsbury's Depot site to meet the requirements that may arise in the latter part of the Plan period. This reflects the status of the site as an existing designated employment site, and the fact that it is better suited to employment uses than two of the other employment sites in the town, and probably superior to the Buntingford Business Park. Demand would also come from a growth in customer service type businesses, including dentists, doctors, vets for example which would be expected as the town grows in population.
- 2.21 Section 8 brings together the conclusions of the Study and sets out an overall strategy for employment and development of commercial floorspace in Buntingford. The Study makes several recommendations for the Council. Normally the



recommendations of technical studies would be worked into the emerging District Plan or other strategies prepared by the Council. However, some of these recommendations will need to be considered now because of the immediate development proposals. These recommendations are summarised as follows:

### **Immediate**

- Retaining 2-3 hectares of land for employment purposes including employment generating uses on the former Sainsbury's Depot site. This would be to provide for the employment needs of the town between 2014 and 2031 (a 17 year period). The recommendations, if adopted, would provide the capacity to support the creation of an additional 1,110 to 1,300 jobs in Buntingford (around 900 to 1,100 FTE jobs).
- The Council should work with the developers of the Sainsbury's Depot site to develop an attractive environment for businesses that is well integrated within the overall mixed use development, recognising the different standards that different occupiers may seek.
- The Council's Development Management approach should be flexible to support the use of the employment land provided for uses other than B1 Use such as service-type businesses as well as B1 Uses.
- The Council should ensure that, if Fairview are committed to the construction of new employment space that there are enforceable conditions that determine the timing and quality of the development to be delivered.
- If Fairview are not committed to this delivery, then conditions should be placed on any developer of the Sainsbury's site that they ensure that the employment site is effectively promoted and marketed.

### **Through the District Plan process and other strategies**

- The Council should undertake a full assessment of broadband capacity and achievable speeds on the key employment sites in the town and address any deficiencies.
- The Council should explore with the County Council whether a case can be made for the dualling of the single carriageway section of the A10 to the south of the town, which would help with the marketing of the employment proposals.

2.22 The recommendation to retain between 2 to 3 ha of land at the Sainsbury's Depot is considered to be sensible and reasonable given the growing population of the town, the uncertainty of existing employment land reaching their potential to create new

jobs, and the desire to claw back some of the jobs lost through the closure of the depot in 2004.

### 3.0 Implications/Consultations

3.1 Information on any corporate issues and consultation associated with this report can be found within **Essential Reference Paper 'A'**.

3.2 In light of the level of public interest in development in Buntingford, it was considered appropriate to give local stakeholders the opportunity to see and comment on a draft of the Employment Study. Copies were sent to the Town Council and Civic Society and to local developers. Comments were made both through this opportunity and through the Draft District Plan Consultation. Comments were fed back to the consultant who made amendments to the Study as a result.

### Background Papers

- Buntingford Employment Study 2014 – <http://www.eastherts.gov.uk/buntempstudy2014>
- The East Herts Employment Land Review Update 2013 – <http://www.eastherts.gov.uk/elrupdate2013>
- East Herts Employment Forecasts and Strategic Economic Development Advice, DTZ 2012 – <http://www.eastherts.gov.uk/economicadvice>
- Employment Land and Policy Review 2008 – <http://www.eastherts.gov.uk/elr2008>

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