

**NORTH HERTFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL**



31 October 2025

Our Ref Overview and Scrutiny Committee 11  
November 2025  
Contact. Committee Services  
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To: Members of the Committee: Councillors Claire Winchester (Chair), Jon Clayden (Vice-Chair), Tina Bhartwas, Cathy Brownjohn, Sadie Billing, David Chalmers, Elizabeth Dennis, Dominic Griffiths, Ralph Muncer, Martin Prescott, Paul Ward and Daniel Wright-Mason

Substitutes: Councillors Matt Barnes, Sam Collins, Sarah Lucas, Caroline McDonnell, Vijaiya Poopalasingham and Claire Strong

**NOTICE IS HEREBY GIVEN OF A**

**MEETING OF THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

to be held in the

**COUNCIL CHAMBER, DISTRICT COUNCIL OFFICES, GERON  
ROAD, LETCHWORTH GARDEN CITY, SG6 3JF**

On

**TUESDAY, 11TH NOVEMBER, 2025 AT 7.30 PM**

Yours sincerely,

Isabelle Alajooz  
Director – Governance

**\*\*MEMBERS PLEASE ENSURE THAT YOU DOWNLOAD ALL AGENDAS AND REPORTS VIA THE MOD.GOV APPLICATION ON YOUR TABLET BEFORE ATTENDING THE MEETING\*\***

## **Agenda**

### **Part I**

<b>Item</b>		<b>Page</b>
<b>1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE</b>	Members are required to notify any substitutions by midday on the day of the meeting.  Late substitutions will not be accepted and Members attending as a substitute without having given the due notice will not be able to take part in the meeting.	
<b>2. MINUTES - 9 SEPTEMBER 2025</b>	To take as read and approve as a true record the minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on the 9 September 2025.	(Pages 5 - 18)
<b>3. NOTIFICATION OF OTHER BUSINESS</b>	Members should notify the Chair of other business which they wish to be discussed at the end of either Part I or Part II business set out in the agenda. They must state the circumstances which they consider justify the business being considered as a matter of urgency.  The Chair will decide whether any item(s) raised will be considered.	
<b>4. CHAIR'S ANNOUNCEMENTS</b>	Members are reminded that any declarations of interest in respect of any business set out in the agenda, should be declared as either a Disclosable Pecuniary Interest or Declarable Interest and are required to notify the Chair of the nature of any interest declared at the commencement of the relevant item on the agenda. Members declaring a Disclosable Pecuniary Interest must withdraw from the meeting for the duration of the item. Members declaring a Declarable Interest, wishing to exercise a 'Councillor Speaking Right', must declare this at the same time as the interest, move to the public area before speaking to the item and then must leave the room before the debate and vote.	
<b>5. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION</b>	To receive petitions, comments and questions from the public.	
<b>6. URGENT AND GENERAL EXCEPTION ITEMS</b>	The Chair to report on any urgent or general exception items which required their agreement. At the time of printing the agenda, the Chair had not agreed any urgent or general exception items.	

**7. CALLED-IN ITEMS**

To consider any matters referred to the Committee for a decision in relation to a call-in of decision. At the time of printing the agenda, no items of business had been called-in.

**8. MEMBERS' QUESTIONS**

To receive and respond to any questions from Members either set out in the agenda or tabled at the meeting.

**9. OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME  
REPORT OF THE SCRUTINY OFFICER**

(Pages  
19 - 30)

This report highlights items scheduled in the work programme of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee for the 2025-26 civic year. It also includes items that have not yet been assigned to a specific meeting of the Committee.

**10. NORTH HERTFORDSHIRE DRAFT TOWN CENTRE STRATEGY  
REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR: PLACE**

(Pages  
31 - 160)

To issue the draft North Hertfordshire Town Centres Strategy subject to Cabinet approval for public consultation.

**11. INFORMATION NOTE: MOBILISATION OF WASTE, RECYCLING AND  
STREET CLEANSING CONTRACT  
INFORMATION NOTE OF THE SHARED SERVICE MANAGER – WASTE  
AND RECYCLING**

(Pages  
161 -  
186)

Update on the mobilisation of waste, recycling and collection services from the start of the new contract in May 2025, primarily focusing on the roll out of the new waste and recycling services from August 2025.

**12. LEISURE AND ACTIVE COMMUNITIES CONTRACT YEAR ONE  
OVERVIEW  
REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR – ENVIRONMENT**

(Pages  
187 -  
202)

This report provides an update on the first year of the Leisure and Active Communities contract, which commenced on 1 April 2024.

**13. SOLAR FOR BUSINESS SCHEME  
REPORT OF THE CLIMATE CHANGE AND SUSTAINABILITY PROJECT  
MANAGER**

(Pages  
203 -  
216)

The purpose of the report is to provide an overview of the key lessons learned and project closure reasons for the Solar for Business pilot project.

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# Public Document Pack Agenda Item 2

## NORTH HERTFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

### OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MEETING HELD IN THE COUNCIL CHAMBER, DISTRICT COUNCIL OFFICES, GERNOH ROAD, LETCHWORTH GARDEN CITY, SG6 3JF  
ON TUESDAY, 9TH SEPTEMBER, 2025 AT 7.30 PM

#### MINUTES

**Present:** *Councillors: Claire Winchester (Chair), Jon Clayden (Vice-Chair), Tina Bhartwas, Sadie Billing, David Chalmers, Elizabeth Dennis, Ralph Muncer, Martin Prescott, Paul Ward and Daniel Wright-Mason.*

**In Attendance:** *Faith Churchill (Democratic Services Apprentice), Ian Couper (Director - Resources), Robert Filby (Trainee Committee, Member and Scrutiny Officer), Jeevan Mann (Scrutiny Officer), Anthony Roche (Chief Executive), Nigel Smith (Director - Place) and Louise Symes (Strategic Planning and Projects Manager).*

**Also Present:** *At the commencement of the meeting there were no members of the public.*

*Councillor Ian Albert, as Executive Member for Resources, Councillor Val Byrant, as Deputy Leader of the Council, and Councillor Donna Wright, as Executive Member for Place.*

#### 13 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

*Audio recording – 1 minute 6 seconds*

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Cathy Brownjohn and Dominic Griffiths.

#### 14 MINUTES - 10 JUNE 2025

*Audio Recording – 1 minute 18 seconds*

Councillor Claire Winchester, as Chair, proposed and Councillor Jon Clayden seconded and, following a vote, it was:

**RESOLVED:** That the Minutes of the Meeting of the Committee held on 10 June 2025 be approved as a true record of the proceedings and be signed by the Chair.

#### 15 NOTIFICATION OF OTHER BUSINESS

*Audio recording – 1 minute 54 seconds*

There was no other business notified.

**16 CHAIR'S ANNOUNCEMENTS**

*Audio recording – 2 minutes 1 second*

- (1) The Chair advised that, in accordance with Council Policy, the meeting would be recorded.
- (2) The Chair drew attention to the item on the agenda front pages regarding Declarations of Interest and reminded Members that, in line with the Code of Conduct, any Declarations of Interest needed to be declared immediately prior to the item in question.
- (3) The Chair advised that for the purposes of clarification clause 4.8.23(a) of the Constitution does not apply to this meeting.
- (4) The Chair reminded Members of the adopted North Herts Scrutiny Charter and the need to ensure that the meeting was conducted with independence, initiative and integrity. The full Charter was available to Members via the Scrutiny Intranet pages.

**17 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION**

*Audio recording – 3 minutes 11 seconds*

There was no public participation at this meeting.

**18 URGENT AND GENERAL EXCEPTION ITEMS**

*Audio recording – 3 minutes 16 seconds*

No urgent or general exception items were received.

**19 CALLED-IN ITEMS**

*Audio recording – 3 minutes 21 seconds*

There have been no called-in items.

**20 MEMBERS' QUESTIONS**

*Audio recording – 3 minutes 24 seconds*

No questions had been submitted by Members.

**21 COUNCIL DELIVERY PLAN 2025-26 (QUARTER 1 UPDATE)**

*Audio recording – 3 minutes 32 seconds*

Councillor Ian Albert, as Executive Member for Resources, presented the report entitled 'Council Delivery Plan 2025-26 (Quarter 1 Update)' and advised that:

- In response to the Corporate Peer Challenge and the subsequent audit, the Council had been investigating how to extend Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) to focus on achieving the outcomes set out in the Council Delivery Plan (CDP).
- These would be included in the Q2 report and smart measures would also be introduced without increasing pressure on workload.

The Director – Resources gave a verbal presentation and advised that:

- Digital Transformation and Leisure Centre Decarbonisation were the only projects with an amber status.
- The amber status classified projects that had missed one or more milestone dates without there being a significant impact to their delivery.
- In Appendix A, changes to milestones and new milestones that were subject to Cabinet approval were highlighted in blue and yellow respectively.
- Leisure Centre Decarbonisation, Churchgate, Decarbonisation of Council Buildings – Phase 2 and Local Plan Review all had a red risk level, as well as the overarching corporate risks.
- A red risk level was present where the project had scored highly on likelihood and impact which led to a higher level of monitoring and review.
- Three KPIs had a red status. Two of these related to Careline Installations and the other to Customer Service Centre (CSC) calls answered in 45 seconds.
- Explanations and planned actions were detailed in paragraph 8.4 of the report.
- The performance indicator for the Revenue Budget KPI was +2.4%.

The following Members asked questions:

- Councillor Jon Clayden
- Councillor Paul Ward
- Councillor Elizabeth Dennis
- Councillor Claire Winchester

In response to questions, the Director – Resources advised that:

- The red status on Careline Installations was due to resourcing issues, however, there were actions in place to address these to ensure that they would progress to a green status.
- KPIs on working days lost to short-term absence and staff turnover were worth measuring as they could present problems if they exceeded a certain level.
- Both KPIs had been measured over a long period and had targets despite them not being included in the table. This error would be rectified before the report was presented to Cabinet.
- No financial implications were expected from the Building Safety Act issues detailed within the report.
- The due date on the milestone to provide Salex with finalised project data had not changed as ancillary works would not have a direct climate impact and as such, data could be provided before they were complete.
- The Leisure Centre Decarbonisation Project Manager had left their post due to a change in personal circumstances, however, the project had now entered the construction phase and would not require the same level of support that had been given by them during the project setup phase.
- An illustrated grid for risk level scoring was included at page 22 of the report.
- The assessment of whether the impact would be low, medium or high not only accounted for the impact on residents, but considered legal impacts, financial impacts and other impacts to the Council as a whole.
- Each impact was assessed by the officer relevant to that area, but it was also down to Cabinet, the Overview & Scrutiny Committee and the Finance, Audit & Risk (FAR) Committee to provide feedback on these.
- The Medium Term Financial Strategy due date had been changed to enable FAR Committee, Cabinet and Council to consider it individually.
- Recent waste data had not been collected as priority had been given to oversee the waste contract and service change first. Once this had been completed, all the relevant

data would be collected and the period in which no data had been collected would not be lost.

In response to questions, Councillor Ian Albert advised that:

- There was no update on the implementation of a learner pool at Royston Leisure Centre but the importance of this was noted and they would aim to have information available at the upcoming Budget Workshop.
- Members were invited to attend the quarterly Resource and Performance Management Group meetings where risks were highlighted and discussed.

Councillor Jon Clayden proposed and Councillor Sadie Billing seconded the recommendations.

As part of the debate, Councillor Ralph Muncer suggested that Members should receive an update at the next meeting on the Public Sector Decarbonisation Scheme as milestones associated with this had slipped and costs had significantly increased since initial project estimations, therefore, they should monitor issues to be able to act at the earliest opportunity.

After consulting the Executive Member for Resources and Director – Resources, the Chair confirmed that Members would be able to ask additional questions.

The following Members asked additional questions:

- Councillor David Chalmers
- Councillor Ralph Muncer
- Councillor Paul Ward
- Councillor Claire Winchester
- Councillor Jon Clayden

In response to additional questions, Councillor Ian Albert advised that:

- There had not been a lack of transparency on the Churchgate project as regular Member briefings had been held and there would be more in the future.
- £296,000 had been spent on Churchgate to date, mostly on consultancy fees.
- An extensive public consultation process had yielded over 3,000 responses.
- A Parking Strategy Survey would be conducted to review existing parking usage which would inform how they could signpost users to alternative parking sites.
- Understanding the impact that the project would have on pedestrians and other modes of transport across Hitchin was critical.
- Hitchin Market Board had been consulted from the beginning of the project and the importance of working with market traders was recognised.
- The Council had been working with Market Curators to determine the best look and feel for the market in Hitchin after Churchgate had been redeveloped.
- A report at Full Council in December would take Members through the findings to date and plans in the lead up to a full procurement exercise.
- Depending on the procurement route taken, the building work would begin in 2027 or 2028 once the building process had been affirmed.
- A highly experienced Project Manager who had worked with several local authorities had been appointed and would start next week.
- Project Board workshops had been held and regular audits through the Internal Shared Audit Service had been carried out to hold the team accountable for each phase of the project to ensure that it had been effectively run.
- The latest audit made three recommendations, and these had been addressed within the agreed timescales.
- Engagement on the project masterplan was planned.

- Market traders, the Market Manager and Hitchin BID Manager were engaged with regularly and had been consulted on their concerns around the project.
- There was a challenge between balancing parking space and the redevelopment of Churchgate which the Parking Strategy Survey would help to inform.
- It was recognised that the Churchgate project would continue after Local Government Reorganisation had taken place and that they would need to consult shadow authorities once they had been formed.
- Inevitably, projects in their early stages or with a degree of uncertainty were likely to have a red risk level, but there were mitigations in place to manage risk.
- £30,000 of the initial £400,000 funding allocated for Charnwood House had been spent on essential roofing works, electrical works and clearance to maintain structural integrity and prevent further decay of the building.
- They were committed to the revitalisation of Charnwood House for the benefit of Hitchin and the wider district.
- External agents were appointed with the task of engaging suitable operators to run the building as a community hub, however, their marketing had not yielded a letting for various reasons.
- There would be a review of the work on the building to date, and future options for the building would be put to Executive Members.
- While it was not formally on the market, they had retained contact details of groups that were formerly interested in running it as a community hub.
- Ensuring that Charnwood House would be in the community for the long-term was important.
- A dedicated webpage with periodic updates on Charnwood House was available on the Council website.
- Regular reports on Charnwood House were given at Hitchin Community Forum.
- The remainder of the initial funding allocated to the project would hopefully help a future operator of the facility obtain funding from other sources for the project.

In response to additional questions, Councillor Val Bryant advised that there was a page on the Council website entitled 'The Churchgate Conversation' which gave a detailed the timeline of the project and associated documentation.

In response to additional questions, the Director – Resources advised that:

- The status of the high priority audit finding would be checked and verified before the next FAR Committee meeting.
- The purpose of the report was to highlight risks and to track the completed actions against the planned actions that had been put in place to address those.
- More detail on each project including their risks and planned actions could be found on Ideagen.
- Charnwood House would not be on the Council Delivery Plan until a defined plan had been made for it.

In response to additional questions, the Chief Executive advised that:

- Ongoing reviews of strategy and policy documents would have to account for the changes that Local Government Reorganisation would bring, including Hertfordshire County Council assets that would come under the control of the future unitary authority and impact their current assets, especially if they were nearby or adjoining.
- Once assets for all eleven authorities across Hertfordshire had been mapped out, a division of these would be negotiated among the new unitary authorities.

Following additional questions from Members, there were no more points in the debate.

Having been proposed and seconded and, following a vote, it was:

**RESOLVED:** That the Overview and Scrutiny Committee:

- (1) Provided comment on the Council Delivery Plan Quarter 1 monitoring report.
- (2) Determined any project they want to receive more detail on, as part of the next monitoring report.

**RECOMMENDED TO CABINET:** That Cabinet notes progress against Council projects and performance indicators, as set out in the Council Delivery Plan (Appendix A), and approves new milestones and changes to milestones.

**REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATION:** The Council Delivery Plan (CDP) monitoring reports provide Overview and Scrutiny Committee, and Cabinet, with an opportunity to monitor progress against the key Council projects, and understand any new issues, risks, or opportunities.

## 22 UPDATE ON PAY ON EXIT PARKING IN COUNCIL OPERATED CAR PARKS

*Audio recording – 1 hour 0 minutes 45 seconds*

Councillor Donna Wright, as Executive Member for Place, presented the report entitled 'Update on Pay on Exit Parking in Council Operated Car Parks' and advised that:

- The Council commissioned Flowbird UK to replace parking machines across all its car parks.
- New machines were touchscreen and ticketless with a check-in, check-out system that accepted contactless payments.
- Signage was provided in every car park to inform users how to pay.
- Except for Woodside Car Park in Hitchin, one machine in each car park accepted cash payments, and receipts were available in all car parks on request.
- By late March, new machines had been installed in all car parks except for Norton Common and Hitchin Swimming Centre due to Traffic Regulation Orders.
- A communication strategy had been in place through the rollout phase and comprised member briefings, press releases, website FAQs and social media engagement by the Communications Team to address concerns.
- Support had also been provided by Civil Enforcement Officers (CEOs) and the Customer Service Centre.
- Teething problems arising from the new machines included network connection issues which had caused delays to payments and penalty charge notices (PCNs) to be issued.
- Touchscreen visibility was also a problem in the sunlight.
- Planned fixes included the installation of industrial sim cards, modems, software resolutions, signage changes and the consideration of zoning adjacent car parks to provide alternative payment options.
- Touchscreens would also be regularly cleaned to ensure visibility.
- New signage would address user confusion from some pre-paid ticket holders who had attempted to check-out when they did not need to, and blue badge and season ticket holders who were not required to register for a parking session.
- PCNs had increased 61% from Q1 2024 to Q1 2025 partly due to users entering their Vehicle Registration Marks (VRMs) incorrectly under the new system, but also the recruitment of two more CEOs which had allowed for more coverage.
- Challenges to PCNs had increased from 32% to 44% and of these, 78% had been cancelled compared to 66% in Q1 the previous year as a more lenient approach to PCN challenges had been taken during the rollout phase.

- Despite initial problems, the new system had modernised their car parks and increased flexibility for users.
- A 26% reduction in PCNs from April to July showed that the public were adapting to the new machines.
- Most users had successfully continued to pay for parking since the rollout.
- Even with the recent increase in PCNs, they still counted for less than 1% of all successful parking transactions.
- Transaction volumes were up 6% overall, therefore, the new machines had not discouraged motorists from parking in Council owned car parks.

The following Members asked questions:

- Councillor Ralph Muncer
- Councillor Jon Clayden
- Councillor Tina Bhartwas
- Councillor Paul Ward
- Councillor Martin Prescott
- Councillor Claire Winchester

In response to questions, Councillor Donna Wright advised that:

- Signage and information boards had been installed prior to the rollout phase and guidance including FAQs had been published on the Council website.
- CEOs had been present in car parks for the first two weeks after the rollout to increase the ease of use and accessibility of the new machines.
- An initial increase in PCNs had been anticipated, however, they had not anticipated the number of VRMs that had been incorrectly entered.
- Human error would always exist in the check-in, check-out system, which is why PCNs had been rescinded where VRMs had clearly been wrongly inputted.
- Pay by phone methods might allow some VRM cross checking with the DVLA, however, doing this would not be possible due to privacy and logistical issues.
- Some PCN challenges had not received a response due to time lag. They had either been responded to since the publication of the report or would be responded to in due course.
- The voucher system for the Free After 3 scheme in Royston car parks would require users to display a ticket on their windscreen.
- Still requiring check-in after 3pm had allowed them to build a robust data baseline that would inform third party subsidy discussions.
- Over 3,000 free parking sessions had been voluntarily registered in August, however, the number of unregistered sessions was unknown as they had not issued PCNs for failure to comply with this.
- A decision on the Free After 3 subsidy would be taken as part of the Parking Tariff Review 2026/27 report that would be discussed at Cabinet in early 2026.
- Discussions with Royston First BID and Royston Town Council would be held on the subsidy to inform the review.
- The Communication Strategy had concentrated on providing adequate signage and guidance on information boards and the machines themselves.
- The public were informed about the new machines through press releases and via their Outlook magazine, both prior to and after their installation.
- Guidance on how to use the new machines was posted on their website on 18 March.
- FAQs were not initially available after the rollout as a buildup of questions was required to inform which questions were most frequent.
- A slower rollout might have mitigated some of the issues experienced, however, the period of disruption would have been longer and economies of scale gained by the quick rollout would have been lost.

In response to questions, the Strategic Planning & Projects Manager advised that:

- Signal strength and connection tests were undertaken by Flowbird UK in each car park before installation and they had informed the Council that roaming SIM cards would allow the machines to connect to the best network available.
- Hitchin was well known for its weak network connectivity and consequently, most problems associated with this had been experienced there.
- Various solutions had been investigated including additional sim cards, antennae, and hiring an independent company to assess signal strength.
- After locking the machines onto the O2 and EE networks, network connectivity issues were alleviated in Hitchin car parks except for those on Portmill Lane where they would look to relocate the machines to address this problem.
- The project had been delivered within budget.
- The cost of relocating the machines would be negotiated with the contractor if necessary as they had been assured that the new machines would perform.
- Industrial strength SIM cards had already been introduced to all machines to improve their connectivity, however, this had not improved the connectivity at the Portmill Lane car parks. As such, a modem and router had been trialled but this had only caused more signal dropouts.
- In response, antennas had been installed onto the machines to test their signal and they would be advised of the outcome in due course.
- Further solutions would be prepared by the contractor if this was unsuccessful.
- Flowbird UK were a reputable contractor and had rolled out the check-in, check-out system across other local authority car parks.
- If a machine was out of order, it would display a message to use an alternative machine and CEOs could also display physical notices.
- Signage had been budgeted for within the project.
- Costs for solutions to the problems experienced had not been discussed with the contractor.
- New signage for blue badge holders had been displayed as near to disabled bays as possible and there was also information on the Council website on this.
- As long as a user could identify the car park they had used and provide proof of payment, this could be cross checked through the system and allow a PCN to be cancelled, even if a significant VRM error had been made.
- An Automatic Number Plate Recognition (ANPR) CCTV system had been investigated but due to the small size of their car parks, this system had been deemed to be too expensive.
- They would speak to the contractor about attaching covers over the touchscreens to help with visibility in sunlight.

In response to questions, the Director – Place advised that:

- They were working with the Legal Team to resolve the agreement with Knebworth Parish Council on the subsidy for the 30-minute free parking tariff in St Martin's Road Car Park.
- Decisions on PCN challenges were made by officers in the back office rather than CEOs who merely enforced parking infractions.
- The PCN challenge process was managed by the Customer Directorate, but the increase in the number of challenges would be investigated.

There were no points made as part of the debate.



Councillor Jon Clayden proposed and Councillor David Chalmers seconded and, following a vote, it was:

**RESOLVED:** That the Overview & Scrutiny Committee noted the Quarter 1 update of the Pay on Exit Parking Project.

**REASON FOR DECISION:** This report is following the request of the Committee for an update on the Pay on Exit Parking Project and to provide a comparison between 2025/26 Quarter 1 and 2024/25 Quarter 1 parking transaction figures and the number of Penalty Charge Notices issued per car park.

## 23 PRESENTATION ON LOCAL GOVERNMENT REORGANISATION

*Audio recording – 1 hour 47 minutes 39 seconds*

Councillor Laura Williams, as Executive Member for Local Government Reorganisation/Devolution, and the Chief Executive provided a presentation entitled 'Update on Local Government Reorganisation Progress' and advised that:

- Local authorities in Hertfordshire would merge into unitary authorities.
- The Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) process was currently in stage two which would involve a submission to central government on how the current authorities would like LGR to take place in Hertfordshire. This stage would conclude in late November.
- Principles on working together had been agreed by the Leaders and Chief Executives of all twelve authorities including the Hertfordshire Police and Crime Commissioner.
- An interim submission document detailing the outline proposals on behalf of Hertfordshire was submitted on 21 March to allow the Government to check-in on their progress relating to LGR.
- Two sets of parallel work were undertaken by district, borough and county councils as well as districts and borough councils on their own, but the decision had been made that it would be better for a single set of work to be carried out.
- The Governance structure adopted in March would operate until the November submission date, after which, there would be an opportunity to change this again.
- Hertfordshire Leaders Group meetings took place fortnightly, and the Chief Executive Co-ordinating Group met weekly.
- There was a Programme Management Office with Project Managers to ensure workstreams stayed on track and that information was fed back to Leaders via Chief Executives.
- North Herts were represented on every workstream by a Director or Senior Manager within the Council.
- The Service Design work stream had five co-leading Chief Executives and North Herts represented one of these.
- The Director – Customers was leading the Technology work stream.
- The Programme Board had three Chief Executives who represented Labour, Liberal Democrat and Conservative led authorities.
- Three work streams (Horizon 1, 2 and 3) with different deadlines had been created.
- Horizon 1 was for the November submission document where the initial effort would be focused, but this would reduce in early October once the document had been finalised.
- Horizon 2 involved transition planning and setting up the unitary authorities before launch day on 1 April 2028. Work on this was already underway but would increase after work on Horizon 1 had dropped off and would peak before the unitary authorities went live.
- Horizon 3 was focused on ambition and vision which would be detailed within the submission document, however, it would be up to the unitary authorities and strategic authority to adopt their own council plans and strategies once they were formed, therefore, the effort on this workstream would be low until then.

- The submission document would be drafted in October using the stakeholder engagement data gathered in September.
- Workstreams on Services and Finance were key for the submission document.
- A Member briefing on LGR had been delivered.
- Stakeholder engagement in September would take place through staff conference sessions and Community Forum meetings where Hertfordshire County Councillors would also be present.
- Stakeholders were also being directed to online assets relating to LGR including a feedback form.
- After seeking advice, King's Counsel indicated that discretion sat with the Executive to decide on the model preference, however, it was recognised that all Members should have the opportunity to debate on the issue, therefore, an Extraordinary Council meeting had been scheduled before Cabinet made the final decision on the matter on 19 November.
- Having a consistent submission from all eleven councils with the same recommendations would be desirable.
- The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) had informed them that each authority could only choose one option as their preference, however, it was also possible to express no preference at all.
- Options for two, three or four unitary authorities would either be attached as appendices to the submission document or be embedded within.
- The Secretary of State (SOS) would decide the outcome of LGR, not the local authorities.
- They had asked MHCLG Civil Servants for more specific dates than what had already been provided by the SOS on 24 July.
- After submission, the Government would decide which options would be put forward to statutory consultation.
- Statutory consultation could be launched after the New Year and close after local elections in May 2026.
- It was speculated that the Government would announce which proposal it would implement before summer recess in 2026.
- Deadlines were tight, therefore, they would start the transition work before the Government had made their decision.
- Secondary legislation that would set out the ward boundaries, number of councillors, electoral cycles and the predecessor authorities could go to Parliament for decision after summer recess in 2026.
- Elections to the shadow unitary authorities would happen on 6 May 2027.
- Power for the shadow unitary authorities to make decisions needed to be in place so that a constitution, financial regulations and budgets could be adopted before the unitary authorities went live.
- New authorities needed to be safe and legal as a minimum to go live.
- There would be engagement with Leaders on how much transformation and ambition could be delivered upfront and as part of the transition programme.
- There could be benefits with better services and savings being found sooner, however, they would have to balance risks with opportunities as they would not want to harm already vulnerable residents.

The following Members asked questions:

- Councillor Ralph Muncer
- Councillor Paul Ward
- Councillor Jon Clayden
- Councillor Elizabeth Dennis
- Councillor David Chalmers
- Councillor Sadie Billing

- Councillor Claire Winchester

In response to questions, Councillor Val Bryant, as the Deputy Leader, advised that she could not comment on how Cabinet would decide on the LGR submission document in November.

In response to questions, the Chief Executive advised that:

- There was a pressure to balance the delivery of day-to-day Council services as usual, work towards the submission document, and the desire of the administration to achieve what they could before North Herts ceased to exist.
- Some officers would see LGR as an opportunity to retire early, however, lots of officers would still want to work and they would be reviewing their Workforce Strategy to support them through uncertainty and put them in the best possible position to retain their roles after LGR.
- Consultants had supported the consultation process and would analyse the data to provide results for Hertfordshire as a whole and individual areas to allow comparisons. It had not been determined how this would be shared but this would be discussed with other authorities to ensure a consistent approach.
- There was no template for the submission document, however authorities in Hertfordshire wanted to raise a single submission which would have a spine document detailing the common proposals with mini proposals for each option underneath.
- Within the executive summary of the submission, they would detail which authorities supported each option.
- Communication professionals and graphic designers would help to make the submission document persuasive, visually attractive and reflective of Hertfordshire.
- The presentation slides would be made available to Members on The GrowZone as well as the slides that were presented at the Member briefing.
- An Extraordinary Council meeting had been organised to discuss the submission document because LGR was of great interest to Members.
- The submission document would be made public as soon as it was published.
- Models for how LGR would look would not be made available to the public prior to this due to the pace at which they were working.
- The Government would have the final decision on the unitary authority structure, however, it would be possible for them to challenge the decision via Judicial Review.
- The Government could go against the preferences set out by the majority of local authorities in the submission document if they could justify their decision.
- Consultation would be based on principles rather than detail due to proposals that would have to be made on assumptions.
- It was speculated that the Government Executive would decide on the legislation for LGR that would also be voted on in Parliament.
- There had been no suggestions that the elections in 2026 would be postponed as per conversation with MHCLG.
- The scheduled district and borough council elections in 2027 would be cancelled and replaced by elections to the shadow authorities.
- No clarity had been provided by the Government on the timeline for creation of a strategic authority and as such, they were discussing the potential to include a proposal for this to be created on the same timeline as the unitary authorities within the submission document.
- They had not decided how the submission document would address electoral boundaries and constituency changes.
- Elections for shadow unitary authorities would be determined by the Government in terms of the structural changes order that would include the number of councillors and ward boundaries and more.

In response to questions, the Director – Resources advised that there were many uncertainties relating to finances and LGR, therefore, the finance model was constantly changing but would be finalised for the submission document in October.

The Chair thanked Councillor Laura Williams and the Chief Executive for their presentation.

*N.B. Following the conclusion of this item, there was a break in proceedings and the meeting reconvened at 22.15. During the break Councillor Martin Prescott left the Chamber and did not return.*

## **24 OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME**

*Audio recording – 2 hours 45 minutes 44 seconds*

The Scrutiny Officer presented the report entitled 'Overview and Scrutiny Work Programme 2025-26' and advised that:

- Members should contact the Scrutiny Officer, Chair or Vice-Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee if they wished to raise an item for the Work Programme and a form to aid this process was in development.
- Detailed explanations on deferrals to the Museum Storage Update and North Herts Town Centres Strategy items could be found in the published supplement.
- The S106 Task and Finish Group met on 16 July to draft consultation questions. These had since been compiled into questionnaires and would be circulated to stakeholders.
- A further meeting would be held with Strategic Planning Officers on Tuesday 30 September to address questions on scope and S106 obligations.
- The Local Government Association Peer Review had been removed from the report as all actions on this had been completed.
- The Decisions and Monitoring Tracker had not been included in the report as there were no decisions to monitor at this meeting.

Councillor Ralph Muncer noted that due to advice to delay stakeholder consultation, it would be more appropriate for the S106 Task and Finish Group to present their report to the Committee meeting in February rather than January.

The Chair highlighted the following:

- The update from the Director on Health Equalities could be deferred to the meeting on 6 January 2026 as it was not a time critical item.
- It would be feasible to postpone the item on Environmental Health to the Committee meeting in January.
- Given the volume of business, 2-3 items scheduled for the Committee meeting on 11 November would need to be postponed or deferred.

In response to points raised by the Chair, the Director – Resources advised that:

- The Council Tax Reduction Scheme (CTRS) item could be deferred as consultation needed to take place on this before changes were made.
- As part of Local Government Reorganisation, future CTRS timelines would be changed to align with other authorities once it was known which authorities would be grouped together to form the new unitary authorities.

