

Examination of the Welwyn Hatfield Local Plan

Council's Statement - Stage 8 Hearing session

**Development Management Supplementary
Issues**

Policy Number: SP7, SP8, SP17, SP21

Matter number: 4

Issues: Topic Specific Policies

Question Numbers: N/A



Matter 4 – Topic Specific Policies

Issue

In the context of the plan's overall vision and strategy are the Topic Specific Policies positively prepared, justified, effective and consistent with national planning policy and therefore a sound basis to manage development within the Borough during the plan period?

SP 7 Type and Mix of Housing

Should the criteria in the section that refers to off-site purpose-built student accommodation, be extended to include university endorsement; pastoral care; a proven demand from the student population; a reference to a loss of existing housing; car parking standards; amenity space and warden control?

Welwyn Hatfield Response

a) In short, no. The relevant part of Policy SP7 states:

Purpose built student accommodation: *Purpose built on-campus student accommodation to meet the demonstrated needs of higher education providers in the borough will be supported where this is in accordance with a master-plan that has been approved by the Council. Off-site purpose built student accommodation will be supported where it is highly accessible to a main university or college campus within the borough by walking, cycling and public transport and provides sufficient on-site car parking. Development should not on its own, or cumulatively with other similar developments in the area, have a significant adverse impact on the amenity of residents and local communities, or on the character of the area.*

b) In response to consultation at Regulation 19 stage, the University of Hertfordshire, in representation dlpps 2215, sought a number of changes in so far as the policy relates to off-campus¹ accommodation, as follows:

Off-site purpose built student accommodation will be supported where it is:

- Endorsed by a University and has adequate levels of pastoral care and welfare support;
- Demonstrate need for such development and that it meets proven demand from the student population in terms of price and type of accommodation;
- The development not resulting in the loss of existing market housing and affordable housing;
- Highly accessible to a main university or college campus within the Borough by walking, cycling and public transport; and
- Provides sufficient on-site car parking that is in-line with University and Council adopted parking standards.
- Provide a good level of outdoor amenity space;
- If appropriate, being warden-controlled to minimize any potential for anti-social behaviour

¹ A modification is proposed

- c) As set out in the Council's Regulation 22 Statement of Consultation 2017 (SUB/1), the Council does not consider it necessary to amend the Policy in any of the ways proposed by the representor in order to make the plan sound.
- d) **University endorsement.** It is not considered necessary for a third party, in this case a university, to endorse off-campus purpose built student accommodation in order for planning permission to be granted or to make the plan sound. The Local Planning Authority is the decision maker. A university may well be a consultee and comments received at application stage would be taken into account. However, even if endorsement was not forthcoming, it would not necessarily mean that an application would not be permitted in light of all material considerations.
- e) Mechanisms already exist for students (of either the University of Hertfordshire or the Royal Veterinary College) to access accommodation that has been assessed for quality standards. The PAL scheme (Partnership Accreditation for Landlords), of which the University of Hertfordshire is a sponsor, was launched in 2012 by Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council and the University of Hertfordshire to help students and other private rental tenants find good quality homes in the borough. The website has a section dedicated to helping students find good quality, well managed accommodation².
- f) **Pastoral care³ and welfare support.** The UH has a dedicated Community Liaison and Support Officer who is responsible for the welfare and pastoral care of students living in private off-campus accommodation including those who commute into Hatfield⁴.
- g) It's website signposts students to a Student Wellbeing service⁵, providing support for emotional, mental health, disability and health related issues as well as a chaplaincy service for spiritual growth and well-being, with a Student Support Service⁶ specifically for students living on-campus.
- h) It also recognises that Hatfield has a variety of support services available off-campus, which are used by residents and students (principally health related examples are signposted on the university's website).
- i) In addition, students also have access to the Hertfordshire Students union Advice and Support Centre, which offers free, confidential and impartial advice on a variety of issues, including mental health, and provides a 'buddy' scheme to help students settle into university life⁷.
- j) It is not considered necessary to modify policy SP7 to place a requirement on new off-campus student accommodation to effectively make provision for services that are either the responsibility of others or are otherwise provided through other mechanisms. It may be that a university may need to forge a relationship with off-

² <https://www.pal-online.org.uk/students/>

³ Pastoral care - emotional, social and spiritual support

⁴ <https://www.herts.ac.uk/life/student-accommodation/accommodation-support>

⁵ <https://www.herts.ac.uk/life/support-and-wellbeing/student-wellbeing>

⁶ <https://www.herts.ac.uk/life/student-accommodation/accommodation-support>

⁷ <https://hertfordshire.su/your-support/>

campus providers to help increase visibility of care and support services for their students but it is not considered a necessary requirement to make the plan sound.

