



Buntingford Employment Study

Final Report: Executive Summary

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East Hertfordshire District Council
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Executive Summary

1. This report sets out an overall vision and objectives for employment growth in Buntingford. In doing so it identifies the likely growth in the resident population and workforce of the town over the next 17 years, and considers the need to provide local employment and how this might be achieved.
2. The specific triggers that have led EHDC to commission this report are the application for redevelopment of the former Sainsbury's Distribution Depot for around 327 new homes and 1,700 sq m of employment floorspace; and approval for development of over 700 new homes elsewhere in Buntingford.
3. Around 5,400 people live in Buntingford in 2,130 households. The resident workforce of Buntingford totals some 2,870 people, 93% of whom are in work either as employees (80%) or on a self-employed basis (20%). However, only 1,320 people work for employers in Buntingford – and not all of these will live in the town.
4. The majority of residents who live in Buntingford and who are in work travel out of Buntingford to their place of employment (an estimated 1,920 people); it is estimated that only around 750 people both live and work in Buntingford – a self-containment ratio of only 26%.
5. The employment base of Buntingford has fallen significantly in the last decade, from in excess of 2,000 people in the period 1998-2004, to its current level of around 1,300 jobs. This is likely to be largely attributable to the closure of the Sainsbury's Distribution Depot in 2004.
6. While the population of Buntingford grew very little between 2001 and 2011, the population of the town will grow substantially in the next decade. New housing schemes already approved can be expected to increase the population of the town by around 1,700 people, while other schemes coming forward could, if approved, increase the population of the town by a further 2,350 people, an overall increase of 4,150 people.
7. Depending on the scale of new housing development, it can be expected that the total number of residents in employment will grow by between 690 and 1,625 people. Unless additional jobs are created in Buntingford, then all of these people will be commuting out of the town to work elsewhere – and the vast majority can be expected to drive to work, as they do at present.
8. In planning the future of the town, there is a need to address the issue of whether it would be desirable to grow the employment base of the town; and if so, how this should be achieved. Wessex Economics believe that it would be desirable to grow the employment base of the town to increase the opportunities for people to live in Buntingford and to work locally.
9. There is no guarantee that additional jobs created in Buntingford will be filled by local residents but the availability of local employment opportunities is particularly important to those who wish to work part time, those with lower skills and in lower paid work. Growth in the number of people who work in Buntingford, particularly if they are not residents, will help support retail and service activities in the town centre.
10. The largest employment site currently designated for employment use in Buntingford is the former Sainsbury's Distribution Depot site. This 11 hectare site has been vacant since 2004. Fairview Homes have applied for planning permission to develop 327 homes and 1,700 sq m of employment floorspace (on c1.2 ha of the site).

