



North Hertfordshire's

RURAL STRATEGY

2010 - 2015

DRAFT

Making North Hertfordshire a vibrant place to live, work and prosper

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A large proportion of North Hertfordshire is rural or has rural characteristics. Just under 24% of North Hertfordshire's population lives in those rural areas which are represented by 31 Parish Councils and Parish Meetings as well as by the District and County Councils.

The Rural Strategy represents a commitment to those areas. The Parish Charter, which was first published in 1998, describes how the Councils can work together.

A lot has been delivered since our first Rural Strategy was published in 2005.

This strategy recognises the importance of ensuring that rural issues are considered in the development of other policies and strategies.

Key issues are grouped under ten headings:

- **Protecting and Enhancing the Environment** – heritage, climate change, reducing waste and encouraging recycling, biodiversity, access to the countryside
- **Providing Decent and Affordable Housing** – relevant, sustainable and affordable housing in rural areas
- **Travel, Transport and Connectivity** – parish travel plans, extended cycling strategy, improved public rights of way, better internet connectivity
- **Children and Young People** – improved opportunities for rural children and young people to take part in sport and physical activity, establish rural youth councils
- **Strengthening Communities and Involving People** – reduce social exclusion, greater community participation
- **A Safer Community** – responsible citizenship, community reassurance days, deal with anti-social motoring
- **Health and Recreation** – improve informal recreation opportunities, parish paths partnership, access to GPs and NHS dentists
- **Older People** – transport links, combat isolation of older people
- **Economic Prosperity and Employment** – sustainable economic development, Eastern Plateau, diversification
- **Promoting Lifelong Learning, Training and Skills Development** – improve participation in education and training by people living in rural areas

Our ambitions will be tempered by the availability of resources, as graphically illustrated by the publication of the Comprehensive Spending Review on 20th October 2010. What is clear it that little will be done without the active engagement of our partners.

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FOREWORD

North Hertfordshire's rural areas and the communities that live in them are important to the District Council. Nearly a quarter of the district's population live outside of Hitchin, Letchworth, Royston and Baldock.

In 2005 I introduced the first Rural Strategy for North Hertfordshire. Since then we have reviewed that strategy and taken into account the changing circumstances and developed this new document. Now I am delighted to introduce this new strategy. This time we have decided to include an updated Parish Charter in the same document.

During the past year Elected Members and Officers of the Council have put a lot of work into developing the new Rural Strategy and Parish Charter. I would like to thank the Parish Councils and a wide range of partnership organisations and agencies that have worked with us to provide a very clear focus and direction for future joint working to improve the quality of life of those living in our rural areas.

In this time of severe financial constraints we may not be able to do all we want to do immediately but this important piece of work shows what we want to achieve.

The Strategy cannot be seen as a stand-alone document. It reflects and adds a rural dimension to the Sustainable Community Strategy. Neither is it fixed and immovable. It does represent a set of ideas and actions that have been developed over time in full consultation with local communities. It will continue to evolve and adapt to different circumstances.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank all those who have contributed to the development and production of this strategy and I look forward to further successful partnership working that will help to make a difference to North Hertfordshire's rural people and their communities.

Councillor Tricia Cowley

Portfolio Holder for Community Engagement and Rural Affairs

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INTRODUCTION

This strategy is a revision of the North Hertfordshire Rural Strategy 2005 – 2010 and has been produced in tandem with the updated Parish Charter. North Hertfordshire benefits from 31 Parish Councils and Parish Meetings and covers an area of 144.93 miles²/375 km² with 93.39% of the district regarded as possessing rural characteristics. Rural North Hertfordshire consists of those areas outside of Baldock, Hitchin, Letchworth Garden City and Royston. Almost 24% of North Hertfordshire's residents dwell in these rural areas, demonstrating the need to create a strategy that reflects these residents' needs.

WHAT DID THE LAST RURAL STRATEGY DELIVER?

The preceding rural strategy to this document ran for five years, from 2005 – 2010. It achieved many objectives, listed below under the original themes:

COMMUNITY SAFETY

- Through partnership work between our parishes and the Hertfordshire Constabulary we secured four additional Police Community Support Officers for the district.
- Our Southern Rural Committee purchased covert CCTV cameras for use in areas prone to flytipping, resulting in convictions of those caught breaking the law.
- We have established rural business and farm watch schemes in areas prone to theft of equipment, such as horse trailers.

EDUCATION AND LIFELONG LEARNING

- Our parishes have sought and secured funding to increase access to IT in rural facilities, such as the Kimpton Community Information Point.

HEALTH

- Working through the Hertfordshire Integrated Transport Partnership, access to transport to health facilities has improved with the establishment of the Lister Shuttle Service and a number of community transport schemes.
- Partners have made grants available for the creation and improvement of play facilities and play schemes in rural areas to increase physical activity.