- k) ***Need and demand for development:*** The ‘need’ (or requirement) for student accommodation is a consequence of supply and demand. Where the borough’s higher education providers are unable to supply sufficient levels of accommodation to meet demand, the market will intervene, and has intervened, to offer alternatives.
- l) The University of Hertfordshire (UH), (Reg. 19, paragraph 2.3.8) recognises that not all students can or want to live on campus. Its priority is to house first year and international students. It also recognises that many students seek affordable accommodation within the community (largely in houses of multiple occupation) particularly in second and subsequent years.
- m) In Welwyn Hatfield, the full demand for student accommodation cannot be met by higher education providers through on-campus supply for the number of students requiring accommodation in the local area away from their normal or previous place of residence.
- n) The market has responded accordingly so that in Welwyn Hatfield, where students are unable (or choose not to) live in purpose built on-campus accommodation, they instead live in Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs), with family or friends, or in purpose built off-campus accommodation. Indeed, throughout the length of a degree course, students may live in more than one type of accommodation.
- o) The more recent provision of purpose built off-campus accommodation in Hatfield has provided some diversity within the market, offering a choice to students and helping to meet the demand for accommodation. This has been a helpful development, in a town where the concentration of Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMO) had reached such levels to prompt the Council to adopt a Supplementary Planning Document in 2012 to help manage an over-concentration of HMOs in certain areas and help create balanced and sustainable communities⁸.
- p) ***Demand in terms of price and type of accommodation:*** Like all forms of housing, the demand for and price of accommodation will vary depending on matters such location, the quality of the local environment, proximity to services and facilities, and the size, type and quality of accommodation.
- q) The UH on-campus accommodation is no different, providing choice in terms of size and type, e.g. between twin or single rooms, en-suite and premium rooms or studio accommodation, with prices varying⁹ between around £4,200 and just over £10,000 p.a. (between £100-200 per week) for the academic year 2020/21.
- r) The representor considers that the plan fails to meet student need by the delivery of unaffordable housing [for students]. However, by way of comparison, a private

⁸ https://www.welhat.gov.uk/media/4755/Houses-in-Multiple-Occupation-SPD-07-02-2012/pdf/Houses_in_Multiple_Occupation_SPD_February_2012.pdf?m=634637909920000000

⁹ <https://www.herts.ac.uk/life/student-accommodation>

provider in Hatfield (Curzon Point) is offering rooms for students for between £138 and £199 per week¹⁰, sitting within the cost range offered by the UH.

- s) Private sector providers would not seek to deliver additional accommodation in the borough if they did not consider there was a demand. They will only operate well if its prices are competitive with alternative options and if it has willing occupants. It not considered necessary to make a change to policy in order to make the plan sound.
- t) **The loss of market or affordable housing:** Policy SADM9 deals with the loss of dwellings (affordable or otherwise). The policy allows for certain circumstances where losses may be applicable, e.g. where the social, economic or environmental benefits of doing so are demonstrated to significantly outweigh the need to minimise net losses to the borough's housing stock.
- u) The delivery of student accommodation makes a valuable contribution towards overall housing supply¹¹. In Welwyn Hatfield, the net contribution can be seen in the table below.

Student Accommodation Completions						
	Gross Gain Student Bed spaces	Loss Student Bed Spaces	Net Gain Student Bed Spaces	Dwelling Equivalents (Net)	On Campus Net Gains	Off Campus Net Gains
2013/14	111	0	111	44	0	44
2014/15	696	511	185	74	74	0
2015/16	1003	548	455	182	182	0
2016/17	812	0	812	325	325	0
2017/18	0	0	0	0	0	0
2018/19	0	0	0	0	0	0
2019/20*	308	0	308	123	0	123
Total Completions	2930	1059	1871	748	581	167

*Provisional Data

- v) It is considered that sufficient local plan policy mechanisms are in place to protect the existing dwelling stock and allow for the circumstances where net losses may be appropriate. It is not considered necessary to modify Policy SP7 as suggested by the representor (a less flexible approach) in order to make the plan sound.
- w) **Car parking:** Policies SADM2, SADM3 and SADM12 (Parking, servicing and refuse) of the plan will adequately deal with parking, transport and travel related matters. The Council also has a set of adopted car parking standards, which it proposes to review in light of LTP4¹². It is not considered necessary to modify Policy SP7 to make

¹⁰ <https://www.hellostudent.co.uk/student-accommodation/hatfield/curzon-point/#book> (March 2020)

¹¹ In accordance with the Planning Policy Guidance - Housing and Economic Land Availability Assessment, paragraphs 42 and 43, student accommodation can contribute to housing delivery based on the 'amount of accommodation it releases to the market'. A ratio of 2.5:1 is applied to any C1 student completions as outlined in the Housing Delivery Measurement Test Rulebook published by MHCLG in July 2018.

