

Productive North Herts

Economic

Development Strategy

DRAFT

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www.north-herts.gov.uk

“Making North Hertfordshire a vibrant place to live work and prosper”

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Foreword

North Hertfordshire is a great place to live and work and has a diverse and strong economy with potential to grow. Productive North Herts sets out the Council's economic vision to ensure we have a thriving, vibrant and prosperous economy going forward and one which is underpinned by its strengths and enterprise.

The district hosts a number of internationally important businesses. Johnson Matthey in Royston is a world leader in environmental technologies and precious metal production. LV Insurance has major offices in Hitchin and Samsung has a key service presence in Letchworth Garden City. We also have important companies in pharmaceutical technologies as well as advanced engineering, information technology and in the service and business support sectors. Manufacturing forms a key part of our economy and "production" is a key part of what the economy does.

The Council has an important role to play in shaping our local economy but cannot achieve this in isolation. A crucial element of our strategy is to work in partnership with key stakeholders in the North Hertfordshire economy to support and grow new and existing businesses and to attract inward investment. This includes the Hertfordshire and Greater Cambridge, Greater Peterborough Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs), the Federation of Small Business, Chambers of Commerce, North Hertfordshire College, among many others. We wish to see the economy grow and prosper generating employment opportunities and we need to ensure we have a valued local skilled workforce in place to take advantage of those opportunities.

Introduction

The purpose of Productive North Herts is to present, as the basis for delivery, the Council's aims and proposed actions for improving economic prosperity across the District so that residents and businesses can thrive and contribute to creating sustainable communities.

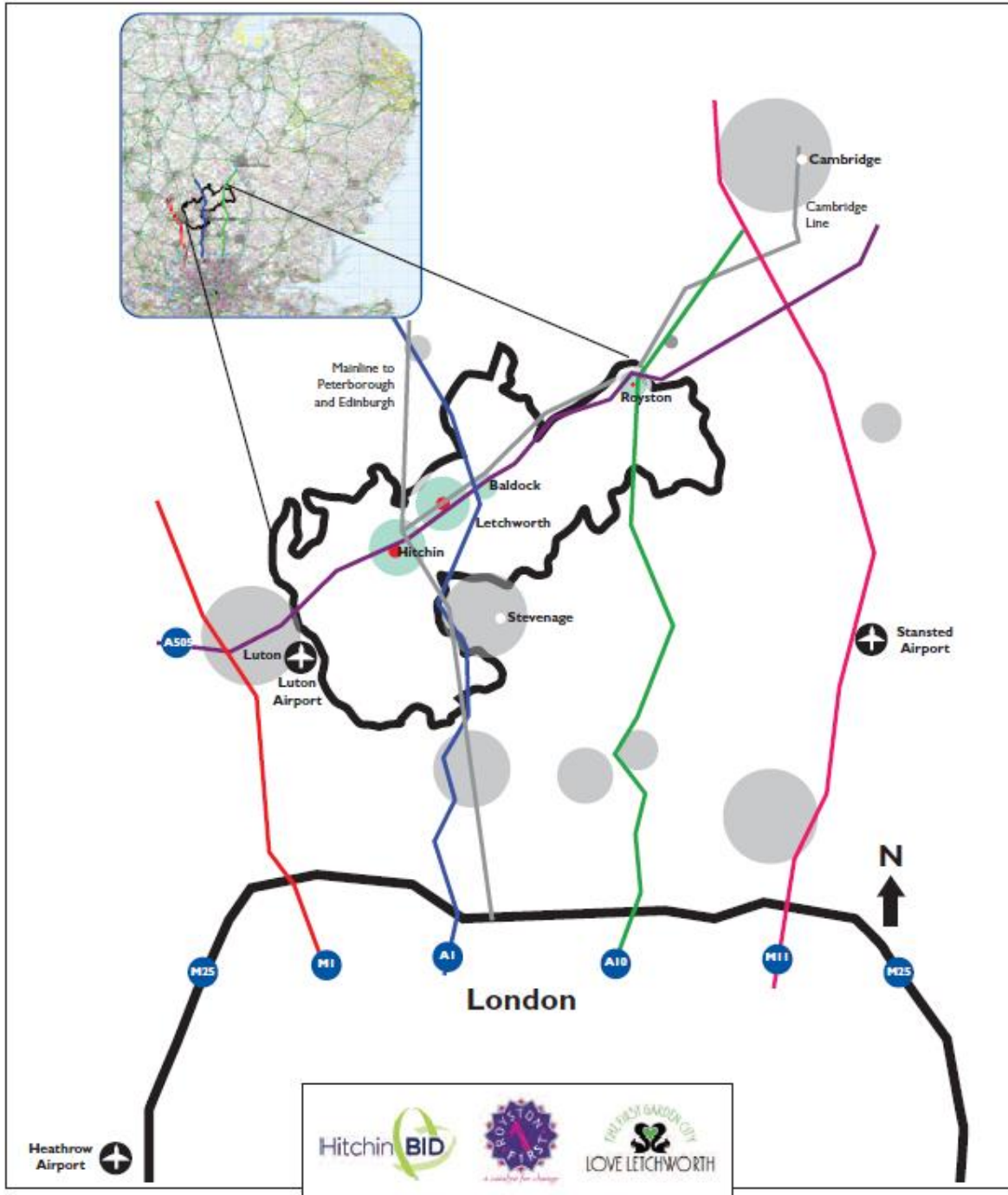
In developing the strategy the Council recognises the importance of considering all aspects of community life and (as promoted by the Hertfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership) champions the concept of 'Smart Growth' rather than growth at any cost.

