

COUNCIL – 7 APRIL 2011 – ITEM 7**Priorities for the District – 2011/12****FOREWORD – Cllr Needham, Leader**

This document sets out how the Council will work with the community to deliver our priorities to the residents of North Hertfordshire.

It builds upon the Corporate Plan covering the period 2005 to 2015. At the time we put that document together, we thought that looking ahead 10 years gave a good balance between looking at those things that could be planned and budgeted for in the short to medium term and at the same time considering longer term requirements for the area.

Much of what the Council does is in the shorter term and we need to refresh our actions and activities on an annual basis to reflect the changes in the world around us. We first developed a corporate plan in 2005, so as we enter 2011 we are mindful of the fact that we are over halfway through the initial 10 years.

As Leader of the Council I am proud of the things we are able to do. The Council has an excellent track record of delivering real improvements in local services and continually seeking better value for money despite the ever increasing demands of new initiatives and responsibilities.

In view of the reduction in funding for the Council from Central Government for 2011 onwards, the financial challenges we face are unprecedented and mean we will have to continue to make significant savings year on year for the foreseeable future.

In the past six years NHDC has already secured almost £7 million in efficiencies, changing the way in which we work, providing more services on line, or seeking alternative methods of delivery, including with other local authorities. This makes future large-scale savings even more challenging and therefore we are likely to require some radical changes to our services over the next few years. However, the

needs of residents and local communities will be uppermost in our minds as we make the painful but necessary financial decisions in the months and years ahead.

With that in mind, this version of our Priorities for the District replaces the former Corporate Plan 2005-15 and sets out what the District Council will be doing to make North Hertfordshire 'a vibrant place to live, work and prosper' in 2011/12.

I hope you find it a worthwhile and informative read and if you do have any comments please let us know. I am always keen to receive comments from our residents and details of how to contact the Council are set out later in the document.

DRAFT 2011/12

INTRODUCTION – Cllr Strong – Portfolio Holder

As the Portfolio Holder for Policy I need to ensure that the Council has a firm focus on our key priorities. For 2011/12, we will continue to work to deliver the vision for the District, through our three priorities of town centres, green issues and sustainable development. During 2011/12 there will be a period of considerable transition for local government and we will review our plans and priorities to reflect emerging legislation and the economic climate to ensure that we maintain the focus on the issues that are important to our residents.

The Localism Bill, published in December 2010, heralds significant change in a number of areas of our own and our partners' work. It places increased emphasis on 'transparency', ensuring our residents know even better how the money we receive is spent. We now publish details of the pay of our Chief Officers and Council expenditure in excess of £500 on our website.

Local Government has long been subject to external inspection against nationally set criteria and targets. The recent removal of these statutory inspections will not only reduce our inspection costs, but we are now subject to a lighter inspection regime, part of which includes an element of self-assessment.

The emphasis throughout the Localism Bill is the concept of 'Big Society' which is about actively encouraging local communities to participate more in joint activities, to develop 'neighbourhood' plans, have more involvement in the planning system, to request referenda, to take on services formerly provided by the Council, and seek ownership of, or the ability to run, community facilities.

We already administer a comprehensive rural grants programme, providing funds for capital improvements to village halls, community and cultural events, to improve sports facilities for rural areas and to enhance the general appearance of villages through our environmental grant awards and our Community Development officers work with many groups and organisations across the District to promote community participation.

Other changes to our services were proposed in the Public Health White Paper, 2010, its principles under consideration in the Health and Social Care Bill currently before Parliament. 'Public health' in its widest sense was one of the founding principles of local government, ensuring good hygiene, healthy homes and living conditions. The Council and its partners will have an important role in delivering a 'health improvement' agenda in coming years, and our future plans from 2012 will reflect that.

The three priorities within this plan reflect the views of our communities as expressed through consultation in customer surveys, our District Wide Survey, from our Citizen's Panel, from community meetings, and what people tell the members of the Council. We will also use the results of our latest Citizens Panel in 2011 to capture other priorities which are important to our residents. We realise that we work in a constantly changing environment, and we need to review and agree the priority areas for the Council, not only to 2015, but looking further ahead too. Our Council is proud of the role it has in leading and driving change in our district and looks forward to the challenges in the future.

OUR PRIORITIES

All local authorities are involved in delivering or enabling a vast range of services that impact directly on the lives of the people in local communities. Every year it is necessary for local Councillors on your Council to make choices and select priority areas at which to target action.

