

East Herts Council Report

Executive

Date of meeting: Tuesday 18 March 2025

Report by: Councillor (Vicky Glover-Ward) – Executive Member for Planning and Growth

Report title: East Herts District Plan Review - Buntingford Employment Study 2025

Ward(s) affected: Buntingford;

Summary – An updated employment study for Buntingford has been undertaken to inform both the new District Plan and responses to speculative planning applications in the town. This report summarises the findings of the Buntingford Employment Study 2025, and seeks agreement to use the document as part of the new District Plan evidence base, and to inform Development Management decisions.

RECOMMENDATION FOR EXECUTIVE to recommend to Council that:

- a) The Buntingford Employment Study (2025), attached as Appendix A, be agreed as part of the evidence base to inform the new East Herts District Plan and as a material consideration for Development Management purposes in the determination of planning applications.**

1.0 Proposal(s)

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to advise Members of the completion of the Buntingford Employment Study 2025, which is intended to provide an updated understanding of the current employment market in Buntingford. Similar studies will be undertaken for the other towns in due course.
- 1.2 The results will help inform both policy and strategy decisions for Buntingford in the new District Plan, and the assessment of planning applications in the town. The study can influence future

proposals for vacant land allocated for employment at Buntingford Business Park and emerging employment development proposals approved as part of the mixed-use outline planning permission on land to the East of the A10.

2.0 Background

- 2.1 Local planning authorities are required to complete a review of their local plans at least once every 5 years from the adoption date to ensure that plans remain relevant. In October 2023, the Council agreed that East Herts District Plan 2018 needs updating and that work should commence in 2023/24 on updating the technical studies and other preparatory work required to provide a robust evidence base to support this update¹. The 30 month period of formal plan-making will then commence in January 2026.

District Plan Evidence Base

- 2.2 A clear, relevant and proportionate evidence base is essential for efficient and sound plan-making to ensure that all future planning policy and decisions are based on up-to-date information. The National Planning Policy Framework (2024) sets out the requirement for the preparation and review of all policies to be *'underpinned by relevant and up-to-date evidence'* (paragraph 32).
- 2.3 The evidence base consists of supporting documents that will help inform the future policies and site allocations in the new District Plan. It will cover a range of social, economic, and environmental topics and help identify local needs, constraints and opportunities. Some of the evidence will update previous studies prepared to support the current adopted District Plan. Many of these are now around 10 years old and need updating to reflect contextual and policy changes. Equally, additional evidence will be needed to address new issues and topics that have become more prevalent in recent years.

¹ [Agenda for Executive on Tuesday 3rd October, 2023, 7.00 pm - East Herts District Council](#)

- 2.4 The evidence base will be developed throughout the preparation of the District Plan. As new studies are finalised, the planning policy team will seek agreement from Executive and Council to include them as part of the new District Plan evidence base.

Need for Buntingford Employment Study

- 2.5 An update of the Buntingford Employment Study is part of this evidence base. An employment study was published for the town in 2014 to inform both the strategy in the adopted District Plan and responses to speculative planning applications, including the redevelopment of the former Sainsbury's Distribution Depot.
- 2.6 Ten years on, Buntingford has experienced significant housing growth, alongside changes to employment provision in the town. Since 2011, over 1,700 dwellings have been granted planning permission and many of these are complete and occupied. As the only town in the district not constrained by Green Belt, Buntingford continues to face development pressure and there are a number of speculative planning applications currently to be determined by the Council. With increasing national demand for housing, infrastructure, industry and employment opportunities, this development pressure is likely to continue, particularly if the Council cannot demonstrate a five year housing land supply.
- 2.7 The relationship between jobs and housing is a key consideration in the delivery of sustainable development. Therefore, it is important to understand the current employment market in Buntingford, including existing supply and opportunities for new provision. The impact of wider socio-economic changes since 2014 also need to be considered, including the change in working practices following Covid 19 and sectoral and policy changes.

3.0 Reason(s)

- 3.1 As outlined above, planning policy must be evidence-based so it is important to update the Buntingford Employment Study to ensure that the Council has an up to date understanding of the local

employment context in the town. The Study will guide strategy and policy decisions in the new District Plan about the provision and type of employment land needed in Buntingford. It will also be used to inform planning application decision-making, including the current speculative planning application for significant employment land to the west of the town and future reserved matters applications for employment uses at land East of the A10, which was granted at appeal in August 2024.

- 3.2 However, it is important to recognise that this Study will be part of a wider evidence base, and the strategy for supporting employment in Buntingford in the new District Plan will also be informed by wider employment, housing, infrastructure and environmental considerations, at both a strategic and local level.
- 3.3 The Buntingford Employment Study 2025 has been produced by AECOM, in collaboration with the Council. An overview is provided below and a copy of the Study is attached at **Appendix A**.

