

Priorities for the District – 2012/13

FOREWORD – Cllr Needham, Leader

This document sets out how the Council will work with the community to deliver its 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 planned for 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 2012 we are mindful of the fact that we are well 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 continuing reduction in funding for the Council from Central Government and the general economic climate, 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 £8.7 million in efficiencies, changing the way in which we work, providing more services online, 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 'Priorities for the District' document 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 2012/13.

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 feedback from our residents and details of how to contact the Council are set out later in the document.

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 2012/13, we have reassessed our three priorities to ensure they continue to enable us to deliver the vision for the District and at the same time recognise the changed circumstances in which we now work. Our priorities are:

- Living within our means to deliver cost-effective services
- Working with local communities
- Protecting our environment for our communities

The financial year 2011/12 saw a period of considerable transition for local government and we expect this to continue into 2012/13 and beyond. We have reviewed our plans and priorities to better reflect emerging legislation and the economic climate to ensure that we maintain focus on the issues that are important to our residents.

The Localism Act proposes a number of ways in which local communities can become more engaged in the delivery and running of local services, prioritising areas for development, and encourage greater engagement in decision making processes themselves.

This 'localism agenda' is complimented by a raft of proposals seen not only to engage but to actively *enable* local charities, parish and town councils and community groups to take ownership of and deal with local issues. The intention is for local authorities to facilitate these changes. This is a significant change in terms of how we work, requiring an even closer relationship with local groups and individuals currently responsible for services and greater engagement with those forming new groups specifically to take on the running of 'Council' services.

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. Our team of Community Development

officers also 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, the principles of which are currently under consideration in the Health and Social Care Bill before Parliament. This will require authorities to ensure that the use of open spaces, parks, playgrounds and relevant leisure facilities are promoted in terms of reducing the impact of obesity on long term health, their importance in the management of mental health problems such as depression and in aiding relaxation, as well as their more 'sensory' enjoyment.

The three priorities within this plan reflect the views of our communities as expressed through consultation in customer surveys, at community meetings, and what people tell their elected Councillors. We have also used the results of our latest Citizens Panel (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 inevitable challenges of 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 to make choices and select priority areas at which to target action. The Council's priorities have been changed to reflect the current economic downturn and government policy initiatives relevant to local councils.

For 2012/2013 the Council has decided to focus on three main priorities and these have been reassessed as:

- Living within our means to deliver cost-effective services
- Working with local communities
- Protecting our environment for our communities

The details behind these priorities are set out in the remainder of this document. This provides the policy for our budget process and our medium term financial strategy. In preparing this strategic document, it is clear that our top priority of *living within our means* reflects the need to respond to the economic downturn and ensure that we are providing services at an appropriate level which reflect the current financial circumstances.

Our response to the significant reduction in Government funding since 2010/11 (a cash reduction of almost £3 million) has been to review everything we do to ensure we are living within our means and protecting front line services wherever possible. We have achieved this despite freezing Council Tax at the same levels since April 2010 and while still delivering key projects to enhance communities. We now finance 65% of our net expenditure from Council Tax and 35% from Government grants.

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

LIVING WITHIN OUR MEANS TO DELIVER COST EFFECTIVE SERVICES

The Council unanimously decided to have “Living within our means to deliver cost effective services” as its top priority. This is in direct response to the economic downturn and the reduction in central government funding to the Council from £8,070,000 in 2010/11 to £5,360,000 in 2012/13. Despite this, the Council has not raised Council Tax for three years. The District Council’s portion of Council Tax for a Band D property has remained at £196.59 since 2010/11.

The Council’s annual net Revenue expenditure will have fallen from just over £18 million in 2010/11 to just under £15 million by 2015/16, after allowing for the impact of annual inflationary pressures.

It is now clear that the financial position in the future will require an even greater focus on finding innovative ways to do more with less. The Council aims to live within its means, reducing reliance on external funding sources as much as possible, to deliver cost effective services. This will include initiatives on new ways of working, delivering value for money, reviewing service subsidies and reducing overall spend to match available income, without reliance on reserves.

We also look to secure funding from external sources wherever possible to support the delivery of projects.