The following Members asked questions:

- Councillor Paul Ward
- Councillor Ralph Muncer

In response to questions, the Chair advised that:

- The North Herts Town Centres Strategy would be presented at the meeting in November.
- The Museum Storage Update did not have a deadline for decision, therefore, it could be postponed to a future meeting.

In response to questions, Councillor Jon Clayden advised that they did not have the data related to the waste contract change yet, therefore, it would be better to delay discussion on this until the relevant data was available.

In response to questions, the Scrutiny Officer advised that they would contact the Director – Environment to investigate the availability of data from the waste contractor.

In response to questions, Councillor Paul Ward advised that the waste contractor might be operating under a normal regime once the six-monthly review was due in February.

In response to advice, Councillor Ralph Muncer highlighted that bin collections impacted all residents, therefore they should be reviewing this sooner to bring positive change to the service.

Councillor David Chalmers highlighted the following:

- Hertfordshire Constabulary had decided to withdraw all visible support for LGBT Pride events in Hertfordshire which was of real concern at a time when trust amongst the LGBT community with the police was not at its strongest, therefore, questions should be put to the Police on hate crime when the Crime and Disorder Matters item was considered at the Committee.
- The Committee should request an update on recent crime against the LGBT community in Hitchin.
- They should also request how their decision to withdraw support had correlated with the community as they were one of the first police forces in the country to come to this decision.

In response to points raised by Councillor David Chalmers, Councillor Ralph Muncer noted that:

- They needed to consider the appropriateness to discuss this issue at the Committee as this policy would have been taken at headquarters rather than a local level, therefore, it would be more appropriate for this to be asked at a Police and Crime Panel meeting where the Police and Crime Commissioner and Chief Constable could be held to account.
- However, local issues should be discussed and they could look at the existing community work by the Constabulary and how they could build relationships with the Council, its councillors and officers.

In response to points raised by Councillor Ralph Muncer, Councillor Jon Clayden detailed that the decision affected residents everywhere but perhaps the scope could be broadened to look at all hate crimes.

In response to points raised by Councillor Ralph Muncer, Councillor David Chalmers advised that the decision taken would impact the community and they should ask questions on their behalf.

In response to points raised, Councillor Claire Winchester advised that they had until January to submit questions to the Police on this.

Councillor Paul Ward highlighted that burglaries in the form of organised crime had taken place in the district, therefore, it would be useful for the Police to speak about organised gang crimes relating to burglaries and other crimes.

Councillor Sadie Billing highlighted that they should look at crime trends and how those compared with the previous year.

Councillor David Chalmers highlighted that cybercrime against elderly residents should be discussed.

Councillor Ralph Muncer advised that they should decide on a few topics to ensure that depth on each topic was not sacrificed.

Councillor David Chalmers put forward crime against the LGBT community district as the main topic to discuss with the Police.

Councillor Tina Bhartwas suggested for antisocial behaviour in the context of vulnerable residents in social housing to be discussed.

Councillor Sadie Billing suggested to have LGBT related issues as the main topic of discussion but to request written responses on other topics that had been raised.

Councillor Tina Bhartwas proposed and Councillor David Chalmers seconded and, following a vote, it was:

***RESOLVED:***

- (1) That the Committee prioritised topics for inclusion in the Work Programme attached as Appendix A and, where appropriate, determines the high-level form and timing of scrutiny input.
- (2) That the Committee, having considered the most recent iteration of the Forward Plan, as attached at Appendix B, suggests a list of items to be considered at its meetings in the coming civic year.

***REASONS FOR DECISIONS:***

- (1) To allow the Committee to set a work programme which provides focused Member oversight, encourages open debate and seeks to achieve service improvement through effective policy development and meaningful policy and service change.
- (2) The need to observe Constitutional requirements and monitor the Forward Plan for appropriate items to scrutinise remains a key aspect of work programming

The meeting closed at 10.46 pm

Chair

## OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

11 NOVEMBER 2025

### \*PART 1 – PUBLIC DOCUMENT

**TITLE OF REPORT: OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMME 2025-26**

REPORT OF THE SCRUTINY OFFICER

EXECUTIVE MEMBER: NOT APPLICABLE

COUNCIL PRIORITY: THRIVING COMMUNITIES / ACCESSIBLE SERVICES / RESPONSIBLE GROWTH / SUSTAINABILITY

#### **1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

This report highlights items scheduled in the work programme of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee for the 2025-26 civic year. It also includes items that have not yet been assigned to a specific meeting of the Committee.

#### **2. RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 2.1. That the Committee prioritises topics for inclusion in the Work Programme attached as Appendix A and, where appropriate, determines the high-level form and timing of scrutiny input.
- 2.2. That the Committee, having considered the most recent iteration of the Forward Plan, as attached at Appendix B, suggests a list of items to be considered at its meetings in the coming civic year.

#### **3. REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 3.1 To allow the Committee to set a work programme which provides focused Member oversight, encourages open debate and seeks to achieve service improvement through effective policy development and meaningful policy and service change.
- 3.2 The need to observe Constitutional requirements and monitor the Forward Plan for appropriate items to scrutinise remains a key aspect of work programming.

#### **4. ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS CONSIDERED**

- 4.1 The Committee has varied its approach to overview and scrutiny activity over recent years. Currently it seeks to enter the process of policy development at an early stage and consequently may consider items associated with service action plans.

#### **5. CONSULTATION WITH RELEVANT MEMBERS AND EXTERNAL ORGANISATIONS**

- 5.1 Each Committee meeting includes the opportunity for Members to comment on and input to the Committee's work programme.

#### **6. FORWARD PLAN**

- 6.1 This report does not contain a recommendation on a key Executive decision and has therefore not been referred to in the Forward Plan.
- 6.2 The Chair and Vice-Chair of the Committee are sent the latest Forward Plan upon publication.
- 6.3 The Committee is asked to review the Forward Plan at each regular meeting to identify potential issues for inclusion in the work programme. Identification of a focus for the Committee's future activity should be identified at this stage wherever possible.

#### **7. BACKGROUND**

- 7.1 The LGA Peer Committee Support was undertaken in 2022 and finalised in January 2023, which focused on the Overview and Scrutiny and Finance, Audit and Risk Committees. Recommendations for Overview & Scrutiny were made and are set out in an Action Plan, all actions in the plan have now been completed and the Action Plan will no longer be part of this report.
- 7.2 In line with the recommendation of the Corporate Peer Challenge 2023 Executive Members were invited to present reports that fall under their remit and to make presentations on specific issues that the Committee wish to consider.
- 7.3 The Committee now considers a wide range of issues, where appropriate, commencing its reviews early in the policy development process. By doing this it seeks to ensure assumptions are challenged at an early stage, mistakes are avoided, and eventual outcomes provide optimal benefit to the community.
- 7.4 The Committee seeks to ensure that consideration of agenda items minimises the additional burdens on staff resources. Wherever possible, requests are made for the presentation of documents already in existence rather than the production of new documents specifically for the Committee.



## **8. RELEVANT CONSIDERATIONS**

### Work Programme

- 8.1 The Committee's work programme for the year requires reviewing at each meeting and direction is sought from the Committee on items they wish adding. Appendix A contains the work programme for 2025-26.
- 8.2 When considering additional topics their risk assessment and prioritisation will ensure that the most appropriate items taking forward to the work programme.

### Forward Plan

- 8.3 The Forward Plan for October can be found at Appendix B. Members can view currently published forward plans here: [Browse plans - Cabinet, 2025 | North Herts Council](#)
- 8.4 Members are reminded that the Forward Plan acts as public notification of key executive decisions during the next four months and beyond that it is a working document subject to regular amendments.

## **9. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 9.1 Under section 6.2.5 the Constitution, the Committee is responsible for setting its own work programme however it must ensure it retains sufficient capacity within the programme to meets its statutory obligations.
- 9.2 Section 6.2.7 (u) of the constitution allows the Committee “to appoint time limited task and finish topic groups to undertake detailed scrutiny work and report back to the overview and scrutiny committee to make recommendations to the Cabinet.”
- 9.3 In accordance with the Council’s Constitution, the approval of the future scrutiny work programme falls within the remit of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

## **10. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 10.1 Depending on how they are applied in practice, the scope of the options presented in Sections 7 and 8 have the potential to be wide reaching. As detailed in Section 14: Human Resource Implications, the wider the reach, the more significant the impact on Officer time in terms of report writing, data analysis, and committee meeting attendance. Given recent funding pressures and the consequent reduction in Officer numbers, significant requests for scrutiny work will limit officer time available to spend on activities such as identifying and delivering cost reductions, income generation and project management.

- 10.2 Although not significant, a committee attendance allowance of £25.17 per Officer per evening meeting is payable to officers in attendance. This is in addition to providing time off in lieu or overtime as an alternative.

## **11. RISK IMPLICATIONS**

- 11.1 Effective overview and scrutiny of policy, administrative, service delivery, and expenditure decisions helps reduce the risk of an inappropriate decision being made. The scope and timeframe for scrutiny interventions should be considered in light of the potential impact of inappropriate scrutiny leading to decisions not being made, inappropriately made or not made at the right time.

## **12. EQUALITIES IMPLICATIONS**

- 12.1 In line with the Public Sector Equality Duty, public bodies must, in the exercise of their functions, give due regard to the need to eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation, to advance equality of opportunity and foster good relations between those who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.
- 12.2 There are no direct equality implications arising from this report. Effective scrutiny is an essential part of ensuring the local government remains transparent, accountable and open which ensures that the delivery of public services benefits all aspects of the community, where practical.

## **13. SOCIAL VALUE IMPLICATIONS**

- 13.1 The Social Value Act and “go local” requirements do not apply to this report.

## **14. ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 14.1 There are no known environmental impacts or requirements that apply to this report.

## **15. HUMAN RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS**

- 15.1 The widening of the reach of scrutiny reviews has the potential to significantly impact on officer time in terms of the reprioritisation of already agreed projects, their scope or timetabling or resources. There is also the potential for additional resource requirements in relation to report writing, information collection and analysis and committee attendance. Delivery of service plans to achieve the Council’s agreed Corporate Plan objectives might, therefore, be potentially negatively impacted.

## **16. APPENDICES**

- 16.1 Appendix A – Work Programme of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee 2025-2026

16.2 Appendix B – Forward Plan – 17 October 2025

16.3 Appendix C – Overview and Scrutiny Decisions and Monitoring Tracker

## **17. CONTACT OFFICERS**

17.1 Jeevan Mann, Scrutiny Officer, [Jeevan.Mann@north-herts.gov.uk](mailto:Jeevan.Mann@north-herts.gov.uk) , ext 4295

17.2 James Lovegrove, Committee, Member and Scrutiny Manager, [james.Lovegrove@northherts.gov.uk](mailto:james.Lovegrove@northherts.gov.uk) , ext 4204

17.3 Isabelle Alajooz, Legal Commercial Team Manager and Deputy Monitoring Officer, [Isabelle.Alajooz@north-herts.gov.uk](mailto:Isabelle.Alajooz@north-herts.gov.uk) , ext 4346

17.4 Tim Everitt, Performance and Risk Officer, [Tim.Everitt@north-herts.gov.uk](mailto:Tim.Everitt@north-herts.gov.uk) , ext 4646

## **18. BACKGROUND PAPERS**

18.1 Previous Reports to the [Overview and Scrutiny Committee](#) and [Forward Plans](#).

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KEY
Items identified for work programme
Annual reports
Scrutiny reports
Completed

## OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME 2025-26

MEETING DATE	ITEMS AT MEETING	EXECUTIVE / REPORT AUTHOR
10 June 2025	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>O&amp;S Annual Report</li> <li>3C's – info to note</li> <li>Waste Contract</li> <li>Work Programme &amp; Decisions and Monitoring Tracker</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Councillor Matt Barnes</li> <li>Councillor Val Bryant</li> <li>Councillor Amy Allen</li> <li>Scrutiny Officer</li> </ul>
9 September 2025	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Council Delivery Plan &amp; Performance indicators - Q1 Update</li> <li>Pay on Exit Parking</li> <li>Local government Reorganisation</li> <li>Work Programme &amp; Decisions and Monitoring Tracker</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Councillor Ian Albert</li> <li>Councillor Donna Wright</li> <li>Councillor Laura Williams</li> <li>Scrutiny Officer</li> </ul>
11 November 2025	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Town Centre Strategy</li> <li>Leisure and Active Communities Contract update</li> <li>Waste and Recycling Service change mobilisation</li> <li>Solar for Business</li> <li>Work Programme &amp; Decisions and Monitoring Tracker</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Councillor Donna Wright</li> <li>Councillor Amy Allen</li> <li>Councillor Amy Allen</li> <li>Councillor Amy Allen</li> <li>Scrutiny Officer</li> </ul>
6 January 2026	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Crime and Disorder Issues – Hertfordshire Constabulary</li> <li>Council Delivery Plan &amp; Key Performance Indicators – Q2 Update</li> <li>Museum Storage</li> <li>Effectiveness of Council Tax Reduction Scheme</li> <li>Community Safety</li> <li>Work Programme &amp; Decisions and Monitoring Tracker</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Hertfordshire Constabulary</li> <li>Councillor Ian Albert</li> <li>Councillor Tamsin Thomas</li> <li>Councillor Ian Alber</li> <li>Councillor Mick Debenham</li> <li>Scrutiny Officer</li> </ul>
3 February 2026	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Budget Topics</li> <li>Digital Transformation and Inclusion</li> <li>Enterprise portfolio Update</li> <li>Work Programme &amp; Decisions and Monitoring Tracker</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Councillor Ian Albert</li> <li>Councillor Val Bryant</li> <li>Councillor Tamsin Thomas</li> <li>Scrutiny Officer</li> </ul>
24 March 2026	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>RIPA</li> <li>Council Delivery Plan &amp; Key Performance Indicators – Q3 Update</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Councillor Daniel Allen</li> <li>Councillor Ian Albert</li> </ul>

MEETING DATE	ITEMS AT MEETING	EXECUTIVE / REPORT AUTHOR
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• S106 Task and Finish Group Report</li> <li>• Work Programme &amp; Decisions and Monitoring Tracker</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Councillor Ralph Muncer (Chair of Task and Finish Group)</li> <li>• Scrutiny Officer</li> </ul>

#### Items deferred / to be rescheduled

- Annual Safeguarding Review
- Environmental Health
- Local Plan Review
- Update on Health Equalities

#### For further investigation

- Decarbonisation
- National Planning Changes
- Officer recruitment / retention – grow your own / apprentices / career grading

#### Candidate topics to be scheduled:

- Cabinet Panel
- Impact of the Council's grant policies
- Officer recruitment & retention
- Sustainability
- Tackling Homelessness in North Herts

# NORTH HERTFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

## Forward Plan of Key Decisions - 17 October 2025

The Forward Plan contains brief details of Key Decisions that the Council is likely to take over the next four month period and beyond. You will also find details of contacts who can provide further information and hear your views. **Please note that the dates of some of the decisions may change from month to month, please check with Committee, Member and Scrutiny Services on (01462) 474655 before deciding to attend a meeting.**

Decision required	Overview and Scrutiny	Decision Maker	Date of Decision	Documents to be submitted to Decision Maker	Contact Officer from whom documents can be requested	Confirmation that other documents may be submitted to the Decision Maker	Procedure for requesting details of other documents
3C's Policy Update		Cabinet	19 Nov 2025		Chris Jeffery, Customer and Digital Services Manager chris.jeffery@north-herts.gov.uk	Yes	Via the Contact Officer named in Column 6
Procurement Strategy		Cabinet	19 Nov 2025		Ian Couper, Director - Resources ian.couper@north-herts.gov.uk	Yes	Via the Contact Officer named in Column 6
North Herts Council Draft Town Centres Strategy		Cabinet	19 Nov 2025		Louise Symes, Strategic Planning and Projects Manager louise.symes@north-herts.gov.uk	Yes	Via the Contact Officer named in Column 6
Local Government Reorganisation in Hertfordshire		Cabinet	19 Nov 2025		Anthony Roche, Chief Executive anthony.roche@north-herts.gov.uk	Yes	Via the Contact Officer named in Column 6
Supported accommodation for homeless people		Cabinet	19 Nov 2025		Martin Lawrence, Strategic Housing Manager martin.lawrence@north-herts.gov.uk	Yes	Via the Contact Officer named in Column 6

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Decision required	Overview and Scrutiny	Decision Maker	Date of Decision	Documents to be submitted to Decision Maker	Contact Officer from whom documents can be requested	Confirmation that other documents may be submitted to the Decision Maker	Procedure for requesting details of other documents
Decarbonisation Phase 2 Feasibility		Cabinet	20 Jan 2026		Sarah Kingsley, Director - Environment sarah.kingsley@north-herts.gov.uk	Yes	Via the Contact Officer named in Column 6
Revocation of Air Quality Management Areas in Hitchin		Cabinet	20 Jan 2026		Jo Doggett, Director - Regulatory jo.doggett@north-herts.gov.uk, Frank Harrison, Environmental Health Manager frank.harrison@north-herts.gov.uk, Lucy Tucker lucy.tucker@north-herts.gov.uk	Yes	Via the Contact Officer named in Column 6
Local Plan next steps		Cabinet	20 Jan 2026		Rachael Rooney, Planning Approver rachael.rooney@north-herts.gov.uk	Yes	Via the Contact Officer named in Column 6
Garden Waste Charge 2026-27		Cabinet	20 Jan 2026		Sarah Kingsley, Director - Environment sarah.kingsley@north-herts.gov.uk	Yes	Via the Contact Officer named in Column 6
North Herts District Design Code		Cabinet	17 Feb 2026		Sohanna Srinivasan, Principal Planning & Urban Design Officer sohanna.srinivasan@north-herts.gov.uk	Yes	Via the Contact Officer named in Column 6



## DECISIONS

Item number	Recommendation/ Referral	Details from Cabinet	Status
COUNCIL DELIVERY PLAN 2025/26 (QUARTER 1 UPDATE)			
25	<p><b>RECOMMENDED TO CABINET:</b> That Cabinet notes progress against Council projects and performance indicators, as set out in the Council Delivery Plan (Appendix A), and approves new milestones and changes to milestones.</p> <p><b>REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATION:</b> The Council Delivery Plan (CDP) monitoring reports provide Overview and Scrutiny Committee, and Cabinet, with an opportunity to monitor progress against the key Council projects, and understand any new issues, risks, or opportunities</p> <p><a href="#">O&amp;S committee meeting - Tuesday 9th September 2025 @ 7.30pm</a></p>	<p><b>RESOLVED:</b> That Cabinet noted progress against Council projects and performance indicators, as set out in the Council Delivery Plan (Appendix A), and approved new milestones and changes to milestones.</p> <p><b>REASON FOR DECISION:</b> The Council Delivery Plan (CDP) monitoring reports provide Overview and Scrutiny Committee, and Cabinet, with an opportunity to monitor progress against the key Council projects, and understand any new issues, risks, or opportunities.</p> <p><a href="#">Cabinet meeting - Tuesday 23rd September 2025 @ 7.30pm</a></p>	Open

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## OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

11 NOVEMBER 2025

### \*PART 1 – PUBLIC DOCUMENT

#### TITLE OF REPORT: DRAFT TOWN CENTRES STRATEGY

REPORT OF: NIGEL SMITH, DIRECTOR: PLACE

EXECUTIVE MEMBER: CLLR. DONNA WRIGHT, PLACE

COUNCIL PRIORITY: THRIVING COMMUNITIES / ACCESSIBLE SERVICES /  
**RESPONSIBLE GROWTH** / SUSTAINABILITY

#### 1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1 The adopted [Local Plan 2011-2031](#) stipulates that the Council “prepare and maintain up-to-date town centre strategies to support its strategic policy approach and / or adapt to change. These will be used to inform the approach to retail at the time of the early review of the Local Plan”.
- 1.2 As such, we are preparing an overarching Town Centres Strategy to
- provide additional guidance to Local Plan Policies: ETC3: New retail, leisure and other main town centre development, ETC4: Primary Shopping Frontages, ETC5: Secondary Shopping Frontages and SP4: Town Centres, Local Centres and Community Shops;
  - Set out the Council’s planning priorities for its town centres which can be given appropriate weight in relevant planning decisions; and
  - Act as a ‘bridging document’ pending the approved review of the Local Plan.
- 1.3 As an interim tool until any new Local Plan is progressed and adopted, the Town Centres Strategy seeks to provide the necessary policy guidance to maintain each town’s unique successful qualities and place identities. It will offer good practice guidance to developers and relevant stakeholders when developing proposals and policy advice to development management officers when determining planning applications. It will also seek improvement for town centre vitality and viability within a planning context, whilst referencing other council strategies (including the Council Plan, the Economic Development and Sustainability strategies).
- 1.4 The draft Town Centres Strategy will (subject to Cabinet approval) be issued for public consultation in late 2025 with a final version anticipated to be presented for adoption in early 2026.

## **2. RECOMMENDATIONS**

That Overview and Scrutiny Committee recommend:

- 2.1. That the draft Town Centres Strategy (attached as Appendix A to this report) and its associated Appendices be endorsed and approved for public consultation.
- 2.2 That delegated authority is granted to the Director, Place in consultation with the Executive Member for Place to make any minor non-material corrections, including but not limited to cosmetic additions or presentational alterations, to the draft Town Centres Strategy as considered necessary for the public consultation.

## **3. REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 3.1. To allow the draft Town Centres Strategy to be progressed to public consultation so that it may be developed and eventually adopted as a material planning consideration to support developers, landowners and relevant stakeholders when considering developing proposals and to provide policy advice to development management officers when determining planning applications until superseded by any new Local Plan.
- 3.2. To set key priorities which seek to maintain and enhance the unique character and vitality and viability of the district's four town centres through agreed partnership working.
- 3.3. To reinforce and deliver the Council's ambitions as set out in the Council Plan (2024 - 2028).

## **4. ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS CONSIDERED**

- 4.1. The Council could rely solely on the Local Plan for all matters relating to town centres instead of publishing a Town Centres Strategy. However, policy elements of the Local Plan, particularly those relating to significant development, town centres first approach, and land use class considerations require further clarification and guidance which can be provided through the Town Centres Strategy to help implement the Plan and achieve its good growth objectives. Much of the evidence underpinning the Local Plan predates, in particular, the Covid-19 pandemic which had a significant impact on the way communities across the country use and interact with their town centres.
- 4.2. The Council could have considered the creation of four distinct town centre strategies, meaning an individual piece of work per town centre with a deeper investigation, rather than this consolidated overarching singular strategy. However, creating four distinct town centre strategies would have required significantly more time, human resource and investigation. An overarching higher level Town Centres Strategy would help speed up the process and provide the necessary policy guidance for each town centre while the Local Plan is under review and help to manage speculative development proposals.
- 4.3 The Council could have produced a holistic corporate strategy for its town centres. combining the content of planning-led Town Centres Strategy with relevant projects and ambitions emerging from the Economic Development Strategy, the Churchgate redevelopment, Sustainability Strategy and other relevant workstreams. This was not

pursued from an early stage and the broad scope of the Town Centres Strategy has been agreed in consultation with Executive Members and the Council's Strategic Planning Project Board. The Local Plan is clear on the need for a planning-led strategy to perform a specific function in light of the commitment to an early review and update of the Plan. There needs to be appropriate separation(s) between the roles of the Council as Local Planning Authority and the Council as landowner / development project sponsor. The projects and documents cited above are hosted within different Directorates of the Council to perform distinct functions and / or deliver on a wider remit. Each document cross-refers to the others where relevant and appropriate.

## **5. CONSULTATION WITH RELEVANT MEMBERS AND EXTERNAL ORGANISATIONS**

- 5.1. The Executive Member for Place has been briefed on the matters set out above.
- 5.2. In addition, consultation has taken place with the Strategic Planning Matters Project Board on the scope of the Town Centres Strategy in October 2024 with updates on its draft iterations in May, July and October 2025.
- 5.3 The comments received from the above-mentioned Project Board regarding the scope of the Town Centres Strategy and future direction of North Herts town centres have informed the current draft, resulting in improvements to the Strategy in terms of its scope and mechanisms to promote town centre vitality and viability.
- 5.4 Internal consultation with relevant officers across Council departments and external consultation with relevant key stakeholders, such as the town's Business Improvement Districts and business representatives, as well as the Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation, have been involved in developing the draft Strategy, including in relation to the most recent updates.
- 5.5 Regular updates on the Strategy have been provided to Cabinet through various Strategic Planning Matters Reports, together with updates in Members Information Service (MIS) in relation to the preparation of the Town Centres & Retail Study, which provides the evidence base to the draft Strategy.

## **6. FORWARD PLAN**

- 6.1 This report contains a recommendation on a key Executive decision that was first notified to the public in the Forward Plan on the 13 September 2024.

## **7. BACKGROUND**

- 7.1. [The National Planning Policy Framework \(NPPF\) Chapter 7 \(paragraphs 90 – 95\)](#) outlines guidance for town centre vitality. "Planning policies and decisions should support the role that town centres play at the heart of local communities, by taking a positive approach to their growth, management and adaptation."
- 7.2. North Herts Local Plan 2011-2031 was adopted November 2022, and the Council has committed to reviewing this. The Local Plan 2011- 2031 stipulates the need for a new Town Centres Strategy; to bridge the gap between current and emerging Local Plans and provide further details and guidance to support compliance with relevant town centre policies in the existing Local Plan. The commitment to producing town centre strategies,

in combination with the broader commitment to early review, was a key influence on the Inspector's conclusions that the Local Plan was 'sound'.

- 7.3. The town centre policies for the district are set out in the Local Plan. These policies establish the amount of retail required to meet the projected population growth and also allocates parcels of land for retail-led, mixed-use development. The policies were developed through evidence gathering from experts and stakeholders and were subject to both public consultation and formal examination by the government's appointed Planning Inspector.
- 7.4. The evidence for the retail and town centre policies in the adopted Local Plan was published in 2016 and provides data to 2031. The Council commissioned consultants, Lichfields, in late 2023 to provide an up-to-date Town Centres and Retail evidence base to take account of the impact of Covid 19, online shopping, the cost-of-living increases, and new population projections to provide fresh retail needs projections to 2031 and 2036. This Study, completed in December 2024, will inform the review of the retail and town centre policies in the Local Plan and provide the necessary evidence base for the preparation of this Town Centres Strategy. This draft Strategy takes account of this updated evidence and its implications for policy and strategy development in the context of the North Herts' town centres.
- 7.5. The Council last published town centre strategies between 2004 and 2008. These were strategies for each of the four town centres in North Herts and need updating.
- 7.6. The adopted Local Plan, contains policies with implications for town centres, these include:
  - Policy SP4: Town Centres, Local Centres and Community Shops,
  - ETC3: New retail, leisure and other main town centre development,
  - ETC4: Primary Shopping Frontages and
  - ETC5: Secondary Shopping Frontages.

These policies seek to promote, protect and enhance the well-being of the town centres in the District, whilst directing sustainable development, new retail, leisure and other town centre land uses within the town centres particularly following the NPPF's town centres first approach. The frontages policies seek to ensure that the town centres maintain their primary retail function whilst increasing their diversity with a range of complementary uses, promoting competitive, flexible town centre environment.

- 7.7 The Town centres Strategy is to be read alongside other policies and supporting guidance documents in the Local Plan which will have an impact on development proposals – including:
  - Policy D1: Sustainable design
  - Policy HE1: Designated heritage assets
  - Policy SP13: Historic Environment
  - Policy SP9: Design and Sustainability
  - Policy SP6: Sustainable transport
  - Policy HC1: Community Facilities
  - Policy D1: Sustainable Design
  - Policy SP10: Healthy Communities

- Developer Contributions SPD
- Parking SPD

7.8 The [2024 Retail and Town Centre Study](#) has identified that there is a need to review these policies as part of the New Local Plan given changes in consumer behaviour patterns and the changing role and function of town centres in meeting these demands. The retail and town centre policies in the New Local Plan will need to be more flexible in their approach whilst ensuring that any development and improvements within the town centres contributes and strengthens the retail, economic, environmental and social benefits of the town centres as well as reinforcing each town centre's local distinctiveness as a special place to invest, live and visit.

7.9 This draft Strategy therefore seeks to provide the necessary interim guidance.

## **8. RELEVANT CONSIDERATIONS**

- 8.1. The draft Strategy incorporates advice on a range of changes in national policy and guidance and takes account of the updated evidence in the Town Centres and Retail Study (2024).
- 8.2. The draft Strategy addresses the relevant policy criteria identified in the adopted Local Plan by providing more robust guidance for developers and stakeholders that should be taken into consideration for any type of development or improvements within the town centres to promote their vitality and viability.
- 8.3. The draft Town Centres Strategy is a planning-led document and should be read in conjunction with relevant policies in the adopted Local Plan whilst also taking into consideration other important Council Strategies and projects, such as the Economic Development Strategy, the Churchgate Regeneration Zone project, the Council Plan and the Council's Sustainability Strategy. All these documents together contribute towards the Council's overall strategy for its town centres.
- 8.4. The draft Strategy has been prepared following similar principles to a Supplementary Planning Document including reference to relevant policies and evidence and stakeholder engagement in its preparation and, subject to Cabinet approval, public consultation.
- 8.5. The draft Strategy provides the overall direction of travel with clear policy guidance and priorities for each town centre to guide developers when submitting planning applications and other town centre improvements. It is based on a sound evidence base with clear connections to published policy and supplementary planning documents, including other Council and external organisations documents. These together inform the Strategy and contribute towards meeting the Council's Plan and the Local Plan goals and vision.
- 8.6. The Strategy covers a range of town centre topics including land use capacities and distributions, mixed-use needs, vacancy reoccupation, public realm quality, heritage preservation, sustainable transport, connectivity, active travel, and community facilities and community well-being.
- 8.7. As written, the draft Strategy covers all four town centres of the district: Hitchin, Letchworth Garden City, Royston and Baldock, with considerations and implications for the surrounding context of each centre. It sets out the Council's vision for the town

Centres across four generic themes: land use and retail, built environment, transport access and movement and communities.

- 8.8. The Strategy is delivery and development focussed, providing a comprehensive overview and summary of the Council's evidence base for development in and affecting town centres at **Part 1: Town Centres Context**. This section will assist landowners, architects, planners, and stakeholders bringing forward development proposals in understanding the relevant context for North Herts' town centres.
- 8.9. In order to bridge the gap between current and emerging Local Plans and to provide further details and guidance to support compliance with relevant town centre policies in the existing Local Plan, **Part 2: Town Centre Guidance**, sets out a series of Guidance Notes. These Guidance Notes provide supplementary information to inform planning applications for development proposals affecting town centres.
- 8.10. Each of North Herts' town centres have specific strengths and weaknesses, offering their own unique offer and **Part 3: Individual Town Centre Strategies**, provides a vision statement, summary of key priorities for each centre including development opportunities for larger parcels of land and how these could be taken forward through partnership working.
- 8.11 **Part 4: Further Council Actions**, identifies opportunities to support the vitality and viability of the town centres and proposes further actions together with several funding and delivery options that the Council could consider in delivering the ambitions set out within the draft Strategy. The effective delivery of the Strategy will require the Council to work closely with several partners and stakeholders. It is proposed to gauge the support of key identified partners and stakeholders through the formal consultation process of the Strategy. This will be important in terms of delivering the identified priorities for each of the town centres and the recommended further actions. This approach will help inform a clearer, action-oriented delivery plan to be included in the final version that can be subject to regular review and update.
- 8.12 The **Appendices** to the draft Strategy comprise:
- Appendix 1: providing a full reference list and hyperlinks to the comprehensive evidence base at Part 1.
  - Appendix 2: outlines the Town Centre Policy Direction recommending alterations to the adopted Local Plan given the significant changes in retail floorspace demand, changes in use classes and other policy recommendations identified in the 2024 Retail and Town Centre Study. This has informed the guidance principles outlines in Part 2 of the draft Strategy, but its recommendations will be formally considered and taken forward through the Local Plan review.
  - Appendix 3: includes further background evidence notes for each of the town centres to be read alongside Part 3.
- 8.13 The draft Town Centres Strategy is attached at Appendix A together with the supporting Appendices.



