

1. Covid-19 Impact on Planning.

- 1.1 The global pandemic still remains a major issue to all those who are involved in the planning and construction industries. The full impact this pandemic will have on planning will not be known for some time, even though restrictions have been fully lifted in England. A report by the Planning Portal in April 2020 undertook market analysis and when we entered Lockdown from 23rd March 2020, there was a 20% drop in planning applications across the Country. However, as restrictions were being lifted, construction sites started to re-open from May 2020 along with suppliers and merchants supporting the construction industry with increased levels of deliveries. Construction sites have become more flexible in their working hours to ensure there is a productive operation in place combined with putting in measures to be Covid secure.
- 1.2 Since construction sites have re-opened across the country and have remained open since (even during the most recent lockdowns and Covid-19 restrictions), confidence has increased in the construction and planning industry. The Planning Portal in their most recent report (July 2021)ⁱ identified that the deficit in applications throughout lockdown has more than recovered during the summer months and seeing uptick in 2021. In terms of a comparison between June 2020 and June 2021, there was a 17% increase and between May 2020 and May 2021, there was a 52% increase in applications. The swell in applications during the summer and through to this year, as we have also seen in Stevenage, is down to pent up demand in the system due to the respective lockdowns. It is anticipated that applications will start to level off and we will start to see a more usual trend. Figure 1 shows the trend in planning application numbers across the country from 2016 to 2021.

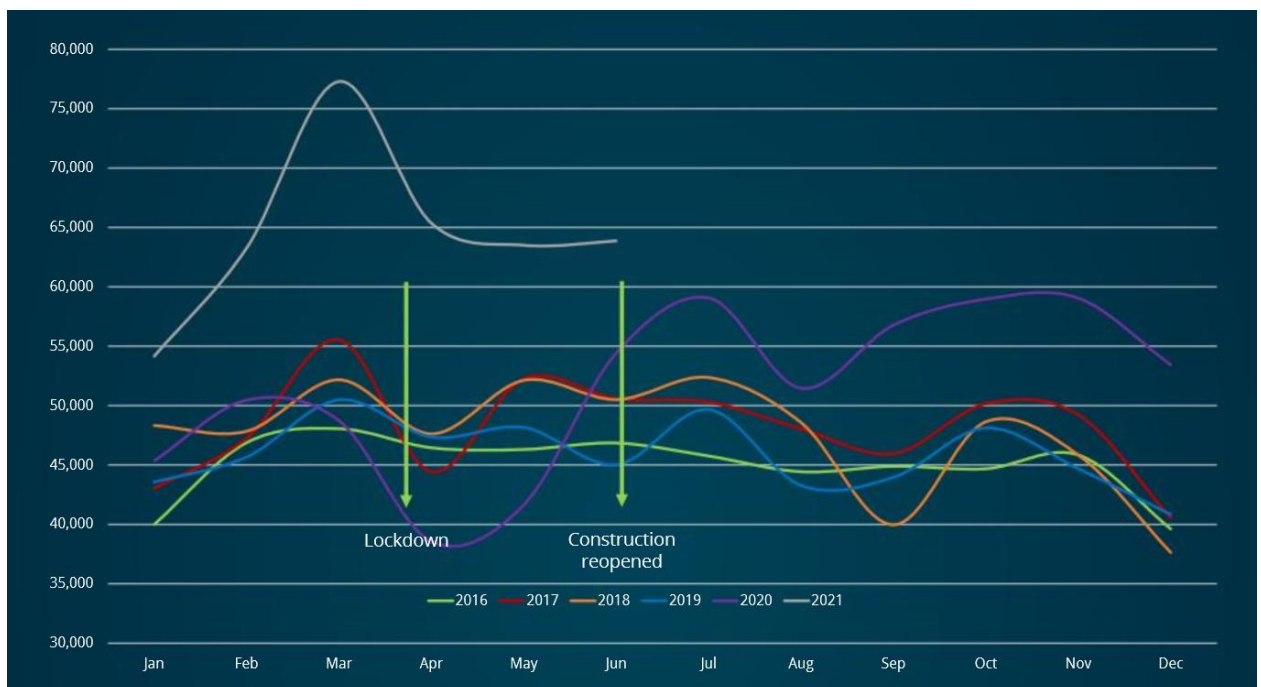


Figure 1:- Application numbers in England and Wales (Source:- Planning Portal 2021).