HOUSING

- We have delivered rural affordable housing schemes, in such places Therfield and Barkway, to ensure young people can remain in the communities in which they grew up or now work. These included comprised flexible, convertible homes.
- The Gateway Allocation Scheme designed to widen access to affordable housing was implemented in 2005. There is also now a Common Housing Register that enables housing applicants to apply for all social housing in the district via the District Council or its housing partners, rather than approaching each organisation separately. Choice Based Lettings has also been launched and this enables applicants to view all vacancies in the district and bid for appropriate properties.
- The Council provides housing advice appointments for residents and also visits people in their home if there is a particular requirement for this. The website is also currently being reviewed in order to provide more housing information for the public.

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- The District Council has a rolling programme of parish surveys that are undertaken by the independent CDA Rural Housing Enabler. At the moment, three surveys are completed a year in order to assess to housing need in the parishes.

LEISURE AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

- A Village Halls brochure offering facilities available was produced.
- An annual Town and Parish Councils' conference now takes place and twice-yearly networking meetings for rural representatives have been set up.
- £1.25 million has been invested to improve the physical condition and accessibility of village and community halls. North Hertfordshire District Council PACIF (Parish Amenity and Capital Investment Fund) was extended for another two years beyond the original four year plan, with another £250,000 investment in 2009/10 alone.
- A number of successful community schemes have taken place under the guidance and management of Hertfordshire's Countryside Management Service (CMS), including increased footpath signage, hedging and owl box establishment.
- Whilst the Post Office closure programme threatened to close and change access to our local post offices, North Hertfordshire District Council was able to reverse the decision to close Whitwell, Willian and Sandon post offices assisted in no small part by the residents, parish councils and businesses providing evidence of need and community support. We will continue to challenge inappropriate closures in the future as such community facilities are key to the viability of a number of our villages.
- Working with the Community Development Agency for North Hertfordshire, we have:
 - Assisted with the Development of Parish Plans, Design Statements and local consultations
 - Supported and advised Village Hall Committees
 - Co-partnered the SCooTs projects
 - Provided funding advice on rurally based projects

PLANNING AND ENVIRONMENT

- Our rural areas now benefit from having increased access to recycling facilities, both at the kerbside and through bring banks.
- The Best Kept Village competition has been very well supported.
- A number of parishes have completed comprehensive Parish Plans.
- Partnership work on the RDPE (Eastern Plateau) is already releasing more funding to business support and development in our rural areas.

TRANSPORT

- In terms of the overall transportation theme, it has been difficult to progress a number of the original aspirations of the original Rural Strategy shown above, since there have been additional pressures placed on the resources available to both the County Council and North Herts District Council. In the light of current spending reductions, it is increasingly likely that a number of these plans may need to be reconsidered and reprioritised again to reflect any further reduction of resources.
- The District does now have a rural (Sustrans) cycling route, with accompanying guide to draw cyclists into and through our villages. The Council has worked in partnership with HCC to encourage consideration of how pupils travel to school and through working with our community safety partners, a number of schemes have been created to reduce speed through villages, particularly near schools and playgrounds.

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YOUNG PEOPLE

- Transport facilities enabling rural young people to reach education, training or social activities have been greatly enhanced by our SCooTS scooter transport scheme.
- We have extended our work with young people through the establishment of youth councils and youth engagement activities.
- Grant Aid from the North Hertfordshire Sports Partnership has enabled individual development opportunities for aspiring young people and continues through additional Ready for Winners funding up to and through the 2012 Olympics.

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PRINCIPLES

The Rural Strategy will reflect many of the aspirations of the current Sustainable Community Strategy for North Hertfordshire since that was created following extensive consultation with individuals, representative groups from the voluntary and community sector, Parish and Town Councils as well as through statutory agencies. It has been created as a response to recognising the importance of rural areas and their unique characteristics. It will help focus the district vision 'Making North Hertfordshire a vibrant place to live, work and prosper' to ensure it meets the specific needs and circumstances of our rural communities. This strategy will also contribute to the implementation of the North Hertfordshire District Green Infrastructure Action Plan.

We believe that a sustainable community is one that is organised to enable all its citizens to meet their needs and enhance their well-being without damaging the natural world or endangering the living conditions of other people, now or in the future. Thus the following principles have been adopted:

- **well-run communities** – good governance with effective and inclusive participation, representation and leadership
- **environmental** – providing places for people to live in an environmentally friendly way, including awareness of, and action on, climate change
- **economic** – a thriving, vibrant and diverse local economy
- **housing and the built environment** – well-designed, high-quality and affordable buildings in a well-balanced built and natural environment
- **transport and connectivity** – well-connected communities with good transport services linking people to jobs, health and other services
- **services** – public, private, community and voluntary services that are available to all
- **social and culture** – active, inclusive and safe with a strong local culture and other shared community activities
- **equality and diversity** – fair for everyone in our diverse world, both for today's and tomorrow's communities
- **rural consideration** – ensuring that rural issues are explicitly considered in the development and review of strategies

IMPORTANCE OF RURAL ISSUES

The Council recognises the opportunities and pleasures of rural life but also appreciates the growing complexity, pressures and challenges of rural life. In so doing, we understand that such issues cannot be solved by the local authority or indeed any agency acting alone, but by working together with our partners – public, private, voluntary and community organisations.