- 8.14 Subject to approval by Cabinet, the draft Town Centres Strategy together with its supporting appendices will be made available for public consultation in early December. It is proposed to have an extended consultation period over December and January given the Christmas period. This programme will also afford wider public engagement with the Area Forums in December during the consultation period, in addition to consulting with key stakeholders in terms of preparing a delivery plan as outlined in paragraph 8.11 above delivering, as well as with local businesses and members of the public registered on the Council's Local Plan data base.
- 8.15 Any comments received will inform the final version of the Strategy which would then be re-presented to Cabinet for approval and adoption at an appropriate time in early 2026. The final version of the Strategy will be desktop published with graphics, photos and designed as a readable and well-presented document.
- 8.16 If / once adopted, the Town Centres Strategy would be a material planning consideration for relevant planning applications and would supersede the Council's previous town centre strategies for Baldock, Hitchin, Letchworth Garden City and Royston prepared between 2004 and 2008.

## **9. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 9.1. Under the Terms of Reference for Cabinet, paragraph 5.7.18 of the Constitution states that the Cabinet should exercise the Council's functions as Local Planning Authority except to the extent that those functions are by law the responsibility of the Council or delegated to the Director: Place. This includes the preparation and adoption of planning strategies and guidance notes which do not form part of the Council Policy Framework.
- 9.2. The preparation of statutory plans and supporting documents is guided by a range of acts and associated regulations including the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 (as amended) and the Localism Act 2011.
- 9.3 Supporting documents and strategies to the Local Plan are often prepared as Supplementary Planning Documents (SPDs). These have a defined meaning and place within the statutory planning system and are subject to various regulatory requirements.
- 9.4 The Town Centres Strategy has and will closely follow the *process* for the preparation of a SPD. However, because its *content* diverges from the policies of the Local Plan – due to the changed circumstances outlined in the report – it is not possible to formally adopt it as an SPD. It is intended that, subject to future approval, the Town Centres Strategy would be adopted as a material planning consideration for relevant planning applications.
- 9.4 The weight to be attributed to any policy or policy document or material consideration is a matter for the decision-maker on a case-by-case basis. However, by following the steps outlined above it is considered that a future, adopted strategy could be considered broadly commensurate to a formal SPD and applied as such.

## **10. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 10.1. No new financial implications arising from this report. The general costs of preparing the draft Town Centres Strategy including consultancy and supplementary staffing costs has

been met through existing revenue budgets (see also Human Resources Implications below). £119k was carried forward into 2025/26, £29k has been spent so far in 2025/26, leaving £90k in the town centres budget.

## **11. RISK IMPLICATIONS**

- 11.1. Good risk management supports and enhances the decision-making process, increasing the likelihood of the Council meeting its objectives and enabling it to respond quickly and effectively to change. When taking decisions, risks and opportunities must be considered.
- 11.2. Town Centres Strategy is listed as a Corporate Risk relating to a key project in the Council Delivery Plan. As part of Council Delivery Plan monitoring arrangements, the risk entry is reviewed and updated on a quarterly basis and reported to Overview & Scrutiny Committee and Cabinet. Without having a Town Centres Strategy in place that provides a strategic direction and overall policy guidance could lead to speculative development that undermines the function of the town centre thereby impacting its vitality and viability.

## **12. EQUALITIES IMPLICATIONS**

- 12.1. In line with the Public Sector Equality Duty, public bodies must, in the exercise of their functions, give due regard to the need to eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation, to advance equality of opportunity and foster good relations between those who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.
- 12.2. There are not considered to be any direct equality issues arising from this report. Future individual schemes or considerations may well be subject to appropriate review to ensure they comply with latest equality legislative need. Any risks and opportunities identified will also be subject to assessment for impact on those that share a protected characteristic.

## **13. SOCIAL VALUE IMPLICATIONS**

- 13.1. The Social Value Act and “go local” requirements do not apply to this report.

## **14. ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 14.1. There are no known direct Environmental impacts or requirements that apply to this report and its recommendations; this is a procedural decision.
- 14.2. The adopted Local Plan policies which implement the guidance and priorities within the draft Town Centres Strategy have been subject to statutory environmental assessment as part of the Local Plan examination. Officers will consider the environmental implications of any developments or improvements within or nearby the town centres when assessing planning applications and when reviewing retail and town centre policies in the updated Local Plan.

## **15. HUMAN RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS**

- 15.1. There are no new human resource implications arising from the contents of this report, other than officer requirements to progress the public consultation, which is part of their duties.

- 15.2 A Town Centre Project Officer post was established through a revenue budget growth bid a number of years ago with the intention it would lead on delivery of the Town Centres Strategy. This post was never successfully filled on a permanent basis despite multiple rounds of advertisement and recruitment. Resource for the project has been provided through a combination of agency contractors, consultant support, fixed-term appointments to the establishment post and backfilling by other officers.
- 15.3 The Town Centre Project Officer post is currently vacant. However, there is sufficient funding within the town centres budget (see para 10.1 above) and / or arising from salary underspend from this current vacancy should further work be required following the public consultation to complete the Strategy for final adoption by Cabinet.
- 15.4 Future officer resources required to deliver on the projects and priorities in the Town Centres Strategy are currently under consideration by the Service Manager and Director. The outcomes of this will be reflected in the Budget setting cycle for 2026/7 onwards and / or through quarterly budget monitoring reports as appropriate.

## **16. APPENDICES**

- 16.1 Appendix A: Draft Town Centres Strategy (Sept 2025) and Supporting Appendices

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## **18. BACKGROUND PAPERS**

- 18.1 [Town Centres and Retail Study \(December 2024\) prepared by Lichfields](#)
- 18.2 [Adopted Local Plan \(2011 – 2031\)](#)

- 18.3 Various [Strategic Planning Matters Reports](#) updating Cabinet at the following meetings:  
[16 January 2024](#)  
[19 March 2024](#)  
[09 July 2024](#)  
[14 January 2025](#)  
[24 June 2025.](#)  
[23 September 2025](#)
- 18.4 Various [MIS Notes](#) published in February 2024 and June 2024, available upon request.

# North Hertfordshire Town Centres Strategy

Lichfields draft v4

21 October 2025

Draft for Consultation

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# Foreword

This Town Centres Strategy will support development in and surrounding North Hertfordshire's four town centres of Hitchin, Letchworth Garden City, Royston and Baldock, setting out the Council's vision for the town centres across the following themes:

## Land use and retail

The Council will ensure that any significant development within the town centres contributes and strengthens the economic, environmental and social benefits of the town centre as well as reinforcing its local distinctiveness as a special place to invest, live and visit.

## Built environment

The Council requires high quality design from landowners and developers to develop and maintain buildings, the built form, the public realm and open spaces in town centres that will reinforce the local distinctiveness of the town centres, mitigate climate change, support ecological networks and have regard to adopted and emerging design guides, design codes and other guidance as agreed with the Council.

## Transport, access and movement

The Council will seek to provide inclusive and convenient sustainable transport and active travel options for all users to move with autonomy to support the economic vitality of the town centres as competitive hubs for resources, amenities and experiences, opportunities for social interaction and promoting physical health and well-being.

## Community

The Council will utilise the planning system to facilitate social interactions, and the creation of healthy, inclusive communities. The town centres can support community well-being with access to facilities, secure environments and opportunities to thrive.

The Strategy is delivery and development focussed, providing a comprehensive overview and summary of the Council's evidence base for development in and affecting town centres at **Part 1**. This part will assist landowners, architects, planners, and stakeholders bringing forward development proposals in understanding the relevant context for North Herts' town centres.

North Hertfordshire Local Plan 2011-2031 was adopted in November 2022, and the Council is currently progressing the Local Plan Update 2025-2045. In order to bridge the gap between current and emerging Local Plan and provide further details and guidance to support compliance with relevant town centre policies in the existing Local Plan, **Part 2** sets out a series of Guidance Notes. These Guidance Notes will provide supplementary information to inform planning applications for development proposals affecting town centres.

Each of North Herts' town centres have specific strengths and challenges, offering their own unique offer and **Part 3** provides a summary of key priorities for each centre. These priorities are informed by the stakeholder consultation and the evidence gathered.

The Strategy then sets out key funding options for the Council at **Part 4**, including a summary of risks and opportunities, and suggested approaches for delivery. The Section includes recommendations of suggested Council Further Actions to be taken forward. Gauging the support of key identified partners and stakeholders through the formal consultation process of the Strategy will be important in terms of delivering the identified priorities for each of the town centres and the recommended further actions.

The Appendices are to be read alongside the Strategy. These provide hyperlinks to access full documents listed in the Evidence Base at Part 1, policy recommendations from the Town Centre & Retail Study 2024 supporting Parts 2 and 3, and more detailed evidence notes on each town centre supporting Part 3.

### **Overview**

This planning-based Town Centres Strategy has been developed by identifying clear threads through the existing **evidence** and stakeholder consultation, setting out interpretation of relevant Local Plan policies through **guidance**, summarising challenges and opportunities through **SWOT analysis**, presented as a series of key **priorities**.

### **How to read this document**

The Town Centres Strategy will serve various roles for stakeholders living, visiting, working and investing in North Herts' town centres. As a guide to using this document, example use cases for each stakeholder are summarised below:

- **Council Members and Officers:** Predominantly focussed on Parts 3 and 4, summarising priorities for town centres and next steps and potential funding and delivery scenarios. Part 4, while predominantly applicable to Council Members and Officers, will be of interest for town centre stakeholders to understand how the Council may bring the priorities forward.
- **Town Centre Stakeholders [Business Improvement Districts (BIDs), residents, businesses etc.]:** Part 3 will be of most interest, informing stakeholders of the Council's key priorities for the centres identified through the planning-based strategy. Part 1 will also provide details of the Council's previous work, evidence base and decisions.
- **Landowners and Developers:** Part 3 will provide a steer on the Council's planning-based priorities for the centres, whilst Part 2 will assist with understanding of existing Local Plan policies and Part 1 provides a summary of the Council's broader plans and ambitions.
- **Consultants and Development Professionals:** Will utilise Part 1 to provide references to key evidence, Part 2 to inform interpretation of Local Plan policies and Part 3 to understand key priorities for delivery within the respective centres.



# Part 1: Town Centre Context

## 1A: Introduction and context

### Introduction

In 2022, the Council adopted its Local Plan, a plan which allocates development sites and provides policy to guide developers and development decision makers over the period 2011-2031. The town centre policies for the district are set out in the Local Plan. These policies establish the amount of retail required to meet the projected population growth and also allocates parcels of land for retail/mixed use development. The policies were developed through evidence gathering from experts and stakeholders and were subject to both public consultation and formal examination by the government's appointed Planning Inspector.

The evidence for the retail and town centre policies in the Local Plan was published in 2016 and provides data to 2031. In 2023, the Council commissioned new evidence for the town centres to take account of the impact of Covid-19, online shopping, the cost-of-living increases, and new population projections to provide fresh retail needs projections to 2031 and 2036.

This Strategy takes account of this updated evidence and its implications for policy and strategy in the context of the North Herts' town centres that informed the planning policy approach set out in the Council's 2022 Local Plan. Once consulted upon and agreed by the Council's Cabinet, this Town Centres Strategy will inform future policies, strategies and decisions.

This Town Centres Strategy covers all four town centres and will supersede the Council's previous town centre strategies (2004-2008) upon adoption.

### North Herts' Towns

North Herts is a rural district with four historic towns, a bounty of charming villages and protected townscapes and landscapes. The district has strong economic interactions with major settlements that surround its boundary; Cambridge to the north, Stevenage to the east, London to the south and both Luton and Milton Keynes to the west. These compliment the retail, leisure, business and entertainment offer for the residents and businesses in North Herts. In turn, the district attracts visitors and investors from these and other nearby settlements.

**Hitchin** is the largest North Herts town, with a Census 2021 population of 35,220, and dates to at least, the 7th century. The town centre has a medieval layout and developed out from its marketplace, alongside the River Hiz. The town's trade developed with agricultural goods sales including lavender, corn and malt. Hitchin expanded from the 19th century when it was connected to the Great Northern rail line from London with its Cambridge branch line, and later in the 20th century with the M1 via the A505 to the west, and the A1 (M) to the east via the A602 road connections.

**Letchworth Garden City** (Letchworth) is the second largest town in North Herts with a Census 2021 population of 33,990. It has developed from an ancient parish, as noted in the Domesday Book of 1086, to the world's first Garden City in 1903. The town was connected to the Great Northern East Coast rail line to London with its Cambridge branch line in 1903, and had its first Garden City homes completed in 1904. The modern town was established by investors, who bought up land to create the world's first Garden City. Much of the towns industrial, office and retail premises are now owned by a charity, the

Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation. The A1(M) to the east directly connects the Garden City to the national road network.

**Royston** is the third largest town in North Herts with a Census 2021 population of 17,448. It is located at a crossroads of the historic Roman, Ermine Street and the prehistoric, Icknield Way. It was once a settlement straddling both Hertfordshire and Cambridgeshire. Its market charter was granted by Richard I in 1189 and the market currently takes place every Wednesday and Saturday. A Corn Exchange opened in 1829 and is now home to retail premises. The town is linked to London and Cambridge by the East Coast Cambridge rail branch line and to the national road network via the A10 and A505.

**Baldock** is North Herts's smallest market town with a Census 2021 population of 10,615. As a prehistoric town, Baldock town centre has mainly 14th – 16th century buildings. Its wide High Street was formed by the demolition of up to three rows of buildings and now serves as a through road, parking, and outdoor seating areas. The Great North Road and the Icknield Way cross Baldock and have traditionally been a resting point for these routes. Baldock is also on Cambridge rail branch line.

## **1B: The Council's Role**

The Council has a strategic role in town centre management and renewal. This is acknowledged in its Council Plan covering the period 2024-2028 which includes four priorities:

**Thriving Communities:** Reducing health inequalities by working closely with partners like Everyone Active, to deliver physical activity programmes for older adults and less active residents. Continuing our commitment to providing grants to local organisations and investing in projects to strengthen the fabric of the district's towns and villages and a continued focus on our community safety priorities to foster safer and more inclusive communities.

**Accessible Services:** The Council will continue modernising its services by enhancing online accessibility, simplifying customer experiences, and investing in facilities like leisure centres and parks.

**Responsible Growth:** As the Local Plan continues to be implemented, North Herts will see much-needed housing and responsible development that considers the district's infrastructure and sustainability needs. Strategies to rejuvenate town centres and support local businesses are also central to the plan.

**Sustainability:** The Council strives for sustainable service delivery both in terms of budget setting and protecting our environment. Responding to the climate and ecological emergencies, the council is committing to reducing carbon emissions and improving biodiversity.

The Priority of Responsible Growth directly supports the creation of a new Town Centres Strategy for North Hertfordshire':

*We also want to support economic growth across our district. We will prepare Town Centre Strategies and an Economic Development and Tourism Strategy to outline our approach to enhancing our town centres, business engagement and support, tourism, and emerging economic growth opportunities. We will work closely with businesses and other partners to deliver on our key objectives.*

Whilst Responsible Growth is the key priority for this Strategy, the other three priorities of the Council Plan will also contribute to the success of the town centres through its service delivery in working together with partners and the community. The Strategy cannot be delivered by the Council alone and will be dependent on close collaboration with key partners (including business groups (e.g. Business Improvement Districts - BIDs), landlords and leaseholders of town centre premises, community and other organisations) who might best work together to protect and enhance the economic, environmental and social benefits of the district's town centres. These benefits would include increases in visitors to the town centres, with associated uplifts in spending, alongside more sustainable linked trips within and across the towns and efforts to support the diverse and resilient mix of uses in the centres that will continue to serve residents, visitors and businesses within the centres.

The Council has collaborated with stakeholders including residents and visitors, local organisations, adjacent local authorities, and economic partnerships in producing this Town Centres Strategy. This has included an independent public survey of 1,001 residents by mobile/landline in January to February 2024, a workshop with stakeholders<sup>1</sup> with an interest in the district's town centres in June 2024 and discussions with relevant BIDs, landowners and the Royston Town Council.

## **1C: The Purpose of the Town Centres Strategy**

This Town Centres Strategy is to be read in conjunction with North Hertfordshire Local Plan 2011-2031 (adopted 2022), providing town centre businesses, residents, developers and other stakeholders guidance to support the interpretation of relevant town centre policies, and priorities for the respective centres.

The Town Centres Strategy will provide clear planning policy guidance to support and maintain each town's unique successful qualities and place identities, and to improve the vitality and viability of each town centre to ensure that change and development occur in a positive way while the Local Plan is under review. The guidance and recommendations will also inform the Council's future Local Plan policies.

Following consultation, the Strategy will be put forward for adoption by Cabinet to be given weight as an important material consideration in the assessment and determination of planning applications in and surrounding North Hertfordshire's four town centres of Hitchin, Letchworth, Royston and Baldock. Once adopted, the Strategy will supersede the Council's existing Town Centre Strategies (2004-2008).

**Part 1** sets out the Council's evidence base for development in and affecting town centres.

**Part 2** provides the Guidance Notes providing supplementary information to support compliance with relevant town centre policies.

**Part 3** focuses on the strategies and priorities for North Herts' town centres.

**Part 4** proposes further actions together with several funding and delivery options that the Council could consider in delivering the ambitions set out within the draft Strategy.

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<sup>1</sup> Stakeholders invited to the workshop include: Hertfordshire Futures, Herts County Council, Hertfordshire Building Preservation Trust, Baldock Town Partnership, Baldock Bygrave and Clothall Planning Group, Baldock Events Forum, Hitchin Forum – Transport and Planning Group, The Hitchin Society, Hitchin Market Traders Association, Hitchin Historical Society, Hitchin Youth Trust, Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation, Royston Town Council, Royston Community Association, On Our Doorstep, North Hertfordshire College, North Hertfordshire Minority Ethnic Forum, Martin Group, Visit Hitchin (Business Improvement District), Love Letchworth (Business Improvement District), Royston First (Business Improvement District), settle, Martin Group, Decarbonise Letchworth (Transition Town Letchworth), Garden Square, Town House Publishing, John Shilcock, North Hertfordshire District Council Teams (Community Partnerships, Enterprise, Development Management, Strategic Planning) and Neighbouring authorities (St. Albans, Luton, East Hertfordshire District Council, Welwyn Hatfield, South Cambridge, Central Bedfordshire, Uttlesford, Stevenage)

The abovementioned sections/parts have been divided into four themes for ease of reference:

- |   |                                |
|---|--------------------------------|
| 1 | Land use and retail            |
| 2 | Built environment              |
| 3 | Transport, access and movement |
| 4 | Community                      |

The Appendices set out key supporting details and are to be read alongside the Strategy:

**Appendix 1** lists the supporting Evidence Base documents, including hyperlinks.

**Appendix 2** extracts the policy recommendations from the Town Centre & Retail Study 2024.

**Appendix 3** provides detailed evidence notes for each town centre.

## 1D: Town Centres Evidence

Further information on Part 1: Town Centre Context is found in Appendix 1: Resource List and Hyperlinks.

### Introduction:

This section focuses on the evidence base which will underpin the North Hertfordshire Town Centres Strategy. Each part is structured by a strategic theme and starts with outlining the relevant Local Plan and National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) policies to provide the policy context for each theme. It then outlines which documents from North Hertfordshire's evidence base relate to each theme and explains how each document relates to town centres. Finally, it summarises the recommendations and guidelines that each piece of evidence provides for town centres in the District.

This chapter explains how each document/set of documents can inform the North Hertfordshire Town Centres Strategy and ultimately, how they help meet the Council's Local Plan goals and vision.

### Theme 1: Land Use and Retail

#### Relevant subthemes:

Retail Needs, Allocations, Designations, and Impact Assessments;

Vitality and Viability in the Town Centres;

#### NPPF sections of Relevance:

Chapter 7: Ensuring the Vitality of Town Centres

#### North Hertfordshire Local Plan Policies of Relevance:

Policy ETC3: New Retail, Leisure and Other Main Town Centre Development

Policy ETC4: Primary Shopping Frontages

Policy ETC5: Secondary Shopping Frontages

Policy SP4: Town Centres, Local Centres and Community Shops

#### Relevant evidence

### **BID Brochures**

**BID Brochure – Hitchin (Visit Hitchin BID, 2024):** The brochure explains how the Hitchin BID is working to support businesses and the town centre, for the 2024-29 business plan.

The recommendations developed for the town centre include the following:

- New initiatives to encourage the “experience economy”.
- Increase promotions in quieter areas of the Town Centre to encourage visitors to stay longer.
- Increase business support on a local and national level.

- Improvement to town centre parking and accessibility.
- Force the pace of the Council's Town Centre Strategy.

**BID Brochure - Letchworth GC (Love Letchworth BID, 2024):** The brochure outlines the priorities and objectives for the BID which have been proposed for the next five years (Starting 2024). They include: (1) a 21st century Garden City which is connected to its business community, residents, and visitors; (2) a vibrant 'Go To' place which is attractive for everyone in Letchworth; and (3) A place which has strong sense of identity and is recognised locally, nationally, and internationally. Letchworth BID propose to undertake the following activities:

- Organise an annual calendar of events, campaigns and street entertainment.
- Introduction of shop local promotional opportunities and loyalty schemes.
- Maximise marketing and promotional opportunities of the town centre
- Enhancing landscaping, greenery and planting across the town centre.
- Maintaining and extending the operation of CCTV cameras across the town centre to help address anti-social behaviour and crime.
- Coordinating an enhanced business waste collection service, including recycling.
- Be the voice of businesses in the wider town centre meetings, such as the Town Centre Recovery Group and Sustainable Travel Group.
- Exploring opportunities for businesses to reduce overheads by working and seeking services collectively as a BID

**BID Brochure – Royston (Royston First BID, 2024):** the brochure outlines the ambitions and initiatives for Royston BID over the next five years including town investment events, smart radios, new industrial estate signage to assist with deliveries, youth employment initiatives to tackle anti-social behaviour and support youth, a ShopSafe app to protect employees and customers, fire extinguisher and first aid training for businesses and employees, quarterly networking events and digital signage to provide free advertising space for businesses.

### How can BID Brochures inform the North Hertfordshire Town Centres Strategy?

Although the BID Brochures outlines proposals and ambitions which are unique to improving the business prospects within each town centre, they can be developed into general principles and measures which can be applicable for town centres across the District as a whole. They contribute towards meeting the Local Plan's vision of North Herts as "attractive and vibrant" with a "robust and prosperous economy", and generally boost the "viability and vitality" of the town centres.

**Recovery Reports for Baldock, Hitchin, Letchworth GC and Royston (People & Places, 2022):** These are part of a district-wide initiative by the Council to work with key stakeholders in Baldock, Hitchin, Letchworth, and Royston. Published in 2022.

In the short term, the reports outline a COVID recovery plan for its town centres. In the medium to longer-term, they set out a development strategy framework to assist town centres in developing successfully over the next decade.

They provide the following recommendations:

- Finalise development plan and ‘forward framework’: Key stakeholder organisations to review and comment on the draft development plan and its forward framework to enable People & Places (a partnership independent of the Council with a principal goal of revitalising town centres) to finalise it.
- Publish stakeholder summary: A short, illustrated version of the development plan findings can be published by People & Places for wider distribution, possibly supported by an accompanying video presentation.
- Initial business engagement and survey: The publication of the summary should be used to begin engagement with businesses through visits, meetings and a survey to gauge their perceptions, priorities and reaction to proposals.
- Meetings of theme-based sub-groups: to discuss the development of proposals for partnership working/governance.
- Partnership development and governance: Existing stakeholders as well as businesses representatives need to determine the partnership development and governance arrangements for revitalising Baldock’s town centre. This includes focusing on the representation and roles for a core group responsible and equipped to manage the coordination of activity, including identifying resources, communication and engagement with wider stakeholders.
- Determine initial delivery priorities: The evolving partnership needs to determine initial delivery priorities that underpin long-term strategy and capacity as well as demonstrate ‘quick wins’ to stakeholders and the wider community. The Shared Prosperity Fund (SPF) provides an initial and flexible injection of funds to help achieve this.

### **How can the Recovery Reports inform the North Hertfordshire Town Centres Strategy?**

The recommendations of the recovery reports can provide governance advice with regards to preparing strategies for improving town centres - i.e. how stakeholders (both the Council and other local bodies and businesses) can best collaborate in order to implement the proposals as well as the recovery strategy more generally.

### **Town Centre Strategies (2004-2008)**

**Town Centre Strategy – Hitchin (NHDC, 2005):** Published in 2005, the Hitchin strategy sets out a vision and key aims that acknowledge the historic character of Hitchin and propose the enhancement of its town centre to serve the local community and attract visitors.

The strategy aims to guide physical development and maximise the future viability and vitality of Hitchin town centre, whilst emphasising its historic character, its local distinctiveness and the needs of its local community. The strategy allocated five key development sites at Paynes Park; Crown House; Post Office; Ransoms; plus Churchgate and its environs. Notably, Crown House, the old Post Office Site, Ransoms and part of the rear of Paynes Park have been developed since the initial publication of the strategy, providing mixed-use developments comprising mostly residential with retail at ground floor level.

**Town Centre Strategy – Letchworth GC (NHDC, 2006):** Published in 2006, the Strategy sets out the vision, objectives and planning strategy for the town centre including the allocation of opportunity

sites. The Strategy outlines the proposed approach towards conservation management and urban design in the centre, as well as proposals for improving public realm and transport.

It proposes to expand the town centre's retail provision with increased floorspace and more stores, accommodating for greater provision of smaller specialist stores and a greater choice in food shopping, as well as ensuring that its character and design features as the first Garden City are protected and enhanced. Additionally, it explains that tourism, business and investment in the town centre will be promoted.

It proposes measures to improve the public realm and pedestrian environment, to attract visitors and encourage them to spend time there and recognises that more visitors will require improved parking management, better security, improved public transport, and improved facilities for walking and cycling.

The Strategy also seeks to ensure that open spaces and gardens that contribute to the landscape character of the Garden City are protected and enhanced for their amenity and environmental value including biodiversity.

**Town Centre Strategy – Royston (NHDC, 2008):** Published in 2008, the Royston strategy sets out the Council's vision and aims for the town centre in the next 15 years. Seven opportunity sites were identified as potential locations for development.

The Royston Town Centre Strategy highlighted that through traffic is directed onto local distributor roads outside of the main town centre shopping areas. While allowing access to the town centre businesses, through traffic can interrupt and detract from the appearance, amenity of the town centre and ease of pedestrian movements.

**Town Centre Strategy – Baldock (NHDC, 2004):** Published in 2004, the Baldock strategy promotes opportunities for enhancement of the town centre's street scene.

The Strategy for Baldock also outlines a number of improvements to the town centre following the opening of the Baldock Bypass, including retaining the High Street as a wide open space when undertaking any future enhancements, and respecting the historic layout and character of the town centre through enhancements to the streets and new developments.

The Strategy also seeks to continue to encourage retail and specialised shops into the town centre, improve and promote the Baldock Market and the use of the market area for other events, develop a strong Chamber of Trade, and promoting Baldock's heritage, cultural and leisure facilities.

### **How can the existing Town Centre Strategies for the North Herts Towns inform the new North Hertfordshire Town Centres Strategy?**

The North Hertfordshire Town Centre Strategies provide useful context, as their structure and recommendations can be transferable across the documents and across different towns. Further, the set of documents directly address issues of conservation, heritage character, public transport, economic vitality, and viability, all of which are issues which help meet the goals of the town centre vision.

**North Hertfordshire Town Centres & Retail Study (Lichfields, 2024):** The study includes an assessment of future retail and leisure-related development needs within the District's main town centres of Baldock, Hitchin, Letchworth, and Royston.



Since the previous studies, amendments to national planning policies in the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) and the Use Classes Order (UCO) have allowed for greater flexibility of uses within town centres, without requiring planning permission, through the integration of Use Class E. Key trends, such as the implications of Brexit, the Covid-19 pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis, continue to affect the high street and demand for town centre uses, which means town centres have had to change and diversify over the past years. Shopping behaviour will continue to change, subject to other emerging changes and uncertainties, and town centres will need to respond by providing a combined retail and leisure experience.

There is likely to be a shift from retail space to more food and beverage and leisure/ entertainment/ cultural uses, with vacant shop premises converting to these uses. This also provides an opportunity for a flexible approach to new formats and uses where they would support the overall vitality and viability of centres and reoccupy long-term vacant premises. Such uses could be encouraged where they complement the existing mix of uses in the area and would support the evening economy across the District's town centres. Not all vacant units will be suitable for conversion to these uses; therefore, new development may be required to accommodate some new uses.

The combined cumulative total floorspace capacity projections for all retail and food and beverage floorspace is just over 5,000 sq.m gross up to 2036. Based on a reasonable reduction in shop vacancy rates, reoccupied space could in theory accommodate around three quarters of the projected need up to 2036. However, these floorspace projections should not be adopted as rigid targets, nor as maximum or minimum requirements, but be viewed as broad guidance and as a starting point for the review of site-specific allocations and development management policies.

The capacity projections set out at Appendix 3, 4, and 5 of the 2024 Town Centres & Retail Study suggest no pressing requirements to allocate new sites for major retail or commercial leisure developments to accommodate projected growth for the next decade. The priority in the short- to medium-term would be for the reoccupation of vacant shop units, with existing mixed-use development allocations and new facilities in the Strategic Housing Sites being sufficient to cover any long-term residual need.

### **Recommendations:**

- Regarding town centre growth, national policy requires that a range of suitable sites should be allocated to meet the retail development needs of a variety of scales and types, to accommodate for at least ten years and preferably up to 2036. The main concentration of vacant shop floorspace is in Letchworth, which in turn means it has the most potential to accommodate growth alongside existing allocations.
- The potential to redistribute capacity from Baldock and Hitchin to Letchworth should be explored, with opportunities to reoccupy vacated retail spaces across other town centre uses considered viable.
- The leisure expenditure projections indicate there may be potential to accommodate an additional 1,700 sq.m gross of commercial leisure and cultural floorspace by 2036, which could include any combination of two medium sized health and fitness facilities, new leisure innovations and small-scale tourist attractions/ cultural facilities. As main town centre uses, these facilities should be directed to town centre locations. The location and distribution of any new facilities would depend on the nature of the proposal and operator interest. However, it is

expected that these facilities would be located within the districts' larger towns, unless suitable alternative town centre opportunities present themselves.

- Overall, North Herts has a reasonably strong evening economy, particularly in terms of restaurant uses. The emerging Local Plan review should recognise and foster the potential for uses that enhance the evening and night-time economy in centres, albeit recognising potential negative environmental and amenity effects and considering appropriate management strategies and mitigation measures.
- No change to the existing hierarchy of centres is considered necessary. The network of town, village and neighbourhood centres should be protected and enhanced to ensure sustainable shopping patterns and that there is appropriate accessibility to important facilities for all sections of the community.
- The need for town centre boundaries and primary/secondary shopping frontages should be reconsidered, for example in Baldock, where a separate town centre boundary and a defined secondary shopping frontage is potentially unnecessary.
- The primary shopping area (PSA) designation can fulfil the purposes of both primary and secondary frontages in most town centres. Relatively low retail floorspace capacity projections suggest there is no need to extend the existing town centre boundaries to accommodate future growth, but longer-term projections of an under-supply of floorspace implies a contraction is also unwarranted. However, as town centre boundaries are quite widely drawn in most centres, predominantly residential areas on the peripheries of town centres could be removed. Notably, main town centre uses (as defined by the National Planning Policy Framework) would continue to be protected within town centre boundaries.