Key achievements since 2010

- We have changed the way that information technology is used, allowing us to provide increased web access to services for customers, which in turn reduces administration costs. There are now 24 “electronic forms” which enable residents to apply online for a number of services.
- In 2011/12 we made £672,000 in savings from a staff and senior management restructure, a reduction of 22 posts.
- We reduced office accommodation costs by closing the Town Lodge Offices and moving those staff into the District Council Offices. This has led to annual revenue savings of at least £50,000 from 2011/12.

- Through the renewal of the contract for the management of Hitchin Swim and Royston Leisure Centres in 2010 we have achieved annual savings of £600,000 which are potentially available for the next 14 years. These savings were increased in 2011 by extending the contract for the Letchworth leisure facilities, bringing additional savings of £69,000 in the next three years.
- The success of the recycling service provided by the Council was rewarded through a £369,000 recycling credit in 2010/11 from Hertfordshire County Council and a further £378,000 from the Herts Waste Partnership for diverting waste from landfill.
- We participate in a Shared Internal Audit Service with Hertfordshire County Council and four other Hertfordshire districts. This will lead to projected savings of almost £50,000 in 2012/13.
- We have been successful in obtaining just over £123,000 of development funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) for the new North Hertfordshire Museum. This will fund the appointment of a specialist designer to ensure the new museum is fit-for-purpose.
- In November 2011, we agreed to develop a detailed business case for a shared service arrangement with East Herts District Council and Stevenage Borough Council for some of our support services.

On-going and future projects

The Council has already taken action to reconfigure services through outsourcing, centralising and restructuring. The extent of the financial challenge going forward means that we will focus both on prioritising front-line services and areas where expenditure can be reduced still further. We will seek opportunities for delivering our services in different ways to ensure we deliver economic and efficient services that continue to support the delivery of our priorities.

- The Council will progress to the second-round of the HLF application process for the new North Hertfordshire Museum, where we will be applying for an additional £831,000 for the fit-out. This new facility for the public will in addition, result in an eventual saving in the region of £200,000 per annum in

revenue costs. If the funding secured by Hitchin Town Hall Ltd from the Future Builders Scheme is taken into account, the scheme will attract nearly £1.7 million in external funding.

- We are considering changes to the way the Council works by sharing back office services with East Hertfordshire Council and Stevenage Borough Council. A detailed business case for the joint provision of Human Resources, Information Technology, Facilities Management, Print and Estates Management will be considered in June 2012. Dependent on the outcome of this, work will continue throughout 2012/13 to enable the provision of any Shared Service arrangements to commence in 2013/14. Although the public will not notice any difference to the provision of front-line services this may provide savings of up to £250,000 each year for the Council.
- We will continue to undertake service reviews targeted at achieving service efficiencies, transformation and cost savings.

WORKING WITH LOCAL COMMUNITIES

North Hertfordshire is a diverse mixture of small urban centres and many small villages dispersed across a large area of open countryside. To recognise the Council's commitment to Community Development work in the widest sense, such as existing work on our town centres, rural projects, health improvement and the localism agenda, we have developed a new priority – "Working with local communities".

This priority embraces the provisions of the Localism Act which was passed in November 2011, and proposes a number of ways in which local communities can become more engaged in the delivery and running of local services, prioritising areas for development, and encouraging greater engagement in decision making processes. The intention is for local authorities to facilitate these changes by working very closely with their local communities, parishes, town councils and charities. This will require an even closer relationship with the local groups currently responsible for services and significant support to those seeking to form new partnership arrangements, such as social enterprises or mutual societies.

Specifically, the Council will be required to:

- consider applications from local community and voluntary groups to run services or facilities formerly delivered by the Council or its contractors (subject to Government timescales as yet to be announced).
- maintain a list of 'community assets', comprising both land and buildings, deemed to be of value to the community.
- revise its approach to planning, including the development and response to new neighbourhood planning forums and to how it cooperates with neighbouring authorities in areas of joint interest.
- establish its own criteria for successful application to the housing register, whilst ensuring the needs of the most vulnerable remain a priority.