- 1.3 Turning to Stevenage, since January 2009, the Planning Department has seen a steady increase in the number of planning applications which has been received. As shown in Figure 2, the Council was had on average 35 planning applications a month in 2009. However, by July 2021, the Planning Department had approximately 67 planning applications a month. The most recent data from Technical Support that in July of this year, the

department had 60 planning applications which is a drop of a high of 85 planning applications in May this year. This is an increase from 2020 where in May, the department had 41 applications but a similar number of applications in July 2020. This is where the Council started to see an influx of applications since the lifting of the first lockdown. Notwithstanding this, the application numbers are still up from pre-pandemic levels. This is a sign that there is confidence in terms of investment in the Borough.

- 1.4 Looking at the impact of the first lockdown, between March 2020 and June 2020 during lockdown, the Council had a total of 146 applications. However, in the same period in 2019, there were a total of 175 applications. As such, the department did see a reduction of 29 applications or 16%. However, when we entered the Second Lockdown in November, the Council had 74 applications; this is an increase of 24 applications from the same month in 2019. The Council was also receiving very similar numbers of applications over the summer months to those received in 2019. Moving forward, between January 2021 and March 2021 when restrictions were beginning to be lifted, the Council had received 188 applications. This is an increase from the 164 received in January to March 2020, an increase of 13%. This reflects the trend identified by the Planning Portal where the deficit of applications has more than recovered. In fact, as set out above, the Department is receiving more applications than it did at the same time last year.
- 1.5 It does need to be caveated that the stats include all application types including applications not completed due to being withdrawn, not proceeded with and invalids in each months figures, but are included as they are still being worked on by the Technical Support Team. However, it is important to note even when an application is invalid, or it has been withdrawn, it has still been worked on by either the Technical Support Team and / or officers.

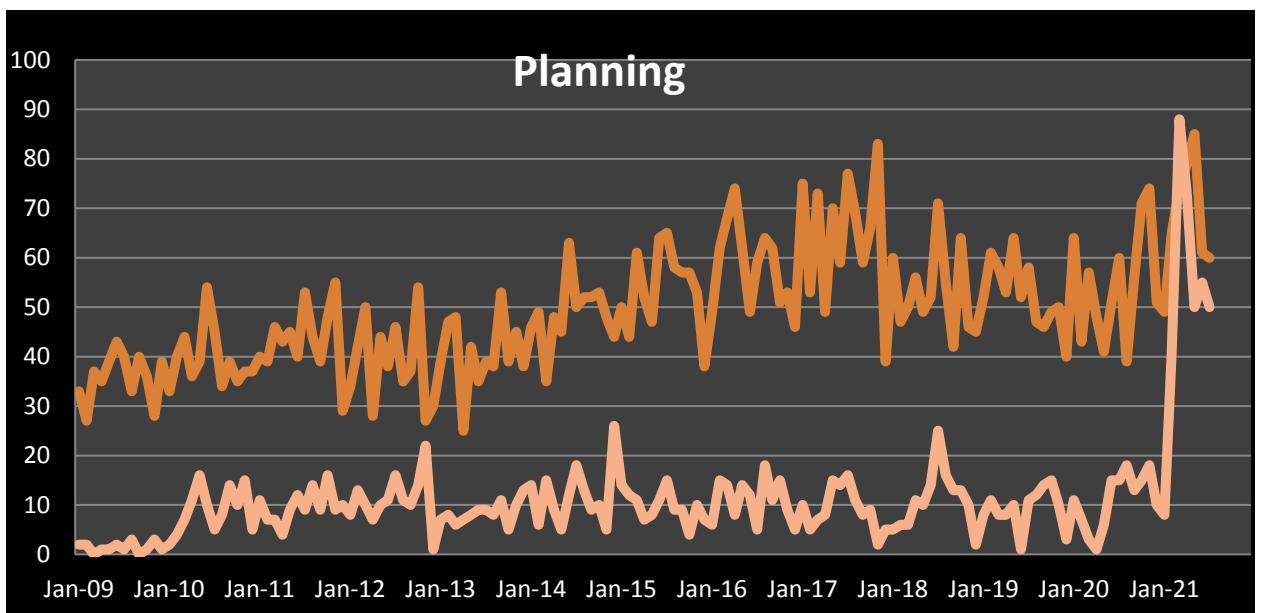


Figure 2:- Applications received between January 2009 to July 2021 (Source- Technical Support).