### **How can the Town Centres & Retail Study inform the North Hertfordshire Town Centres Strategy?**

The Study can inform the overall guidance of the North Hertfordshire Town Centres Strategy through updated evidence for retail and leisure floorspace capacity, as well as future recommendations for amendments to town centre boundaries and shopping frontages. The Study Appendices include town centre health checks, which inform the individuals strengths and weaknesses of each town centre. , and recommendations for subsequent priorities for future growth of the town centres, which in turn, can help meet the Local Plan's vision of a "robust and prosperous economy".

**Developer Contributions (NHDC, 2023):** This Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) sets out detailed guidance on the type and scale of developer contributions that will be sought to support new development in North Hertfordshire. It contains a section on the economy and town centres. It states that in the town centres, contributions towards future town centre public realm enhancements will be sought from relevant major development schemes, including:

- Schemes for development within existing town centres;
- Schemes for out-of-centre development where the contributions may help preserve the vitality and / or viability of the existing centre(s); and
- Schemes elsewhere that may result in a substantive increase in footfall in existing town centres.

It also states that improvements to the public realm will not necessarily be confined to the main town centres. Where appropriate, the Council will seek contributions towards public realm improvements in smaller centres and other areas which play an important role in defining place and supporting the day-to-day function of the built environment. Priorities for public realm enhancements may be identified in Neighbourhood Plans or other locally led strategies such as Parish Plans.

### **How can the Developer Contributions SPD inform the North Hertfordshire Town Centres Strategy?**

The SPD provides guidance on what developers need to consider when submitting an application for a development scheme in the town centre, recommendations of where in the town centre these contributions should be targeted, i.e. public realm enhancements, and to what type of town centre – small or large. This information could be included in the Strategy document, and help achieve the Council's vision of North Hertfordshire being an "attractive and vibrant place" where "vitality and viability" has been safeguarded.

The Council is currently reviewing the Developer Contributions SPD which will be subject to formal consultation later in 2025 with anticipated adoption in early 2026.

**North Hertfordshire Economic Development Strategy:** The Council adopted its new Economic Development Strategy for the District in July 2025. The strategy is aligned with the Council's economic aspirations, priorities and economic vision. The Council Plan (2024-2028) sets out the importance of 'Responsible Growth'. This demonstrates a clear commitment has been made to "support economic growth across the district", and to "work closely with businesses and other partners to deliver on our key objectives". The strategy is supported by a comprehensive evidence base, that includes stakeholder engagement with a variety of local businesses and an in-depth analysis of economic data in North Hertfordshire (in relation to jobs, trending growth areas, industries, connectivity etc.). The Strategy identified five action areas from the evidence base to focus on: business and enterprise, people and skills, innovation and economic change, site and premises, investment, position and promotion. The strategy also celebrates North Hertfordshire's position geographically and maps out areas within the district ("looking in") and outside ("looking out") – both themes identify opportunities available to the Council to achieve substantial economic growth. The strategy focuses on economic portraits of each town in North Hertfordshire, mapping out key opportunities in each of them.

### **How can the North Hertfordshire Economic Strategy inform the North Hertfordshire Town Centres Strategy?**

A successful Economic Development Strategy would encourage the productivity of existing businesses and attract new business in and around North Herts' towns, increasing resident and workers spending and further supporting existing businesses. This increase in prosperity and diversification of economic drivers would increase the draw and attraction of the District's centres to a wider variety of retail and leisure operators.

The Strategy also directly references town centre development opportunities, as well as areas where developments in and around the centres would benefit from greater connectivity and links to and through the centres including the Churchgate Regeneration Zone, Garden Square Shopping Centre in Letchworth, Growing Baldock, and Royston Gateway.

### **How the land use and retail evidence helps meet the Local Plan's vision**

The evidence outlined above helps work towards the following sections of the Council's Vision, as outlined in the Local Plan:

- By 2031 North Hertfordshire will be an attractive and vibrant place where people will want to live, work and spend their leisure time.
- North Hertfordshire will have a robust and prosperous economy (including sustainable tourism) with a greater mix of skilled jobs, focused in locations that best support the District's growing population. Local and smaller scale businesses will have had the opportunity to grow.
- The vitality and viability of the towns of Hitchin, Letchworth, Royston and Baldock are safeguarded in a way that takes account of their distinctive role. This will have been achieved through carefully planned development which meets the needs of these centres, retaining their market share in terms of their retail offer, whilst recognising the importance of preserving and enhancing their historic character. In local and village centres, shopping facilities that meet local needs will be supported.
- The District's important natural and historic areas and buildings that help to create the distinctive identity of the District in both urban and rural areas will have been protected and enhanced where possible. The quality and attractiveness of the landscape of North Hertfordshire, which contributes to its distinctive character, will have been conserved and enhanced where possible.
- Additionally, the 2024 Town Centres & Retail Study provides opportunities and recommendations for town centre policies in the emerging Local Plan update relating to emerging capacity for new floorspace, amendments to boundaries, and suggested controls for the mix of uses.

## **Theme 2: Built environment**

### **Relevant subthemes:**

The Built Form, Public Realm and Design

Heritage and Historic Character;

Spatial Layout;

### **NPPF Sections of Relevance**

Chapter 12: Achieving well-designed places

Chapter 16: Conserving and enhancing the historic environment

Local Plan Policies of Relevance:

Policy D1: Sustainable design

Policy HE1: Designated Heritage Assets

Policy SP13: Historic Environment

Policy SP9: Design and Sustainability

Relevant evidence

**Character and Conservation Statements (NHDC) for Hitchin (2011), Letchworth (2001), Royston (2007), and Baldock (2003)**

**Hitchin:** The Statement explains that the designated conservation area, the Hitchin Conservation Area, encompasses the historic town centre as well as public or private parkland and high-quality residential suburbs. The Statement goes on to propose three new conservation area designations, because of their unique character: (1) Butts Close, contained by Fishponds Road and Bedford Road; (2) The Railway Station and associated railway buildings and Ransom's Recreation Ground, and (3) Hitchin Hill Path and Butchers Lane. Character statements and conservation area maps for each of the three proposed conservation area designations were adopted in 2011. Other recommendations for site specific improvements included improvements to Bancroft Recreation Ground (which received a splash park in 2015 and further play equipment in 2025), enhancements to The Dell Woodside Open Air Theatre, as well as *"to continue improvements to the River Hiz, including, where possible, the opening up of the river frontage for public access"*.

**Letchworth:** Section 3.0 of the Statement describes the special interest and character and appearance of the town centre. In addition, the Statement identifies areas and buildings within the town centre which are not considered to preserve or enhance the special character of the area as opportunity areas for improvement. The Statement highlights these areas and identifies the reasons why they are not considered to be in character. It then goes on to recommend the improvement of these areas or buildings to ensure that they preserve or enhance the special character of the town centre. It is important to note that this document was published in 2001 and as such, some areas or buildings referred to as not preserving the character of the area have been redeveloped or repurposed for alternative uses including Station Parade (amended façade as part of an extension in 2019) and the Council's old Town Lodge and Document Centre buildings on Gernon Road (demolished to provide an office building and residential accommodation) amongst others.

**Royston:** The Statement assesses the setting, character and appearance of the conservation area, and identifies the areas where improvement or redevelopment opportunities exist. It also identifies the areas in the historic town centre which are redevelopment opportunities, i.e. regarded as having a negative impact upon the character and appearance of the conservation area and where redevelopment is positively encouraged. The majority of the areas identified for redevelopment are on, or in, close proximity to the high street.

**Baldock:** The Statement outlines steps taken to ensure that changes within the conservation area preserve or enhance its special character or appearance. It identifies and describes the special characteristics of the market town that will need to be considered when considering proposed changes. The Statement identifies areas within the town centre which have a negative or neutral impact on the local conservation area but does not provide any targeted recommendations.

### **How can the Character and Conservation Statements inform the North Hertfordshire Town Centres Strategy?**

The principles and measures outlined in each of the documents to preserve each of the conservation areas and the special character of the town centre, the identification of each conservation area's special characteristics, and the redevelopment proposals for areas which have a negative impact on character can inform and be included in the Strategy's guidance. This contributes towards meeting the Council's vision of protecting and enhancing the historic areas and buildings.

**Design Supplementary Planning Document (NHDC, 2011):** This July 2011 Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) sets out guidance, expanding on policies within the Council's previous Development Plan. The SPD provides key design standards to inform development schemes and planning applications across a series of key principles ranging from character to public realm and legibility. The SPD goes on to set out key design principles for the four town centres in Section 4, with reference to key characteristics such as layout, views, and street scene to be reflected in future development schemes.

### **How can the Design SPD inform the North Hertfordshire Town Centres Strategy?**

The SPD provides guidance on the key design characteristics that development proposals will be assessed against, and that planning applications will need to clearly demonstrate for proposals within and surrounding the District's town centres. Whilst the policy elements are somewhat dated and reference a previous Development Plan, the context for the centres and design principles identified remain relevant and will be carried forward in the Council's emerging Design Code work.

**Sustainability Supplementary Planning Document (NHDC, 2024):** The 2024 Sustainability Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) provides the standards required to meet the objectives and policies of the North Hertfordshire Local Plan through the three pillars of sustainability, i.e. environmental, social, and economic.

Reflecting the Council's 2019 climate emergency motion and subsequent Climate Change Strategy, recently replaced in August 2025 by its Sustainability Strategy (2025-2030), the SPD includes detailed guidance on sustainability expectations for different forms of development when applying the Local Plan policies. The guidance is presented thematically, covering energy performance and minimising carbon footprints, to healthy placemaking and sustainable travel.

Each theme includes a checklist with a threshold for application alongside expectations for developments and a ranking system of bronze, silver, and gold that ranges from basic Local Plan policy compliance (the baseline minimum expectation) through to areas where developments excel. It is not expected that all development will achieve gold for all themes and applicants are to identify which themes to aim for gold standard, depending on site context, type and scale of development.

### **How can the Sustainability SPD inform the North Hertfordshire Town Centres Strategy?**

The SPD provides guidance, thresholds and a checklist on what developers need to consider when submitting an application for a development scheme. These include proposals in the town centres, as well as those surrounding centres, and themes including healthy placemaking, sustainable travel, and historic buildings would directly affect how development proposals interact with the District's town centres whilst supporting the Council's Plan sustainability priority.

### **How the built environment evidence helps meet the Local Plan's vision:**

The evidence helps meet the following part of the Council's vision, as outlined in the Local Plan:

- The vitality and viability of the towns of Hitchin, Letchworth, Royston and Baldock are safeguarded in a way that takes account of their distinctive role. This will have been achieved through carefully planned development which meets the needs of these centres, retaining their market share in terms of their retail offer, whilst recognising the importance of preserving and enhancing their historic character. In local and village centres, shopping facilities that meet local needs will be supported.
- The District's important natural and historic areas and buildings that help to create the distinctive identity of the District in both urban and rural areas will have been protected and enhanced where possible. The quality and attractiveness of the landscape of North Hertfordshire, which contributes to its distinctive character, will have been conserved and enhanced where possible. New green infrastructure will have enhanced the network of green corridors linking settlements to the open countryside, providing greater opportunities for healthy lifestyles.
- The Council's vision describes how new developments will contribute to sustainable communities, defined as safe, attractive and inclusive, to be achieved through compliance with guiding principles set out within the Local Plan alongside the Sustainability SPD.

## **Theme 3: Transport, access and movement**

### **Relevant subthemes:**

Sustainable Travel

Transport Services

Transport infrastructure

### **NPPF sections of relevance:**

Chapter 9 – Promoting sustainable transport

### **Local Plan Policies of Relevance:**

Policy SP6: Sustainable transport

Policy T1: Assessment of transport matters

Policy T2: Parking

Vehicle Parking at New Development SPD

### Relevant evidence:

**Hertfordshire Active Travel Strategy (Hertfordshire County Council, 2013):** Hertfordshire's Active Travel Strategy sets out how the County Council will deliver and promote interventions to increase the number of people walking and cycling in Hertfordshire. Its recommendations are relevant to ensuring the provision of cycle and pedestrian access arrangements, and links to local cycling and walking networks are provided across the town centres.

Recommendations include:

- Providing secure cycle parking at key destinations e.g. rail stations, town centres, and schools.
- Ensuring that all railway stations, key employment sites and key services in towns, especially those associated with high levels of commuting or limited car parking, have convenient cycle and pedestrian access arrangements, high-quality, covered and secure cycle parking and links to local cycling and walking networks.
- Production of up-to-date route and network maps of the cycling and walking network for each town and wider networks.

### How can the Active Travel Strategy inform the North Hertfordshire Town Centres Strategy?

The Active Travel Strategy can provide guidance and targeted interventions/recommendations for the promotion of active travel modes in town centres across North Hertfordshire, helping meet the Council's vision of improving opportunities for travelling by walking and cycling in order to combat climate change.

**Hertfordshire Highways Place & Movement Design Guide (Hertfordshire County Council, 2024):** Chapter 3 of the Guide describes how environmentally sustainable, healthy and future ready movement networks will be delivered in Hertfordshire (including in the town centres).

The Guide recommends the following:

- Promotion of walking by implementing measures to increase the priority of pedestrians relative to motorised vehicles, especially in town centres, and creating walking-friendly town and neighbourhood centres.
- All occupied parts of development should be within 400m walking distance of a bus stop or transport.
- In a town centre location, areas with a significant proportion of elderly residents, around educational establishments, and commercial and industrial developments, the maximum walking distance should be reduced to 200m.
- Consideration of cycling connectivity should ensure priority links to town centres and sustainable transport hubs and connections.

### How can the Hertfordshire Highways Place & Movement Design Guide inform the North Hertfordshire Town Centres Strategy?

The Hertfordshire Highways Place & Movement Design Guide can provide guidance and targeted interventions and recommendations for the provision of walking, cycling and public transport within



the town centres, and provide guidance with regards to transport provision for new development. It can also provide design measures to promote walking in town centres and help meet the Council's vision of improving opportunities for travelling by walking and cycling in order to combat climate change.

#### **Hertfordshire Local Transport Plan (LTP4) 2018-2031 Guide (Hertfordshire County**

**Council, 2018)**: Objective 5 of the Plan aims to enhance the quality and vitality of town centres. Policy 7: Active Travel (walking) explains that the County Council will aim to encourage and promote walking by implementing measures to increase the priority of pedestrians relative to cars, especially in town centres, and create walking-friendly town and neighbourhood centres.

Objective 5 identifies that there are a number of towns which are in need of renewal and regeneration, and that transport plays a role in improving the urban environment. The negative impact of high levels of car use and congestion on the urban environment (noise, air quality, aesthetics, historic & natural environment) limits the potential to improve provision for other modes. It identifies a need to enhance the accessibility to town centres to support growth, development and vitality.

The Plan makes reference towards balancing the negative impact of congestion and car use with the role of transport in improving the urban environment, which is relevant for town centres, particularly for larger town centre areas experiencing greater levels of demand from shoppers and other visitors.

#### **How can the LTP4 inform the North Hertfordshire Town Centres Strategy?**

The LTP4 provides the reasoning and justification for increasing provision of walking and cycling within the town centres, and balancing car use with more sustainable transport modes around the town centres. This helps meet the Council's vision of improving opportunities for travelling by walking and cycling, as well as improving the vitality and viability of town centres.

**Local Cycling Walking Infrastructure Plan (LCWIP) (WSP, 2022)** The Plan references relevant local policies and guidance, including the Local Transport Plan, place and Movement Design Guide and the Sustainable Hertfordshire Strategy and highlights the importance of integration of town centres within local walking and cycling routes. The LCWIP goes on to identify a number of routes to be taken forward to improve connectivity to (and within) each of the town centres.

#### **How can the LCWIP inform the North Hertfordshire Town Centres Strategy?**

The LCWIP can provide guidance and targeted interventions and recommendations for the provision of walking and cycling within the town centres, which can feed into the Strategy. It can also provide design measures to promote walking and cycling in town centres. This helps meet the Council's vision of improving opportunities for travelling by walking and cycling in order to combat climate change.

**North Central Growth Transport Plan (AECOM, 2022)**: Provides targeted interventions relating to sustainable transport measures for each of the four North Herts town centres. Recommendations include:

- Package 7 (Hitchin Centre) which outlines the aim to encourage use of public transport through support for services and creation of a safe and attractive corridor in which to take advantage of the services within Hitchin Town Centre and Rail Station.

- Package 10 (Hitchin to Letchworth/Baldock) seeks to enhance cycling infrastructure between Hitchin, Letchworth and Baldock; and make it a safe and attractive option for sustainable trips.
- Package 11 (Letchworth Centre and Employment Area) aims to increase active transport provision between Letchworth Centre and Employment Area by providing a signposted and connected active transport network and to improve access to Letchworth rail station.
- Package 13 (Baldock connectivity, rail station and development) seeks to make Baldock a safe, convenient and attractive place to make sustainable transport trips through improvements to cycling and walking infrastructure and facilities as well as public transport journeys.
- Package 15 (Royston) aims to transform Royston into a town that facilitates safe, attractive and convenient journeys by active and sustainable transport modes.

### **How can the North Central Growth Transport Plan inform the North Hertfordshire Town Centres Strategy?**

The North Central Growth Transport Plan can provide guidance and targeted interventions and recommendations for the provision of walking, cycling and public transport within the town centres. This helps meet the Council's vision of improving opportunities for travelling by walking, cycling and public transport to combat climate change.

**North Hertfordshire Local Transport Strategy (Markides Associates, 2017):** Outlines transport strategies for each of the town centres and analyses the results of transport modelling impact assessments. It identifies key issues and transport strategy elements, outlining various measures and recommendations for the town centre areas. Recommendations include:

1. Design focus on walking and cycling through all development, to local facilities and to adjacent areas.
2. Development of a sustainable spine along the A505 enhancing people movement between the towns
3. Bus-based public transport and interchange in the main urban centres

### **How can the North Hertfordshire Local Transport Strategy inform the North Hertfordshire Town Centres Strategy?**

The North Hertfordshire Local Transport Strategy can provide guidance and targeted interventions and recommendations for the provision of walking, cycling and public transport within the town centres. It also assesses the key strengths and weaknesses of the transport system in each town, in order to develop enhanced recommendations via an evidence-based approach, which can feed into the North Hertfordshire Town Centres Strategy. This can help meet the Council's vision of improving opportunities for travelling by walking, cycling and public transport to combat climate change.

**North Hertfordshire Parking Strategy (NHDC, 2019):** References off-street parking capacity in town centres. Policy 2 explains that the Council will periodically review the level of off-street car parking capacity in each of the town centres. The Council will aim to manage the overall level of capacity in line with policy objectives for town centre vitality, while seeking to minimise environmental impacts, recognising the need for encouraging sustainable travel and adapting to new technology and trends in parking. The Council will consider the balance required between short and longer-stay parking needs in

its reviews. The Council will manage its off-street car parks in a financially responsible manner. Where appropriate, the Council will work with other off-street parking operators to seek to ensure that the combined car parking capacity in town centres meets policy objectives and is financially sustainable.

### **How can the North Hertfordshire Parking Strategy inform the North Hertfordshire Town Centres Strategy?**

The North Hertfordshire Parking Strategy can provide guidance with regards to balancing the need for parking provision in town centres for purposes of vitality (part of the Council's vision) with the environmental impacts of parking.

### **Sustainable Travel Town Documents**

- **Letchworth GC Outline (NHDC, 2021):** Makes reference to parking provision in town centres. North Hertfordshire District Council through its adopted Parking Strategy is supportive of the principle of working towards the removal of free parking in its town centres to encourage modal shift towards more active and sustainable travel through walking, cycling and public transport. The Council will work towards achieving no net gain in parking spaces, both for on-street in the town centre and in off-street facilities where it is within the Council's power to do so.
- **Royston Outline (NHDC, 2021):** Outlines recommendations for the town centre including cycle parking (in town centre, at neighbourhood retail centres and other key service locations including improved cycling facilities at the Railway station), additional seating in town centre and on key route, widened pavements and planters, and consideration of potential semi-pedestrianisation in the future. References are also made to a phased approach to reducing free parking within the centre to encourage a modal shift towards more active and sustainable travel.

### **How can the Sustainable Travel Town Documents inform the North Hertfordshire Town Centres Strategy?**

The Sustainable Travel Town Documents provide targeted recommendations for town centres regarding the promotion of walking and cycling, as well as design and parking measures to help encourage modal shift. These town centre specific recommendations can be distilled into general principles for use in the Strategy, and work towards achieving the Council's vision of getting more people walking and cycling.

**Active North Hertfordshire Strategy Report (SLC, 2023):** References a key theme outlined within the Council Plan relating to the local economy; highlighting the role of the regeneration of town centres and addressing issues faced by rural communities

### **How can the Active North Hertfordshire Strategy inform the North Hertfordshire Town Centres Strategy?**

Provides the link between sustainable transport and regenerating the local economy.

**Electric Vehicle Strategy (Hertfordshire County Council, 2022):** Sets out Hertfordshire County Council's actions to enable the roll-out of public EV charging infrastructure to facilitate this transition. It explains that charge points are increasingly installed in supermarkets, retail outlets,

leisure facilities hotels, restaurants, tourist attractions, and privately managed town centre car parks. Recommends installation of charge points and roll out of charging infrastructure.

### **How can the Electric Vehicle Strategy inform the North Hertfordshire Town Centres Strategy?**

The Strategy regarding electric vehicles can inform the development of guidance and development of recommendations regarding electric vehicles for the North Hertfordshire Town Centres Strategy to help meet the Council's vision towards "using natural resources more efficiently" and address climate change.

**North Hertfordshire Infrastructure Delivery Plan (RS Regeneration, 2018):** Outlines strategies for improving and delivering infrastructure in the District, including in Town Centres. Outlines potential for significant levels of new investment to deliver growth, impact on the transport network, and how to address this. For example, proposes for cycling infrastructure in Hitchin to include advance stop lines, improved signage and covered parking in the town centre

### **How can the North Hertfordshire Infrastructure Delivery Plan inform the North Hertfordshire Town Centres Strategy?**

The Plan provides guidance for improving transport infrastructure and potential investment strategies, which can feed into this Town Centres Strategy. Although these are location specific, they can be distilled to develop general principles for the Strategy.

**Air Quality Strategy, and Air Quality Implementation Plan (Hertfordshire County Council, 2019):** Although the documents do not make direct reference to town centres, the principles outlined in the documents are relevant towards developing strategies for improving air quality and introducing modes of clean transport, and this is applicable to town centres.

### **How can the Air Quality Strategy and Air Quality Implementation Plan inform the North Hertfordshire Town Centres Strategy?**

The guidance can explain that development coming forward should consider that clean air is a Council priority, and this should be made explicit in the town Centres Strategy document. The clean air principles outlined in both documents should inform the Strategy's guidance.

### **How the transport, access and movement evidence helps meet the Local Plan's vision**

The evidence base outlined above helps address the following section of the Local Plan vision:

- The District will play its part in addressing climate change by improving opportunities for travelling by public transport, walking and cycling, using natural resources more efficiently, reducing the demand for water, securing high quality sustainable design and managing the risk of flooding.
- Increased footfall in town centres through increased levels of walking and cycling, can in turn result in improved "viability and vitality" of town centres, and improved local economies, which is also part of the Council's vision.

## Theme 4: Community

### Relevant subthemes:

Community Facilities

Community Safety

Community Health;

### Local Plan Policies of Relevance:

Policy HC1: Community Facilities

Policy D1: Sustainable Design

Policy SP10: Healthy Communities

### NPPF Sections of Relevance:

Chapter 8: Promoting Healthy and Safe Communities

### Relevant evidence

#### **North Hertfordshire Sport Provision and Open Space Review & Standards (NHDC, 2016):**

Assesses the provision of open space, sport and recreation facilities in North Hertfordshire. In relation to town centres, it explains that small sites of less than 0.1 ha can provide valuable local open space, particularly in residential areas and town centres.

#### **How can the North Hertfordshire Sports Provision and Open Spaces Review inform the North Hertfordshire Town Centres Strategy?**

This Review can provide guidance for the Town Centres Strategy with regards to open space provision in town centres and helps realise the Council's vision to provide community and recreational facilities accessible to the local population. An updated study is being finalised and will supersede the 2016 work.

**Council Plan 2024-2028 (NHDC, 2024):** One of the priorities outlined in the plan is *Thriving Communities*, which means focusing on community safety priorities such as anti-social behaviour, violence against women and girls, and environmental crime (such as fly tipping). Recommendations include continuing to allocate grant funding to local groups who provide vital services and activities, as well as working with partners to deliver projects which reduce health inequalities. The Plan references the importance of street cleaning services, as well as the leisure centres provided by Everyone Active. The Council Plan also emphasises efforts towards the reduction of Carbon emissions across the District. Further commentary on the strategic role of the Council Plan is set out in Section 1B.

#### **How can the Council Plan inform the North Hertfordshire Town Centres Strategy?**

The Council Plan provides recommendations to improve community safety in the town centres, which can be applied to the North Hertfordshire Town Centres Strategy and help realise the Council's vision for thriving communities with accessible services through responsible growth and sustainability.

**Sustainability Strategy 2025-2030 (NHDC 2025):** The Sustainability Strategy launched in August 2025 and replaces the Climate Change Strategy to align with the Council priority of Sustainability. The Sustainability Strategy takes a broader scope by including many areas of sustainability, including emissions reductions, climate change adaptation and biodiversity, taking into account action needed to tackle climate change, protect nature, and make better use of natural resources. This strategy has five areas of focus: Council Emissions, District Emissions, Adaptation, Biodiversity and Cross Cutting.

The aims of the Sustainability Strategy are:

- Achieve Net Zero by 2030 for the Council's own operations.
- Achieve a Net Zero North Hertfordshire district by 2040.
- Ensure all operations and services are resilient to the impacts of climate change.
- Become a district that is resilient to unavoidable impacts of climate change.
- Increase biodiversity in North Hertfordshire.

#### **How can the Sustainability Strategy inform the North Hertfordshire Town Centres Strategy?**

This Strategy sets out the key areas of focus for the Council to improve its sustainability, including how the North Hertfordshire Town Centres Strategy can guide developments within town centres that will require consideration of sustainability across biodiversity, emissions and adaptation to climate change.

**Resilient Together Report (ResilientTogether, 2017):** Resilient Together is a Local Authority led partnership which works with the local community to reduce flood risk from the Pix Brook (which flows through Letchworth) and improve water quality. As urban areas have grown, the health of some watercourses has weakened. The Pix Brook has been affected by urban growth and is at increased flood risk from rapid storm runoff, as well as from pollution and a reduction in habitat. ResilientTogether aims to address flooding in urban areas, including Letchworth town centre. ResilientTogether aims to create a 'smart catchment' to reduce flood risk, enhance the water environment and improve community resilience. It proposes installation of monitoring stations along the Pix Brook in order to understand the impacts of extreme weather on water flows and water quality.

#### **How can the Resilient Together Report inform the North Hertfordshire Town Centres Strategy?**

The Resilient Together Report can provide guidance for the North Hertfordshire Town Centres Strategy of how to reduce flood risk in town centres, enhancing community resilience in the process whilst at the same time protecting and enhancing biodiversity, which is part of the Council's vision.

**Green Infrastructure (GI) Principles (Natural England, 2023):** Natural England has developed a set of GI Principles that underpin the GI Framework. The Principles are intended to provide a baseline for different organisations to develop stronger green infrastructure policy and delivery. The principles cover the *Why, What and How* of how to deliver good GI. There are mapped environmental, socio-economic datasets to support the standards. The Principles can be applied to town



centres, and include Nature Rich Places, Active and Healthy Places, Thriving and Prospering Places, Water Management and Resilient and Climate Positive Places.

### **How can the Green Infrastructure Principles inform the North Hertfordshire Town Centres Strategy?**

The GI principles can be applied to devise guidance to enhance and protect green infrastructure in the North Hertfordshire town centres. This will help realise the aim of the Council's vision to enhance and protect its landscape as well as enhance the network of green corridors linking settlements to the open countryside, providing greater opportunities for healthy lifestyles; and the protection and enhancement of biodiversity in the area.

#### **How the community evidence helps meet the Local Plan's vision:**

The evidence base outlined above helps meet the following sections of the Local Plan vision:

- The District's important natural and historic areas and buildings that help to create the distinctive identity of the District in both urban and rural areas will have been protected and enhanced where possible. The quality and attractiveness of the landscape of North Hertfordshire, which contributes to its distinctive character, will have been conserved and enhanced where possible. New green infrastructure will have enhanced the network of green corridors linking settlements to the open countryside, providing greater opportunities for healthy lifestyles.
- The rich biodiversity and geodiversity of North Hertfordshire will have been protected and enhanced where possible. Where new development could potentially have an adverse impact on biodiversity and geodiversity, measures will have been taken to ensure that the impact was either avoided or mitigated.
- North Hertfordshire will have a range of community, leisure, cultural and recreational facilities in locations that are accessible to the local population, creating cohesive communities that enhance the opportunities and recognise the needs of the centres' diverse demographics from the day-to-day workers to the older population, children and young people.

# Part 2: Town Centre Guidance

## 2A: Town Centre Developments

### How to use this Part

This part of the Town Centres Strategy provides a series of Guidance Notes to support developers, consultants, landowners, and decision makers responding to the requirements of Local plan policies when progressing development proposals in North Herts' town centres.

The Guidance Notes set out advice to assist with the interpretation of relevant Local Plan policies, providing additional information and guidance to ensure that development proposals take account of the breadth of relevant evidence and the Council's broader strategies effecting and affected by developments in the town centres. These include:

- clarifying how and where Local Plan policies will be applied in the assessment of planning applications;
- interpretation of Local Plan policies, listing examples of key criteria and principles that would be expected to be addressed when submitting applications for developments within town centres; and
- examples of supporting information, details, design considerations and infrastructure contributions that would demonstrate Local Plan policy compliance.

Early engagement with the Guidance Notes is encouraged when developing proposals within and affecting town centres, including through pre-application discussions with the Council, to address any areas that would require further consideration to meet the requirements of the Local Plan and Town Centres Strategy. Whilst the Guidance Notes reflect Local Plan policy requirements, the broader principles are considered beneficial for all town centre proposals, including those that would not require an application for planning permission (such as changes within the same Use Class, funding bids, licencing, and prior approval applications) to support the Council's aspirations for the town centres.

Part 1 of this document has set out the relevant town centre related evidence base documents, supplementary planning documents, and Council strategies. This section should also be read alongside the North Hertfordshire Local Plan 2011-2032 (adopted 2022).

As with Part 1, the Guidance Notes are presented thematically, expanding on select Local Plan policies as referenced in the text. The Guidance Notes include requirements and recommendations for approaching policy criteria to: address the requirements of the Local Plan policies, consider the findings of the relevant evidence, and implement the Council's strategies affecting town centres.



## 2B: Guidance Notes

### Introduction

To ensure the strategy is responsive to wider trends and strategic challenges, the Council has reviewed the trends in the usage of the town centres through stakeholder engagement, public telephone surveys and commissioning town centres experts, Lichfields, to provide data, trends and recommendations. The surveys provide insights to the shopping habits and desires of residents and visitors. These findings, together with other relevant evidence, strategies and frameworks summarised across Part 1 have helped to identify a number of common themes which seek to deliver the strategic objectives of this strategy through a set of general policy Guidance Notes that provide a greater level of detail into Local Plan policies that can be applied to developments across the four town centres.