Rural life is very important in shaping the character of North Hertfordshire, its communities, economy and environment. The importance of agriculture and rural businesses, the countryside, along with the small scale and dispersed nature of rural communities, all serve to pose challenges that are often quite different to our urban areas within the district. Our approach and that of our partners must respond accordingly to these rural needs. This is a vital consideration when developing effective public policy and service delivery in rural areas.

It is also important to recognise that our rural communities do not exist in isolation from the rest of the district. Indeed there is a high level of mutual dependence and connectivity between rural and urban areas. For example those who live in our rural areas often work in our towns or go

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there for shopping, social and leisure facilities. Similarly, the rural environment adds to the quality of life enjoyed by all residents of the district and is a considerable asset for the area.

CONTEXT

This strategy will assist in delivering the strategic objectives of the Council and the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) in the rural area of North Hertfordshire. Although this is a standalone document designed to recognise the unique needs for rural North Hertfordshire, it is also important to recognise that all North Hertfordshire District Council (NHDC) and partnership documents constitute a combined commitment to work collaboratively for the whole district.

The Local Development Framework (LDF) contains NHDC's planning policies. It impacts upon rural North Hertfordshire in various ways, predominantly in land allocations for services and housing.

NATIONAL CONTEXT

The importance of rural areas in the national context is illustrated by the fact that England's rural places and communities occupy around 86% of its land mass and are home to one fifth of the national population¹. The overarching concepts of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) Rural Strategy 2004 - *Economic and social regeneration; Social justice for all; and Enhancing the value of our countryside* – are all reflected in this document and are justified by the fact that over 70% of the land in the UK is in agricultural use. The Rural Development Programme for England (2007-2013) committed to providing £3.9 billion in funding for farmers, growers, foresters, land owners, rural businesses and rural communities, affecting the aforementioned overarching concepts of the DEFRA Rural Strategy 2004.

Demographically, rural England is accommodating an older population compared with urban areas with the median age of residents as 44.4 years in rural areas compared to 38.5 years in urban areas, as recorded in 2006². This is resulting from a larger proportion of older people as well as a smaller proportion of those in the 16 to 29 age group.

The Forestry Commission's Strategy for England's Trees, Woods and Forests was refreshed in 2007 with a delivery plan scheduled for review in 2012. There are five key aims of the strategy that impact upon the *Protecting and Enhancing the Environment, Health and Recreation* and *Economic Prosperity and Employment* sections of this Rural Strategy, including:

- to secure trees and woodlands for future generations
- to ensure resilience to climate change
- to protect and enhance natural resources
- to increase the contribution that trees, woods and forests make to our quality of life
- to improve the competitiveness of woodland businesses and products.

¹ DEFRA (2009), *Rural & countryside: Legislation, policy & regulations*

² Commission for Rural Communities (2010), *State of the Countryside 2010*

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REGIONAL CONTEXT

More than 80% of the East of England's land is classified as rural, with 40% of the region's population dwelling in these rural areas³. With such a large share of the regional population being encompassed under a rural umbrella, it is vital that this sector of society is represented. In the last ten years, the East of England Development Agency (EEDA) has invested over £81 million directly into the Hertfordshire economy, which was spent on improving Hertfordshire's economy. This organisation has now been abolished to make way for Local Economic Partnerships.

The former East of England Regional Assembly (EERA) produced an East of England Plan. This was withdrawn in 2010 and EERA has since been abolished. Some of its functions have been adopted by the East of England Local Government Association (EELGA).

LOCAL CONTEXT

The Sustainable Community Strategy (SCS 2009 – 2021) was developed by the North Hertfordshire Partnership (North Hertfordshire's LSP) and is the overarching strategy for the area. The Partnership brings together the public, private, voluntary and community sectors – including parish council representatives – to improve the social, environmental and economic well-being of our district. While references are made in the SCS to rural issues and strengthening communities, linked strategies (such as a rural strategy) are necessary to provide more specific detail over a shorter time period.

³ The East of England Development Agency (2010), *The Importance of Rural Areas*

KEY OBJECTIVES

PROTECTING AND ENHANCING THE ENVIRONMENT

Rural North Hertfordshire enjoys many aesthetic environmental features, including Therfield Heath and Wymondley Woods. The far north west of the district is encompassed within the Chilterns Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), designated for its nationally significant landscape. This section of the strategy includes actions designed to be sympathetic to North Hertfordshire's rural environment.

The Council's Planning Control and Conservation Service has a Principal Conservation Officer who is currently producing a strategy to conserve the District's historic environment. The work is partly in response to the government policy document PPS5 – Planning for the Historic Environment, published in March 2010 – and considerations evolving from the strategy will be affecting and involving Parish Councils in the future. The strategy will factor in North Hertfordshire's historic buildings, conservation areas, parks and gardens.

Partnership working at the Council to protect and enhance rural North Hertfordshire's environment has included organisations such as English Heritage, Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation, the Hertfordshire Biological Records Centre, the Hertfordshire Building Preservation Trust and local groups to promote the understanding and protection of the District's historic environment.