- 1.6 In terms of pre-application submissions to the planning department, the number of applications which have been submitted have also increased since the last financial year (2020/2021). Between April 2020 to March 2021, the Council received a total of 59 pre-applications which included 19 Majors, 30 Minors, 8 householders and 2 other. These are set out in more detail in Figure 3. This is an increase on the pre-applications which had been received in the financial year April 2019 and March 2020 as detailed in Figure 4. For reference, between April 2019 to March 2020, the Council received a total of 45 pre-applications which included 9 Majors, 26 Minors, 9 householders and 1 other. As such, there

has been an increase in pre-application submissions from 2019/20 by approximately 23%, especially in Major pre-application submissions which have increased by 53%.

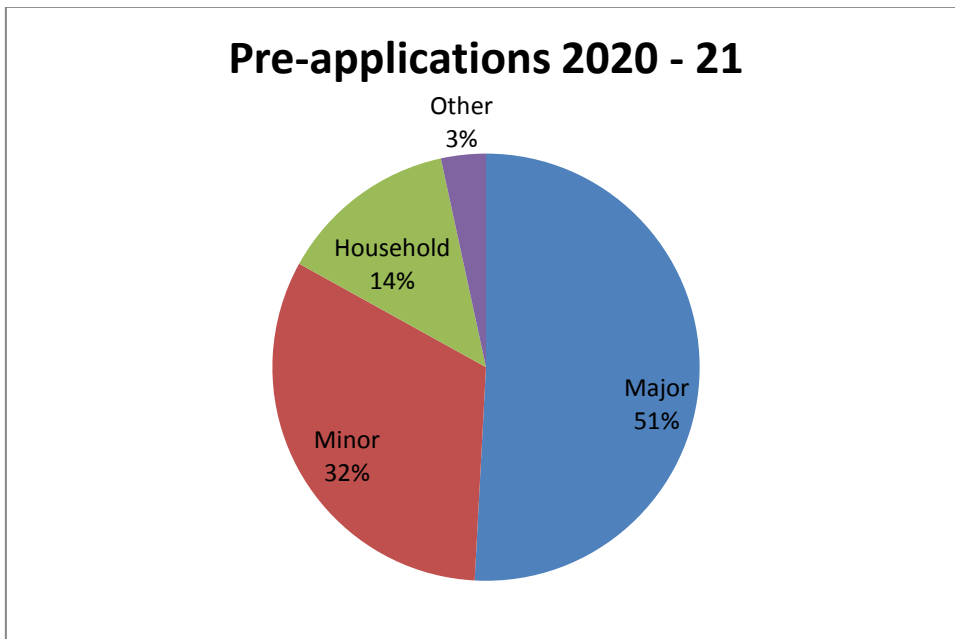


Figure 3:- Pre-applications received between April 2020 and March 2021.