The Guidance Notes in this part provide a framework for protecting, improving and delivering positive changes in North Herts' four town centres. The policies are thematically aligned as follows:

	Guidance Note	Theme
1	Promoting Vitality and Viability in Town Centres	Land use and retail
2	The Built Form, Public Realm and Design	Built environment
3	Heritage and Historic Character	Built environment
4	Promoting Sustainable Travel	Transport, access and movement
5	Community Facilities	Community

**Table B1:** Thematically guiding policies that are applied to each town centre strategy.

## **Guidance Note 1**

### **Promoting Vitality and Viability in Town Centres**

- a Local Plan Policy SP9 defines significant developments as those ‘generally comprising residential development of 100 dwellings or more’. In relation to commercial development and other main town centre uses, development of 1,000 sq.m gross or more, sites greater than 1 ha, or existing allocations within town centres would be considered significant development.
- b To promote, protect and enhance the four main town centres in accordance with Local Plan Policy SP4 a), proposals involving the loss of retail and leisure floorspace will be resisted, other than where evidence can be provided demonstrating that the floorspace would not otherwise be required to meet an identified need over the plan period.
- c Proposals that require planning permission that would result in the loss of Use Class E Uses at ground floor level in the Primary Shopping Area (currently designated as Primary Shopping Frontages) or main town centre uses (including Use Class E, Sui Generis and Use Class F) within the town centre boundaries should only be permitted subject to criteria relating to:
  - adverse impact on the vitality and viability of the centre as a whole;
  - individual or cumulative impact on neighbouring amenity;
  - provision of an active frontage at ground floor level which relates well to the design of the building and to the street-scene and its setting; and
  - adequate marketing of the unit for Use Class E uses in primary shopping frontages or for main town centre uses (including Use Class E, Sui Generis and Use Class F) in other parts of the town centre.
- d In accordance with Local Plan Policy SP4 b), it is appropriate for significant developments proposing new or replacement retail and leisure floorspace to provide for a mix of uses (with suitable planning controls, where necessary) to support the vitality and viability of town centres. These uses could include shops, cafes and restaurants (Use Class E) along with pubs and drinking establishments and takeaways (Sui Generis).
- e The Council will consider that any significant development within the town centre boundary, including Local Plan allocations, meets the criteria of Local Plan Policy SP9 and should be subject to a proportionate Strategic Masterplan exercise which, as a minimum, should demonstrate how the proposals have taken account of the guidance set out within this document.

#### **Local Plan Policies of Relevance:**

*Policy SP4: Town Centres, Local Centres and Community Shops*

*Policy SP9: Design and Sustainability*

*Policy ETC3: New retail, leisure and other main town centre development*

*Policy ETC4: Primary Shopping Frontages*

*Policy ETC5: Secondary Shopping Frontages*

## **Guidance Note 2**

### **The Built Form, Public Realm and Design**

- a In accordance with Local Plan Policy D1, proposed streetscapes including roads, buildings, pavements, hard and soft landscaping, lighting and street furniture in significant developments or public realm interventions should:
  - be of high quality and contribute towards an overall user experience in town centres;
  - be safe and accommodating to people with mobility, sensory and neurological impairments;
  - improve wayfinding and legibility, permeability, and key views of landmark buildings; and
  - take account of the existing hierarchy of streets and pathways if proposing a change to the street hierarchy. This should not be to the detriment of pedestrian and cycling routes.
- b Open spaces should be designed and maintained to a high quality to promote active recreation, opportunities for social interaction and physical linkages across and between the town centres to support visitors' health and wellbeing to support Local Plan Policy NE6.
- c To meet Local Plan Policy SP12 2), biodiversity and habitats should be protected and improved in the town centres, in open and green spaces, riversides (as in the case of Hitchin), as well as in the built environment which supports ecological networks. Developers and landowners for significant developments should demonstrate how they will promote these policy aims through design, layout, land use, lighting and landscaping, and prioritise climate action with a long-term vision, including contributing to biodiversity net gain where relevant to help create an attractive environment for the users of the town centres that will also help to mitigate climate change.
- d To support Local Plan Policy D1 a) building types, massing, building and ground floor heights, sight lines, setbacks, and gaps for non-residential development should be proportional in the context of the town, street and surrounding buildings.
- e In accordance with Local Plan Policy D1 a), materials proposed for buildings and ornamentation should be of high quality, sustainable and long-lasting, with reference to the form and character of the proposed development (and where relevant, in relation to the historic buildings). Designs should be complementary, rather than directly copying or competing with historic styles, with scope for innovation allowing the town centre to evolve. They should enhance the existing fabric through similar materials and sympathetic designs.
- f In support of Local Plan Policy D1 b), pavements should be of high quality, clear of obstructions and integrate within the street hierarchy and right of ways. Street trees, planting and shrubs are also important elements contributing to the public realm and built environment, and these should be retained and enhanced wherever possible.

### **Guidance Note 3**

#### **Heritage and Historical Character**

- a In accordance with Local Plan Policies HE1-3, proposed developments should conserve and enhance the special architectural, historic interest, character and appearance of each of the town centres, and integrate new development sensitively to the setting of listed buildings, designated and non-designated heritage assets.
- b Local Plan Policy SP13 sets the Council's strategy for the protection and enhancement of North Hertfordshire's historic environment. Reflecting Strategic Objective ENV3, this should be taken to include the town centres' cultural assets, in addition to buildings of cultural and heritage value. Proposed developments in town centres will be expected to deliver (as appropriate) and fund (or contribute funding towards) the centre's cultural heritage, such as the promotion of Garden City principles in Letchworth Garden City, Royston Town Trail, the River Hiz and historic market in Hitchin, amongst others.

#### **Local Plan Policies of Relevance:**

*Policy D1: Sustainable design*

*Policy NE6: New and improved open space*

*Policy SP12: Green infrastructure, landscape and biodiversity*

*Policy SP13: Historic environment*

*Policy HE1: Designated heritage assets*

*Policy HE2: Heritage at risk*

*Policy HE3: Non-designated heritage assets*

*Strategic Objective ENV3: Protect, maintain and enhance the District's historic and natural environment, its cultural assets and network of open spaces, urban and rural landscapes*

## Guidance Note 4

### Promoting Sustainable Travel

- a Local Plan Policies SP6 and T1 d) seek to deliver accessibility improvements and promote the use of sustainable transport modes. Proposed developments in or surrounding town centres will be expected to deliver (as appropriate) and fund (or contribute funding towards):
- i. infrastructure on-site and off-site that promotes:
    - safe and direct walking and cycling routes to town centres, and between town centres, key amenities and travel/mobility hubs including railway stations;
    - secure cycle parking; or
    - parking spaces for club cars\*, including at or close to railway stations
  - ii. new or extended services, linked to appropriate triggers, for the following:
    - bus services;
    - bike/e-scooter rental schemes (on or off site); or
    - car clubs and ride-sharing services.

\* Car clubs are short-term car rental services that allow members access to locally parked cars and pay by the minute, hour or day.

- b The Council's Vehicle Parking at New Developments SPD (2011) Paragraph 4.8 sets out the evidence needed for the Council to consider a level of parking provision below the minimum standards in accordance with Policy T2:
- "Clear evidence must be provided that residents and visitor parking demand will not exceed the parking provided OR that alternative short and long stay daytime and evening parking will be readily available to future residents and visitors. The developer should identify examples of this evidence from other developments or locations in similar circumstances to those found in the district."*

A future update to the SPD will provide further details of the level of evidence required where it is considered that existing and future demands for parking is likely to be lower than the minimum standards. This evidence is likely to be based on the site's location and the quality of sustainable transport options already available, in addition to any transport options that will become available as a result of the application proposal or agreed to be delivered with the development.

- c The Council's Vehicle Parking at New Developments SPD (2011) Paragraph 4.10 provides criteria where car free developments may be considered in town centres where any of the following apply:
- The extension or alteration or re-use of an existing building with no access to parking;
  - The reversion of a previously converted property to its original residential use, including flats above shops;
  - The provision of residential accommodation on a small town centre site that may not otherwise come forward for development; or
  - Where arrangements are made to share an existing car park within the vicinity of the site that can accommodate development

**Local Plan Policies of Relevance:**

*Policy SP6: Sustainable transport*

*Policy T1: Assessment of transport matters*

*Policy T2: Parking*

**Guidance Note 5**  
**Community Facilities**

- a Local Plan Policy HC1 seeks the retention and provision of cultural, recreation and community facilities. For new significant developments in town centres that:
  - i. include community facilities, developers and landowners are expected to reflect best practices for community cohesion, health and safety, as well as opportunities for skill development within their development.
  - ii. do not include community facilities within the scheme, the Council will seek commuted payments from developers through planning obligations towards the provision of new off-site facilities or enhancements to existing community facilities within the town centre, where there is a demonstratable need.
- b In accordance with Local Plan Policy HC1, development of new and improved health, children's and youth facilities will be supported within or close to town centres, as part of town centre allocations and/or through contributions secured through planning obligations for development proposals, where there is a demonstratable need.
- c The Council will resist the loss of community facilities and will require the replacement of existing community facilities in development proposals or through enhancement schemes, in line with Local Plan Policy HC1.
- d The Local Plan definition of community facilities under Policy HC1 should be taken to include public access to toilet facilities. Where public toilets are not available in the vicinity of a proposed development including a community facility use, proposed community facilities should provide the general public access to toilets and changing rooms on their premises, otherwise known as a Community Toilet Scheme.

**Local Plan Policies of Relevance:**

*Policy HC1: Community facilities*

# Part 3: Individual Town Centre Strategies

## Introduction

The following strategies for North Hertfordshire's individual towns focus on a concise series of key priorities for the town centres, that will work alongside the Guidance Notes set out in Part 2 to steer development and investment in and surrounding Hitchin, Letchworth, Royston and Baldock.

The priorities identified provide a focus and key actions for the Council, and work within the planning policy context of the Council's adopted Local Plan 2011-2031, ahead of the new Local Plan. Part 4 also sets out further District-wide initiatives for the Council to undertake alongside the key priorities identified. The Council may wish to revisit these sections and update the priorities in due course as actions are undertaken and new opportunities emerge.

The key priorities are informed by the SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) analysis for each town, based on the context and evidence summarised in Part 1 and Appendix 3 alongside consultations, ranging from residents to stakeholder workshops, undertaken during the Town Centre and Retail Study (2024), as well as subsequent meetings with Business Improvement Districts (BIDs), landowners and stakeholders.

Consideration of the suitability of planning obligations will be particularly relevant where proposals impact town centres, either through trade diversion or any increases in the number of visitors or users of existing or proposed town centre services. Part 4 sets out how the Council may also seek to explore alternative funding options including national government funding opportunities, private investment, or direct funding allocations from District Council or County Council budgets to deliver identified priorities.

The strategies' key priorities identify opportunities to support vitality and viability of the town centres.

This strategy has been developed with a planning and delivery focus, setting out next steps and actions to bring forward the key priorities. One area that this can be achieved is through financial contributions from developments that would affect the town centres in the form of planning obligations. It is noted that Section 106 sets out the tests for requesting planning obligations<sup>2</sup>, in accordance with Regulation 122 of The Community Infrastructure Levy Regulations 2010. It is not for strategies such as this, to specifically set out formulaic requests for such financial contributions, which would be subject to viability and costings via the Council or applicant.

<sup>2</sup> Planning obligations assist in mitigating the impact of unacceptable development to make it acceptable in planning terms. Planning obligations may only constitute a reason for granting planning permission if they meet the tests that are necessary to make the development acceptable in planning terms. They must be:

- necessary to make the development acceptable in planning terms;
- directly related to the development; and
- fairly and reasonably related in scale and kind to the development.

## 3A: Hitchin

Further information on Hitchin town centre is found in Appendix 3A: Hitchin Town Centre Evidence Notes.

### Identity

Hitchin's origins have been traced back to pre-Roman times, aligned with the River Hiz as an important crossing point. Over time, Hitchin developed as a market town, and thus, the layout of the town centre has unfolded with temporary market stalls becoming permanent. In the 19th century, with the arrival of the railway, the previously unchanged street plan rapidly expanded to meet the new demands of the town's growth.

Now, the historic layout of the town centre is linear in structure stretching for over 800 metres north-south along Bancroft and the High Street. Narrow streets are clustered around Market Place adjoining to St. Mary's Church (dating back to the 14th century) and are adjacent to the Churchgate Shopping Centre developed in the 1970s.

There is a mix of typologies and uses in Hitchin town centre; a conservation area, listed buildings and late twentieth century developments, as well as a mix of residential, commercial shopping, recreation, and restaurants or cafe uses. The town centre has evolved over time and will continue to do so, but any changes should respect the overall historic character of Hitchin.

Hitchin is the main shopping and commercial centre in North Hertfordshire, predominantly serving the western half of the District. The centre has the strongest range and choice of comparison and convenience goods retail and services uses, including a wide range of national multiple operators.

Visitors are drawn to Hitchin by the market town's attractive historic character, as well as the variety of restaurants and cafes. The town also serves as a popular filming location, further tying the aesthetics and historic character of the town to its identity. Nonetheless, the River Hiz and the area surrounding St. Mary's Church are underutilised assets, with planned development of the Churchgate Regeneration Zone providing a significantly opportunity to secure the long-term viability of the centre.

### Vision

Hitchin will maintain and support the quality of its intrinsic historic market town character to develop an attractive, mixed-use, safe, accessible, vibrant and lively town centre for the local community and visitors to shop, work and live in. Hitchin will have strong and sustainable connections to key destinations, such as the railway station, Hitchin Lavender Fields, and nearby towns and villages. Town centre assets will be optimised, such as the River Hiz, St. Mary's Church, museums and its historic market. For the Churchgate Regeneration Zone and any other new development, Hitchin will take advantage of the opportunity to bring people into the town centre, provide quality public spaces, contribute to the cultural heritage and support the retail core.



## SWOT Analysis

### *Summary of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats*

#### **Strengths**

1. Hitchin is the main shopping destination in the district, providing a good range and choice of convenience and comparison shops. It has a reasonable selection of national multiple retailers, and it has the strongest range and choice of comparison and convenience retail, and services uses in the district.
2. Large food stores are available which cater for main and bulk food shopping needs.
3. The environmental quality of the centre is good, reflecting its historic character and the centre's attractive mix of period buildings and a varied street scene, including the Market Place.
4. The town centre provides a range of service facilities including banks and building societies.
5. The evening economy is relatively strong with many restaurants, pubs and bars.
6. The vacancy rate is much lower than the national average - suggesting demand for premises is relatively good.
7. Most areas of the centre are well maintained, and adequate street furniture is provided.
8. The centre has a good range of small specialist independent retailers.
9. The centre has a good bus service, with many bus routes serving the centre.
10. Buildings are generally attractive and in a reasonable to good condition.
11. The household survey results suggest Hitchin has higher levels of customer satisfaction than dissatisfaction.
12. Hitchin features a popular market in the town centre, operating on Tuesdays, Fridays and Saturdays.

#### **Weaknesses**

13. The choice of retailers is not comparable with some larger centres, which encourages expenditure leakage to centres with a better range of facilities, such as Cambridge, Luton and Stevenage.
14. The linear form of the centre does not provide a natural circuit for shoppers, and pedestrian flows within peripheral areas are low, i.e. Bridge Street and the top end of Bancroft.
15. Some non-pedestrianised streets have narrow pavements and can be congested, and difficult for those with mobility difficulties at peak times, such as Sun Street and Bucklersbury.
16. The historic character of the town centre, particularly in terms of the Conservation Area designation and listed buildings could constrain potential redevelopment opportunities. It could restrict the growth of the centre and deter new operators, due to the lack of availability of spaces needed for larger format stores.
17. The Churchgate Shopping Centre and the market area between St Mary's Church and the Churchgate Centre detract from the overall attractiveness of the town centre.

18. Surface car parking around St Mary's Church is visually dominant and detracts from the advantages of the proximity to the river frontage and historic core.
19. The train station is not within a reasonable walking distance of the town centre.
20. Lack of legibility from the town centre to peripheral car parks (e.g. Woodside and Lairage) and key facilities within and on the edge of the town centre (e.g. swimming pool, schools, museums, Priory Park and the rail station).

## **Opportunities**

21. Hitchin has a reasonably affluent population, but a high proportion of the expenditure generated leaks from the area. Population and expenditure are expected to grow in the future. If Hitchin can maintain its current share of market expenditure there is potential to improve and expand retail, leisure and service uses.
22. There remain several opportunity sites within the town centre, which could accommodate new retail/leisure uses, which would help to retain more expenditure and customers in the area.
23. Improved linkages along the River Hiz could provide better access and natural circuit for pedestrians between Bridge Street, the Churchgate Centre, the Portmill Lane car parks and Hermitage Road.
24. Improved pedestrian, cycling and bus linkages to the railway station would improve overall levels of customer accessibility to the town centre.
25. Enhancement of the Churchgate Centre and market area would significantly improve the attraction and ambience of the town centre as a retail and leisure destination.
26. The centre is already popular as a restaurant and café destination, providing a key opportunity (particularly within or associated with any development of the Churchgate Regeneration Zone) to develop a complementary cultural strategy.
27. A holistic approach to transport and parking may provide opportunities for reconfiguration of provision, whilst maintaining or increasing footfall and vitality.

## **Threats**

28. The number of vacant shop units has increased significantly in recent years. The continuation of this trend could undermine Hitchin's role as a higher order shopping destination in the retail hierarchy.
29. The continued polarisation of national multiples in larger centres and/or the business failure of more national multiples could lead to the closure of outlets. The continued rationalisation and restructuring of national multiples could lead to the closure of outlets. Multiple operators could seek to focus on (sub-)regional centres such as Stevenage, Cambridge and Luton rather than Hitchin.
30. Transport impacts of growth within and around Hitchin, including Luton Airport, could exacerbate congestion. This could deter town centre visits, given the proximity and capacity of through routes.

## **Key Priorities – Hitchin Town Centre**

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Priority area</b>	<b>Actions / Planning considerations</b>	<b>Responsibility</b>
<p>A</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Land use and retail</li> <li>• Built environment</li> <li>• Transport, access and movement</li> </ul>	Churchgate Regeneration Zone	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Through the Council's <b><i>development management role</i></b> in the planning system, the Council will assess proposals associated with the Churchgate Regeneration Zone (Local Plan Allocation HT11) as a Significant Development in accordance with Local Plan Policy SP9 and the Guidance Notes identified in Part 2. This would require a strategic masterplan demonstrating how the development could: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– provide a mix of flexible and adaptable commercial units that would enable future reoccupation by a range of town centre uses, as well as a mix of accommodation to increase the town centre's resident population;</li> <li>– strategically target a mix of retail, food and beverage, and leisure operators, including recognition and assessment of the impact of any potential overlap of catchments for leisure uses;</li> <li>– activate and open up the River Hiz for user recreation;</li> <li>– improve pedestrian and active travel permeability through the site and surrounding area such as introducing street patterns to increase accessibility and linkages across the centre;</li> <li>– support the ongoing vitality of the town centre by increasing potential for visitors and footfall including the promotion of active travel to the centre.</li> <li>– deliver a holistic parking strategy; any proposals should be supported</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<p>NHDC as Local Planning Authority (LPA) development management)</p> <p>Future development partners</p>

		<p>by a parking survey to demonstrate the current use of existing car parks in and around the town centre and plan for appropriate levels of parking, integrating with an emerging transport strategy for Hitchin;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– ensure any scheme facilitates and does not prejudice further sites being brought forward in the future; and</li> <li>– provide accessible links to, and enhanced utilities infrastructure for Hitchin Market, including electrical connections and water supply.</li> </ul>	
<p><b>B</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Built environment</li> <li>• Transport, access and movement</li> </ul>	<p>Public realm, connectivity and wayfinding</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop and deliver a joint public realm, connectivity and wayfinding strategy and delivery plan for Hitchin, taking forward the recommendations of the Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan. For Hitchin: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Create a public realm and wayfinding strategy in collaboration with the BID, Churchgate Regeneration Zone development partners and other stakeholders, including viability and costings, to identify key opportunities for investment from street furniture, lighting and planters, as well as the provision of public realm alongside the River Hiz.</li> <li>– Identify funding sources, future joint bidding opportunities, and requests for planning obligations for relevant developments for financial contributions to wayfinding, pedestrian routes, and public realm investments, particularly between the town centre, new public realm along the River Hiz, and the surrounding open space and gardens.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<p>NHDC HCC Visit Hitchin Business Improvement District (BID) Future development partners</p>

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Improve transport links and signage from the town centre to key destinations such as the Hitchin Lavender Fields, the theatre and event space at The Dell, and other leisure destinations outside the town centre.</li> </ul>	
<p>C</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Land use and retail</li> <li>• Community</li> </ul>	Cultural economy strategy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Through the Council's <b>development management role</b> in the planning system, the Council will recognise the benefits of innovative commercial uses that contribute to the nighttime economy, particularly options for young people, as a positive material consideration when supported through evidence of viability, long-term vacancies, preventing breaks in active frontages, resolving amenity issues (e.g.: noise and smells), impact on the nature and character of the retail frontages</li> <li>• Building on the economic opportunities from the Churchgate Regeneration Zone, the Council and development partners for Churchgate will engage with key stakeholders to identify further commercial and cultural opportunities including investing in The Dell as an open-air theatre and to identify possible future funding sources.</li> </ul>	NHDC Visit Hitchin Business Improvement District (BID)
<p>D</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Transport, access and movement</li> </ul>	Hitchin as a key sustainable transport hub	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In collaboration with HCC, the BID and other stakeholders, the Council will develop a transport strategy for Hitchin that aims to reduce car dependency in the district and promote sustainable modes of travel into and within the town, including to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– better integrate rail and bus services to facilitate travel by public transport within the district and to major destinations beyond, including</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	NHDC HCC Visit Hitchin Business Improvement District (BID) Future development partners

		<p>Stevenage, Luton (including the airport), Biggleswade and Bedford;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– consider opportunities for providing a bus station in the town centre to increase the convenience and comfort for people interchanging between services;</li> <li>– improve the efficiency of bus routing in the town centre by adding a bus turnaround;</li> <li>– deliver schemes in the Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan;</li> <li>– consider redirecting through-traffic and more effectively regulate traffic flows within the town to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ minimise congestion that impacts bus journey times and reliability;</li> <li>▪ enable the reallocation of road space for safer walking and cycling, particularly between the town centre and railway station;</li> <li>▪ reduce the severance and other inhibitory effects of the A505 on people walking and cycling into and in the town;</li> </ul> </li> <li>– improve air quality for residents and visitors.</li> </ul>	
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## 3B: Letchworth Garden City

Further information on Letchworth Garden City town centre is found in Appendix 3B: Letchworth Garden City Town Centre Evidence Notes.

### Identity

Letchworth Garden City (Letchworth) is a unique town centre as a result of its origins as an intensively planned town – the world’s first Garden City – founded in the early twentieth century. By following masterplan principles to balance high quality residential homes with nature pursuits, local employment and accessible transport, the areas of open space, commercial land uses and housing are integrated and convenient to one another. Detailed buildings contribute to the town centre’s unique flair, as the concept of the Garden City incited innovation and competitive design.

The Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation owns a large proportion of the town centre land and assets, and are involved in the visioning, development and investments of the town’s future. Such a large volume of ownership to a single organisation is unique compared to the other town centres and stimulates different commercial decisions and town-centre-wide interventions. This single ownership also provides a key point of difference, providing opportunities for broader strategic alignment.

Letchworth is the only town centre with a railway station directly within its boundary and allows visitors to immediately arrive to the centre. The town centre, although hosting wide, accessible and pleasant footpaths, is spread without a distinct core. There is a variety of uses throughout the town centre, shops, residential flats, restaurants, cafes, with a range of budget priced comparison retail. Letchworth is positioned as an important town centre demonstrating Garden City principles, opportunities for recreation and leisure, and a balanced offer.

More recently, Letchworth is part of Hertfordshire County Council’s Sustainable Travel Town programme, which aims to bring forward a series of measures to reshape the local highways network and achieve a significant switch to walking, cycling and public transport.

### Vision

Letchworth will maintain and develop the town centre for civic and social life, connected by accessible public transport networks through leadership, sense of place, and enterprise. Letchworth will: support the future of arts and heritage; will be a great place to live, visit and shop in; will increase residents life chances; and will be a protagonist in raising investment for the local economy; uphold and promote Garden City principles, and therefore its unique identity, as the first of its kind.

## **SWOT Analysis**

### *Summary of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats*

#### **Strengths**

1. Letchworth is a compact well-defined centre with a natural circuit for shoppers. The centre has a relatively pleasant shopping environment.
2. The large Morrisons food store is an important anchor store catering for main and top-up food shopping.
3. Letchworth has retained a reasonable range of comparison goods shops, although this has declined and there is a lower representation of comparison retailers than Hitchin.
4. The Arcade, The Wynd and other secondary areas provide a good range of interesting specialist retailers.
5. The centre is easily accessible by a range of modes of transport, with a railway station located within the town centre. Car access is also convenient with several centrally located car parks.
6. Movement around the centre on foot is supported by wide pavements and pedestrianised areas, and Letchworth is one of the County Council's Sustainable Travel Towns.
7. The centre is attractively landscaped giving the centre a sense of spaciousness. Environmental improvements have enhanced the overall attractiveness of the centre.
8. Much of the town centre is consolidated under the sole ownership of the Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation, which provides a simpler single point of contact and greater opportunities for longer-term strategies.

#### **Weaknesses**

9. The proportion of vacant units is significantly above the national average, with vacancies spread across the centre, which suggest the supply of units is currently greater than operator demand.
10. The centre has a lower number of national multiples when compared with Hitchin and other larger centres in the sub-region such as Cambridge and Welwyn.
11. Like many centres of a similar size, Letchworth has lost most of its banks and building societies.
12. Leakage of higher value comparison spend to other centres within and beyond District

#### **Opportunities**

13. Letchworth has a reasonably large and affluent population, which presents an opportunity to claw-back leakage from this catchment by improving its current offer.
14. The vacant premises across the centre could provide an opportunity to consolidate retail, redevelop and accommodate new facilities.
15. The new Emil Dale Academy school recently opened, providing another source of footfall within the centre and an opportunity to cater to the new student population.



16. The Broadway Cinema helps to boost the evening economy, but this facility could be improved and the number of visitors optimised.
17. There remains a number of opportunity sites within the town centre, including the potential regeneration of Garden Square Shopping Centre, which could accommodate new retail/leisure uses that could help to retain more expenditure and customers in the area.
18. There are a number of open and green spaces in close proximity to the town centre that would provide a draw to the centre (if supported by necessary routes and linkages) in keeping with the town's Garden City principles.

### **Threats**

19. The continued rationalisation and restructuring of national multiples could lead to the closure of outlets. Multiple operators could seek to focus on (sub-)regional centres such as Stevenage, Cambridge and Luton rather than Letchworth.
20. Prominent town centre units are vacant with a lack of interest from suitable (main town centre uses) occupiers, held back by various heritage, conservation and planning constraints, with a risk of long term or repeat vacancies.
21. The District Council's offices are located adjacent to the centre, providing a steady stream of workers in the centre each day. In the long-term, potential Local Government Reorganisation could impact the need for this office space.

## Key Priorities – Letchworth Garden City Town Centre

Theme	Priority area	Actions / Planning considerations	Responsibility
<p>A</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Land use and retail</li> <li>Built environment</li> </ul>	<p>Town centre development opportunities and allocations (Garden Square Shopping Centre and Arena Parade)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Through the Council's <b>development management role</b> in the planning system, the Council will assess proposals associated with the development of Garden Square and Arena Parade (Local Plan Allocation LG21) as a Significant Development in accordance with Local Plan Policy SP9 and the Guidance Notes identified in Part 2. This would require the preparation of a strategic masterplan demonstrating how the developments could: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>provide a mix of flexible and adaptable units that would enable future reoccupation by a range of town centre uses, as well a mix of accommodation to increase the town centre's resident population;</li> <li>strategically target a mix of retail, food and beverage, and leisure operators, including recognition and assessment of the impact of any potential overlap of catchments for leisure uses;</li> <li>demonstrate consideration of the inclusion of community facilities, including the potential for a primary care/health hub;</li> <li>improve pedestrian and active travel permeability through the site and surrounding area, such as introducing street patterns to increase legibility and linkages across the centre;</li> <li>support the ongoing vitality of the town centre by increasing potential for visitors and footfall, including the promotion of active travel to the centre; and</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<p>NHDC (as Local Planning Authority (LPA) development management)</p> <p>Future development partners</p>

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– ensure any scheme facilitates and does not prejudice further sites being brought forward in the future.</li> </ul>	
<p>B</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Land use and retail</li> </ul>	Repurposing of vacant units	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Through the Council's <b>development management role</b> in the planning system, the Council will seek to address higher levels of vacancy by giving positive weight to the repurposing of vacant units by uses that contribute to the vitality and viability of the centre as a material benefit to be weighed against limited loss of floorspace or limited harm to heritage assets in the determination of planning applications.</li> </ul>	<p>NHDC (as Local Planning Authority (LPA) development management)</p> <p>Landowners</p> <p>Future development partners</p> <p>Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation</p>
<p>C</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Land use and retail</li> <li>• Community</li> </ul>	The Wynd	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Through the Council's <b>development management role</b> in the planning system, the Council will give positive weight to new uses and formats (including non-main town centre uses) in the Wynd where it can be demonstrated that they would contribute to the character of the street (to be weighed against any loss of main town centre uses and floorspace).</li> </ul>	<p>NHDC (as Local Planning Authority (LPA) development management)</p>
<p>D</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Land use and retail</li> <li>• Community</li> </ul>	Evening economy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Through the Council's <b>development management role</b> in the planning system, the Council will give positive weight to innovative commercial uses that contribute to the nighttime economy, particularly options for young people, when supported by evidence of viability, long-term vacancies, preventing breaks in active frontages, resolving historic amenity issues (e.g. noise, unpleasant odours, or anti-social behaviour), and the impact on the nature and character of the retail frontages.</li> </ul>	<p>NHDC (as Local Planning Authority (LPA) development management)</p> <p>Love Letchworth Business Improvement District (BID)</p> <p>Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation</p>

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Through the Council's <b>development management role</b> in the planning system, the Council will give positive weight to planning applications for amendments to operating hours to support an evening economy where supported by evidence that it will not lead to unacceptable adverse amenity issues.</li> <li>Collaborate with the Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation, alongside the BID, to build on the Letchworth Culture Strategy 'Create the Future' to incorporate the evening economy. This will include identifying funding sources and future joint bidding opportunities to support potential pilot schemes and the roll-out of extended operating hours as part of a wider evening economy strategy.</li> </ul>	
<p>E</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Transport, access and movement</li> </ul>	Connectivity and links to Broadway Gardens and Howard Park	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Develop and deliver a joint public realm, connectivity and wayfinding strategy taking forward the recommendations of the Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan (LCWIP). For Letchworth: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Taking account of the findings and recommendations of the Places &amp; People 'Town Centre Access Review' and 'Placemaking Plan' to develop viability and costings to deliver key priorities identified, including orientation and signage improvements at Letchworth Station and Broadway Gardens.</li> <li>Progress the recommendations of the LCWIP for the development of a segregated carriageway facility for cyclists around Broadway Gardens, on Bridge Road, Station Place and Station Road.</li> <li>Identify funding sources, future joint bidding opportunities, and requests</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<p>NHDC</p> <p>HCC</p> <p>Love Letchworth Business Improvement District (BID)</p> <p>Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation</p>

		for planning obligations for relevant developments for financial contributions to wayfinding, pedestrian and cycling routes and public realm investments between the town centre and the surrounding open space and gardens.	
<p>F</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Transport, access and movement</li> </ul>	Station forecourt	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In collaboration with HCC, engage with Network Rail to progress the redevelopment of the Station forecourt as a key gateway into Letchworth, building on existing design and funding for the redevelopment of existing areas of parking and vegetation to improve access and visual links into the centre.</li> </ul>	<p>HCC NHDC Network Rail Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation</p>

## 3C: Royston

Further information on Royston town centre is found in Appendix 3C: Royston Town Centre Evidence Notes.

### Identity

Royston has a rich heritage dating back to the 12th century, with surrounding green open spaces and town centre streets with a variety of cafes and restaurants offering a diverse mix of food and drink. Royston is distinctive through its historic qualities of the town centre, such as its medieval street layout, market places and sites of archaeological and historic interests. An outstanding feature of Royston town centre is its compact size and streets, namely, King Street and High Street, lined with historic shop fronts. Leaning into the rich heritage, the Royston Town Trail has 31 marked stops throughout the centre detailing medieval and cultural buildings of interest.