Smart Growth is based on knowledge and innovation, which promotes a resource efficient, greener and competitive economy embracing and responding to the dynamic relationship between the district's economy, its' diverse communities and places and the need for "sustainable" growth.

The Council cherishes the area's economic heritage associated with the existing economic sectors such as manufacturing and will seek to ensure they remain drivers for local economic development as well as encouraging new sectors to flourish.

This strategy has been prepared in consultation with key stakeholders and local businesses and is supported by an assessment of local evidence. The Council will use the strategy to underpin joint working with partners and build better relationships with businesses in Hertfordshire and the wider economic geography to optimise the benefits of collaboration and seek to unlock the full potential of the area's resources.

Strategic Context



North Hertfordshire

North Hertfordshire has significant assets:

- Highly skilled, highly motivated workforce
- Excellent strategic location between Cambridge and London
- The A1(M) and A10 bisect the district in a north- south direction and the M1 is only a couple of miles west
- The A505 runs east - west through the district and directly connects
- The main towns in North Herts are located near to the A1(M), A10, and Cambridge
- Rail links in all towns to London Kings Cross and Cambridge
- Luton Airport is on our borders and Stansted and Heathrow are within an hours drive
- The attractive market towns of Baldock, Hitchin and Royston and the world's first Garden City, Letchworth all set within a green, desirable rural environment
- Internationally renowned schools and North Hertfordshire College Campuses
- Knebworth House and the Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation
- Internationally important businesses
- Resilient economy due to high proportion of small and micro businesses

There are some challenges, which need to be overcome:

- The need for growth which reinforces the principles of Green Belt
- Tired looking employment areas, some with access issues
- No local economic identity or brand
- Pockets of deprivation
- High levels of congestion on main transport routes
- High levels of out-commuting
- Ensuring our town centres remain vibrant in a changing retail environment

But there are a number of opportunities:

- Potential for growth in high-end sectors such as advanced manufacturing and life sciences
- Growth of Cambridge
- Growth of Luton airport
- Highly skilled residents
- A1 and A10 Growth Corridors
- Business Improvement Districts in three of the four towns

Economic Vision

In accordance with our Corporate objective to *'promote sustainable growth within our district to ensure economic and social opportunities exist for our communities, whilst remaining mindful of our cultural and physical heritage'*; we will support new and existing businesses to deliver smart, sustainable economic growth, encouraging entrepreneurship, building on our strengths, location and offer.