Hertfordshire's Countryside Management Service (CMS) is funded by the District Council to involve communities in enhancing and improving opportunities to enjoy North Hertfordshire's environment. In particular this organisation provides advice and action on Council-owned nature reserves to contribute to the Greenspace Strategy and Biodiversity Action Plan delivery. The Rural Development Programme for England funds Environmental Stewardship – an agri-environment scheme that supports farmers and land managers to provide wildlife, landscape and countryside access benefits for people. The CMS is working with farmers to enable applications worth in excess of £5m to be spent in North Hertfordshire over the lifetime of this plan.

The North Hertfordshire District Green Infrastructure Plan (GIP) (finalised in 2009) is designed to enhance existing green infrastructure and connections and provide an holistic consideration of green infrastructure deficiency. It will also inform priorities for new green infrastructure, providing environmental, social and economic functions including positive health benefits. The accompanying Green Space Action Plan sets out an implementation strategy for prioritising and delivering the projects.

The Performance Reward Grant from Central Government in 2010 has ensured that over £400,000 can be put towards projects in North Hertfordshire, as allocated by the North Hertfordshire Partnership (LSP). The CMS is represented at the North Hertfordshire Partnership and will be ensuring that rural North Hertfordshire benefits from Performance Reward Grant funding spent on the ongoing Green Infrastructure project.

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Key actions

- Promote sustainable development of the district to ensure we protect the environment and conserve the heritage of our historic and rural settlements
- Increase the opportunities for recycling and encourage people to use fewer resources
- Encourage the inclusion of environmental actions into parish plans
- Enhance conservation and the positive historical aspects of village life
- Advance the district's climate change strategy including aspects relevant to rural areas
- Enable the agricultural and forestry sectors to make a positive environmental impact
- Continue to produce and implement Green Space Action plans
- Improve the ecological condition of the rural environment, including providing advice to realise the good conservation management of the district's Wildlife Sites
- Reduce waste arising from the agri-food sector
- Improve opportunities to access and enjoy the countryside whilst avoiding negative impacts on the environment and biodiversity

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PROVIDING DECENT AND AFFORDABLE HOUSING

Housing demand in North Hertfordshire is high. The cost, including the high levels of deposit required, is putting home ownership out of reach for many households. Residents who are without adequate housing and who cannot afford to buy or rent suitable housing in the open market are said to be in housing need. As the Strategic Housing Authority and the Planning Authority, the Council is committed to meeting this housing need. In order to determine local housing needs, the Council supplements data from the district wide housing needs surveys with more localised information from surveys carried out in individual parishes. These are conducted in partnership with parish councils and the Community Development Agency's housing need surveys.

The Rural Services Network conducted a survey highlighting that rural areas have been hit particularly badly by rising repossessions and unintentional homelessness. The Hertfordshire Young Homeless Group works with 16 to 25 year olds who are, or are about to become, homeless, with approximately 10% of their clients originating from rural areas.

The Performance Reward Grant has ensured that over £400,000 can be put towards projects in North Hertfordshire, as allocated by the North Hertfordshire Partnership. Some of these funds have been allocated to a project that will survey the under-occupancy of housing in North Hertfordshire.

Key actions:

- Engage in positive action to meet affordable housing needs in rural parishes in ways that are relevant and sustainable
- Continue to work on a programme of parish housing need surveys in partnership with the Community Development Association (CDA) Rural Housing Enabler
- Deliver affordable homes on identified rural sites to meet rural housing needs, including rural exception sites
- Review, with other housing providers, opportunities within resources available for bringing empty rural homes back into occupancy
- Ensure rural affordable housing designated as 'intermediate tenure' (i.e. shared ownership) remains affordable for use by the local community
- Develop and maintain close liaison with all Parish Councils in order to respond to changing community needs

TRAVEL, TRANSPORT AND CONNECTIVITY

Some rural residents are concerned about the lack of public transport, its frequency, convenience and fare levels⁴. Added to these concerns of travel, transport and connectivity are that the rural roads are used as cut-throughs and that access to the internet in rural areas is inadequate.

⁴ Rural Services Network (2010), *The Rural Review of Public Services*

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Hertfordshire County Council (HCC) supports various plans and organisations with the aim of improving the lives of its residents, including Parish Travel Plans, Central Chilterns Area Traffic Management Project, Hertfordshire Rural Forum, and Hertfordshire Rural Social and Community Programme. The Hertfordshire Rural Transport Partnership includes members of the HCC. HCC are currently in public consultation for the Local Travel Plan (LTP3) for April 2011. The Rural Transport Statement for this is interim to the strategy being reviewed in December 2011, which will present four key themes – Traffic and Environment Schemes; Deliver Rights of Way Improvement Plans; Improve the Quality of Rural Passenger Transport; and Improve Rural Accessibility. The Sustainable Modes of Travel Strategy for Schools and Colleges (SMoTS) was published in August 2010.