Royston is smaller than Hitchin and Letchworth and primarily serves the day-to-day shopping, food, beverage, and service needs of local residents. Its town centre is located in the northeast of North Herts, southwest of Cambridge; it is approximately 10 miles away from the Hitchin-Letchworth-Baldock grouping, and thus, plays an important service role for many of the surrounding villages in both Hertfordshire and Cambridgeshire. There is a large employment estate to the north of the town, Royston Gateway Retail Park and Industrial Estate.

In recent years, the expansion of out-of-town retail at Royston Gateway has developed into a significant draw to the area, bringing visitors from a catchment extending north into Cambridgeshire. However, Royston Gateway is not currently well linked to the town centre, which provides a longer-term opportunity to develop a cohesive wider offer.

In 2022, Royston became a Sustainable Travel Town, and as such, prioritises measures to improve public transport, walking and cycling. Royston Railway Station approximately half a mile north of the town centre and is accessed on foot via narrow pedestrian paths along Kneesworth Street which carries high levels of traffic.

### Vision

Royston will have a thriving town centre with a strong sense of identity marked by a clearly identifiable and vibrant 'heart' by tapping into its distinct character marked by rich heritage, medieval layout and a diverse mix of food and drink offerings. The centre features cultural attractions including Royston Cave, Royston Museum, Priory Memorial Gardens, and Royston Town Trail that offer a key opportunity for further economic and cultural growth. The town centre will encourage sustainable travel and serve its local community as a welcoming place that is a pleasure to live in, work in and visit.

## SWOT Analysis

### *Summary of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats*

#### **Strengths**

1. The centre serves the day-to-day service needs of residents.
2. The centre is accessible by a choice of modes of transport other than the car, with bus stops and a railway station located close to the centre, supporting a high proportion of trips by walking.
3. Access by car is served by convenient car parks located within and around to the main shopping area.
4. There is a small but interesting range of independent specialist retailers.
5. There is a good selection of pubs and restaurants that strengthen the evening economy.
6. The centre has a relatively low proportion of vacant units compared to both the District and UK averages, showing a healthy level of market demand.
7. Royston Town Council offices are located immediately adjacent to the town centre, providing access to key administrative functions as well as a draw to the centre.
8. The centre features a number of distinct cultural attractions within and in close proximity to the town centre, including Royston Cave, Royston Museum, Priory Memorial Gardens, and Royston Town Trail.
9. Royston features a popular market in the town centre, operating on Wednesdays and Saturdays.

#### **Weaknesses**

10. The closure of the Morrisons town centre food store has reduced the food and grocery offer and an important anchor store for the centre has been lost.
11. Premises in Royston are generally small which may be less attractive to potential new occupiers looking for more modern premises. The centre has a limited number of larger retail units to accommodate national multiple retailers.
12. The Angel Pavement shopping mall features a number of vacancies but is dated and the design is relatively constrained reducing the attractiveness of the units for new occupiers.
13. Many of the pavements in the peripheral parts of the centre are narrow which causes congestion and vehicular and pedestrian conflict.
14. The opportunity to expand and improve the market is constrained by the existing location and infrastructure, including limited pedestrian access.
15. Although the train station is within a reasonable walking distance from the heart of the town centre, the trip is along narrow pedestrian paths, inactive frontages and with little buffer to vehicular traffic.
16. A number of key retailers including Tesco, Aldi M&S and Costa have located to peripheral locations on the bypass and northern fringe of the centre, drawing spending from the core centre.

17. The main employment area is located to the north of the town, closer to the Royston Gateway Retail Park, limiting the attractiveness of the town centre and the amount of lunchtime / after work spending.

## **Opportunities**

18. Royston Town Centre benefits from a local customer base, and local residents need to travel large distances to reach alternative facilities. Population and expenditure generated by this customer base is expected to grow in the future, which should provide opportunities to improve the range and choice of shops and services in the town.
19. The Corn Exchange is an attractive destination within the centre with key heritage traits, featuring a variety of small specialist independent shops and the potential to offer a range of town centre services building on the popularity of the existing offer.
20. Royston Town Centre is closely linked by public transport to Cambridge and intervening villages (such as Melbourn, Shepreth etc.) and has the potential to benefit from increased spending from planned strategic housing growth around Cambridge and South Cambridgeshire.
21. Royston Town Centre is dominated by independent traders, which could benefit from planning policy support for growth and opportunities for diversification through potential amalgamation, subdivision and investment in existing units.
22. Both the Royston Gateway Retail Park and Industrial Estate attract different users that could be drawn into Royston town centre for complementary activities.

## **Threats**

23. The recent loss of the Morrisons from the town centre further reduces the number of national multiple retailers and the convenience goods shopping draw of the centre (as a distinct destination from Royston Gateway).
24. The potential for further edge-of-town / out of centre retail development at Royston Gateway (given the limited town centre opportunities) would draw further trade from the town centre.



## Key Priorities – Royston Town Centre

Theme	Priority areas	Actions / Planning considerations	Responsibility
<p>A</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Land use and retail</li> <li>Community</li> </ul>	Royston's key assets	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Work with the Town Council and BID to establish a joint marketing strategy for the Royston Cave, Royston Museum, Priory Memorial Gardens, and Royston Town Trail to encourage visitors to the town centre.</li> <li>Building on the Council's Economic Strategy, collaborate with the BID, Royston Town Council and other stakeholders to support the establishment of a Royston focussed Destination Management Organization (DMO) to promote leisure activities and attractions in and around Royston.</li> </ul>	<p>NHDC</p> <p>Royston Town Council</p> <p>Royston First Business Improvement District (BID)</p>
<p>B</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Land use and retail</li> </ul>	Growth and evolution of independent and speciality operators, protecting their contribution to Royston's character	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Through the Council's <b>development management role</b> in the planning system, the Council will recognise the benefits of the viability of existing operators that contribute to the vitality and viability of the centre and give positive weight to applications for the amalgamation, subdivision and investment in existing units to be weighed against limited loss of floorspace or less than substantial harm to heritage assets in the determination of planning applications</li> </ul>	<p>NHDC (as Local Planning Authority (LPA) development management)</p> <p>Landowners</p> <p>Future development partners</p>
<p>C</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Transport, access and movement</li> </ul>	Public realm, connectivity and wayfinding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Develop and deliver a joint public realm, connectivity and wayfinding strategy taking forward the recommendations of the Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan (LCWIP). For Royston: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provide signage and facilitate transport links to improve links, legibility and wayfinding routes to and from the key retail areas to the north of Royston and surrounding industrial areas</li> <li>Improve transport links and signage from the town centre to the Priory Memorial Gardens, railway station, bus station,</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<p>NHDC</p> <p>HCC</p> <p>Royston Town Council</p> <p>Royston BID</p>

		<p>Royston Cave, Royston Museum, Therfield Heath, Royston Gateway Retail Park, and other destinations with a focus on visitors from South Cambridgeshire</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Progress LCWIP recommendations, in particular to facilitate north and south cycle movements.</li> </ul>	
<p>D</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Land use and retail</li> <li>• Community</li> </ul>	Royston Market	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Encourage Royston Town Council to undertake a study to identify the demand and opportunities to expand and enhance the existing market offering, including the potential for addition pitches and a greater range of operating hours and days</li> <li>• Collaborate with the BID and the Town Council to identify and apply funding sources to support expansion and promotion of the market.</li> </ul>	<p>NHDC Royston Town Council</p>

## 3D: Baldock

Further information on Baldock town centre is found in Appendix 3D: Hitchin Town Centre Evidence Notes.

### Identity

Baldock is the smallest town centre in North Herts and is located to the east of Letchworth. The town centre provides a mix of independent specialist retailers, food and beverage outlets and service businesses alongside a historic open market that operates every Wednesday.

Baldock town centre has a strong local identity with a thriving cafe and pub culture, which takes full advantage of the wide High Street and its refined old buildings. Baldock's strength lies with its specialist, independent retailers and service business sector which make a valuable contribution to the local economy and community. Combined, the built environment and town identity provides a pleasant social centre for residents and visitors to interact.

The town centre has retained its traditional market town character with the historic core containing fine architecture from the medieval and Georgian periods. St. Mary's Church, a Grade I Listed Building, lies in the northern part of the town centre and is surrounded by historic and more recent residential areas. The town centre is designated a Conservation Area and contains a mix of uses with town houses, inns and commercial buildings.

Since the completion of the A505 bypass, opportunities exist to promote a more vibrant and sustainable town centre, a social centre for residents as identified in the North Hertfordshire Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan (LCWIP). Moreover, the Tesco Extra – located on the periphery of the town centre – attracts customers from neighbouring villages and towns, as well as locals but would benefit from better links to the town centre.

Looking forward, significant residential development surrounding Baldock town centre will likely increase town centre footfall and demand; the Growing Baldock scheme is planned to provide an additional 3,000 homes.

### Vision

Baldock will maintain and maximise its town centre's strengths, namely, its historical market context, network of pedestrian paths, leafy green features, and local identity for cafe culture – by enhancing its attractive, safe, accessible, and lively town centre that incentivises investment for the local community and visitors to work, live and relax. Significant growth surrounding Baldock will provide a vibrant new resident and working population to visit and spend in the centre.

## SWOT Analysis

### *Summary of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats*

#### **Strengths**

1. Baldock is an attractive historic market town with period buildings and a pleasant environment. The centre has a wide and attractive tree lined High Street and a high-quality public realm.
2. The town centre is relatively compact, easy to navigate and generally accessible. The pavements are relatively wide and well maintained.
3. The shop vacancy rate is below the District and UK averages, and this has not increased significantly since 2015.
4. The centre has a strong presence of small independent outlets and primarily serves the day-to-day shopping and service needs of local residents.
5. There is adequate on-street parking provided within the centre and off-street parking at the Tesco Extra store and the Twitchell car park.
6. Baldock has a well-established evening economy with a wide selection of restaurants, pubs and bars for a centre of its size. The town centre has a higher-than-average proportion of food and beverage outlets.
7. Following the completion of the A505 Baldock bypass, the centre has benefited from investment and public realm improvements with recent updates including the replacement of street furniture along High Street and Whitehorse Street.
8. The town hosts a variety of regular community events that 'activate' the High Street ranging from Ecofest to Baldock Beer Festival, as well as the weekly outdoor market on Wednesdays.

#### **Weaknesses**

9. The large Tesco Extra on the edge of the town centre is a significant draw, but there is little evidence of a commensurate level of linked trips into the town centre. This is potentially exacerbated by the poor wayfinding and a lack of clear pedestrian links between Tesco Extra and the centre. As such, Baldock currently draws trade from a relatively small catchment area, similar to Royston, in contrast to Hitchin and Letchworth.
10. The public realm in the core Market Square is directly adjacent to parking bays, which may detract from the quality and experience of the public realm.
11. High volumes of traffic along Hitchin Street, Whitehorse Street, and High Street undermine the ambience of the shopping environment and inhibit pedestrian movements. Additionally, the pedestrian crossings of High Street, which is a busy road, are far apart (240m and 300m). Pedestrians are often observed walking on the road, especially near Simpson Drive.
12. The centre has no banks or building societies.
13. Shopping areas are fragmented with several breaks in the retail frontage by offices and dwellings located on the High Street.

14. Many of the shops are converted dwellings and some are also listed buildings, which can limit interest from potential occupiers that require a specific spatial format.
15. There are a limited range of retail shops, including national multiples. There are few comparison goods retailers within Baldock, well below the District and UK averages.
16. There is no co-ordinating body between local businesses and the District Council, and limited demand for a group (such as a BID) that would facilitate stakeholder engagement and local representation.

## **Opportunities**

17. Shop rental rates are lower in Baldock than the other town centres in North Herts and more affordable for small independent traders.
18. The Local Plan (2011 – 2031) allocates 3,360 homes in Baldock. This could significantly increase the resident population supporting new and existing shops and services within the town centre.
19. The BA10 employment land allocation (19.6ha) could increase spending in the town. This will depend in part on improving cycling and walking connectivity between the industrial/employment land and the town centre.
20. The Growing Baldock development will provide a greater critical mass of businesses and commercial activity within the town, attracting a wider variety of retail and leisure operators.
21. If more of the customers drawn to the Tesco Extra, some of whom are from outside the district, could be attracted to other shops and services in the town centre, that would boost the vitality and viability of the town centre. This depends in part on improving pedestrian routes and signage through the memorial gardens from Tesco to the High Street.
22. The transport strategy for Growing Baldock redirects through traffic away from the centre to A505/A1(M)/Letchworth Gate. This provides an opportunity to address east-to-west traffic on Hitchin Road/Whitehorse Road that detract from the centre, as well as to provide an additional pedestrian crossing on High Street (as recommended by the LCWIP).
23. Baldock town centre is dominated by independent traders, which could benefit from planning policy support for growth and opportunities for diversification through potential amalgamation, subdivision and investment in existing units.

## **Threats**

24. Since 2015, the number of comparison goods shops has decreased significantly. The continuation of this trend could undermine the centre's attraction as a shopping, food and beverage destination.
25. Whilst Growing Baldock will increase the resident population within the town's catchment, the edge of centre Tesco Extra store provides an extensive range of food and non-food goods, which may directly attract the new spending, reducing the potential spending available to new and existing facilities in the town centre.
26. The increase in spending and activity generated by the Growing Baldock development may be lost by the limited opportunities/vacant units for existing businesses to expand or relocate within the town centre.

27. Failure to appropriately manage, monitor and influence the Growing Baldock development may result in an adverse impact on the town centre in terms of loss of vitality or footfall, increased traffic etc. if the emerging residents and workers are drawn to alternative destinations.

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## **Key Priorities – Baldock Town Centre**

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Priority areas</b>	<b>Actions / Planning considerations</b>	<b>Responsibility</b>
<b>A</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Land use and retail</li> <li>Built environment</li> </ul>	Growth and evolution of independent and speciality operators, protecting their contribution to Baldock's character	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Through the Council's <b>development management role</b> in the planning system, the Council will:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>recognise the benefits of the viability of existing operators that contribute to the vitality and viability of the centre through amalgamation and subdivision of units, and investment in existing town centre facilities as a material benefit to be weighed against limited loss of floorspace or less than substantial harm to heritage assets in the determination of planning applications.</li> <li>give positive weight to new uses and formats (including non-main town centre uses) where it can be demonstrated that they would contribute to the character of the street (to be weighed against any loss of main town centre uses and floorspace).</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	NHDC (as Local Planning Authority (LPA) development management)  Existing and future operators Landowners Developers
<b>B</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Built environment</li> <li>Transport, access and movement</li> </ul>	Connectivity and wayfinding as the wider centre grows	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Develop and deliver a joint public realm, connectivity and wayfinding strategy taking forward the recommendations of the Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan (LCWIP). For Baldock:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Growing Baldock residential-led development should support new residents access to the town centre via cycling and pedestrian routes, car, and public transport in accordance with the approved masterplan. This will include the redesign of Station Road / Icknield Way junction and additional cycle</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	NHDC HCC Future development partners

		<p>routes, and overall improvements to Whitehorse Street, amongst others;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– links to new employment floorspace at Local Plan Allocation Policy BA10 including development of a new access from Royston Road alongside additional signage and access routes to draw workers into the town centre; and</li> <li>– improvements to pedestrian links between Tesco Extra and Baldock Town Centre to incentivise and support linked trips.</li> </ul>	
<p>C</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Land use and retail</li> <li>• Community</li> </ul>	Monitoring of town centre service provision and infrastructure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Council will request funding from development such as Growing Baldock to support the Council's monitoring of the mix of uses and services within and surrounding Baldock Town Centre including main town centre uses, community administrative and medical facilities in order to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– identify and address any deficiencies through the loss of existing services and/or capacity as a direct result of the planned increases in residential population, visitors and employees; and</li> <li>– build-up an evidence base to support intervention through additional allocations, funding bids, or marketing initiatives.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<p>NHDC</p> <p>Future development partners</p>
<p>D</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Land use and retail</li> </ul>	Capture benefits of planned growth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Through the Council's <b>development management role</b> in the planning system, the Council will require developments in and surrounding the town centre, such as Growing Baldock to enter into planning obligations for financial contributions to deliver the actions and town centre priorities (as well as those within the approved masterplan, LCWIP amongst others) to</li> </ul>	<p>NHDC (as Local Planning Authority (LPA) development management)</p> <p>Future development partners</p>



		mitigate the impact of otherwise unacceptable developments to make them acceptable in planning terms.	
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### 3E: Summary of priority areas

Hitchin	Letchworth	Royston	Baldock
Churchgate Regeneration Zone	Town centre development opportunities and allocations (Garden Square Shopping Centre and Arena Parade)	Royston's key assets	Growth and evolution of independent and speciality operators, protecting their contribution to Baldock's character
Public realm, connectivity and wayfinding	Repurposing of vacant units	Growth and evolution of independent and speciality operators, protecting their contribution to Royston's character	Connectivity and wayfinding as the wider centre grows
Cultural economy strategy	The Wynd	Public realm, connectivity and wayfinding	Monitoring of town centre service provision and infrastructure
Hitchin as a key sustainable transport hub	Evening economy	Royston Market	Capture benefits of planned growth
	Connectivity and links to Broadway Gardens and Howard Park		
	Station forecourt		

# Part 4: Further Council Actions and Funding Opportunities

## 4A: Further Council Actions

The Towns Centres Strategy has identified a series of cross-cutting planning-based thematic policies to guide development, Council intervention and investment proposals. The Strategy adopts a place-based approach to identifying key investment priorities, tailored to the needs of each individual town centre to support vitality and viability throughout the district.

The Council should look to support, protect and enhance long-term viability and vitality of town centres. The effective delivery of the Strategy will require the Council to work closely with several partners and stakeholders.

Set out below are recommendations for Council-led priorities for action across each of the town centres.

Gauging the support of key identified partners and stakeholders through the formal consultation process of the Strategy will be important in terms of delivering the identified priorities for each of the town centres and the recommended further actions. This will inform an action-oriented delivery plan in the final version that can be subject to regular review and update.

### Land use and retail

1. The Council will incorporate the findings and recommendations for new policies from the North Hertfordshire Town Centres & Retail Study (2024, or any subsequent updates) when preparing the emerging Local Plan Update. The recommendations are reproduced at Appendix A of this document.
2. The Council will continue to foster engagement and partnerships with relevant town centre stakeholder groups including Royston Town Council, Visit Hitchin BID, Love Letchworth BID, Royston First BID, and the Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation (amongst others). The Council will support the potential to diversify commercial uses in vacant units, and further boost footfall and dwell time, including through promotion and marketing efforts.
3. The Council will explore opportunities to facilitate community programming and spaces for recreation across open and green spaces in and surrounding town centres.
4. The Council will implement the Economic Strategy for North Hertfordshire to build a strong, resilient and sustainable local economy that will provide a critical mass of workers, residents, and commercial activity within the town centres.

### Built environment

5. In accordance with Local Plan Policy SP9 and Guidance Note 1, the Council will require 'significant developments', including those within town centres, to be subject to a proportionate Strategic Masterplan exercise.
6. In accordance with Local Plan Policy D1, the Council will:

- a encourage high density development in town centres that incorporate a mix of commercial uses on the ground floor, with residential or commercial above.
- b progress and encourage enhancements to the public realm or new developments that ensure that the character and high quality of the historic fabric is maintained and thematically linked to the town centre enhancements.
- c preserve the historic layout and retain the width of the streets across town centres, with any exceptions to be suitably justified. The towns' pedestrian permeability, achieved through a network of footpaths, should be protected and enhanced.
- d ensure that new developments are complementary, rather than directly copying or competing with historic styles, with scope for innovation allowing the town centre to evolve. They should enhance the existing fabric through similar materials and sympathetic designs, scale, height, massing and proportions.

## **Transport, access and movement**

- 7. The Council will work with partners to develop and deliver a joint public realm, connectivity and wayfinding strategy and delivery plan for the four towns, building on Hertfordshire County Council's Active Travel funded work in Stevenage Town Centre.
- 8. Review the Council's Parking Strategy to complement planned improvements in sustainable travel options. This could be by setting parking tariffs to encourage greater use of car parks outside the town centre boundary and reduce the amount of traffic circulating in town centres.
- 9. The Council, in partnership with Hertfordshire County Council, will seek developer contributions and apply for, or support other bodies' applications for, grant funding to support sustainable transport infrastructure and services, including to:
  - a Appoint a transport project officer to deliver the recommendations of the Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan (LCWIP), including measures and schemes that complement the Plan's priorities.
  - b Reduce through-traffic in all towns to reduce congestion (in particular on bus routes), increase safety and space for people walking and cycling, and improve air quality for residents and visitors.
  - c Reduce traffic speeds where these pose a danger or deterrent to people walking or cycling.
  - d Modify junctions where traffic speeds or volumes pose a danger or deterrent to people walking or cycling, in particular those with mobility or sensory impairments.
  - e Increase the frequency and operating hours of bus services within and into all towns.
  - f Invite and support operators of bike/e-scooter rental schemes and car clubs into all towns.
  - g Promote public and shared transport services, including carpooling/ridesharing, to employers, education providers, leisure and sports centres, tourist attractions and information providers, etc.
  - h Create, reconfigure, add waiting facilities or otherwise enhance travel/mobility hubs, including existing railway and bus stations, to better integrate sustainable modes of travel – walking,

wheeling (wheelchair, rollator, child buggy, etc), cycling, e-scootering (when and where legal), public and shared transport – and make interchanging more convenient, safe and comfortable.

- i Support technology initiatives to integrate transport services into a single platform for planning, booking and payment options.
- j Review the location and quantity of disabled parking bays to ensure that they adequately match demand.
- k Prioritise buses using smart traffic management (e.g. traffic signals that respond to approaching buses or hold traffic where queues cause least disruption to bus services), bus lanes (provided these do not compromise provision unacceptably for active travel), and bus gates (where access is restricted to buses, other authorised vehicles and cycles).

## **Community**

- 10. The Council through its annual Authority Monitoring Report will record the provision of the community facilities and services within the Primary Shopping Area and town centre boundary to assess any gaps in meeting the needs of the local community.
- 11. The Council will facilitate collaboration between stakeholders and facility providers as appropriate to help meet the needs of the local community.
- 12. The Council's forthcoming Design Code will include advice on permeability and layout that foster a safe environment and deter anti-social behaviour to help guide developers and landowners.
- 13. The Council will expect licencing regulations of commercial retailers, within the Council's control, to deter 'dead frontages' through recommending appropriate hours of operation based on the surrounding mix of uses, proximity to areas of sensitivity (such as schools), delivery needs in comparison to the public realm and noise and waste pollution from the retailer.
- 14. The Council, through partnership working, will:
  - a Promote each of North Herts' town centres to demonstrate their unique character and strengths.
  - b Communicate and market the town centre offers, events and engagements to keep residents and visitors informed and to increase the frequency of their usage of the town centres.
  - c Support stakeholder groups in town centres to strengthen local networks, connections and skills.

## **4B: Funding Opportunities**

In order to ensure that the Council can deliver the ambitions set out within this Strategy, there are several funding and delivery factors that will be integral to the implementation of the identified priorities. This section sets out the potential funding and delivery options that could be leveraged by NHDC.

There are likely to be opportunities for the Council to obtain funding from the Government, building on their previous success with historic funding rounds such as the Growth Area Fund (GAF). This may be

complemented by opportunities for grant funding from third sector or other organisations. Developer contributions from strategic and large developments will be a significant source of funding for all four towns. It may be appropriate in some cases to explore public–private partnerships. A summary of potential private and public sector funding opportunities is provided in more detail in Table 1 below.

Table 1 High-level funding opportunities

Funding Opportunities		Commentary
Public Sector	National	Local Growth Fund Local Mission Fund
		Announced by Government in the Spending Review, awaiting further details. The objectives of these funds align with the priority areas identified in the strategy.
		Heritage Lottery Fund Arts Council England
		Funding to support place-specific heritage and cultural interventions, particularly in Letchworth and Baldock.
		National Wealth Fund
		Blend of public and private financing to aid local authorities with capital to fund projects across priority sectors including transport, creative industries and digital technology.
	Regional	Sub-national / Regional Transport Bodies
		Utilising opportunities from regional authorities and dedicated project officer to secure funding for interventions.
Public Sector		Hertfordshire County Council
		Discretionary funding from the County Council.
	Local	S106 Contributions
Public Sector		Contributions for non-highway town centre improvements and alignment with HCC contributions for transport interventions from the town centre outward. This may consist of ‘Strand 1’ contributions from individual schemes within or adjoining town centres or broader ‘Strand 2’ contributions from developments in the wider area to mitigate cumulative impacts. Collection and spend should be closely co-ordinated to ensure holistic delivery of town centre initiatives.
		Local discretionary funding
Public Sector		From existing capital funding e.g. GAF or discretionary funding through NHDC from council tax or business rate charges. Place-specific funding can also be utilised for targeted investment e.g. the Letchworth Garden City Heritage Fund.

	Business Improvement District (BID) Funding	Leveraging funds raised through the mandatory levy charged to businesses within the BID.
Private Sector	Public Works Loan (PWL)	PWL, now administered by HM Treasury, can be utilised by NHDC to fund capital projects.
	Private Loans/Grants	Use of private equity to wholly or match fund capital projects including the Private Finance Initiative where the project will yield sufficient revenue.
	Local Climate Bonds	Leverage the use of Local Climate Bonds to finance suitable environmental and social impact projects.

## Key considerations for NHDC

Whilst there are a number of potential funding mechanisms, which NHDC can utilise to deliver their strategy, there is both opportunity and risk associated with these mechanisms. The opportunities and risks related to the potential funding opportunities are highlighted below:

### Opportunities

- Although the timing and criteria of Government funding programmes remain uncertain, NHDC can proactively prepare projects to be funding ready. This includes packaging initiatives such as town centre improvements into targeted groups (e.g. walking and cycling infrastructure, wayfinding, and public realm enhancements) to align with specific funding streams.
- The Council should strengthen its capacity and capability to develop high-quality funding applications. Projects should be progressed to a mature stage, supported by a robust evidence base, to enhance the credibility of bids and increase the likelihood of securing funding.
- NHDC benefits from a strong network of stakeholders, which is a key asset for the District. The Council should leverage these relationships to coordinate efforts and facilitate joint funding and delivery of projects. Effective collaboration will help ensure that the distinct priorities of each town centre are addressed.
- Additionally, NHDC should make greater use of national-level resources. For instance, the National Wealth Fund offers support to local authorities by financing capital projects and providing advisory services to help overcome financial barriers.

### Risks

- There is limited transparency in future funding programmes committed by Central Government. These programmes may therefore not align with project timescales and therefore NHDC must develop a clear funding and financing strategy which sets out a series of realistic funding models that deliver the priorities within this strategy.

- Local Government Reform (LGR) will act as both a risk and opportunity. The risk lies in ensuring that the importance of North Hertfordshire town centres are recognised and carried forward to new devolved authorities. LGR also presents an opportunity for additional funding streams through devolved funds, which are more accessible than Central Government funding programmes.

## **4C: Consultation**

The consultation process will help assess the level of support from key partners and stakeholders for the actions set out across the Strategy. Consultation feedback will shape a practical delivery plan for the Council, in order to guide positive development, strengthening the identity, vitality and viability of North Hertfordshire's towns.

# Glossary

## **Use Class A1**

Commercial units/premises previously classed as retail or shop uses, but now part of the new Use Class E.

## **Use Class A2**

Commercial units/premises previously classed as financial or professional services, e.g. banks and building societies, but now part of the new Use Class E.

## **Use Class A3**

Commercial units/premises previously classed as restaurants and cafés, but now part of the new Use Class E.

## **Use Class A4**

Commercial units/premises previously classed as public houses and bars, but now classed as Sui Generis.

## **Use Class A5**

Commercial units/premises previously classed as hot food takeaway outlets, but now classed as Sui Generis.

## **Use Class D2**

Commercial units/premises previously classed as leisure, sport and recreation uses, but now classed as Use Class E, Use Class F.1 or Sui Generis.

## **Class MA**

A new class of permitted development rights allowing certain changes from business and commercial to residential.

## **Convenience goods**

Consumer goods purchased on a regular basis e.g. food/groceries and cleaning materials.

## **Comparison goods**

Durable goods such as clothing, household goods, furniture, DIY and electrical goods.

## **Experian**

A data consultancy widely used for retail and leisure planning information.

## **Food and beverage**

Use Classes A3 food and drink outlets, selling food and drinks consumed away from the home or hot food takeaway food, but not food and grocery items including convenience goods.

## **Goad Plans**



Town centre plans prepared by Experian, which are based on occupier surveys of over 1,300 town centres across the UK.

### **Market share/penetration rate**

The proportion of total consumer expenditure within a given area taken by a particular town centre, destination or shopping/leisure facility. It quantifies its performance against other destinations.

### **Multi-channel shopping**

Products made available to consumers on more than one sales channel, such as ecommerce websites, brick-and-mortar stores, marketplaces, comparison shopping engines, social media platforms, and other online channels.

### **National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF)**

The NPPF sets out the Government's planning policies - economic, environmental and social planning policies - for England and how these should be applied. It provides a framework within which locally-prepared plans can provide for sufficient housing and other development in a sustainable manner.

### **Use Classes Order (UCO)**

A categorisation system within the planning process set out by the Government to label types of property and land based on function.