By 2025 North Hertfordshire will have an economy that provides a mix of jobs to meet the needs of the population and the requirements of the business community; we will achieve this by collaborating with partners to:

- Drive innovation and economic growth to deliver the Local Plan target of at least 3,600 jobs, reversing the trend of negative job growth
- Create a labour market where the educational institutions meet the current and future needs of the economy
- Revitalise our existing employment areas
- Provide a greater mix of skilled jobs
- Respond quickly to changes in the economic situation
- Make North Hertfordshire a place to invest in
- Work with businesses and rationalise business support

Strategic Priorities

To translate this vision into actions the following priorities will be pursued:

Priority 1: Increase investment and business engagement

Priority 2 : Improve the business environment

Priority 3: Championing learning and skills

Priority 4: Supporting business.

1. Increase investment and business engagement

North Hertfordshire District Council hasn't had an economic development officer in post for a number of years and so the relationships, knowledge and networks are not as prevalent as they once were.

Understanding how and where North Hertfordshire fits within the wider economy is an important task to define exactly what we want going forward. To do this we need to find out more about the district's economy and what makes it specific. This will be an important overarching project to identify not only what our economy is made up of, but also potential gaps and opportunities within certain sectors.

Following on from this, we will work with businesses and develop an economic identity, which will provide us with the information to be able to market ourselves, making us more attractive to businesses, employers and outside investment.

Working closer with businesses and building relationships will help ensure that we are more aware when businesses have problems and issues and can help facilitate growth opportunities when funding and incentives become available.

Developing better links between ourselves and businesses, but also between business to business will have the added benefit of encouraging collaborative working. Developing networks and encouraging relationships will have potential benefits for staffing, skills and knowledge and will provide the opportunity for businesses to promote their products and services as well as increasing knowledge of issues such as business regulations, exporting and finance initiatives. These projects will also link to Priority 4 around supporting business.

2. Improve the business environment

A number of our employment areas are tired and dated and are in need of investment. There are also access issues with some employment areas, as well as infrastructure constraints across the wider district.

Working with partners we will seek to improve the condition, look and access of our employment areas. We need to identify the areas which require the most attention to prioritise improvement but conversely we also need to recognise those areas which are functioning well and that can be supported and grown. Through a series of different approaches we will seek to encourage the improvement and enhancement where required. The local plan provides one such opportunity to change boundaries and allow a greater amount of flexibility, which may encourage reinvestment. Recycling and redeveloping our employment areas will ensure that they do not become derelict and unattractive; however these decisions need to be based on up-to-date evidence, which will be the starting point of this project.

Whilst manufacturing is forecast to decline in terms of land requirement (due to further improved working methods), it is a key sector and strength in the North Hertfordshire economy and will continue to be going forward, but the land requirements for this use are predicted to decrease in the long term and this will need to be appropriately managed.

Some of our employment areas are constrained in terms of access, therefore understanding the potential economic, social and environmental benefits of access improvements is a useful exercise to help make an economic case should increased funding be available to implement such a scheme longer term. There are also benefits to improving other forms of access and transport creating a range of options for workers in a sustainable way.

The district's infrastructure and communication networks need to be improved to keep pace with population and economic growth and make sure that we are a location to invest in. Broadband improvements across the wider Hertfordshire area are largely being delivered by the "Connected Counties" project, which is seeking to achieve county-wide fibre coverage of at least 90 per cent by the end of March 2016. Whilst we have limited ability to influence this project, we will support specific local broadband improvements, such as improved access for our employment areas and delivery of free Wi-Fi in our town centres, should appropriate funding streams become available.