¹² Stage 3 Hearing, Session 10, WHBC Statement

reference to another set of parking standards (as suggested by the representor) in order to make the plan sound.

- x) **Outdoor amenity space:** Policy SADM11 requires all proposals to create and protect a good standard of amenity for buildings and open space. It is not considered necessary to modify Policy SP7 to make the plan sound.
- y) **Warden controlled accommodation:** The representor considers that there should be a policy requirement for a warden (if appropriate) in order to minimise potential for anti-social behaviour.
- z) The University's Community Liaison & Support Officer is responsible for the discipline of students living in private off-campus accommodation. They also act as the link between the University and local community¹³ and investigate student-related Community complaints, concerns and incidents.
- aa) In addition, the Council has processes in place for dealing with anti-social behavior, working in partnership with other organisations¹⁴. Separate legislation provides for certain steps to be taken if deemed necessary.
- bb) A policy requirement for a warden would most likely add additional costs to accommodation charges (and the UH has noted concerns about the cost of accommodation). The representor has not demonstrated that such provision is necessary to deliver on-site, that it would be viable to deliver, or in what circumstances, at planning application stage, such a requirement would or would not be deemed 'appropriate'.
- cc) It is not considered that the representor has demonstrated that a policy requirement for a warden is necessary to make the plan sound, or that it would be viable to deliver.
- dd) **Proposed modification:** A pre-submission minor modification was proposed in the schedule of rolling changes¹⁵ to the 12th paragraph of Policy SP7 as follows so that the terminology used is consistent with the first line of this policy section. The policy sub-section would read as follows:

Purpose built student accommodation: *Purpose built on-campus student accommodation to meet the demonstrated needs of higher education providers in the borough will be supported where this is in accordance with a master-plan that has been approved by the Council. ~~Off-site~~ **On-campus** purpose built student accommodation will be supported where it is highly accessible to a main university or college campus within the borough by walking, cycling and public transport and provides sufficient on-site car parking. Development should not on its own, or cumulatively with other similar developments in the area, have a significant adverse impact on the amenity of residents and local communities, or on the character of the area.*

¹³ <https://www.pal-online.org.uk/students/>

¹⁴ <https://www.welhat.gov.uk/community-safety/asb>

¹⁵ https://welhat.gov.uk/media/12600/Schedule-of-Rolling-Changes-Updated-15-September-2017/pdf/Minor_modifications_-_Schedule_of_Rolling_Changes.pdf?m=636409974298870000

SP 8 The Local Economy

Should the first bullet point be qualified to enable an exception when it can be demonstrated that the loss of a Class B Use can be provided to a comparable or greater quality elsewhere within the borough?

Welwyn Hatfield response

- a) Policy SP8 sets out the broad ways in which the Council will support economic prosperity, and encourage inward investment and the creation of a range of local jobs. The first of these is to resist the loss of land from class B uses. In recent years this has been a significant challenge and a substantial amount of employment land and floorspace has been lost. Much, though not all of this has been through office to residential conversions. Whilst the Council is progressing an Article 4 Direction to safeguard office space on four key employment sites, the borough is still vulnerable to the loss of employment space, in particular whilst it does not have a five year land supply for housing.
- b) It is important to recognise that the bullet points in Policy SP8 are broad principles which set out the Council's objectives and underpin more detailed policy. As such they are not intended to be detailed policy in themselves. Whilst the idea which has been proposed of having new land or floorspace provided to offset any losses has some attractions, there are a number of practical difficulties with this approach.
- c) Firstly, in a plan led system, the Local Plan process is the most appropriate mechanism for determining the quantity and location of land for a variety of uses. It would appear unlikely that any such replacement land would have gone through this process so it would be unlikely that full consideration of all possible alternatives would have been undertaken.
- d) Secondly, the means of assessing whether any such land proposed was of "a comparable or greater quality" is likely to be very subjective. Without a robust process to assess any such proposed site against reasonable alternatives, such as the Local Plan process, it is difficult to judge how this would be properly assessed. It is also difficult to judge how the quality of such a proposed site would be assessed against an existing one which was proposed for an alternative use.
- e) Thirdly, it is difficult to understand where any such land would be located. In an area like Welwyn Hatfield where the vast majority of undeveloped land lies in the green belt, identifying areas of such land is likely to be extremely difficult. If land which might be appropriate for employment development existed, was available for development, and would be attractive to the investor and occupier markets, it would seem likely that it would have been promoted through one of the Council's Call for Sites processes. Green belt boundaries should only be amended if exceptional circumstances exist to do so, and the Local Plan process is the mechanism to consider any such amendments.
- f) If a developer wished to propose that an employment site be developed for an alternative use, any such proposal would be considered against Policy SADM10

