

## **East Herts Council Report**

### **District Planning Executive Panel**

**Date of meeting:** Tuesday 23 June 2026

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

**Report title:** Local Plan: Sawbridgeworth Employment Study

**Ward(s) affected:** Sawbridgeworth

### **Summary**

- Members have agreed to prepare a new Local Plan including an update of the evidence documents needed to support the new Plan. The Sawbridgeworth Employment Study provides an updated assessment of the employment market in the town and makes recommendations about the type of jobs and employment land likely to be required, which will help shape the economic strategy in the new Local Plan. This report summarises the key priorities of the Study and seeks agreement to use the document as part of the new Local Plan evidence base, and to inform Development Management decisions.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE DISTRICT PLANNING EXECUTIVE PANEL: that the Executive be advised that:**

- A) The Sawbridgeworth Employment Study, attached as Appendix A, be agreed as part of the evidence base to inform the new East Herts Local 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 Sawbridgeworth Employment Study, and to agree it can be used as part of the evidence base for the new Local Plan and as a material consideration in the determination of planning applications.

## **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 the East Herts District Plan 2018 needs updating, and that work should commence on updating the technical studies and other preparatory work required to provide a robust evidence base. The intention to formally start plan-making was agreed by Council on 10 June 2026.
- 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 (NPPF, 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 Local Plan. It will cover a range of social, economic, and environmental topics and help identify local needs, constraints and opportunities.
- 2.4 The evidence base will be developed throughout the preparation of the new Local Plan and the planning policy team will seek agreement from Executive via the District Plan Executive Panel to include relevant studies as part of the evidence base. Because of the nature of the Sawbridgeworth Employment Study and its potential to influence policy formulation, it is considered appropriate to include it within the Council's evidence base.
- 2.5 The employment land market in Sawbridgeworth is small, and it is the only town in East Herts without any designated employment sites. There are limited employment opportunities and many residents work outside the town, so settlement employment studies have previously concentrated on the other towns in the district, where opportunities for jobs growth and demand for employment land, are more robust. However, as one of the towns in the district, officers consider it important to understand the

characteristics and function of the local employment market and its relationship with the wider area in supporting economic growth.

- 2.6 The Council commissioned consultant Aecom to produce the study, using desktop research and feedback from Epping Forest District Council and local agents. It forms part of a series of employment studies for each of the towns in East Herts. Buntingford and Bishop's Stortford Employment Studies have recently been published and the Hertford and Ware Employment Study is the subject of a separate paper on this agenda.
- 2.7 To ensure all the built-up area of Sawbridgeworth is included within the analysis, the study area incorporates the rural area surrounding the town, following Lower Super Output Area (LSOA) boundaries. There is also a clear relationship between Sawbridgeworth and Lower Sheering, to the east of the River Stort, adjacent to the town. Lower Sheering lies within Epping Forest District but effectively functions as part of the built-up area of Sawbridgeworth, so has been included in the study area.

### **3.0 Reason(s)**

- 3.1 The relationship between jobs and housing is a key consideration in the delivery of sustainable development. Compared to other towns in the district, housing growth in Sawbridgeworth has been relatively modest, with two District Plan sites (SAWB2 and SAWB3) complete and the last allocated site (SAWB4) under construction. There are significant changes coming forward in the area with development at Harlow and Gilston Garden Town. Given the proximity to Sawbridgeworth, this is likely to have a local impact.
- 3.2 In recent years, major societal changes have occurred, including the Covid pandemic and Brexit, which have shaped the way business and industry both structures itself and operates. The purpose of this Study is to provide an up-to-date assessment of Sawbridgeworth's employment market, to consider these changes in the local context and provide robust evidence that can inform the emerging Local Plan. The study explores the relationship between people living in the area and local jobs; the function of existing employment land and the changing role of the town centre as a location for offices. It provides an essential understanding of employment land-use requirements in

Sawbridgeworth, which will help shape the economic strategy in the new Local Plan. The focus on offices in the town centres will also contribute to wider evidence about the function and character of the town centres, which is explored in more detail in the retail and towns centres study, the subject of a separate paper on this agenda.

3.3 The Sawbridgeworth Employment Study is attached to this report at **Appendix A**.

3.4 The Study comprises of the following sections:

- **Introduction and strategic context** – sets out the approach of the study; describes the local context and the national and local policy framework.
- **Socio-economic profile** – presents the socio-economic characteristics of the Sawbridgeworth study area, compared against the district and wider geographies.
- **Property market assessment** – provides a review of office and industrial floorspace, with information on building stock, vacancy, rental values and demand. Explores external factors that could influence employment floorspace in the town in the coming years, such as the proposed introduction of minimum energy efficiency standards and the continued influence of changing space requirements for office and knowledge work following the Covid-19 pandemic.
- **Existing employment clusters** – Sets out the relative characteristics (including uses, vacancy, unit size and type, rental rates, access, amenity) of existing employment clusters that have been identified in the Sawbridgeworth area using CoStar data. These sites include The Maltings (a designated employment site in the Epping Forest District Local Plan), Riverside Business Park and Clarklands Industrial Estate.
- **Conclusions and recommendations** –sets out evidence-based conclusions and recommendations and outlines a potential strategy for the development of employment land in Sawbridgeworth.