For 2011/12 the Council has decided to continue to focus on three main priorities that were first set in 2009:-

- Town Centres
- Green Issues
- Sustainable Development.

and we will consider them within the tough financial climate that we have. The details behind these priorities are set out in the remainder of this document. This provides the policy foundation for our budget process and our medium term financial strategy.

In preparing this strategic document there are a number of other themes which whilst not explicit in our three highest priorities, they remain very important to both our residents and the Council. These include

- ensuring we deliver our service within or under budget
- improving performance,
- improving customer satisfaction and
- responding to the economic downturn

2011/12 will be a transition year for the Council in which we will review our priorities to ensure they remain relevant in the light of recent consultation and impending legislation such as the Localism and Health Bills.

We will also be responding to the significant reduction in Government funding (a cash reduction of £1.29 million) by reviewing everything we do to ensure we are living within our means and protecting front line services wherever possible.

In addition to the Council's action plans for our three priorities we have a number of 'business as usual' activities that will continue to ensure we deliver the services residents expect.

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TOWN CENTRES PRIORITY

North Hertfordshire is a diverse mixture of small urban centres and many small villages dispersed across a large area of open countryside.

As our towns age and grow they require significant investment in infrastructure and local facilities for those who live in our towns and surrounding villages and those who visit them. The District Council has an agreed strategy for improving the Town Centres in Letchworth, Hitchin, Baldock and Royston.

Key Achievements since 2009

Major projects have been delivered in recent years including

- a multi-million pound regeneration and improvement scheme in Baldock Town Centre
- the appointment of a contractor to redevelop Churchgate in Hitchin
- commencement of work with Hitchin Initiative to develop a new District Museum and enhanced Hitchin Town Hall Community Facility.
- completion of public consultation on the planned environmental improvements to Fish Hill in Royston
- commencement of renovations and improvement to Howard Park and Gardens in Letchworth
- commencing implementation of our district car parking strategy
- replacement of town centre CCTV cameras with dome style cameras increasing the clarity of recorded information
- continuing to work with our Community Safety Partners to address crime and disorder, particularly low level anti-social behaviour, moving away from the use of Antisocial Behaviour Orders as we are now required to do.

For us, Town Centres is shorthand for a range of issues including:

- Improving the historic heart of each town whilst preserving our rich local heritage.
- Working with Town Centre Partnerships, our many other partners and other service providers, business and community groups to develop and improve retail

and leisure provision and encourage sustainable development and promote economic vibrancy in our towns.

- Addressing the challenges in relation to parking.
- Ensuring the many uses of the town centres are appropriately managed to ensure they remain attractive places to visit.
- Effectively managing the use of council buildings and assets.
- Acknowledging the positive role played by local markets in supporting the vitality of our towns.
- Continuing to work in partnership with the Business Improvement Districts in Royston and Hitchin.

Ongoing and Future Projects:-

There are a number of large projects either ongoing or being planned for our towns which we intend to complete during the lifetime of this plan, i.e. before 2015.

- The delivery of real improvements to the Churchgate Shopping Centre in Hitchin. We will continue to work with our selected developer, Simons Development and the Churchgate Liaison Forum throughout 2011/12. We anticipate that Planning permission for improvements to the Churchgate Shopping Centre will be sought by the end of 2012. The success of this development will be measured by an increase in footfall after the completion of the scheme.
- The Council will be working with the Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation to enable them to deliver short term improvements to The Wynd to increase its attractiveness to shoppers. The short term improvements will include a play area, sensory garden and new toilet facilities.
- The completion of the project for the new District Museum and Community facility in Hitchin by 2013 by continuing work with Hitchin Initiative & other organisations. The success of the project will be measured by feedback on satisfaction levels through the District Wide Survey and/or Citizen's Panel.

- The opening of the renovated Howard Park and Gardens in Letchworth is due to take place in early November 2011. Many important facilities will be restored and the physical appearance enhanced. The paddling pool will be improved and new water features installed. A new café and modern toilets will be available.
- The completion of the Fish Hill Square enhancement scheme in Royston by the end of April 2012 which is expected to lead to greater occupation of shop units in the area.
- As a result of the feasibility study for the Civic Centre site in Royston, a design brief will be completed following public consultation by March 2012.
- We will undertake improvements to the Hitchin Lairage and Letchworth multi-storey car parks. This work will conclude by October 2011 and will include improvements to the lighting, décor and lifts.