The restructure of the National Health Service and increased links to social care has placed more emphasis on the 'public health' role played by local authorities, a return

to the original purpose for their creation in the 1800s. This will require local authorities to ensure that the use of open spaces, parks, playgrounds and relevant leisure facilities are promoted in terms of reducing the impact of obesity on long term health: their importance in the management of mental health issues such as depression and in aiding relaxation, as well as their more 'sensory' enjoyment.

Key Achievements since 2010

The Council has delivered some major projects since 2010 including:

- the development of detailed proposals for the new North Hertfordshire Museum and refurbished community facility with Hitchin Town Hall Ltd and securing external funding to support this.
- completion of environmental improvements to Fish Hill Square in Royston.
- the redevelopment of Howard Park and Gardens in Letchworth to both restore important historical features and bring the facilities up to date.
- improvement works to the Council's multi-storey car park in Letchworth
- continued work with our selected development partner, Simons Development and the Churchgate Liaison Forum in progressing the Churchgate redevelopment project in Hitchin.
- refurbishment of Radwell and Offley Village Halls by the respective Village Hall Committees in 2011, through Parish Amenity Capital Improvement Fund grants from the Council. .
- ongoing work with organisations such as the Countryside Management Service, Groundwork Hertfordshire and various "Friends of" Groups to enhance the Council's open spaces for all to enjoy.
- improving the facilities available at our leisure facilities by providing new fitness equipment at Archers and Royton Leisure Centre. The café at Letchworth Outdoor Pool was relocated to face Norton Common to enable non-users of the pool to use the facility.
- working with Town Centre Partnerships, other partners and 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.

- supporting the positive role played by local markets in contributing to the vitality of our towns.
- continuing to work in partnership with the Business Improvement Districts in Royston and Hitchin.
- promoting and supporting effective community leadership, and a range of local events, including music festivals, themed markets, and play-schemes

Ongoing and Future Projects

There are a number of large projects either ongoing or being planned which the Council intends to complete during the lifetime of this plan, i.e. before 2015. These include:

- the development of a new North Hertfordshire Museum and Community Facility in partnership with Hitchin Town Hall Ltd. Subject to final approval it is envisaged this project will be complete by 2014.
- working with the Great Ashby Community Association to build an extension to the Great Ashby Community Centre to provide more local facilities. The construction work has been funded from a PACIF grant and Section 106 money. Some money has also been provided by Waste Recycling Environmental Ltd (WREN) for the development of a café. The work should be completed in 2012 and will include the use of more energy efficient heating.
- completing a design brief and undertaking public consultation for the Royston Civic Centre site.
- the delivery of improvements to the Churchgate area in Hitchin. We will continue to work with our selected development partner, Simons Development Ltd and the Churchgate Liaison Forum throughout 2012/13.
- supporting the community in the celebration of events for the 2012 Olympics, Paralympics and the Queen's Diamond Jubilee year
- seeking a solution for Letchworth Town Hall which is a building surplus to requirements.

PROTECTING OUR ENVIRONMENT FOR OUR COMMUNITIES

The Council's former 'Green Issues' and 'Sustainable Development' priorities have been included within the new priority of 'Protecting our environment for our communities.' This priority demonstrates our continuing commitment to care for the environment for the future and do what we can to protect it within limited resources. This includes: protection of the green belt; waste reduction; recycling; work on carbon dioxide reduction; energy efficiency and renovation of our parks and open spaces.

Key Achievements since 2010

Since 2010 we have:

- successfully taken legal action to protect our green belt from inappropriate development in North Hertfordshire around Stevenage.
- continued to resist inappropriate and unsustainable housing development by preparing evidence to present to the Public Examination on the Luton and Central Bedfordshire Joint Strategy. The Core Strategy was withdrawn by those authorities and fresh plans are being prepared.
- progressed the Council's Local Development Framework by agreeing:
 - a Design Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) which gives guidance on design for new developments in the district
 - a New Developments Supplementary Planning Document that sets out the Council's parking standards such as the number of parking spaces to be provided for each new property.
- reduced our office footprint and associated heating and energy costs by moving our staff into a single office building.
- reduced the carbon dioxide emissions of the Council from 5.6 tonnes in 2009/10 to 5.36 tonnes in 2010/11.
- reduced the amount of household waste going to landfill by 10 kg per household in 2010/11 helping to achieve a reuse, recycling and composting rate of just over 50%.
- promoted food waste reduction with the completion of a 'food waste family challenge' and live cookery demonstrations. Recycling bins have been

introduced in Letchworth Town Centre and we have provided a recycling trade waste service to all schools.