Key actions

- Continue to consider and influence Hertfordshire County Council's (HCC) network reviews of all bus services, routes and usage
- Provide advice for the scoping and implementation of parish travel plans (or the transport element of parish plans), including identified objectives such as to:
 - Influence Hertfordshire County Council in the development of school travel plans and safer routes to school
 - Update North Hertfordshire District Council's (NHDC) cycling strategy to cover rural areas and encourage the adoption of the routes preferred by cyclists in parish plans.
 - Work with Hertfordshire County Council to identify 'rat runs' and their impact and propose measures to manage them as well as identify where lorry and large vehicle restrictions are needed
 - Improve Public Rights of Way, footways and crossings to enhance their functionality for local people
 - Introduce highway safety improvements to tackle hazards caused by speeding, poor junction visibility and parking
- Improve transport options for all
- Reduce the need to travel by improving internet and mobile phone connectivity

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CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Nationally there are fewer younger people (16 years to 29 years) in rural areas (13.7%) compared with in urban areas (20%)⁵. The Council has a dedicated and thriving Children's Service Team that, in partnership with other organisations, is implementing the actions in the Children and Young People's Plan 2009 – 2012. HCC are currently developing a new commissioning statement for children and young people.

Rural schools in the UK suffer from a lack of capacity to provide services, such as public transport outside normal school hours, compared with urban schools in that specialist services, such as wrap-around child care, struggle to be supported⁶. In an effort to mitigate this the Council works alongside the Extended Services Consortiums to provide a range of initiatives in the rural areas, including Play Rangers, providing grants to youth organisations to add value to existing provision and initiatives forming part of the Love to Move and Livewire campaigns such as Rural Multisports. North Hertfordshire District Council also supports the Scooter and Cycle Transport Solutions (SCooTS) initiative for teenagers.

A study by the Rural Services Network (2010) found that young people in this country feel their lives would be improved by having somewhere safe to meet friends and that sports centres, clubs and activities would most improve their local area. The report concluded that access to sports facilities and activities is difficult for rural young people. The North Hertfordshire Play Partnership involves various public, voluntary and private organisations who are committed to improving play opportunities for children. Current membership includes schools, playgroups and nurseries, after school and holiday clubs and representatives for the District Council, National Childminders Association, Children's Centres and Extended School's Consortia.

The Hertfordshire Children's Trust Partnership organises Hertfordshire's Children's Centres. Residents in rural North Hertfordshire are provided with various centres that are open daily, including Barleyfields (serving Knebworth and Woolmer Green) and Strawberry Fields (serving Great Ashby and Gravely).

⁵ Commission for Rural Communities (2010), *State of the Countryside 2010*

⁶ Rural Services Network (2010), *The Rural Review of Public Services*

STRENGTHENING COMMUNITIES AND INVOLVING PEOPLE**Key actions**

- Offer advice and support on improving rural play areas. This is a priority in the Children and Young People's Plan for 2009-2012
- Work with agencies such as Pro-Action to establish more youth clubs and activities in rural areas
- Continue the work on rural play under the Extended Services network and the NHDC rural play ranger scheme
- Improve opportunities for young people to take part in sport and physical activity through the provision of services
- Support the HCC Visible Kids road safety project
- Support the Crucial Crew health and safety scheme
- Work with the Children's Centre to provide parenting support for young families
- Enhance health and well-being by providing more and improving existing sporting facilities, especially for children and young people. Establish optimum locations by considering available evidence including the NHDC Sports Facility Strategy
- Where possible, influence the retention of rural schools
- Ensure that young people are consulted and involved in decisions about their local area. Ensure that all areas are covered by a youth council

Although rural areas fare better than their urban counterparts with regards to social disadvantage, there are still significant numbers of deprived residents living in rural areas of the UK⁷. Furthermore, those volunteering unpaid assistance to groups, clubs and other organisations in the UK is greater in rural areas than urban areas at between 28% and 33% of residents⁸. In an effort to promote volunteering, the North Herts Time Bank (co-ordinated by North Hertfordshire Centre for Voluntary Service) was introduced in July 2010. In the first three months the scheme has recruited 75 members.

The Council employs a supportive Area Community Development team, which comprises five officers dedicated to building active and sustainable communities based on social justice and mutual respect. One of these officers is assigned with Southern Rural whilst the responsibilities of two others include the rural areas around Baldock and Royston.

The North Hertfordshire Partnership received a Performance Reward Grant from Central Government in 2010 to spend on projects. Most relevant to this section are the Strengthening Communities and Involving People project (raising awareness among individuals about contributing to their community) and the Community Pot project (allowing grants of up to £1000 from a total of £20,000 to be awarded to voluntary and community sector groups by the North Hertfordshire Centre for Voluntary Services).

A Village Design Statement (VDS) is a tool to help influence decisions on the design and development of parishes. In North Hertfordshire, Ashwell, Pirton and St. Ippolyts currently

⁷ DEFRA (2007), *Rural Development Programme 2007 – 2013*

⁸ Commission for Rural Communities (2010), *State of the Countryside 2010*

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possess VDSs in order to provide a clear statement of the character of their villages and to influence how development should progress whilst respecting the local identity.