Overview of the Study

- 3.4 The purpose of the Buntingford Employment Study is to focus on the town of Buntingford so the area was defined using Lower Super Output Areas (LSOAs), rather than the ward boundary which covered a wider geographical area. However, the study area has to include four LSOAs to incorporate all the built up area of the town, so also includes a number of villages. Throughout the study detailed demographic and employment analysis is for the study area so slightly overstates the population and jobs in Buntingford town itself, but this is not material to the analysis presented in this report.
- 3.5 The Study comprises of the following seven sections:
- **Introduction** – describes the study context and sets out the approach of the study; examining the existing situation in Buntingford and then exploring the potential future requirements for employment space in the town.

- **Strategic context**- outlines the local background and the national and local policy context.
- **Socio-economic profile**– presents the socio-economic characteristics of Buntingford, compared against the district and wider geographies. Key trends identified include:
 - Population growth in the town between 2015 and 2022 has been significantly higher than district and national averages, and recent planning permissions for further residential development suggests this trend will continue;
 - Sixty-four percent of the population are economically active, which is broadly in line with the East Herts average, whilst unemployment is lower than the district average;
 - Outward commuting in the town exceeds inward commuting.
 - In terms of the employment sectors within the town, Buntingford registers sizable proportions of employment in the construction and motor trades sectors, well above the comparator areas, while manufacturing is also prominent considering the district average. The construction sector has seen notable growth since the last employment study.
 - In relation to the sectors driving office-based employment, Buntingford sees a high proportion of employment in the professional, scientific and technical and business administration and support services, though these sit well below the East Herts average.
- **Property market assessment** – provides a review of commercial property with information on building stock, vacancy, rental values and net absorption. Notably there is no known vacant employment floorspace identified in Buntingford, suggesting a lack of spare capacity in the local market. Although, there has been some recent gain in office and industrial floorspace, significant employment floorspace has been lost in the town between 2014 and 2023. The gains are due to development of vacant land at Watermill Industrial Estate, whilst losses can be attributed to the redevelopment of employment land at the former Sainsbury's depot and residential development on part of Park Farm Industrial Estate. Agent feedback suggests there is particularly robust demand in the town for industrial

units. Buntingford is dominated by microbusinesses (companies employing up to nine employees), which account for 92.4% of local units.

- **Existing employment sites** – sets out the relative characteristics (including uses, unit size and type, rental rates, access, amenity) of the three existing employment sites in the town: Buntingford Business Park; Park Farm Industrial Estate and Watermill Industrial Estate.
- **Land for employment development**– examines the potential of existing land available for employment development in Buntingford: vacant land at Buntingford Business Park allocated for employment uses by District Plan Policy BUNT3 and employment land recently granted permission at appeal on land to the East of the A10. It should be noted that only employment land where the Council has agreed the principle is included.
- **Conclusions and recommendations** – As detailed below, this section sets out evidence-based conclusions and recommendations and suggests a strategy for employment development in Buntingford.

Study conclusions and recommendations

3.6 The conclusions and recommendations in the Study range from strategic policy considerations to more detailed or site-specific recommendations. They are framed around three questions.

Is it desirable to increase the number of jobs in Buntingford?

3.7 The analysis demonstrates that additional employment space is required in Buntingford, to address a notable disparity between population and employment growth in the town, suggesting a need for greater balance to support sustainable development. Between 2015 and 2022, the total population and economically active population increased by 33% and 27% respectively, due to new residential development in the town. The difference between the total and the economically active population growth is

primarily explained by an increase in the number of retired people, as set out in table 4.2 of the Study. Comparative to population increase, the number of jobs only increased by 11%. There is no formula that says for a given economically active population there should be a certain number of jobs and likewise there is no guarantee that providing more jobs in the town will increase self-containment as people commute to jobs for numerous reasons. However, 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 those who wish to work part-time.

- 3.8 The loss of employment land and lack of spare capacity in the property market also support the need for additional employment space in Buntingford. In this regard, the analysis suggests that the development of vacant land at Buntingford Business Park and land to the east of the A10 in Buntingford (Ref 3/23/1447/OUT) could result in the generation of between 275 and 736 Full Time Equivalent (FTE) jobs, representing growth of 12-33% on current employment in Buntingford.

What sort of jobs could be attracted or developed in Buntingford?