- been nationally recognised by the award of three Green Apple awards for a community clean up event (Spring Clean Letchworth), electrical and electronic recycling events and programme of Community Reassurance partnership events
- Introduced an office recycling scheme that has significantly increased recycling and in a six month period reduced the amount of waste sent to landfill by 24 tonnes.
- provided new play equipment at Avenue Park in Baldock and Temple gardens in Letchworth Garden City. Temple Gardens has new urban inspired play equipment.
- retained Green Flag awards for Norton Common in Letchworth Garden City and Priory Memorial Gardens in Royston for the second successive year.
- provided a grant of £3,000 to Groundwork Hertfordshire who supported residents of Standhill Road, Hitchin to work together to restore a spinney to a managed copse that includes newly planted trees and a pathway to open up access..
- used a grant of £10,000 from the Forestry Commission to work with the Countryside Management Service (CMS) to improve the paths through the use of recycled stone, in the circular Woodland Walk in Great Ashby.
- used capital grants and worked with the Homes & Communities Agency to encourage Registered Social Landlords to build homes resulting in nearly 1,000 new affordable homes in the area between 2003 and 2011.
- worked with partners to facilitate the construction of the Royston Rail underpass, enabling more residents to walk and cycle.

Ongoing and future projects

Our policies, approach to planning throughout the district, and environmental management all reflect the wider aims of our Climate Change Strategy. Ongoing and future projects include:

- exploring the introduction of sensor lighting and better heating controls to the District Council Offices and introducing these provided they result in both cost and environmental savings.
- ensuring the extension to the Great Ashby community Centre is energy efficient by including solar thermal heating and sun tubes to make the most of natural lighting.
- undertaking a trial to consider the introduction of a recycling service for local businesses which are existing trade waste customers.
- delivering key projects from our Green Space Strategy in 2012/13 including:
 - completion of phase two of renovations at Avenue Park, Baldock by constructing a water splash play feature in the paddling pool area.
 - submitting a Parks for People Heritage Lottery Fund grant application for renovation works at Bancroft Recreational Grounds, Hitchin
 - replacement of Walsworth Common access bridge
 - replacement of trees in Broadway Walk Letchworth, to improve the street scene
- re-using waste water from the Avenue Park Water Splash feature to irrigate the bowls green and cricket pitch and potentially, nearby flower beds.
- using a grant of £35,000 from the Forestry Commission to enable works at Weston Hills in Baldock to be completed in 2012. The work is being coordinated by the CMS and will create a more natural woodland environment and will help improve the habitat for wildlife. The Friends of Baldock Greenspaces group will also be carrying out some of the work including coppicing and installing signs and benches.
- continuing with the project to enhance Pixbrook Meadows with the CMS, Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation and Hertfordshire County Council to enhance the green space that links Norton Common and Standalone Farm. The work will create an all-weather surfaced route through the site for use by cyclists and pedestrians (and linking between the Greenway and the town centre), restore the existing orchard and improve the woodland and hedgerows on the site.

- improving access and maintaining and improving the habitat at Purwell Meadows. This will improve the environment in particular for water voles and otters.
- Installing solar powered car park ticket machines in 29 out of the 53 machines due to be installed in 2012.
- completing the re-roofing of the North Herts Leisure Centre to reduce our energy consumption.
- seeking to extend the boundary to the Chilterns Area of Outstanding National Beauty .
- using guidance from the National Planning Policy Framework to shape our emerging 'Local Development Framework', to set a level of housing growth, (including affordable housing) while considering the need to preserve all that is good about our area. We will be consulting the public in summer 2012 regarding new land allocations.

CONCLUSION

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

We continue to use and look for innovative ways to ensure we obtain the best value from external contractors and/or partnership working.

The Council measures progress and improvement in a number of ways. Each year, Councillors 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 are monitored at six-monthly intervals.

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

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