We will continue to work with other authorities and organisations to lobby Government regarding improvement of the A1 (M).

3. Championing learning and skills

Increasing the total number of jobs in the district would be a very positive step, reversing recent trend of job decline. The area is forecast to grow significantly in terms of population and residential development and therefore providing jobs together with housing is regarded as sustainable development.

Working with public, private and community groups we will seek to improve skills and job prospects in North Hertfordshire. We need to work with businesses to understand where the skills gaps are in the district and wider economic area and engage with education providers to try and encourage students to take up careers in these disciplines.

We will provide opportunities to retain more skilled people, which will increase our levels of enterprise and deliver more jobs and business locally. Supporting projects such as business incubation and initiatives that allow people to set up and showcase their own businesses and products will encourage more entrepreneurs to operate within the local economic area. This encompasses a potentially large number of projects and initiatives and links strongly with Priority 4 around supporting business, but also Priority 1 in terms of increasing investment and business engagement.

We will seek to provide our residents with the skills and capabilities to find work and employment which will help increase prosperity and improve quality of life. This includes providing the younger generation with the skills needed to find and maintain employment as well as providing support and help to those that are out of work and need help finding employment.

4. Supporting Business

Business support is currently being delivered at a number of different levels and by a number of different organisations. This can be both confusing and intimidating. As stated previously we have not had an Economic Development Officer in post for a number of years and so have not explicitly provided a business support role either in the recent past.

We will support all businesses in North Hertfordshire, whether they are located in town centres, employment areas or in the rural area and through better use of the Council's website we will aim simplify the wide extent of business support that is currently available. We will also signpost opportunities for funding and finance where they exist.

We will create a business directory to allow businesses to engage more easily with each other and find services and local businesses easily facilitating collaborative working.

Working to deliver a business incubator in partnership with key stakeholders will provide a facility that will encourage entrepreneurialism and hands on business support but also a focus for learning and skills development. Additionally and linked to this we will work with landowners and town centre managers to provide the opportunities for entrepreneurs and local businesses to test their products through events and through the use of easy in, easy out premises.

Creating better business networks and relationships in North Hertfordshire will be a focus as discussed under Priority 1, but specifically in the rural area, experience has identified it is particularly difficult to publicise projects and initiatives even when European Funding is available, so we will try and improve rural communication links. Building on from this the Eastern Plateau Rural Development Scheme¹ is a project that we need to engage more with to ensure positive benefits for North Hertfordshire. The European funding is committed for 5 years and we need to ensure that money is accessed in spent in North Hertfordshire by our businesses.

Strengthening the economic offer and function of our town centres is also important, ensuring that they are competitive and attractive for modern-day use. This will in turn make them desirable places to be and increase their vitality and viability.

Building on potential growth sectors such as creative industries and film production will also be a key focus bringing forward projects that could increase outside investment.

¹ See here for more information: <http://easternplateau.org.uk/>

Action Plan and Delivery

As a result of consultation on the draft strategy and subsequent work with key stakeholders and local businesses, together with the assessment of local evidence² we have identified a number of projects to help deliver the priorities in this Strategy. These are listed in the accompanying action plan.

The majority of the action plan projects are likely to be deliverable within the short to medium term, i.e. 1-3 years. Therefore, it will be necessary to keep the action plan under review as funding and governance continue to change. We want to keep the action plan current and continue to develop and expand on projects as they come forward.

Whilst the majority of projects are discussed in general under the specific priorities within this strategy, the action plan provides detailed information regarding timescales, partners and delivery mechanisms.

The action plan itself is split into two categories: Short term and Medium term. The short term projects are those that can be started and delivered within a year, whereas medium term projects have a longer timeframe and often require additional work to be completed before they can be commenced.

The action plan will be reviewed in consultation with our key stakeholders to ensure that the projects are being delivered and that the timescales are accurate.

² See Evidence supporting Economic Development Strategy here: www.XXXXX