## **Appendices:**

### **Appendix 1: Reference list and hyperlinks**

### **Appendix 2: Town Centre Policy Direction**

### **Appendix 3: Individual Town Centre Evidence Notes**

Appendix C1: Hitchin Town Centre Evidence Notes

Appendix C2: Letchworth Garden City Town Centre Evidence Notes

Appendix C3: Royston Town Centre Evidence Notes

Appendix C4: Baldock Town Centre Evidence Notes

# Appendix 1: Resource List and Hyperlinks

## Part 1: Town Centre Evidence

### Theme 1: Land use and retail

- [BID Brochure – Hitchin \(Visit Hitchin BID, 2024\)](#)
- [BID Brochure - Letchworth GC \(Love Letchworth BID, 2024\)](#)
- [BID Brochure – Royston \(Royston First BID, 2024\)](#)
- [Baldock Town Centre Recovery & Development Plan \(People & Places, 2022\)](#)
- [Hitchin Town Centre Recovery & Development Plan \(People & Places, 2022\)](#)
- [Letchworth Garden City Town Centre Recovery & Development Plan \(People & Places, 2022\)](#)
- [Royston Town Centre Recovery & Development Plan \(People & Places, 2022\)](#)
- [Town Centre Strategy – Hitchin \(NHDC, 2005\)](#)
- [Town Centre Strategy – Letchworth GC \(NHDC, 2006\)](#)
- [Town Centre Strategy – Royston \(NHDC, 2008\)](#)
- [Town Centre Strategy – Baldock \(NHDC, 2004\)](#)
- [North Hertfordshire Town Centres & Retail Study \(Lichfields, 2024\)](#)
- [Development Contributions SPD \(NHDC, 2023\)](#)
- [North Hertfordshire Economic Strategy \(NHDC, 2025\)](#)

### Theme 2: Built environment

- [Character and Conservation Statements \(NHDC\) Hitchin \(2011\)](#)
- [Character and Conservation Statements \(NHDC\) Letchworth \(2001\)](#)
- [Character and Conservation Statements \(NHDC\) Royston \(2007\)](#)
- [Character and Conservation Statements \(NHDC\) Baldock \(2003\)](#)
- [Design Supplementary Planning Document \(NHDC, 2011\)](#)
- [Sustainability Supplementary Planning Document \(NHDC, 2024\)](#)

### Theme 3: Transport, access and movement

- [An Active Travel Strategy for Hertfordshire \(Hertfordshire County Council, 2024\)](#)
- [Hertfordshire Highways Place & Movement Design Guide \(Hertfordshire County Council, 2024\)](#)
- [Hertfordshire Local Transport Plan \(LTP4\) 2018-2031 Guide \(Hertfordshire County Council, 2018\)](#)
- [Local Cycling Walking Infrastructure Plan \(LCWIP\) \(WSP, 2022\)](#)
- [North Central Growth Transport Plan \(AECOM, 2022\)](#)
- [North Hertfordshire Local Transport Strategy \(Markides Associates, 2017\)](#)
- [North Hertfordshire Parking Strategy 2019 – 2031 \(NHDC, 2019\)](#)
- [Sustainable Travel Town Letchworth GC Outline \(NHDC, 2021\)](#)
- [Sustainable Travel Town Royston Outline \(NHDC, 2021\)](#)
- [Active North Hertfordshire Strategy Report \(SLC, 2023\)](#)
- [Electric Vehicle Strategy \(Hertfordshire County Council, 2022\)](#)
- [North Hertfordshire Infrastructure Delivery Plan \(RS Regeneration, 2018\)](#)
- [Air Quality Strategy, and Air Quality Implementation Plan \(Hertfordshire County Council, 2019\)](#)

#### **Theme 4: Community**

- [North Hertfordshire Sport Provision and Open Space Review & Standards \(NHDC, 2016\)](#)
- [Council Plan 2024-2028 \(NHDC, 2024\)](#)
- [Sustainability Strategy 2025-2030 \(NHC 2025\)](#)
- [Resilient Together Report \(ResilienTogether, 2017\)](#)
- [Green Infrastructure Principles \(Natural England, 2023\)](#)

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# Appendix 2: Town Centre Policy Direction

## Existing Local Plan Town Centre Policy

### **Policy SP4: Town Centres, Local Centres and Community Shops**

The Council will make provision for an appropriate range of retail and service facilities across the District and are committed to protecting the vitality and viability of all centres. We will:

- a) Promote, protect and enhance the provision of shops, financial and professional services, café or restaurants, pubs or drinking establishments or takeaways in the following centres in our retail hierarchy:
  - i. the town centres of Hitchin, Letchworth Garden City, Baldock and Royston;
  - ii. 13 existing local centres consisting of:
    - village centres at Ashwell, Codicote and Knebworth;
    - seven centres in Hitchin;
    - two centres in Letchworth Garden City; and
    - the centre at Great Ashby; and
  - iii. 2 new local centres north of Baldock and East of Luton within the strategic housing sites identified in this Plan;
- b) Support proposals for main town centre uses in these locations where they are appropriate to the size, scale, function, catchment area, historic and architectural character of the centre;
- c) Identify Primary Shopping Frontages within town centres where shops will be expected to concentrate;
- d) To ensure the District's towns maintain their role and market share, make provision for up to 38,100 gross sq.m of additional floorspace over the plan period, comprising shops, café or restaurants, pubs or drinking establishments or takeaways including the re-occupation of vacant floorspace, consisting of:
  - i. 22,500 gross sq.m comparison goods (e.g. clothes, shoes, furniture, carpets);
  - ii. 8,600 gross sq.m convenience (e.g. food, drink, toiletries); and
  - iii. 7,000 gross sq.m food and beverage outlets (e.g. restaurants, takeaways and bars).

38,100 gross sq.m is a district wide retail capacity but it is principally derived from the retail capacity projections for the four town centres, as indicated below:

Years	2016-2021	2021-2026	2026-2031	Totals
Baldock	300	1,600	1,400	3,300
Hitchin	3,800	3,600	3,700	11,100
Letchworth	2,400	3,300	3,500	9,200
Royston	3,200	2,000	1,900	7,100
Strategic Housing Sites	1,500	2,700	2,600	6,800
Other	200	200	200	600
<b>Total</b>	<b>11,400</b>	<b>13,400</b>	<b>13,300</b>	<b>38,100</b>

The three town centres of Baldock, Hitchin and Letchworth have significant overlapping markets, with spend leakage from Letchworth to Hitchin and a lack of physical space at Baldock to accommodate its projected retail capacity. To address the leakage and physical capacity across these three centres the indicative distribution and phasing of provision is as follows:

Years	2016-2021	2021-2026	2026-2031	Totals
Baldock	300	1,600	1,400	3,300
Hitchin	3,800	3,600	3,700	11,100
Letchworth	2,400	3,300	3,500	9,200
Royston	3,200	2,000	1,900	7,100
Strategic Housing Sites	1,500	2,700	2,600	6,800
Other	200	200	200	600
<b>Total</b>	<b>11,400</b>	<b>13,400</b>	<b>13,300</b>	<b>38,100</b>

\*2016 to 2021 projections includes take-up of vacant units and the implementation of commitments.

- e) Prepare and maintain up-to-date town centre strategies to support this approach and / or adapt to change. These will be used to inform the approach to retail at the time of the early review; and;
- f) Support the retention and provision of shops outside of identified centres where they serve a local day-to-day need.

# **Town Centre Policy Recommendations**

*(extract from North Hertfordshire Town Centres and Retail Study 2024)*

## **Meeting North Hertfordshire's needs**

When planning for growth in their town centres, local planning authorities should allocate a range of suitable sites to meet the scale and type of retail development needed. It is important that the needs for retail and other main town centre uses are met in full and not compromised by limited site availability. The combined floorspace projections for retail and food/beverage floorspace in 2026, 2031 and 2036 are summarised and rounded in Tables 8.1 and 8.2.

Table 0.1 Combined retail and food/beverage floorspace requirements (sq.m gross) - cumulative

	Convenience retail (sq.m gross)	Comparison retail (sq.m gross)	Food /beverage (sq.m gross)	Total (sq.m gross)
By 2026	-240	10	870	<b>640</b>
By 2031	-360	180	2,850	<b>2,670</b>
By 2036	-140	390	4,920	<b>5,170</b>

Table 0.2 Combined floorspace requirements by location (sq.m gross) - cumulative

	By 2026	By 2031	By 2036
Hitchin	290	1,180	2,150
Letchworth	160	690	1,350
Baldock	150	550	1,020
Royston	-50	-70	100
Other North Herts	90	320	550
<b>Total</b>	<b>640</b>	<b>2,670</b>	<b>5,170</b>

The early Local Plan review Plan should seek to accommodate for at least ten years and preferably up to 2036. Due to over-lapping shopping catchment areas, there should be potential to redistribute capacity to Letchworth from Hitchin and Baldock. Letchworth has the main concentration of vacant floorspace and the most potential to accommodate growth within the designated centre.

The combined total floorspace capacity projection up to 2036 is 5,170 sq.m gross. Based on a reasonable reduction in shop vacancy rates, reoccupied space could in theory accommodate about three quarters of the projected capacity need up to 2036.

The leisure expenditure projections indicate there may be potential to accommodate an additional 1,700 sq.m gross of commercial leisure and cultural floorspace by 2036, which could include:

- two medium sized health and fitness facilities (about 140 new fitness stations);
- new leisure innovations e.g. trampolines, indoor climbing, escape rooms, virtual sport activities; and
- small scale tourist attractions/cultural facilities.

The development strategy should be flexible to respond to emerging opportunities for new leisure, entertainment and tourist related facilities.

The updated capacity projections suggest there is no pressing requirement to allocate new sites for major retail or leisure development to accommodate projected growth for the next ten years. The priority in the short to medium term will be the reoccupation of vacant shop units. Existing Local Plan allocated sites for mixed use development i.e. HT11, HT12, LG19, LG21 and RY12 and new facilities in strategic housing sites are more than sufficient to accommodate any long-term residual need.

## **Future planning policy**

### **Hierarchy of centres**

Continuing to identify the hierarchy of centres and the centres boundaries in the early Local Plan review is important in terms of:

- ensuring the vitality and viability of town, village and neighbourhood centres is maintained and enhanced as important hubs for the community, through the application of the impact test;
- directing retail and main town centre uses to appropriate accessible and sustainable locations, through the application of the sequential approach to site selection; and
- identifying a viable role and strategy for each centre, based on the health check analysis in this report.

No changes to the existing hierarchy are considered necessary. The network of town, village and neighbourhood centres should be protected and enhanced to ensure appropriate accessibility to important facilities for all sections of the community and to ensure sustainable shopping patterns.

### **Impact and sequential tests**

Local Plan Policy ETC3 and the supporting text clearly set out the sequential and impact tests and are in the most part consistent with the latest NPPF and not affected by the changes to the use classes order. However, the policy wording implies an impact assessment is required for all main town centre uses. Policy ETC3 criterion b) could be amended to “retail and leisure” rather than “town centre” development for consistency with the NPPF.

In relation to the sequential test the supporting text at Local Plan paragraph 5.13 could be expanded to reflect paragraph 92 of the NPPF, which indicates when considering edge-of-centre and out-of-centre sites preference should be given to accessible sites that are well connected to the town centre.

The NPPF minimum threshold of 2,500 sq.m gross continues to be an inappropriate threshold for North Hertfordshire because this scale of development would exceed the five-year retail and food and beverage projections for all centres in the District. The early Local Plan review should continue to adopt lower impact thresholds for retail and leisure uses in Baldock and Royston i.e. 500 sq.m gross. The threshold in Letchworth could also be reduced from 1,000 sq.m gross to 500 sq.m gross, because the floorspace capacity projections are much lower. A lower impact threshold of 1,000 sq.m gross rather than 2,500 sq.m gross could be considered in Hitchin.

All retail and leisure developments above these floorspace thresholds (combined) proposed outside or on the edge of designated town, village and neighbourhood centres should be required to prepare a



proportionate impact assessment, including retail and leisure uses included within mixed use allocations. The level of detail required in the impact assessment will vary case-by-case and it is for the applicant to provide robust justification that their impact assessment is robust, appropriate and proportionate.

As in the adopted Local Plan Policies ETC6 and ETC7 the early Local Plan review should continue to support small scale shops and services within village and neighbourhood centres and outside designated centres, where a particular market and locational requirement has been robustly justified. Both Policy ETC6 and ETC7 should seek to protect valuable local shops and services.

### *Town and local centre boundaries*

The early Local Plan review Plan should continue to define clear boundaries for town, village and neighbourhood centres on the Proposals Map and should remain the focus for retail, leisure and other main town centre uses. The continued need for town centre boundaries, primary and secondary shopping frontages needs to be considered. For example, a separate town centre boundary and secondary shopping frontages is probably unnecessary in Baldock.

The relatively low retail floorspace capacity projections up to 2036, suggest there is no need to extend centre boundaries to accommodate future growth, but the longer term projected under-supply of floorspace implies a significant contraction of centre boundaries is also unnecessary. However, town centre boundaries are relatively widely drawn in most centres and some predominantly residential areas on the periphery of town centres could be removed. The Council should review the centre boundaries and amend as necessary.

### *Controlling the mix of uses*

The policy approach set out in Policies ETC4 and ETC5 could be challenged following recent changes to the Use Classes Order and Permitted Development Rights. The updated floorspace projections do not indicate an overall reduction in Class E main town centre uses is required in North Hertfordshire's town centres. The continued adoption of Article 4 Directions in the four town centres will help to prevent the loss of town centre uses.

The continuation of the policy approaches set out in Policies ETC4 and ETC5 will be undermined and hampered by the UCO/PDR changes. The continued adoption of Article 4 Directions in the four town centres will help to prevent the loss of town centre uses

The early Local Plan review could designate a primary shopping area (PSA) in Hitchin, Letchworth and Royston town centres to manage the mix of uses and protect the vitality and viability of these centres. This PSA should cover the area currently designated as primary shopping frontages. The PSA will be the area where retail uses will be concentrated for the sequential approach and the area from where edge-of-centre sites will be measured. Leisure and other non-retail town centre uses can be focused in the wider town centre area i.e. the area between the PSA and the town centre boundary.

The continued designation of secondary frontages, in addition to a PSA, is probably unnecessary. The designated town centre boundary in Baldock could be adopted to control the mix of uses, rather than a PSA or frontage designations.

Class E uses should be maintained and enhanced in the PSA and development should maintain an active frontage. This approach would replace Policy ETC3. Within other parts of these three town

centres and in Baldock a wider range of main town centre uses including Class E, Sui Generis and Class F could be promoted and protected. This approach would replace Policy ETC4.

Proposals that require planning permission that would result in the loss of these uses at ground floor level in the PSA or wider town centre should only be permitted subject to criteria relating to:

- individual or cumulative impact on neighbouring amenity;
- adverse impact on the vitality and viability of the centre as a whole;
- provision of an active frontage at ground floor level which relates well to the design of the building and to the street-scene and its setting; and
- adequate marketing of the unit for Class E uses in primary frontages or Class E, Sui Generis and Class F uses in other parts of the centre.

In the future and in specific cases, it may be appropriate to consider Article 4 directions to prevent permitted changes of use that could undermine the character or vitality and viability of parts of town centres.

### Future monitoring

The recommendations and projections within this study will assist the Council in reviewing development plan policies over the coming years and to assist future development management decisions. The study provides an overview of the potential need for further retail and leisure development in the medium and long-term up to 2036. Longer-term projections are subject to uncertainty and forecasts will need to be amended to reflect emerging changes, as and when new information becomes available. These uncertainties include the longer-term implications of the Covid-19 and cost of living crisis that will need to be monitored. Longer-term projections up to 2036 should be treated with caution and provide broad guidance only. Projections should be monitored and the floorspace projections rolled forward. The following key assumptions should be updated as necessary:

- population projections;
- local expenditure estimates (information from Experian or other recognised providers);
- growth rate assumptions for expenditure per capita (information from Experian or other recognised data providers);
- the impact of potential increases in home and internet shopping (Experian regularly provides projections for internet shopping and these projections will need to be updated at the same time as expenditure and population figures);
- existing retail floorspace and average turnover to floorspace densities; and
- implemented development within and around the study area.

These key inputs into the retail/leisure capacity assessment can be amended to provide revised capacity projections.

# Appendix 3: Individual Town Centre Evidence Notes

## 3A: Hitchin Town Centre Evidence Notes

- Land use and retail
- Built environment
- Transport, access and movement
- Community

## 3B: Letchworth Garden City Town Centre Evidence Notes

- Land use and retail
- Built environment
- Transport, access and movement
- Community

## 3C: Royston Town Centre Evidence Notes

- Land use and retail
- Built environment
- Transport, access and movement
- Community

## 3D: Baldock Town Centre Evidence Notes

- Land use and retail
- Built environment
- Transport, access and movement
- Community

This appendix is a helpful tool to be read alongside Part 3: Individual Town Centre Strategies, as well as and Part 2B: Guidance Notes, within North Hertfordshire' Town Centres Strategy.

The following sub-sections to Appendix 3 represent evidence related to each town centre, Hitchin, Letchworth Garden City (Letchworth), Royston and Baldock respectively, and across the thematic pillars of the Town Centres Strategy:

- Retail and Land Use,
- Built Environment,
- Transport, access and movement and
- Community.

Links to the relevant supporting documents are listed in Appendix 1.

# Appendix 3A: Hitchin Town Centre Evidence Notes

## Land use and retail

The land uses and town centre health indicators for Hitchin are outlined below relating to the following categories:

- mix of uses,
- vacancy rate and economic vitality,
- boundaries and frontages,
- development allocations,
- leisure,
- Local Needs Index and
- Article 4 Directions.

**Mix of Uses:** There are 346 retail and service units within Hitchin town centre's designated shopping frontages; the mix of uses is set out in **Table 1** below, which is compared with the District and UK averages. Approximately a third of these units are comparison retail, which is just over the District and National average. Falling below the District and National averages, Hitchin has only 10 hot food takeaways.

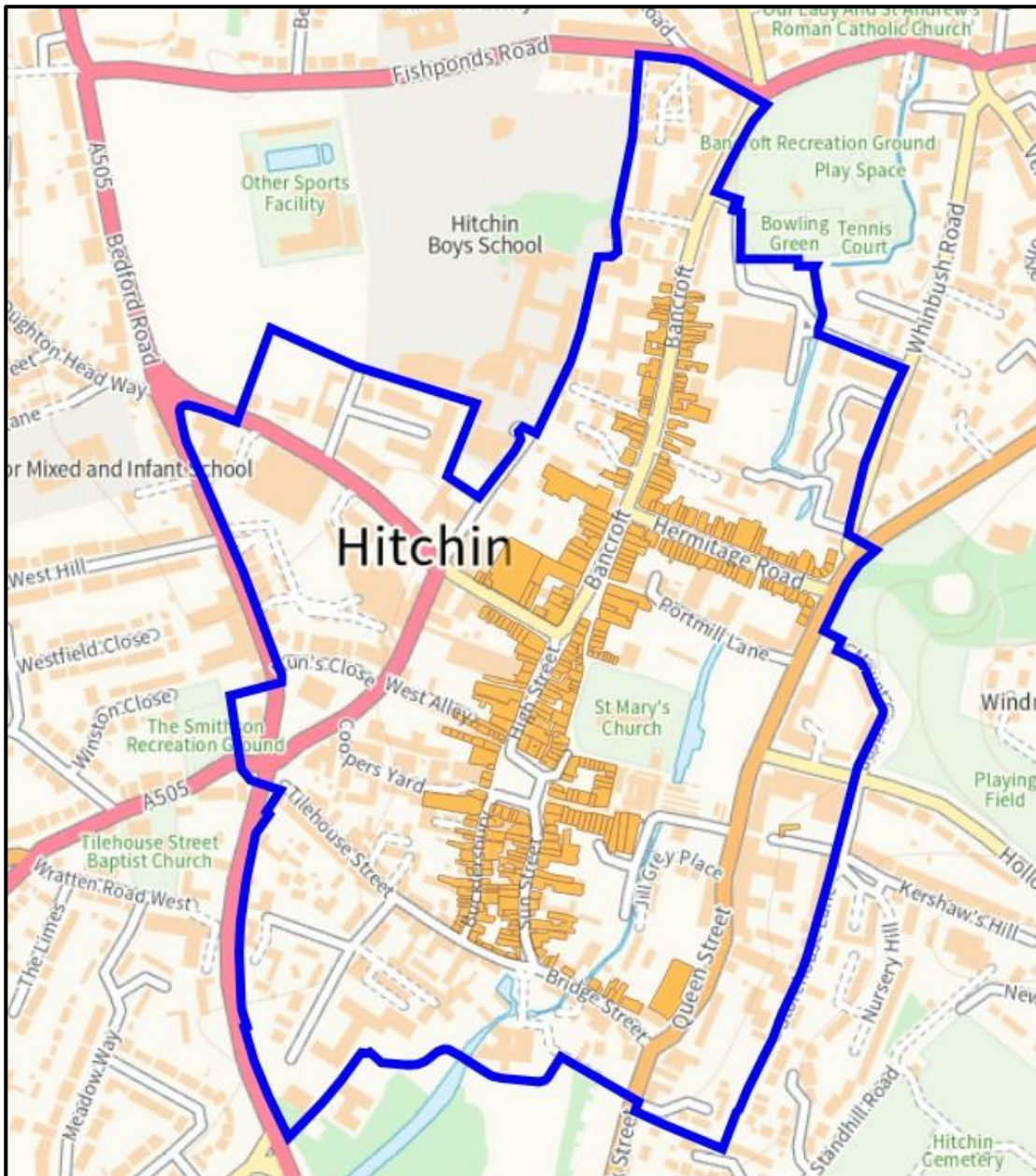
TYPE	# of Units	% of Units	% of Units (District avg.)	% of Units (UK avg.)
Convenience retail	23	6.6	5.6	9.5
Comparison retail	107	30.9	27.8	27.7
Financial/Professional	32	9.2	8.3	8.5
Restaurant/Café	42	12.1	12.8	10.0
Public house/Bar	13	3.8	3.0	4.9
Hot food takeaway	10	2.9	4.1	6.2
Other non-retail service	85	24.6	26.3	19.3
Vacant unit	34	9.8	12.3	13.9
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>346</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>

**Table 1:** Mix of retail and service uses – Hitchin town centre (Town Centres and Retail Study, 2024).

**Vacancy rate and economic vitality:** At 9.8% shop vacancy, Hitchin is below the District and National averages; there were 34 vacant units within the centre at the time of the 2023 land use survey. From 2015 to 2023 the number of vacant units in the town centre increased from 20 units to 34 units. Although Hitchin town centre has experienced the impact of Covid-19 and the cost-of-living crisis, the

vacancy rate remains relatively low compared with other centres. Vacant units vary in size from under 50 square metres to over 1,000 square metres and are relatively evenly spread throughout the centre with no obvious concentrations.

**Boundary and frontages:** The existing town centre boundary for Hitchin can be found in **Figure 1**; notably, town centre boundaries evolve over time as required by the Local Plan updates process. In Hitchin town centre boundary, there are areas that do not actively host commercial or mixed-use development, but rather non-main town centre uses, such as residential use.



**Figure 1:** Hitchin town centre, depicting the current town centre boundary in blue and retail land use in orange (town centre area: 451,274 sq.m).

**Development Allocations:** Based on the Local Plan (2011 – 2031), there are two town centre allocations as mixed-use enhancement opportunity sites in Hitchin.

**HT11 Churchgate & its surrounding area:** This allocation proposes that the current centre is redeveloped to provide 4,000 square metres of additional shop, café, restaurant, pub, drinking establishment or takeaway and other town centre uses at ground floor level, with other main town uses and residential uses in upper or basement areas. The policy requires a concept framework/masterplan to be prepared and provides further guidance on key considerations to be covered.

To help bring this development forward, the Council has acquired the leasehold for the Churchgate Shopping Centre and is marketing the centre and its locational environment as a redevelopment opportunity and is rebranding this allocation as the Churchgate Regeneration Zone (CRZ). The mixed-use policy allocation, HT11 for Churchgate and its surrounding area in the Local Plan (2011 -2031), has supportive text for the redevelopment of this mixed- use site.

Separate to the Town Centres Strategy, the Council’s Enterprise Team has conducted public consultation on this proposed redevelopment site seeking public views. Further information on the CRZ can be found on the Council’s website: [Join the Churchgate Conversation](#).

**HT12 Paynes Park:** This allocation proposes that the current centre is redeveloped to provide 3,000 square metres of additional shop, café, restaurant, pub, drinking establishment or takeaway and other town centre uses at ground floor level, with other main town uses and residential uses in upper or basement areas. The policy requires a concept framework/masterplan, and the policy identifies the key considerations to be covered.

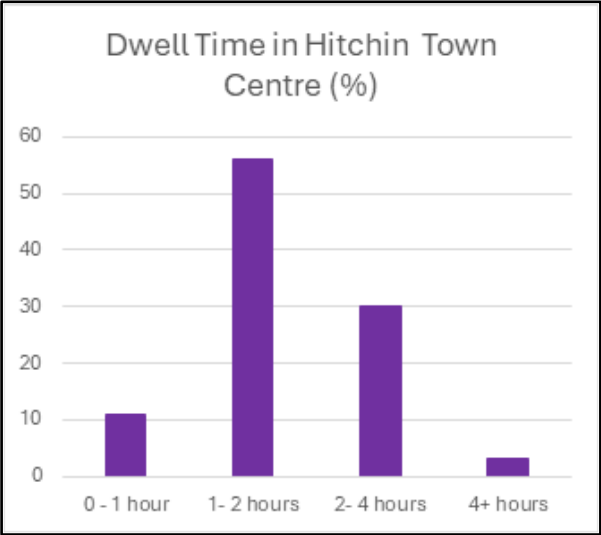
Since the time that Paynes Park was allocated for redevelopment, part of this allocation, known as the former Woolworths building and its car park to the rear, is subject to a Planning Application for the reprovision of retail units and the addition of 44 one-and two- bedroom apartments.

**Leisure:** Informed by the Town Centres and Retail Study, leisure in Hitchin is oriented around food and beverage pastimes, such as frequenting restaurants and pubs, as well as using hair salons, health facilities and non-food shopping. Within the shopping category and compared to the rest of the district’s town centres, visitors report non-food shopping in Hitchin at 10% more, a logical outcome considering this town centre’s robust offer of national and smaller boutique comparison shops. Hitchin also hosts other various leisure experiences in the town centre, such as the North Hertfordshire Museum and British Schools Museum, with recreational lavender fields nearby.

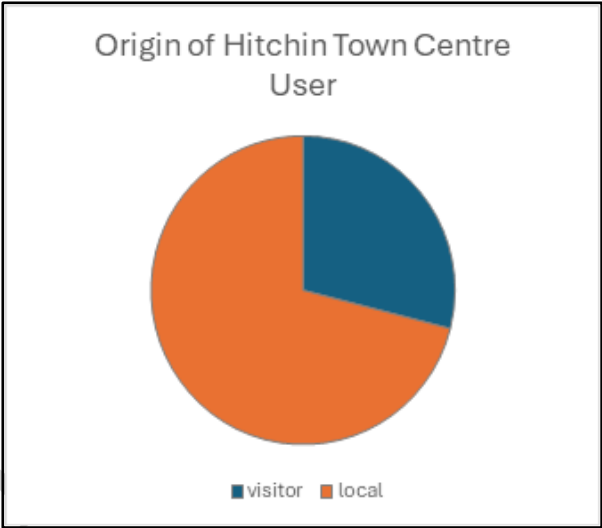
Activity	Hitchin %	Average % across all town centres
Go for walk	0.5	0.9
Cafe/pub/restaurant	57.1	46.8
Leisure activity	8.1	9.9

**Table 2:** Participation in leisure activities by Hitchin town centre users (Town Centres and Retail Study, 2024).

**Visit time:** According to the NEMS household survey (2024), 71% of respondents dwell for more than 1 hour in Hitchin town centre. Hitchin has the highest percentage of visitors that dwell for longer than 1 hour. Compared to the other town centres within North Herts, the user visit duration to the town centre is unique to Hitchin; this is about 20 – 35% more than the other town centres. It is logical that this town’s profile has a longer duration of visits correlated with more ‘out of town’ users, there is a draw to come into Hitchin and make the journey worthwhile.



**Figure 2:** Dwell time for Hitchin town centre users (HUQ, 2023 – 2024).



**Figure 3:** Origin of Hitchin town centre users (People & Places, 2022).

**Local Needs Index:** A standardised Local Needs Index of Hitchin town centre was undertaken in 2024. This exercise judges against 16 types of shops, services or community uses; Hitchin scored 15 out of 16, only lacking a community hall. Although, the community may access this amenity, a community hall, through the presence of St. Mary’s Parish, Hitchin Town Hall and/or the North Herts’ Museum, all of which hold rooms for community uses (such as workshops or events) and are located within the town centre.

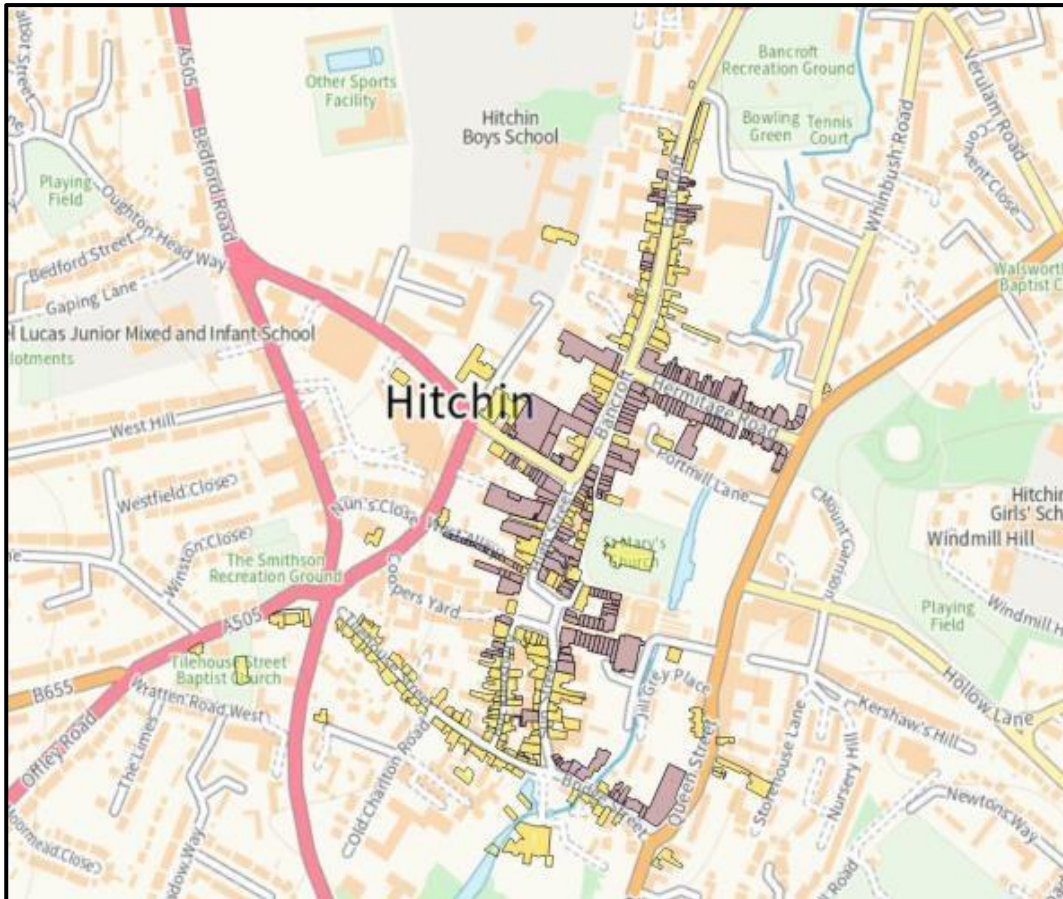
Centre	Hierarchy Classification	Local Needs Index Score (out of 16)
Hitchin	Town Centre	15
Letchworth	Town Centre	16
Royston	Town Centre	14
Baldock	Town Centre	12

**Table 3:** Local Needs Index Summary of North Herts’ town centres (Town Centres and Retail Study, 2024).

**Planning protections - Article 4 Directions and Listed Buildings:** Alongside balancing controls in planning, such as the existing Listing Building designation to protect building heritage and historic integrity, the immediate Article 4 Directions was made to protect the commercial uses in town centres. The Article 4 Directions mandates special controls for planning teams to assess approval for commercial land uses to turn to residential, as this could create a weakening in commercial



opportunities and can also create dead frontages within town centres. The Article 4 Direction applies to the current Primary and Secondary frontage designation in the 2022 Local Plan, and importantly, follows to 2022 Local Plan approach to prioritise main uses in town centres first.



**Figure 4:** Planning protections in Hitchin town centre; Article 4 Directions (purple) protect main town centre uses in town centres first and Listed Buildings (yellow) protect building heritage and historic integrity.

## **Built environment**

The built environmental conditions for Hitchin are outlined below relating to the following categories:

- design and the public realm,
- historic character and
- open and green spaces.

**Design and the public realm:** The historic layout of Hitchin features narrow streets clustered around Market Place adjoining with St Mary's church. Historically, the buildings are a mix of town houses built on narrow burgage plots and for commercial activities. The town centre has evolved over time and will continue to do so, but any changes should respect the overall historic character of Hitchin.



The scale and typology of new buildings should be dictated by the scale and typology of historic buildings. Architecture of new developments should be complementary, rather than directly copying or competing with historic styles. New designs should use materials that compliment historic styles. There should be scope for innovation allowing the town centre to evolve.

Building heights are generally three storeys, although there is a mix of two and three storey buildings which creates interest and variety. As the roofscape in Hitchin town centre varies in pitch and style, flat roofs are considered inappropriate for new development. Higher densities are appropriate within the town centre, as are a mix of uses including residential, retail and commercial.

Vistas and viewpoints are restricted within the town centre due to the curved character of the streets; this creates a sense of anticipation and interest for the user, with important views of St Mary's Church.

As continuous frontages create strong building lines and thus clear enclosures of places, continuous frontages should be retained in any new development, including larger buildings which should reflect plot sizes in their detailing. Moreover, where appropriate, narrow building plots should be maintained. To activate the facades and naturally build in surveillance of the public realm, building frontages should face the street. Blank walls should be modified to create interest in the plinth.