Rural areas generally do better than urban areas in most of the domains within the Index of Multiple Deprivation. There is some evidence, however, that rural areas, including those in North Hertfordshire, do not fare as well when it comes to access to housing and other services. Parts of 10 of North Hertfordshire's rural wards feature in the top 25% of the country as deprived

Key actions

- Target resources at areas of disadvantage in the district to reduce social exclusion and improve the quality of life for everyone
- Organise follow up networking events for village halls
- Continuously revise the Village Halls Handbook
- The Centre and Halls Strategy is currently in preparation. The rural perspectives are being considered and, where appropriate, NHDC will work with the parishes and the CDA for North Herts Village Halls Advisor to improve their centres and halls
- Develop partnerships e.g. with the North Hertfordshire Community Development Agency (CDA) Village Halls Adviser, North Hertfordshire Centre for Voluntary Service (NHCVS) and the Countryside Management Service (CMS)
- Encourage greater community participation and engagement
- Encourage more parishes to produce Parish Plans. These should include environmental actions including the positive conservation management of any parish owned Local Wildlife Sites and other green infrastructure
- Ensure the forthcoming Local Development Framework (LDF) takes into account rural issues. The parishes must continue to be key consultees
- Continue to work with the CDA Rural Services Team
- Provide appropriate support for people with learning difficulties in our rural areas
- Consider the provision of community information points where desired
- Help communities to identify and address their own needs and aspirations for sustainable development
- Assist with the Quality Parish Status process

from access to housing and services.

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A SAFER COMMUNITY

According to the Community Cohesion Topic Report (2005), those in rural areas are less likely to fear crime (31%) than those living in urban areas (45%) and that rural residents generally feel 'very safe' where they live (55%).

The North Hertfordshire Community Safety Partnership comprises North Hertfordshire District Council, Hertfordshire Constabulary, Hertfordshire Fire and Rescue and other partners working collectively to deliver a wide range of community safety and crime prevention initiatives to tackle crime and disorder in the district. The Partnership is responsible for developing an annual Community Safety action plan that includes specific actions that address the priorities for the year identified from data analysis and consultation with the public. The priorities for 2010-2011 include actions that address the following:

- ASB and Criminal Damage
- Burglary Other
- Alcohol Related Crime
- Domestic Violence
- Reassurance

Key actions

- Encourage responsible citizenship and create safer communities with less crime and fear of crime
- Make effective use of mobile anti fly-tipping cameras and evaluate the NHDC report on the use of Covert Cameras for Envirocrime for its relevance to the strategy and consider what recommendations should be made for rural areas in the District
- Through the Community Safety Partnership, work with the police to carry out high visibility operations day and night to cause maximum disruption to criminal activities in rural areas
- To continue organising Community Reassurance Days
- Continue to conduct hare coursing patrols followed by prosecutions
- Work with partners to promote, support and provide activities for young people at risk of offending
- Support for rural businesses to promote the prevention of crime and to increase the security of premises
- Deal with anti-social motoring (including speeding) where raised at a rural Priority Setting Forum as a Safer Neighbourhood priority or where the rural location is an identified accident hotspot

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HEALTH AND RECREATION

Health is not just about health services - it is determined by our environment and our lifestyles. Good health is not merely the absence of disease but also a reflection of the social and mental well-being of people in a community. North Hertfordshire District Council aims to promote leisure, sport, arts and heritage as a means of improving everyone's quality of life as well as a means to improve health.

Co-ordinated by the Countryside Management Service (CMS), North Hertfordshire District Council is involved with Hertfordshire Health Walks to encourage more residents to become active. The walks are featured in rural Hitchin, including Oughtonhead Common, Charlton, Gosmore and Willian.

North Hertfordshire District Council works in partnership with NHS Hertfordshire and one of the delivery themes incorporates developing projects to address health inequalities in North Herts.

Careline is a 24 hour community alarm service that residents may have installed at their homes to offer help, security and peace of mind a the touch of a button. There are currently 622 residents in North Hertfordshire's rural areas that benefit from this service.

North Hertfordshire District Council offers Disabled Facilities Grants to home owner/occupiers and tenants towards the cost of providing adaptations and facilities to assist older people and people with disabilities. The Council has provided 28 of these grants to rural residents to date, which has enabled those residents to remain independent within their own home. Further to this the Council has also presented six Home Repair Assistance Grants to rural residents – designed to provide practical help through a grant for small-scale works of repair, improvement or adaptation to a dwelling, houseboat or mobile home.

Key actions

- Helping communities access their rural landscape
 - Improve informal recreation opportunities e.g. rights of way
 - Promote the rural areas for recreation and outdoor activities
 - Deliver the Parish Paths Partnership to enable Parish Councils and others to improve and promote local paths for local people
 - Enable practical conservation volunteering and allotment use as forms of healthy activity
 - Increase take up of sporting opportunities through grant aid
- Improved co-ordination of transport services for patients to appropriate health and social support services
- Maintain access to GPs and NHS dentists
- Explore opportunities to develop and expand the volunteer led Health Walks programme within North Herts to increase activity levels.