By focussing on town centres we are not forgetting our rural residents who support our towns; we work closely with representatives from our town and parish councils to develop plans and deliver improvements in our rural areas.

GREEN ISSUES PRIORITY

The Council is conscious of the fact that our priorities need to take account of local, and national conditions. Our Green Issues priority is particularly wide ranging as it seeks to do this.

We want to look after our area and also contribute to the national and global effort to combat the negative impacts of climate change.

Our Climate Change Strategy was put in place in 2009 and a number of actions are being worked on to enhance and conserve local habitats, in partnership with colleagues. Our contribution to arresting global climate change will be necessarily small but we are committed to playing our part wherever we can. We have committed ourselves to the principles of the Nottingham Declaration and our Climate Change Strategy and the associated action plan reflects our work towards these.

We are reducing our own carbon footprint and encouraging our residents to do the same, protecting and enhancing our local environment by delivering both a Green Space and a Tree Strategy, continually improving our waste collection services and increasing opportunities for recycling and composting, consequently reducing the amount of residual waste sent to landfill.

Key Achievements since 2009

We have:-

- significantly altered our waste and recycling collection services.
- reduced our office footprint and associated heating and energy costs by moving our staff into a single office building
- completed the first phase of work to re-roof the North Herts Leisure Centre which will reduce our energy consumption.

Ongoing and future projects

The Council delivers a number of services that impact on the environment and our policies and approach to planning, affordable housing, environmental management, etc all reflect the wider aims of our Climate Change Strategy, as will elements of the Localism Bill, currently seeking assent in Parliament.

- As a large local employer and service user the Council will continue to adapt its own behaviour to make ourselves more green and encourage others to do so too.
- We will continue to look for more innovative and creative ways to reduce our carbon footprint.
- We will remain active members of the countywide waste partnership and be fully engaged in the County Council sponsored planned energy from waste project.
- We will engage in further innovation and partnership working with the waste disposal authority, Herts County Council, other district council collection authorities and our contractors.
- Key projects that will be delivered from our Green Space Strategy in 2011/12 include:-
 - Minor renovations at the Priory Memorial Gardens, Royston
 - Renovate Avenue Park, Baldock (phase 1)
 - Renovate Bancroft Recreational Grounds, Hitchin (phase1)
 - Construction of multi-use games area at Bancroft Recreational Grounds, Hitchin
 - Provision of grant-aid towards a new pavilion for the Jackmans playing fields, Letchworth Garden City
 - Provision of portacabin changing rooms at Baldock Road Recreation Grounds, Letchworth Garden City

- Completion of phase 2 of the project to re-roof the North Herts Leisure Centre by July 2011 will reduce our energy consumption

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT PRIORITY

North Hertfordshire has the benefit of large swathes of beautiful rural countryside. Much of this is located between the two large urban areas of Luton and Stevenage. A large part of the area is designated green belt and the Council's view is that this must be preserved and protected.

We recognise that we have a growing population and local needs for more housing, particularly affordable housing for young people. It is therefore important to make it clear that the Council, whilst wishing to protect the Greenbelt, is not anti-development rather we are opposed to and will resist large inappropriate development being promoted in our area.

In addition to producing our "Local Development Framework", the overarching planning document for the district, we will deliver our rural strategy, which establishes a range of activities to engage with our rural communities and ensure they retain vital services where possible in the longer term. Affordability in our villages is a particular concern with many young people leaving our villages simply to find accommodation or work. We need to find ways of tackling this problem but in a managed sustainable way that does not detract from the character of our rural area.

The Council also recognises the importance of creating local economic vibrancy and the contribution that it can make to more sustainable communities, currently too many of our residents choose to travel out of the district to find suitable work. 'Sustainable Development' is not only about the physical development of the district; it is equally important to ensure that we can offer a range of local, skilled jobs near our residential centres in order to deliver more sustainable communities. The Council is active in the establishment of the Hertfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership which aims to improve the economic prospects of the County. Given the economic importance of Cambridge to the District (in particular the northern part) we are also involved in the work of the Greater Cambridge/Greater Peterborough Partnership.

