

Examination of the Welwyn Hatfield Local Plan

Council's Statement - Stage 8 Hearing session

Northern Settlements

Settlement: **Woolmer Green**

Policy Number: **SADM10**

Site Reference: **EA10**

Matter number: **N/A**

Issue: **Employment sites/area**

Question Numbers: **Q42-46**



Policy SADM10 Site EA10, Land at London Road

- 42) What is the justification for protecting the existing designated employment sites within Woolmer Green?
- 43) Does the proposed extent of Employment Area EA10 adequately provide for the expansion of established businesses in the area?
- 44) Does Woolmer Green have adequate transport links to foster a developing business community?
- 45) Are the existing employment sites sustainable?
- 46) Is the requirement to demonstrate three years of unsuccessful marketing in Policy SADM 10 criterion iii. too onerous?

Please note that for convenience and to avoid repetition, questions 42 – 46 will be answered together.

- a) Employment sites across the borough were considered by the Welwyn Hatfield Economy Study (July 2014) produced by independent consultants Atkins (**ECO/5**). This assessed 22 employment sites across the borough, and the criteria used were common to all sites to ensure consistency. This assessment, which was considered and discussed in the Stage 3 hearings in February 2018, assessed various criteria covered by the overall headings of accessibility, sustainability, environmental quality, market considerations and policy considerations. This assessment scored them in order to come up with an overall score. The EA10 site in Woolmer Green was split into two for the purposes of this assessment, Woolmer Green North and Woolmer Green South, Sites 1 and 2. The two Woolmer Green sites scored 64% and 75% which rated them as sites which should be protected.
- b) At an early stage of the Plan's preparation, engagement work was done with Parish Councils and other key stakeholders in order to develop policy objectives for each settlement. One of the objectives for Woolmer Green, which was supported by the Parish Council at the time, was to keep Woolmer Green as a working village, specifically set out as one of the bullet points in paragraph 16.2 of the submitted Plan:

Maintain the provision of employment land to protect and enhance the vitality and viability of Woolmer Green as a working village.
- c) As has been noted earlier in the response to question 27, Woolmer Green is a sustainable location for development. It has good bus links, with a service to Stevenage and Welwyn Garden City /St Albans, with up to four buses an hour at peak times, and with bus stops immediately outside of the EA10 area proposed for safeguarding. It also enjoys easy access to Knebworth railway station, around a mile to the north which provides direct services to London and Cambridge, generally on a half hourly frequency, and many other stations by changing at Stevenage.

- d) Clearly the provision of local employment assists the sustainability of Woolmer Green so protecting this site will help assist this, and would be consistent with the approach used across the borough as a whole, as has been discussed earlier.
- e) As can be seen on the policies map, the north easterly section of EA10 includes an area around the existing buildings which is currently undeveloped. During the 2016 consultation, a joint representation was received from the two businesses on that part of the site requesting that the area covered by that part of site EA10 was extended slightly to the south east, in order to allow for one of the businesses to expand. The land which would be covered by this proposed extension to the area forms a relatively small part of the neighbouring HS15 site which is proposed to be allocated for 150 dwellings, and is not in the ownership of either business. Given this, such an extension would not seem to be deliverable, and given that the land proposed for allocation as EA10 includes an area of land which is currently undeveloped which could be used for business expansion, it is not proposed to make any amendment to the proposed boundaries, either of EA10 or of HS15.
- f) As noted in the question, Policy SADM10 requires that anyone proposing the loss of land from employment to an alternative use must demonstrate “*through active, extensive and realistic marketing over a period of three years that the land or premises are no longer required to meet future employment land needs and that there is a lack of demand for the land or premises in that location*”. This issue has been considered previously by the examination during the Stage 3 of the hearings in February 2018, including a contribution from the Hertfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) who supported the Council’s approach. The post-hearing note of the session (**EX/79**), which was prepared by the Council and the contents agreed by the Inspector, stated on the first page that the Inspector was in agreement with the three year timeframe:

“Economy: Will bring the Woolmer Green issues that weren’t resolved to the settlement stage of hearings. No change to the 3 year/1 year – no”.

- g) As can be seen, the proposal to protect land currently used for employment in Woolmer Green would ensure that the village had an appropriate level of employment in a sustainable location, in line with the local objectives set out in the Plan. The site has been assessed independently along with all of the others included within Policy SADM10. This protection would ensure local employment opportunities without increasing commuting, in a location well served by public transport which is important for current employees getting to work, and for the businesses being able to attract staff. The requirement for marketing set out in Policy SADM10 has been considered on an earlier session of the examination, with no change to the policy wording proposed by the Inspector.