- 3.9 The Study concludes that Buntingford acts as relatively self-contained from a commercial property market perspective. Sectors such as construction, manufacturing and wholesale and retail trades, as well as wider foundational sectors, which deliver the essential goods and services required by the local population, are likely to remain prominent in the local economy. It outlines that future demand for employment land floorspace in Buntingford is likely to centre on the industrial use classes. In addition, although transport improvements such as the Little Hadham Bypass improve access to Bishop's Stortford, Stansted Airport and the M11 and provide some potential for warehousing and storage uses in Buntingford, it is concluded that larger industrial and logistics uses

are likely to come forward in more strategic locations such as Bishop's Stortford.

- 3.10 Given that microbusinesses account for most local businesses, it is anticipated that they will continue to drive demand for smaller, flexible units that can accommodate E class uses². However, reflecting the presence of some small and medium sized businesses in the town and demand for larger units remaining robust over the past 15 years, the provision of a range of unit sizes that provide flexibility and can support the growth aspirations of local businesses is recommended.

What actions need to be taken to achieve the desired outcomes?

- 3.11 To ensure a strong, responsive and competitive economy in Buntingford, the Study recommends that the Council prioritise the following actions:

- Provide a mix of unit sizes to accommodate a range of potential occupiers and to support the potential growth requirements of local businesses. In general, the majority of demand is anticipated to be for small to medium units- the 0-250 sqm bracket for E(g) uses and 0-1,000 sqm for B class uses; though there is evidence of demand for larger units as seen at Buntingford Business Park.
- Protect existing employment sites and encourage completion of existing permissions. Whereupon existing employment land is lost to residential or other uses, or permissions including employment space do not come forward, or are developed in whole or in part for different uses than have currently been consented, this land or floorspace should be re-provided to a similar or improved quantity and quality specification.
- The Council should work proactively with the landowner at Buntingford Business Park to ensure the site comes forward for employment uses. Likewise, the Council should engage with the developer at the site to the East of the A10 to ensure the

² Use Class E is a broad category for commercial, business and service uses introduced in September 2020 as an amendment to the 1987 Use Class Order.

provision of employment space closely aligns with requirements in Buntingford.

- The Council should continue to regularly monitor changes to existing and newly delivered employment space to identify evolving occupier/developer patterns and inform any policy responses that will be required.
- Should the wider new District Plan evidence base support the need for additional employment land at the district level, the evidence presented suggests a potential requirement for additional employment land in Buntingford. In considering additional employment land, or whether the existing supply of employment land is fit for purpose, a number of criteria should be considered including accessibility, sustainable transport links, infrastructure provision, site constraints and ownership.

Conclusion

3.12 It is the view of officers that the Buntingford Employment Study 2025 provides detailed updated information which refreshes the study carried out in 2014. Therefore it is recommended the study is agreed as part of the new District Plan evidence base and as a material consideration in the determination of planning applications.

4.0 Options

4.1 The Council could choose not to agree to the update of the Buntingford Employment Study but this would be contrary to Government policy to have an up-to-date evidence base and would undermine the Council's position in terms of successfully bringing forward the revision of the East Herts District Plan, 2018. It would also mean that the Study would have less weight in the determination of planning applications in Buntingford. Given the number of large, speculative planning applications in Buntingford it

is particularly important that the Council publish an up-to-date employment study.

5.0 Risks

- 5.1 If the Buntingford Employment Study 2025 is not agreed, the Council will not be able to use it as evidence to inform the strategy and the policy in the new District Plan. Relying on out-of-date evidence will threaten the soundness of the Plan. Equally, without the 2025 Study the Council will not be able to ensure that the development management process takes into account the latest recommendations about the employment requirements in the town.

6.0 Implications/Consultations

- 6.1 As part of their research, the consultants consulted a property market agent recommended by the Council's Economic Development Officer. The study will be subject to a number of statutory public consultations as part of the production of the new District Plan.

Community Safety

There are no community safety implications arising from this report.

Data Protection

There are no data protection implications arising from this report.

Equalities

There are no direct equality, diversity, or inclusion implications in this report. An Equalities Impact Assessment (EqIA) will be carried out of the new District Plan in accordance with The Equality Act 2010.

Environmental Sustainability

The purpose of the planning system is to contribute to the achievement of sustainable development, including the provision of commercial development in a sustainable manner.

Financial

The District Plan is being updated from existing budgets, including reserves that have been safeguarded for this purpose.

Health and Safety

There are no health and safety implications arising from this report.

Human Resources

There are no human resources implications arising from this report.

Human Rights

There are no human rights implications arising from this report.

Legal

There are no legal implications arising from this report.

Specific Wards

Buntingford

7.0 Background papers, appendices and other relevant material

7.1 Appendix A: Buntingford Employment Study 2025

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