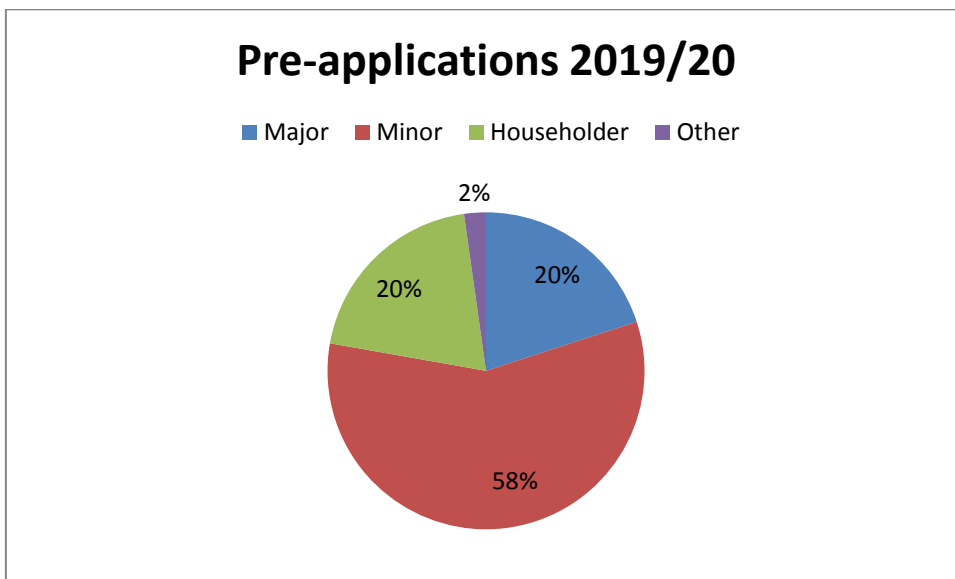
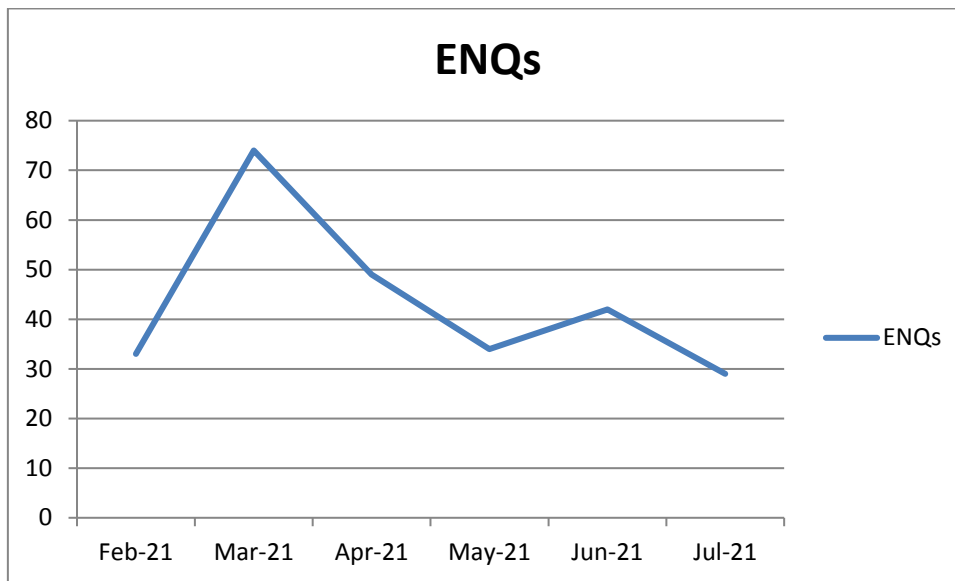


Figure 4:- Pre-applications received between April 2019 and March 2020.

- 1.7 As previously advised and as detailed in the data, the Council did notice a reduction of planning applications during the first lockdown. However, it is evident that confidence has returned and is continuing to grow in the planning and construction industry where applications quickly recovered in the summer months and appear to now be stabilising. Furthermore, the department is also starting to see more planning applications and pre-applications being made to the Council. The department has previously dealt with the large scale regeneration project known as SG1 as well as the large scale residential scheme at North Stevenage. In addition, the Council in just over the last year has determined major projects at John Henry Newman Secondary School, Former BHS at 7 The Forum, The Biopharma development at Marshgate Car Park as well as the reserved matters application for the mixed use residential and commercial development on the Matalan site.