### **Study conclusions and recommendations**

3.5 Based on the analysis of the preceding sections, section 7 presents the conclusions and recommendations of the Study,

framed around the three questions set out below.

*Is it desirable to increase the number of jobs in Sawbridgeworth?*

- 3.6 Population growth in Sawbridgeworth is relatively modest. The demographic profile indicates that while increasing local employment opportunities is desirable, the scale of growth pressure is not significant. Whilst it is important to balance existing housing commitments with jobs, to support sustainable development, there is no guarantee that providing more jobs in the town will reduce out-commuting as people commute to jobs for numerous reasons. Indeed, the analysis indicates that wider commercial development in competing locations is likely to satisfy some of the demand from the resident population in Sawbridgeworth. Agents reported that larger centres such as Bishop's Stortford and Harlow, alongside future proposals at Harlow and Gilston Garden Town (HGGT), present accessible opportunities for Sawbridgeworth residents. Heritage significance in the town centre and congestion on the A1184 are also identified as constraints, limiting opportunities for new employment land.
- 3.7 On balance, modest population growth allied with constraints facing the town, suggest that future employment growth would be more readily accommodated in larger centres and HGGT. However, supporting local employment opportunities remains desirable, but this growth is likely to be met through infill development and the refurbishment /redevelopment of existing sites, rather than through additional employment land.

*What sort of jobs could be attracted or developed in Sawbridgeworth?*

- 3.8 Sawbridgeworth represents a small share of East Herts office market (2.6% of floorspace) and industrial market (3.9 %). Demand for office floorspace is driven by access to a small town with good local amenities and a train station. Future demand in office related sectors would be expected to align with the current structure of the economy, focusing on microbusinesses and Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in local professional services such as lawyers, accountants, architects and financial advisors. Any future industrial growth, were it to be accommodated, would

likely focus on prominent sectors such as construction and manufacturing.

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

- 3.9 To ensure a strong, responsive and competitive economy in Sawbridgeworth, the Study recommends that the Council prioritise the following actions:
- Consider safeguarding existing sites set out in Section 6 of the Study, where possible.
  - While limited demand for additional employment land to support office and industrial development was identified, the Council should look to ensure existing stock remains fit for purpose. There may be opportunities to support the refurbishment/renovation of sites or to accommodate infill development, given the age and quality profile of stock and sites identified in Sections 5 and 6 of the Study. However, this will need to be considered in relation to the site-specific.
  - Where 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.
  - Review opportunities to work with landlords and occupiers to improve office properties in the town centre before they become non-compliant with minimum energy efficiency standards. Also consider the role of more innovative office spaces, for example co-working offices.
  - 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. This is particularly important where there is flexibility for E (g) uses (e.g. office and light industrial) to later change to non-employment uses classes within the E Use Class.
- 3.10 These recommendations can usefully inform policy and strategy decisions about future employment land-use within Sawbridgeworth in the emerging Local Plan and in planning application decisions. The Study provides a robust and up-to-date understanding of the local employment market. When considered

alongside other studies within the evidence base, including a district-wide employment demand assessment and land supply assessments, it will effectively support decisions about the future economic strategy for Sawbridgeworth. Therefore, it is recommended the study is agreed as part of the new Local 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 endorse the Sawbridgeworth Employment Study as part of the new Local Plan evidence base. This would mean that the Local Plan would not be able to rely on this evidence to inform emerging policy and strategy, and it could compromise the progression of the plan. It would also likely cause difficulties during the plan-making process, particularly when the Council defends its strategy at the Examination stage.

#### **5.0 Risks**

5.1 If the Sawbridgeworth Employment Study is not agreed as part of the evidence base, it may be considered as having reduced weight in informing the new Local Plan and planning application decisions. It would mean the Council would not have a current understanding of the employment market in the Sawbridgeworth area. This is contrary to Government policy to have an up-to-date evidence base and could undermine the Council's position in terms of successfully bringing forward the new Local Plan.

#### **6.0 Implications/Consultations**

6.1 As part of their research, the consultants consulted three property market agents active in the Sawbridgeworth area. The study will be made available on the website, in the Local Plan Evidence base section, and be subject to several statutory public consultations as part of the production of the new Local 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 Local 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. Evidence to support provision and location of employment land has a range of implications for environmental sustainability including how people choose to travel to work and how far they need to travel, the impact of noise and other disturbance from employment uses on other uses and the ability of communities to find the services and facilities they need in the places they live.

## **Financial**

There are no financial implications arising from this report.

## **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**

Yes - Sawbridgeworth

## **7.0 Background papers, appendices and other relevant material**

### **7.1 Appendix A: Sawbridgeworth Employment Study**

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