OLDER PEOPLE

As previously mentioned in the national context, rural areas are generally home to older residents. A net immigration from urban areas has resulted in 23.5% of rural residents being over state retirement age compared to 18.1% in urban areas⁹. With regards to the health of rural residents, the Rural Services Network (2010) believes that the rural elderly are more healthy with better local support networks than those in urban areas. The Community Development Officers at the Council promote the following activities for older residents in rural North Hertfordshire:

- Senior Citizen's Club (Ashwell)
- Link Up Club (Knebworth)
- Pirton and Holwell Over 60s Club
- Diamond Club (Weston)
- Welcome Club (Whitwell)

In addition to these, also provided for North Hertfordshire residents are:

- 50+ golf discount card
- 'Bounce Beyond 50' directory of sports and activities
- First Contact, enabling older people to access local community activities and services
- North Hertfordshire 50+ Forum

Age UK Hertfordshire organises 10-3 Clubs in Ickleford, Codicote, Kimpton and Whitwell one day per week in the lounges of sheltered accommodation to promote socialising within the community. Similarly, Age UK Hertfordshire offers Hospital Discharge and Independent Living volunteers to assist those leaving hospital.

⁹ DEFRA (2007), *Rural Development Programme 2007 – 2013*

Key actions

- Influence the availability of transport links to enable fulfilment of the Sustainable Community Strategy objective to enrich the lives of our elders in rural areas
- Combat the social isolation of older people in rural areas
- Provide information on the availability of outreach support for people leaving hospital
- Identify and promote where older people can access IT facilities and training

ECONOMIC PROSPERITY AND EMPLOYMENT

Nationally, rural areas display similar levels of skills, innovation and enterprise to urban areas. There are, however, less competitive and successful in terms of investment. The fewest job opportunities in rural North Hertfordshire include nursing, retail and construction. There are, however, more opportunities in warehouse, unskilled and cleaning employment¹⁰.

Employment is also high in rural areas¹¹ with the highest unemployment in rural areas as 2.3%¹². Most rural residents of North Hertfordshire are employed in managerial and senior official roles (approximately 3500). Agricultural practices employ 2784 North Hertfordshire residents, with 1092 of these employees living within the rural areas. NEET describes those who are Not in Education, Employment or Training. Approximately twelve percent of North Hertfordshire's 16 to 18 year olds that are classified as NEETs are residing in rural areas. Unlike the other local authorities in Hertfordshire (excluding Stevenage Borough Council) the number of NEETs in North Hertfordshire decreased between 2009/10¹³.

The Rural Development Programme for England (RDPE) Network was set up to support the RDPE policy, programme management and implementation of the European Union Rural Development Regulation. Within this, Local Action Groups (LAG) have been created to fulfil this at a local level and North Hertfordshire is represented by the Eastern Plateau LAG. Members of the Eastern Plateau include farmers and landowners, agricultural consultants, rural land agents, environmental organisations and social and community bodies. Activities are centralised around 'making a major contribution to defining 21st century living and working practices in rural areas for ourselves and for future generations'.

Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEP) are set to replace the Regional Development Agencies (RDA). North Hertfordshire District Council will be keen to see what the Hertfordshire LEP will offer rural North Hertfordshire.

¹⁰ Jobcentre Plus (2010), *Data to show vacancies received in rural area of Hertfordshire from 1/10/10 - 4/11/10*

¹¹ DEFRA (2007), *Rural Development Programme 2007 – 2013*

¹² Office for National Statistics (2010), *Unemployment in Hertfordshire by ward - July 2010*

¹³ Youth Connexions Hertfordshire (2010), *16-18 activity status 10.11.2010*

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Key actions

- Create opportunities for all by promoting sustainable economic development
- Promote training to retain rural skills
- Ensure that young people and adults in rural areas have access to training opportunities
- Pursue economic development issues e.g. support the retention of rural post offices
- Support the delivery and work of the Eastern Plateau and the Chilterns AONB Rural Economic Development Funding programmes
- Diversify the economic base of our rural areas and improve rural economic support
- Build prosperous communities by improving the economic performance of our villages
- Investigate the feasibility of rural Business Improvement Districts
- Support the diversification and sustainability of agricultural and forestry businesses
- Ensure that everyone in the rural areas can share in the future prosperity of our district, including those on relatively low incomes

PROMOTING LIFELONG LEARNING, TRAINING AND SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

The Hertfordshire County Council Hertfordshire Adult and Family Learning Service (HAFLS) is the lead accountable body through which funding for Informal Adult Learning is channelled. Their role is to promote a culture of lifelong learning and to develop strong partnerships that will create a diverse learning offer to meet local needs. They also have responsibility for developing an informal adult learning plan, which builds on national initiatives and localised services such as Think Family, A New Approach to English for Speakers of Other Languages and Total Place.