- 1.8 The Council also has a number of Major applications which are currently in the planning Department for determination. The applications which have been received for 2021 are as follows:-
- Roebuck Retail Park (21/00754/FPM) – Conversion of existing units, creation of a new self-storage unit and flexible employment uses;
 - Junction 7 of the A1(M) (21/00536/FPM) – Construction of an Electric Vehicle Charging Station;
 - Land West of North Road (21/00529/FPM) – Construction of a new employment site;
 - Arriva Bus Depot (21/00431/FPM) – Alterations and improvements to the existing bus depot for Arriva;
 - Land West of Stevenage (21/00356/FPM) – Construction of up to 1500 new homes, new employment site, primary school and associated facilities;
 - Land to the South of Norton Road (21/00071/FPM) – Creation of new employment units.
- 1.9 Turning to the applications themselves, it is important to note that not all application submissions are equal. This is because Major Planning applications, including applications such as the Town Centre Regeneration Project (Planning Reference:- 19/00743/FPM) and North Stevenage (Planning Reference:- 17/00862/FPM) along with North West Stevenage (21/00529/FPM) and West Stevenage (21/00356/FPM) can be very resource intensive at officer level.
- 1.10 Furthermore, the 53% increase in the number of pre-application Majors along with the increase in Minors (majority of which are for new dwellings) will have a significant impact on workload for the team. This is because a number of these Major pre-applications are likely to follow through to the planning application stage in the coming year. Therefore, such applications will need to be planned for when being managed by the Planning Department (including the Technical Support Team when they validate the applications) as well as have implications on the Planning Committee in terms of its workload as well. However, these applications will also generate additional fee income into the Council. But, these fees will not only need to cover officer time, they will also need to cover the costs of any consultants the department needs to appoint when determining such applications.
- 1.11 Further to the above, the Government, which published its White Paper on Planning Reform last year, has introduced the Planning Bill which seeks to completely overhaul the existing planning system. The Government also introduced a number of sweeping changes to planning legislation such as new permitted development rights through to a new Use Classes Order as well as publishing a new National Planning Policy Framework which came into force in July 2021. In addition, Central Government continues to emphasise that applications must be determined within the statutory timeframes (8 weeks, 13 weeks and 16 weeks). If these are not met in these strict timeframes, they have recommended the planning fee is returned in full to the applicant. It must be noted that the current rule is to refund the planning fee if an application takes more than 26 weeks under the “Planning Guarantee” unless otherwise agreed in writing with the developer. Moreover, it also puts pressure on the Technical Support Team to turn around validations in an expedient timeframe so that officers do not lose too much time in processing and determining application. Therefore, it is equally important they are properly resourced to handle the increase and management of planning applications coming through.
- 1.12 Since February 2021, the Department now also records general enquiries it receives from the General Public. These can range from seeking advice to extending their property, running a business from home through to authorised planning uses of commercial premises. Figure 5 shows the number of Enquiries (ENQs) the department receives. As shown in the data, the number of enquiries are normally quite high earlier in the year (February 21 to March 21) as people look to start construction work in the summer. As a consequence, a

number of these enquiries may also translate to planning applications being submitted to the department for its determination.



- 1.13 In addition, the department is also responsible for undertaking enforcement investigations to determine whether or not a breach in planning control has occurred. In the financial year April 2020 to March 2021, the department received 79 enforcement reports to investigate. In the financial 2019/20, there were 74 enforcement reports and in the financial year 2018/19, there were 76 enforcement reports. What this data shows is that the department also continued to receive a similar level of enforcement reports during the pandemic as it did before the pandemic hit.
- 1.14 The overall data shows that the department, despite the pandemic which resulted in a drop in applications, has since recovered and continues to receive a number of planning applications, especially Major planning applications. Furthermore, the department has also seen an increase in pre-application requests, especially for Major developments along with general enquiries. In addition, the department also continues to investigate enforcement reports which have remained at the same level for the last 3 financial year of which, some of these investigations can be resource intensive as well. Notwithstanding this, the evidence demonstrates that the department has not been significantly hit by the Covid-19 pandemic and that there is a sign of people willing to invest in the town and that there is continued confidence in the construction delivery. As such, these applications, if approved by the Council, will continue to help aid the town in terms of its post Covid-19 recovery.

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ⁱ https://issuu.com/planning.portal/docs/planning_market_insight_report_july_2021?fr=sZDEyZjMzMjI1MjY