where it would need to be evidenced that the land or site in question had been comprehensively marketed for a period of three years so that it could be as certain as possible that there were no demand for the site and that this could be evidenced over a period of time. If any such proposal were accompanied by a linked proposal to develop a site elsewhere to compensate for any loss, the overall proposals would be assessed on its merits through the planning application process, where it would seem likely that the offer of compensatory development would be treated as a material consideration in that assessment.

- g) The Local Plan is not unsound because it does not make provision for changes of use in such circumstances and the Council consider that such matters are best considered at the plan making stage rather on ad hoc basis through the development management process. Furthermore, it is unlikely that any undeveloped land not in the Green Belt which were available and attractive to the market would not already have been proposed through one of the Council's Call for Sites process. If such a site were to exist and be available for development, it is considered that it would be most appropriate to treat this as a material consideration through the planning application process, where proposals can be assessed on their merits. As a result it is proposed that there should be no change to the policy wording in the submitted Plan.

SP17 Broadwater Road

Should principle viii of Policy SP17 be extended to indicate that residential use could be a suitable alternative to a research facility, if the site is no longer suitable for such a use or it can be relocated elsewhere in the Borough?

Welwyn Hatfield response

- a) Policy SP17 covers the Broadwater Road site in Welwyn Garden City. A large part of this site, sitting immediately east of the railway line, with good linkages to the town centre, is known as the Shredded Wheat site as the last occupant of the site dating from the early days of the town manufactured the cereal. Also known as the Wheat Quarter, this part of the site has planning permission for a significant mixed use development, with demolition of the existing industrial units and site preparation having commenced.
- b) The policy covers a wider area than just the Wheat Quarter and includes two areas to the south and south west currently used for employment. One of these is the Bio-Park, a laboratory / research based employment site. When built, this site was the home of the pharmaceutical company Roche, but was taken over by the University of Hertfordshire in 2007 with funding from EEDA. It then provided valuable employment and laboratory space for a number of life science type businesses.
- c) Given the importance of this as an employment location, both in terms of the number of jobs located there, but also the type of jobs it was considered important that the facility be retained. However, the Plan recognised that it was not a new facility, so a criterion allowing for either its re-provision elsewhere or demonstrating that it was no longer suitable as a research facility was included in the wording of the policy. It is not necessary to set out what alternative use should be considered at the site has

been allocated for mixed use development and this would most appropriately be considered at the application stage.

- d) However, the University decided to close the facility in early 2019 and terminated leases with its occupants so that the site is now completely vacant and it is understood has been sold to a third party. The site was promoted through the Call for sites for residential use and has been proposed through the February 2020 Consultation on proposed changes to the submitted draft Local Plan for 179 dwellings. The results of this consultation will be assessed before any final decision is made. Should this decision be confirmed by Full Council a modification to this policy would be proposed removing any reference to the Bio-Park.

SP 21 University of Hertfordshire

Should the Policy specifically support development proposals that promote business-university collaboration within campus as well as those that improve and strengthen the learning teaching and research environment at the University?

Welwyn Hatfield response

- a) Policy SP21 is a broad based policy that recognises the important role which the University of Hertfordshire has in the borough, as an educational institution, as the home of thousands of students who live in the borough and whose needs have to be balanced with those of other residents, and as a significant part of the local economy.
- b) The policy says that development will be in accordance with a masterplan which has been agreed with the Council, and indeed as paragraph 15.31 of the supporting text notes, the Council approved the University's 2020 Estates Vision as a material consideration in planning applications. It is understood that a revision of this document, to cover changes to the two campuses in the period to 2030 has been prepared and the Council would be keen to discuss endorsement of this revised document with the University at the earliest opportunity.
- c) The final bullet point in the Policy covers the important relationship between the University and local business with the aim that the University "continues to contribute to the local economy".
- d) This policy is necessarily broad given the range of activities which university – business engagement and the University's involvement in the local economy can encompass.
- e) The policy, and Policy SP8 recognise the importance of such collaboration and high value employment, and as the University's Estates Vision is a material consideration in the application process, there is nothing in the Local Plan which would prevent or restrict such collaboration, so a change to the wording of the policy is not required. As a result, having a policy which specifically promotes university – business collaboration on campus is unnecessary.