The HAFLS plan for 2010-2011 focuses on improving life chances and future opportunities for people in the following groups:

- Targeted communities of place and interest
- Those with the least opportunity to access education and/or low levels of skills/qualifications
- Older learners
- Learners with a learning difficulty or disability
- Carers
- BAME Groups
- Isolated individuals

The North Hertfordshire Learning Partnership (NHLP) is the local sub group of the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP). It is responsible for raising the profile of learning opportunities in North Hertfordshire through strategic partnerships that reflect co-operation and contribute to the prosperity of individuals working and living in North Hertfordshire.

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Central Government's promotion of Big Society applies to this theme in encouraging individuals to set up groups and provide free venues for these groups. The Countryside Management Service (CMS) works with the Green Spaces team to establish self managing, active community groups focussed on supporting North Hertfordshire District Council to plan for and manage its Local Nature Reserves and green spaces. This is enabled through the CMS Projects Officers and a jointly agreed Action Pack provided to each group. The CMS have been awarded an Investing in Volunteers Standard for their support for the 300+ conservation volunteers and

Key actions

- Encourage rural communities to engage with the North Hertfordshire Learning Partnership
- Improve participation in education and training for people living in rural areas
- Promote closer working between North Hertfordshire College, parish councils and schools
- Improve the availability of information on IT training for rural communities
- Improve the availability of information on internet facilities within rural communities
- Improve information on literacy and numeracy skills for those in rural communities where necessary
- The Investing in Volunteers accredited Countryside Management Service will support the establishment, development and ongoing independent working of community-based Friends Groups working in a voluntary capacity to maintain and enhance North Hertfordshire Local Nature Reserves

Health Walk Leaders.

CONSULTATION

Initial consultation began in March 2010 where the relevant partners and North Hertfordshire District Council officers were asked to confirm their positions on the strategy and to update any relevant key actions. The key themes have been slightly altered from the last Rural Strategy to better reflect the needs of North Hertfordshire's rural community. Public consultation began at the annual Parish and Town Councils' Conference on 28th June and this event also saw the creation of a working group in order to further progress consultation. The working group met for the first time on 16th July prior to the Council's Cabinet on 27th July, where progress of the documents was discussed. Public consultation on the draft ended on 30th September with the comments received as a result of this address by the working group on 14th October. The next draft of the strategy was presented at the Parish and Town Councils' Network meeting on 25th October by Cllr. Dr. Graham Fothergill. Following further consideration by parish representatives, the aim is for the new strategy to be agreed by Cabinet on 7th December 2010.

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GLOSSARY AND ACRONYMS

AONB	Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty
BAME	Black and Asian Minority Ethnic
CDA	Community Development Agency. A county-wide voluntary and community sector organisation focused on rural issues.
CMS	Countryside Management Service works with communities in Hertfordshire to help them care for and enjoy the environment.
DEFRA	Central Government's Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.
EEDA	The East of England Development Agency is to be replaced by Local Enterprise Partnerships (see LEP)
EELGA	The East of England Local Government Association is voluntary and was set up by the 52 local authorities in the East of England following the abolition of the East of England Regional Assembly.
EERA	East of England Regional Assembly has now been replaced by the East of England Local Government Association (see EELGA)
Exception sites	Sites in small villages that have not been allocated for development in the Local Plan or Local Development Framework, but which might be suitable for small schemes of affordable housing for local people.
GIP	Green Infrastructure Plan
HAFLS	Hertfordshire Adult and Family Learning Service
HCC	Hertfordshire County Council
Intermediate housing	Intermediate affordable housing is at prices and rents above those of social rent but below market price or rents.
LAG	Local Action Group
LDF	A folder of local planning documents outlining how planning will be managed in the area. Community involvement is crucial in the creation of these documents.
LEP	Local Enterprise Partnership
LSP	Local Strategic Partnership comprises representatives from the local statutory, voluntary, community and private sectors to address local problems, allocate funding, discuss strategies and initiatives.
LTP3	Local Transport Plan 3
NEET	Not in Education, Employment of Training

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NHCVS	North Hertfordshire Centre for Voluntary Service
NHDC	North Hertfordshire District Council
NHLP	North Hertfordshire Learning Partnership
NHP/NHLSP	North Hertfordshire Partnership is entitled the North Hertfordshire Local Strategic Partnership
P3	Parish Paths Partnership is a national scheme providing advice and funding to help improve local path networks.
PACIF	Parish Amenity Capital Improvement Fund
PCT	Primary Care Trust
PRG	Performance Reward Grants are paid to the County Council and distributed to the District Council as an award for meeting targets agreed between Hertfordshire and Central Government.
Pro-Action	Pro-Action is an independent charity operating as an infrastructure and support organisation to other charities and organisations working with young people within Hertfordshire.
RDA	Regional Development Agency
RDPE	Rural Development Programme for England
SCooTS	Scooter and Cycle Transport Solutions. Launched by the CDA for Hertfordshire, SCooTS helps young people gain access to employment, training and education opportunities by loaning them scooters.
SCS	The Sustainable Community Strategy was launched at the 2008 Annual Community Conference and this Rural Strategy parallels many of the themes from a rural perspective.
VDS	Village Design Statement

APPENDIX

1. PARISH CHARTER

N.B. Currently presented as a separate document