11. There are three other significant employment sites in Buntingford. The Park Farm Industrial Estate, Buntingford Business Park, and the Watermill Industrial Estate. There is capacity to accommodate some additional development on each of these sites, though there is doubt about the viability of developing B class floorspace on the Watermill Industrial Estate.
12. The former Sainsbury's Depot site has been marketed for distribution purposes without success. Wessex Economics conclude that a single business user is unlikely to be found for the site; and that there is no realistic prospect of the entirety of the site being required for employment purposes, given the essentially local character of demand for employment floorspace in Buntingford.
13. Therefore, it is appropriate that the site comes forward for mixed use development, with part of the site retained for employment development. The appropriate time frame within which to assess the requirement for employment land in Buntingford, and hence the quantum of employment land to be retained at the Sainsbury's Depot site, is that covered by the emerging Local Plan which covers the period to 2031.
14. Wessex Economics recommend that 2 to 3 ha of the former Sainsbury's Depot site should be retained for employment uses. This recommendation takes into account patterns of take up of employment floorspace in East Herts District, evidence presented by Fairview Homes on the viability of development, and the desirability of achieving a better balance between resident population and local employment opportunities.
15. The recommendation takes into account Wessex Economics' assessment that the former Sainsbury's Depot site is the best location for further development of employment floorspace in Buntingford in terms of location, existing access arrangements and the availability of essential infrastructure. It has the potential to attract a different type of user to that which might be attracted to the Buntingford Business Park.
16. A 2 ha retention of employment land on the Sainsbury's Depot site, incorporating Fairview Homes' proposal for 1,700 sq m of development on 1.2 ha, could deliver 5,560 sq m of mixed B1 business space in a development of one and two storey buildings; and could lead to the creation of around 300 jobs (full and part time). This would replace some of the jobs lost in Buntingford when the depot closed.
17. A 3 ha retention of employment land on the Sainsbury's Depot site, incorporating Fairview Homes' proposal for 1,700 sq m of development on 1.2 ha, could deliver 10,380 sq m of mixed B1 business space in a development of one and two storey buildings; and could lead to the creation of around 515 jobs (full and part time).
18. Wessex Economics envisage that the site could also attract a number of businesses that would create jobs but would not be deemed to be B class uses; for example, vets and doctors' surgeries; gyms and alternative therapy centres; and nurseries. Many well managed modern business parks attract such users, since land for modern buildings with good access and parking is often hard to find.
19. When allowance is made for the potential for additional development at the Buntingford Business Park (including the additional 3 ha allocation proposed in the draft Local Plan) and at the Park Farm Industrial Estate, it is estimated that there is capacity to create between 1,100 and 1,300 additional jobs in Buntingford over the period to 2031.

20. This would go a long way to creating local employment opportunities for the expected increase in working population of up to 1,625 people, and replacement of the jobs lost when the Sainsbury's Depot closed. It would contribute to moderating the very substantial net out-commuting from the town; and contribute to retention of a full range of services in the town centre.
21. EHDC and its partners should consider pursuing a range of actions in addition to the development of policy on employment sites as part of an overall employment strategy for Buntingford. These are set out below.
22. EHDC should undertake a full assessment of broadband capacity and achievable speeds on the key employment sites in the town (the Sainsbury's Depot Site, Buntingford Business Park and Park Farm Industrial Estate) and address any deficiencies. Marketing of sites will be significantly hampered if Buntingford cannot provide the same quality of connectivity as major towns in East Herts.
23. EHDC needs to work with the developers of the former 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 design and functional operation of this larger site will be important to its success.
24. EHDC as planning authority will need to be flexible in terms of its development planning decisions for the retained employment site on the Sainsbury's site, recognising that this is key to successful promotion of the site, so uses other than purely B1 use (eg sui generis and health and education uses) should in principle be allowed on the site, as long as they do not compromise other objectives
25. It is not clear yet what the overall quantum of housing development in Buntingford will be in the Local Plan period to 2031. EHDC should review with Hertfordshire County Council whether a case can be made for the dualling of the single carriageway section of the A10 to the south of Buntingford. This would help the marketing of the employment proposals at Buntingford
26. If a key part of Fairview Homes' proposition is that it is willing to commit to the construction of new employment space as part of the overall development scheme (as distinct from simply promoting or marketing retained allocations), then EHDC needs to ensure that there are enforceable conditions that determine the timing and quality of the development to be delivered.
27. If Fairview Homes are not committing to the construction of new employment floorspace, conditions should be placed on any developer of the Sainsbury's site that they ensure that the employment site is effectively promoted and marketed; the ideal position would be to ensure that the land is sold to a developer who has a proven track record of delivery of commercial floorspace and experience of working on smaller sites, delivering a good quality of development in smaller formats.
28. Loans are available through the Local Enterprise Partnerships to open up and develop new employment sites (notably the Growing Places Fund). If there is a need to improve telecoms or other infrastructure, this may provide a means of forward funding such improvements. EHDC should be willing to work with developers to bring sites forward and ensure the availability of essential infrastructure.