Key achievements since 2009

We have

- enabled the building of 725 new homes in the District between 1st April 2009 and 31st December 2010.
- used capital grants and worked with the Homes & Communities Agency to encourage Registered Social Landlords to build affordable homes in the areas where need has been identified, resulting in 161 out of the 725 new homes (referred to above) being delivered as affordable.
- worked with our partners to enhance and improve local transport and other infrastructure.
- encouraged sustainable local economic development through the delivery of our Town Centre Strategies and ongoing work with the Business Improvement Districts
- developed a Local Investment Plan (LIP) that has been submitted to the Home and Communities Agency.

Ongoing and Future Projects

- We will resist inappropriate and unsustainable development by participating in and producing evidence for the public examination into proposals to develop land around Luton that extends into the North Hertfordshire area. The public examination is likely to take place in the latter part of 2011/12.
- We are working with partners to facilitate the construction of the Royston Rail underpass. This will promote more walking and cycling to schools as a more sustainable method of transport. The estimated date for completion of all the works is March 2012.
- We will use our emerging 'Local Development Framework', the overarching document to set a level of housing growth, ensuring that growth and affordable housing are balanced with the need to preserve all that is good about our area.

DELIVERING VALUE FOR MONEY SERVICES

An important theme running through everything we do is a drive to improve Value for Money. We are committed to striving to provide high quality, customer focussed services that provide value for money through the use of our limited resources.

The Council has already identified over £6.8million of savings over the last six years and has to do roughly the same again over the next five years. The annual net Revenue expenditure will have fallen from just over £20 million in 2009/10 to just over £15 million by 2015/16 after allowing for the impact of annual inflationary pressures.

Key achievements since 2009

- In 2010/11 we realised £400,000 in savings through concluding a restructure of the Council. A further £80,000 full year savings will be achieved through the outsourcing of our post room and Document Management Service.
- We also look to achieve funding from external sources wherever possible. The regeneration of Howard Park and Gardens in Letchworth is a £2.7 million project that is able to go ahead following a successful bid for £1.84 million from the Heritage Lottery Fund and Big Lottery Fund through the Parks for People programme
- We assisted Hitchin Town Initiative with their successful bid of £850,000 from the Community Builder's Fund to create a new District museum and provide revitalised community facilities at Hitchin Town Hall

Ongoing and future projects

The Council has already taken actions to reconfigure services through outsourcing, centralising and restructuring. The extent of the financial challenge going forward means that we will focus both on the prioritisation of front-line services and where expenditure can be reduced. We will also continue to identify any means of being

able to work more efficiently, perhaps in different ways, for example by sharing services with others.

- We will participate in a Shared Internal Audit Service with Hertfordshire County Council and four other Hertfordshire Districts. This will be established in June 2011.
- We will explore opportunities for sharing back office services with East Hertfordshire District Council and Stevenage Borough Council. Alongside this we are exploring the opportunities to reduce our costs by participating in the Shared Managed Services Contract between Hertfordshire County Council and SERCO. This work will continue throughout 2011/12
- We will explore opportunities for delivering our services in different ways through restructure, through partnership with other organisations or through outsourcing to ensure we deliver economic and efficient services that continue to support delivery of our priorities

Over the years the Council has focussed on driving costs down without significantly affecting services and we will continue to ensure that we provide services in the most cost efficient way.

CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

The Council is constantly striving to improve its performance and to improve the delivery of outcomes for local people. We are working with our many partners in the Local Strategic Partnership to make our district a better place to live and work.

We continue to use innovative ways to ensure we obtain the best value from external contractors.

Key achievements since 2009

- We have promoted benefit take up and easier ways of claiming benefits. Over 52% of benefit claims are now submitted on line which has enabled us to reduce the time taken to process new claims
- We have streamlined our use of information technology, which allows us to provide increased web access for customers, reducing the cost of administration yet further.
- We have promoted and supported effective community leadership, and range of local events including music festivals, themed markets, and play schemes.
- The Council is proud of its record in regard to equalities. We train our staff to ensure they embrace equality and diversity in our communities.
- We are improving our public reports in order to reflect better the importance of robust equality assessment in our key policies and projects.

The Council measures progress and improvement in a number of ways. Each year members meet to agree targets across a range of key performance indicators. Where possible specific measures of success are included in our action plans and these measures of success will be monitored at six-monthly intervals..

On-going and future projects

- We will continue to undertake Service reviews targeted at achieving service efficiencies, transformation and cost savings.

CONCLUSION

If you have any comments on this document, please contact the Council :-

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