**Historic Character:** Hitchin is one of the oldest continually inhabited towns in the county, and arguably, the historic centre of North Herts. The Hitchin Conservation Area spans beyond the current town centre boundary and contains the entire town centre. There are just under 100 listed buildings in Hitchin town centre which are protected through various listed building designations. A few modern buildings exist throughout the town centre, which arguably detract from the overall historical environmental character. The current pattern of roads and footpaths has significantly influenced the development of the town's layout and further, preserves a network of rights of way over the former medieval open fields.

The relationship of buildings to the spaces in the Hitchin Conservation Area is varied according to historical development and uses within each part of the conservation area.

In the south and west, namely Bucklesburry Street and Sun Street, where the streets are narrow, the buildings are all two or three storeys high and mostly listed and sit on the back edge of the pavement providing a complex and closely contained streetscape of great quality.

Churchgate sits between The Market Place Square and the more modern Hitchin Market. It is also adjacent to St. Mary's Church. This site, including the Market Place Square, is currently under consideration for redevelopment (Churchgate Regeneration Zone) and must respect the surrounding context and town character, such as building heights, density, materiality, design, and views.

St. Mary's Church and churchyard are tucked away behind the Market Place and High Street by narrow pedestrianised lanes (Churchyard and Munts Alley). The grounds sit alongside the River Hiz with scenic banks for users to recreate, and also alongside St. Mary's Car Park. Views to the east of St. Mary's Church (along Queen's Street) detract from the high quality and historic character of the grounds and the town centre.

Hermitage Road includes uniform rows of mixed-use buildings dating back to the early 20th century, with a priority towards commercial activities on the ground floor, and office or residential above. This road includes a clear vantage point up to Windmill Hill.

Compared to the other town centres in the district, Hitchin has more listed buildings in number than Baldock, Letchworth Garden City and Royston town centres combined, but in terms of ratio (non-listed compared to listed buildings) within the town centre, Hitchin has less than Baldock and Royston.

**Open and green spaces:** The town centre contains important public spaces which should be protected and enhanced. The hard character of Market Place contrasts with the soft landscaping to the east of St Mary's church along the banks of the River Hiz. The River Hiz is an important element in the character of Hitchin town centre and its potential for a riverside walk should be fulfilled. Additionally, Priory Park, Windmill Hill and Bancroft Recreation Ground are all close to the town centre and are important open green spaces. It is important to improve connectivity between these spaces and the town centre.

## **Transport, access and movement**

Transport, access and movement conditions for Hitchin are outlined below relating to the following categories:

- access and movement,
- mode of travel
- footfall and
- parking.

**Access and movement:** Hitchin town centre has a strong urban structure resulting in an informal grid of routes. Some of these routes are for both vehicles and pedestrians, although there are a number which are just for pedestrians making Hitchin town centre permeable for people accessing the town centre on foot. However, due to the historic nature of the centre, some pavements and streets are narrow restricting pedestrian movement when congested (i.e. Sun Street and Bucklersbury). From 1993 onwards, the town centre has been partially pedestrianised, and the impact of this intervention can perhaps be traced in user survey results from Hitchin's 2022 Recovery and Development Plan by People & Places: approximately three quarters of respondents felt positively about the "pedestrian access around the town centre", with an addition 24% feeling neutral.

Motor traffic volumes through Hitchin, particularly on the A505 and B656, and large volumes of HGV traffic, in particular on the A505 and Grove Road (leading to the industrial estate), create significant barriers to walking and cycling. The locations that are least supportive for pedestrian uses in and close to the town centre include Cambridge Road railway underbridge, multiple roundabouts on the A505, and major junctions on the B656 (Walsworth Road and Queen Street). Hills around the town centre are also a barrier to cycling, as cycling routes that minimise climbs and avoid steep climbs are preferred.

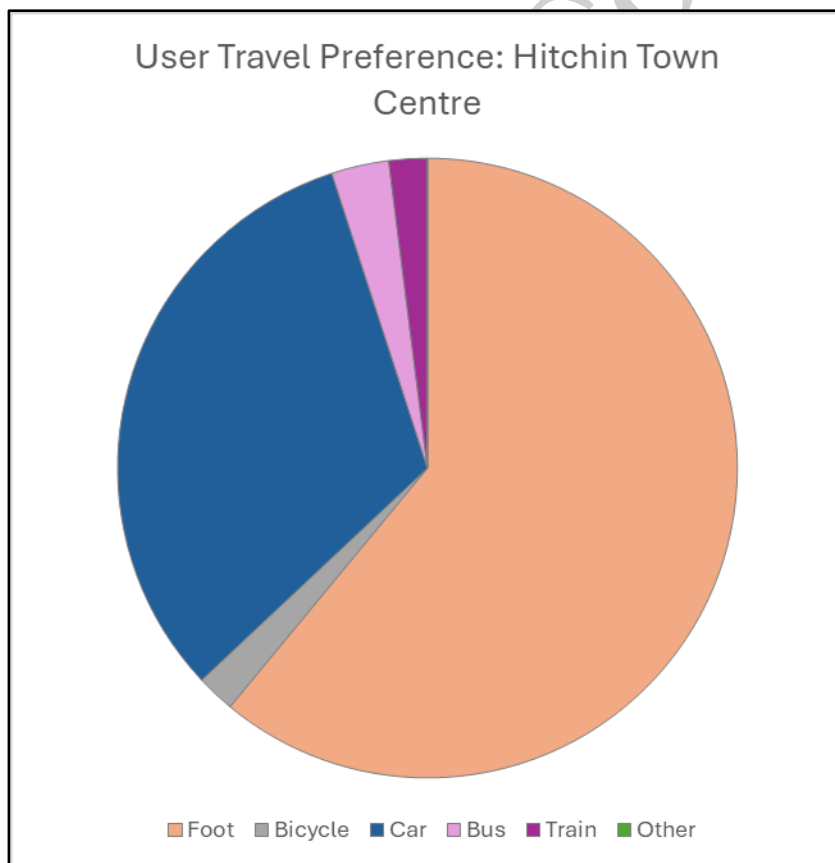
Of relevance to Hitchin town centre, connections that have been identified in the Local Cycling Walking and Infrastructure Plan (LCWIP) to be improved include:

- Hitchin to Baldock via Letchworth Garden City via cycling routes and bus networks,
- Hitchin town centre to the railway station via pedestrian routes, and
- Hitchin town centre to Stevenage via bus networks.

For example, a segregated cycle infrastructure on the route connecting Hitchin to Letchworth to Baldock has been proposed, with lower speed limits for motorised vehicles on respective roads and an improvement in bus provision. Additionally, the LCWIP determined Core Walking Zones (CWZ) to understand trips that can be optimised to increase walkability. Hitchin is considered a CWZ with routes between its town centre and railway station as Key Walking Routes. There are bus stops on Bancroft, Hermitage Road and Queen Street, and bus services link the centre to Bedford, Luton, Shefford, and Welwyn.

**Mode of Travel:** The Hitchin Railway Station is 1.4km from Market Place, a 20-minute walk for most people. As expected, the Household Survey for the Town Centre and Retail Study suggests that few Hitchin town centre users arrive by train. Although there are various bus stops throughout the town centre, there is no bus station. As the bus stops are dispersed around Hermitage Road, Queen Street and Bancroft, interchanging between routes is difficult.

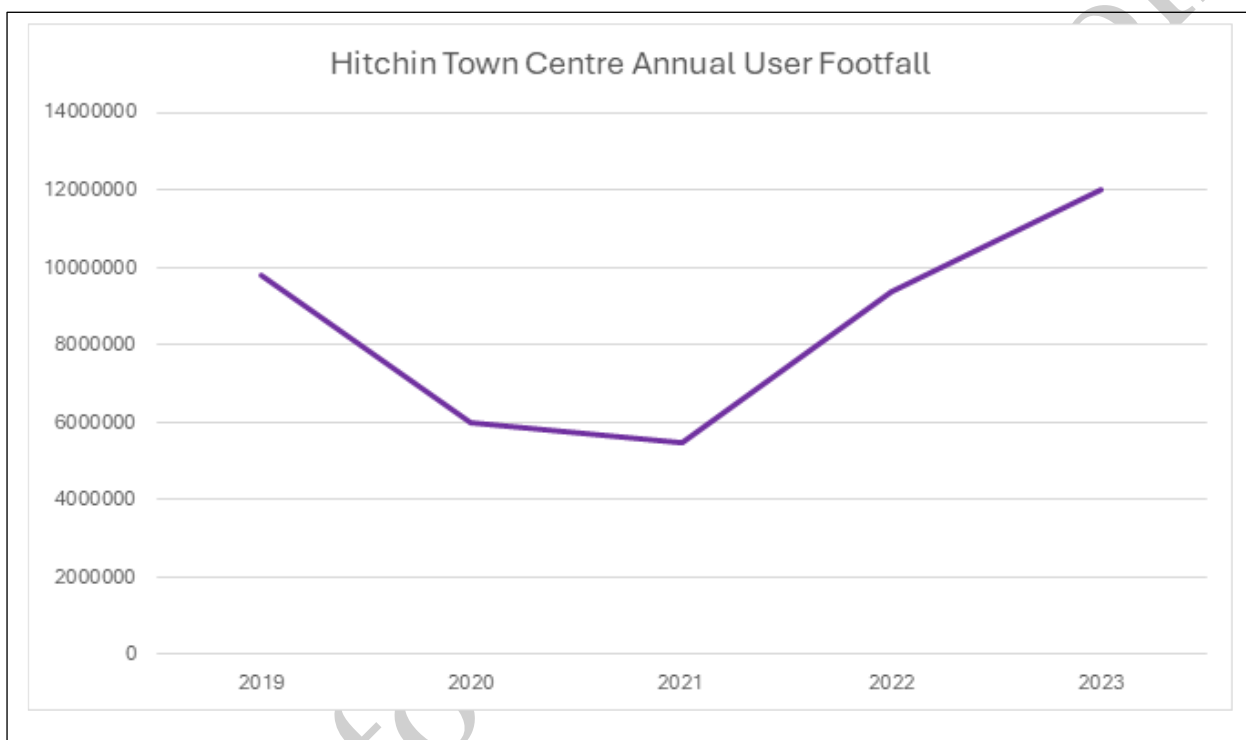
Based on NEMS Household survey, the majority of visitors use the car to reach Hitchin, although this town centre has more walking behaviour compared to the other three town centres. According to the People & Places Recovery Report (2022), 61% Hitchin users reported a preference to travel by foot into the town centre compared to by car (32%). These results indicate that these two studies engaged with different sample populations resulting in different route choice preferences. It can be interpreted that locals are more likely to reach the town centre by foot (who the People & Places Recovery Report engaged with more), while visitors from the wider Study Area reach the town centre by car (who the NEMS Household Study engage with more).



**Figure 5:** User travel preference in Hitchin town centre (People & Places, 2022)

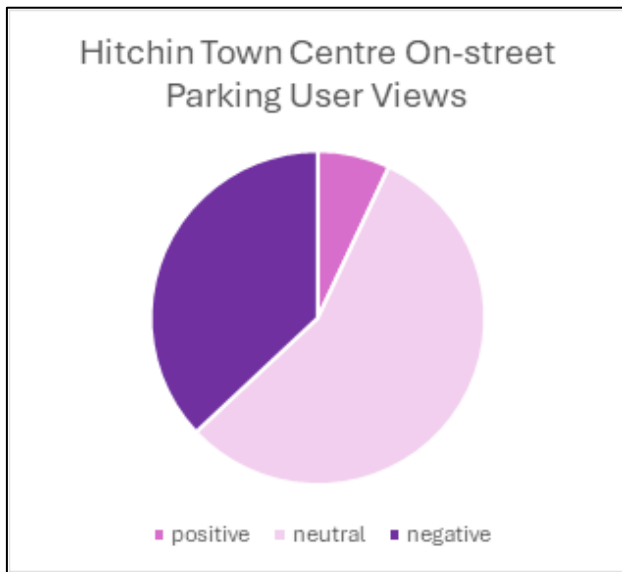
Following Hertfordshire County Council's public consultation on pedestrianisation and travel preferences in Hitchin town centre, both High Street and Market Square are now closed to vehicles during the day, except on Sundays.

**Footfall:** The district's HUQ footfall data indicates that Hitchin town centre has experienced the negative effects of Covid-19 pandemic with a reduced annual footfall from just below 10 million in 2019 to approximately 6 million in 2020 and further to about 5 million in 2021. Likely Recovering from physical isolation measures and businesses temporary closures, the town centre's annual footfall recovered steadily surpassing its pre-covid frequency, to roughly 12 million in 2023.

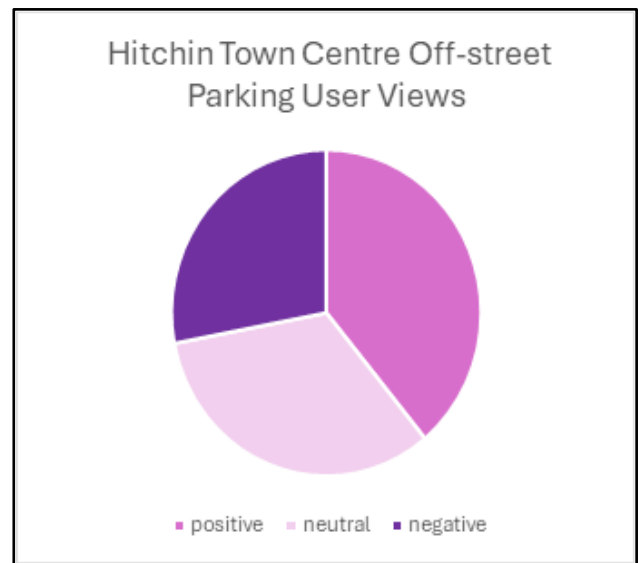


**Figure 6:** Annual footfall in Hitchin Town Centre from 2019 through 2023 (HUQ).

**Parking:** While users report, via the Household Questionnaire and People & Places surveys, a relatively high volume of positive opinions regarding pedestrian access inside the town centre (as well as positive reactions to walking and cycling routes into the town), they also report negative to neutral opinions regarding both on and off-street parking provisions. There is a mix of Council owned and privately owned car parks that are accessible to the main shopping area, but provision is relatively fragmented with some having small capacity and/or located up-hill from the centre. These provide a varied amount of parking in terms of on and off-street, short and long-stay, location, charging periods and price.



**Figure 7:** On-street parking views by Hitchin town centre users. Users lack positive views. (People & Places, 2022).



**Figure 8:** Off-street parking views by Hitchin town centre users. Users are generally split between positive, neutral and negative views. (People & Places, 2022).

## **Community**

Hitchin has a good provision of community facilities, such as the North Hertfordshire Museum and Hitchin Town Hall (both located adjacent to High Street/ Bancroft Road), and various community venues, such as The Block Community Hub, Signing Rooms and St. Mary's Church. The community spaces accommodate a variety of community functions with spaces to hire for external events. Additionally, and linked to promoting the town centre's offer, Visit Hitchin founded in 2009, the town's Business Improvement District (BID), helps to facilitate community culture through programming the Market Square events. Via the North Herts' Communities Partnership Team, Hitchin users are welcomed to monthly Community Forum meetings to present applications for small grassroot grants and hear about important updates, and also Town Drop-ins to express general concerns or questions.

The Hitchin Market is open four days a week and connects a community of market traders invested in raising and maintaining the profile of the town centre to boost the local economy. Moreover, Visit Hitchin hosts over 600 local businesses contributing via a business rates levy to inspire "visitors to the town to stay longer, spend more money and return more frequently." As is set out to be achieved through events, seasonal displays, nighttime security, graffiti removal, online promotion, and business support.

Design-wise, Hitchin's Primary Shopping Area generally follows good design to deter anti-social behaviour using natural surveillance, interactive shop facades, clear lines of sight, and pedestrian paths, although the historic and cosy character of the wider town does foster narrow side streets and routes that do not clearly indicate an end point or how to exit the area. To benefit the community health in Hitchin, and overlapping with both the built environment and accessibility, wayfinding signs would be helpful to indicate clear routes to key amenities throughout the town centre. This will help to facilitate a more pleasant experience with less stress for users and bolster the existing walking culture.

Churchgate lacks pedestrian permeability and good design to invite users to enter, spend time and shop there; there is also a high vacancy rate for tenants in this development, resulting in dead frontages. Directly attached behind the Churchgate shopping centre, the outdoor market has many physical and metal manmade elements that block lines of sight and provide opportunities to hide behind. Arguably, although the path around St. Mary's Churchyard (Churchyard Walk) has vulnerabilities, such as mid-height walls and darker paths at night, in regard to designing out crime, the cosy and historic nature of this path contributes to the town's unique setting.

# Appendix 3B: Letchworth Garden City Town Centre Evidence Notes

## Land use and retail

The land uses and town centre health indicators for Letchworth Garden City (Letchworth) are outlined below relating to the following categories:

- mix of uses,
- vacancy rate and economic vitality,
- boundaries and frontages,
- development allocations,
- leisure,
- visit time,
- Local Needs Index and
- Article 4 Directions.

**Mix of Uses:** There are 244 retail and service units within Letchworth town centre's designated shopping frontages; the mix of uses is set out in **Table 4** below, which is compared with the District and UK averages. Generally, Letchworth has a broad offer with a variety of type of commercial uses, although participants in the Household Survey have indicated a desire for improved quality in the comparison shops. Of the comparison shops, Letchworth has higher than average frequency of charity shops, as well as those that provide books, crafts and hobby materials, but lower than average for shops that sell clothing and footwear. Notably, there is a significant percentage of vacancies at 19.7%, higher than the 13.9% UK average. Of the 244 units, approximately 26% of this is comparison retail, 12% restaurant and 24% other non-retail service (such as hairdressers). Perhaps mirroring the town centre's history of sobriety, Letchworth has 4 pubs making up just 1.6% of retail units; this falls below both the district and the UK averages.

TYPE	# of Units	% of Units	% of Units (District avg.)	% of Units (UK avg.)
Convenience retail	12	4.9	5.6	9.5
Comparison retail	64	26.2	27.8	27.7
Financial/Professional	17	7.0	8.3	8.5
Restaurant/Café	30	12.3	12.8	10.0
Public house/Bar	4	1.6	3.0	4.9
Hot food takeaway	10	4.1	4.1	6.2
Other non-retail service	59	24.2	26.3	19.3
Vacant unit	48	19.7	12.3	13.9
TOTAL	244	100.0	100.0	100.0

**Table 4:** Mix of retail and service uses – Letchworth town centre (Town Centre and Retail Study, 2024).



**Vacancy rate and economic vitality:** There were 48 vacant units within the centre at the time of the Council's 2023 land use survey, equating to a vacancy rate of 19.7%, which is well above both the District and UK averages. Such a high vacancy rate could support distributing a portion of the growth capacity projections, especially for retailers that would service Hitchin and Baldock residents, into Letchworth town centre.

**Boundary and frontages:** The existing town centre boundary for Letchworth can be found in **Figure 9**; notably a significant area that is included within the boundary does not actively host commercial or mixed-use development.



**Figure 9:** Letchworth town centre, depicting the current town centre boundary in blue and retail land use in orange (town centre area: 274,506 sq.m).



**Development Allocations:** Based on the Local Plan (2011 – 2031), there are three town centre allocations as mixed-use enhancement opportunity sites in Letchworth.

**LG19 The Wynd:** This allocation proposes that the current centre is redeveloped to provide 4,500 sq.m of additional shop, café, restaurant, pub, drinking establishment or takeaway and other town centre uses at ground floor level, with other main town uses and residential uses in upper or basement areas.

Since the time that The Wynd was allocated for redevelopment, the landowners and tenants have invested in the area. This investment, including a popular play area, has improved the footfall to the area, vibrancy and quality of the public realm.

**LG20 Gernon Road:** This allocation proposes that the current centre is redeveloped to provide 1,000 square metres of additional shop, café, restaurant, pub, drinking establishment or takeaway and other town centre uses at ground floor level, with other main town uses and residential uses in upper or basement areas.

Since the time that Gernon Road was allocated for redevelopment, the site, excluding the county library, has been redeveloped. The development of homes and an office for Croudace Homes has been completed.

**LG21 Arena Parade:** This allocation proposes that the current centre is redeveloped to provide 5,000 square metres of additional shop, café, restaurant, pub, drinking establishment or takeaway and other town centre uses at ground floor level, with other main town uses and residential uses in upper or basement areas.

Since the time that Arena Parade was allocated for redevelopment, the site has undergone some improvement works. However, the buildings are outdated with the need for improvements and repairs.

**Garden Square Shopping Centre:** Since the adoption of the Local Plan (2011 -2031), this proposed development opportunity has arisen and will be subject to a Planning Performance Agreement, including the preparation of a master plan for the site. Guidance is provided in Part 2 and Part 3 of the Town Centres Strategy.

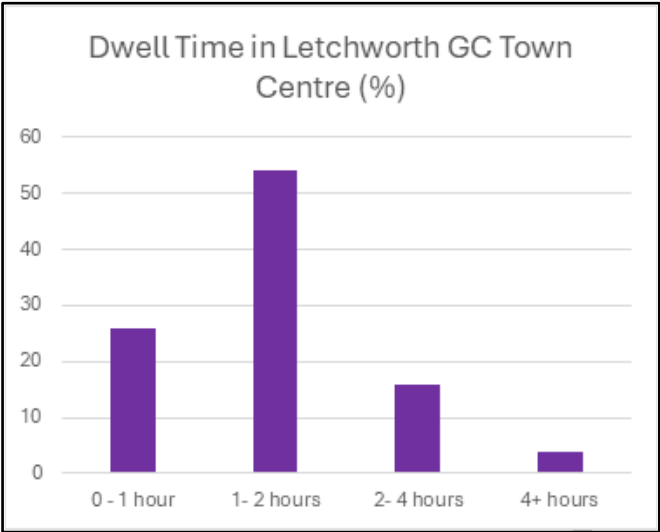
**Leisure:** Letchworth visitors take part in non-food shopping, window shopping and leisure activities more than the combined district average. Compared to other town centres, visitors to Letchworth less frequently visit pubs and restaurants. Interestingly, leisure activities are 18.4%, while the district average is 9.9%. Considering Letchworth's origin as a place for craft, art and innovation, future retail and leisure offer could seek to maintain and support such experiences and artistic activities.

Activity	Letchworth %	Average % across all town centres
Go for walk	0.4	0.9
Cafe/pub/restaurant	43.5	46.8
Leisure activity	18.4	9.9

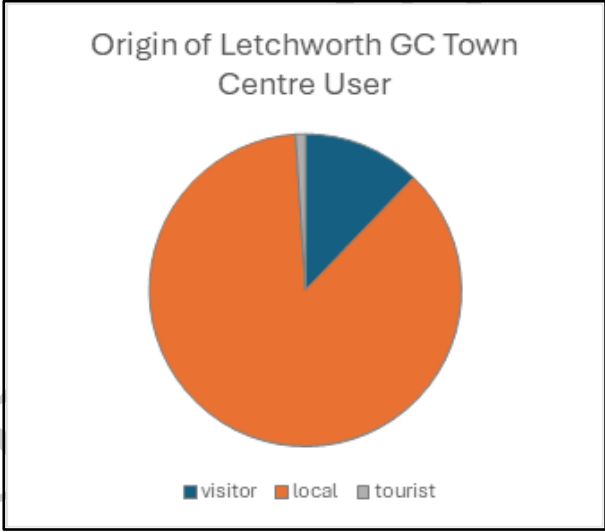
**Table 5:** Participation in leisure activities by Letchworth town centre users (Town Centre and Retail Study, 2024).

**Visit time:** According to the NEMS household telephone survey (2024), 49% of respondents (from the wider region and locals) dwell for more than 1 hour in Letchworth town centre. Letchworth is the second highest town centre for users to dwell for longer than an hour, following behind Hitchin which holds the longest user dwell time.

Similarly, the People & Places Recovery Report (2022) also found that Letchworth was the second highest town centre for dwell time for longer than an hour (74%); this was based on users surveyed from Letchworth. While the percentages for Letchworth vary between surveys, the order remains the same in relation to the other town centres – this indicates Letchworth has maintained its relative status over the years and between users groups, those who live locally or more distant.



**Figure 10:** Dwell time for Letchworth town centre users during one year period 2023 – 2024 (HUQ).



**Figure 11:** Origin of Letchworth GC town centre users (People & Places, 2022).

**Local Needs Index:** A standardised Local Nees Index of Letchworth GC town centre was undertaken in 2024. This exercise judges against 16 types of shops, services or community uses; Letchworth GC scored 16 out of 16, meeting all types of listed services. Letchworth is in an advantageous position to build on a strong and complete mix of essential services to further incentivise visitors to shop, stay and recreate in the town centre.

Centre	Hierarchy Classification	Local Needs Index Score (out of 16)
Hitchin	Town Centre	15
Letchworth	Town Centre	16
Royston	Town Centre	14
Baldock	Town Centre	12

**Table 6:** Local Needs Index Summary of North Herts’ town centres (Town Centre and Retail Study, 2024).

**Planning protections - Article 4 Directions and Listed Buildings:** Alongside balancing controls in planning, such as the existing Listing Building designation to protect building heritage and historic integrity, the immediate Article 4 Directions was made to protect the commercial uses in town centres. The Article 4 Directions mandates special controls for planning teams to assess approval for commercial land uses to turn to residential, as this could create a weakening in commercial opportunities and can also create dead frontages within town centres. The Article 4 Direction applies to the current Primary and Secondary frontage designation in the 2022 Local Plan, and importantly, follows to 2022 Local Plan approach to prioritise main uses in town centres first.



**Figure 12:** Planning protections in Letchworth town centre; Article 4 Directions (purple) protect main town centre uses in town centres first and Listed Buildings (yellow) protect building heritage and historic integrity.

## **Built environment**

The built environment conditions for Letchworth are outlined below relating to the following categories:

- design and the public realm,
- historic character and
- open and green spaces

**Design and public realm:** As outlined in the planning of the world's first Garden City, the town follows a masterplan on the principle of balance using a central town square with radiating axes and grid pattern layouts. This balance integrates high quality residential homes with natural pursuits, local employment and accessible transport, areas of open space, commercial shopping and housing. Letchworth was the creation of a town dominated by open space, varied types of trees to symbolise distinct areas of the town, and groups of houses oriented to obtain the maximum benefits of daylight. Such master planning garnered widespread interest and led to the development of pioneer planning legislation and the founding of the Royal Town Planning Institute in 1914.

In the 1990s, the environmental quality of Letchworth town centre improved following significant interventions in the public realm focused on consistency of design and was likely supported by the town's unique land ownership context; one main owner (Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation) in combination with the Council's holdings. The centre has a pleasant shopping environment, particularly from pedestrian-oriented improvements along Eastcheap and Leys Avenue, yet the hierarchy of streets lacks clear order, and users report that there is no one distinct core area of the town centre. Partial or full pedestrianisation exists in the main shopping area and contributes towards the town's sense of spaciousness; such is the case in The Wynd, Arcade, and Garden Square Centre.

The centre has wide, clean pavements and several areas of open space and planting. Street furniture is provided along the length of Leys Avenue including benches, bins, and street lighting. Commercial units are generally well maintained and are of good quality. Leys Square provides landscaped seating areas, water features and sculptures, which enhances the appearance of the town centre. The centre has attractive arcades, e.g. the covered Arcade, which connects Leys Avenue with Station Road. The Wynd area has lower density and provides an enclosed pedestrianised area for cafe seating, a children's playground, and community garden. The Garden Square Shopping Centre is partially covered and located off Eastcheap with several units occupied by national retailers. However, although this shopping centre is pedestrianised, it is relatively unattractive compared to the rest of the centre and has a number of vacant units.

According to the People & Places Recovery & Development Plan (2022), and specifically the User Survey Section, Letchworth users are less negative towards the status of the public realm and more critical of what services the town centre has to offer. Similarly, the health checks within the Retail and Town Centres Study (2024) indicate that the public realm, or the environmental quality of Letchworth's town centre, is regarded positively by users, and thus a strength.

**Historic Character:** Although Letchworth is a relatively recent town centre compared to Baldock, Hitchin and Royston, it does hold important historical value as the world's first Garden City. As such, Letchworth town centre sits entirely within the wider Conservation Area and hosts a series of heritage

and listed buildings, which are protected through listed building designations. In particular, the Museum, The Grammar School and The Town Hall border the important site of Broadway Gardens and feature a distinct Georgian design. Additionally, the Broadway Cinema is a unique repurposed art deco building from the 1930s. Other buildings throughout the town centre represent more modern styles and architecture, dating from the 1960s and 1970s. The more recently built development of Garden Square Shopping Centre stands out compared to other buildings in the town centre; according to the People & Places Recovery and Development Plan, “the frontage within the Garden Square Shopping Centre... was identified of poorer quality and less sympathetic to the character of Letchworth, and this detracts from the town centre appearance.”

Overall, Letchworth has large buildings, often formal Georgian in style with rough cast brickwork and rich red tile roofs; they are two or three storeys with continuous façades and provide a high density interspersed throughout the town centre. Following the Garden City principle of balance, the scale and mass of the town’s buildings are pleasantly counterbalanced by the relative width of the streets.

Any future development proposals in the town centre of Letchworth should be complementary, taking into consideration the design, layout, scale, material and colours of the surrounding character. There should be scope for innovation allowing the town centre to evolve.

**Open and green spaces:** Letchworth town centre has a pleasant public realm with consistent design, wide pedestrian paths, and open and green spaces that include both formal and informal types. Along Leys Avenue, there is water splash zone gently enclosed with street furniture: benches, garden planters, and bins. Additionally, outdoor seating areas nearby spill into this zone. On Eastcheap, there are many benches positioned along the wide pedestrian pavements. At the station, there is a small green park and memorial statue, although this resource is underperforming with reports of antisocial behaviour and a general low-quality environment due to overgrowth and litter, the Love Letchworth BID has undertaken improvements to this area. In the Wynd, there is a small route spanning roughly 70 meters transecting Openshaw Way’s curved road that is pedestrianised with garden planters, cherry blossom trees, and outdoor seating from the small cafes. Directly beside this area is a children’s playground and a community garden. In the northwest part of the town centre, along Broadway Avenue, the pedestrian routes are through a wide central footpath with benches, bushes, and small trees.

Formally, there is one green space within Letchworth’s town centre boundary, Broadway Gardens. Howard Park is directly adjacent to the town centre boundary, and further, there are two formal green spaces nearby, Norton Common and The Grange Recreation Park. Norton Common and The Grange sit relatively close to one another and considering upcoming residential development of 900 homes bordering this area (LG1), there is a unique opportunity to connect the town centre to residences via these green links. Both the formal and informal open spaces should seek to be better connected to improve the town centre hierarchy of streets and user experience.

## **Transport, access and movement**

Transport, access and movement conditions for Letchworth are outlined below relating to the following categories:

- access and movement,
- mode of travel,
- footfall and
- parking.

**Access and movement:** Letchworth, according to Town Centre and Retail Study (2024) health checks, the town centre maintains a good quality public realm, including pedestrian paths, accessibility and quality of surfaces. Walkways and pavements within the town centre boundary are well kept and wide enough for users to walk without impediment. In recent years, Eastcheap and Leys Avenue have been resurfaced, as defined in the previous Letchworth Town Centre Strategy (2007), and now allocates less space for roads and parking; through this design pedestrians are given more priority to traverse the centre. While design on the material level is perceived positively by both experts and users, as understood from the Town Centres and Retail Study (2024) and the User Survey within the Letchworth Recovery and Development Plan (2022), wayfinding through the town centre and a hierarchy of streets towards a central core is not clear. As the Garden Square Shopping Centre has been identified as detracting from the historic quality of the town centre, future development here could be a catalyst to create a stronger hierarchy and network of streets to clearly symbolise the central core of the town.

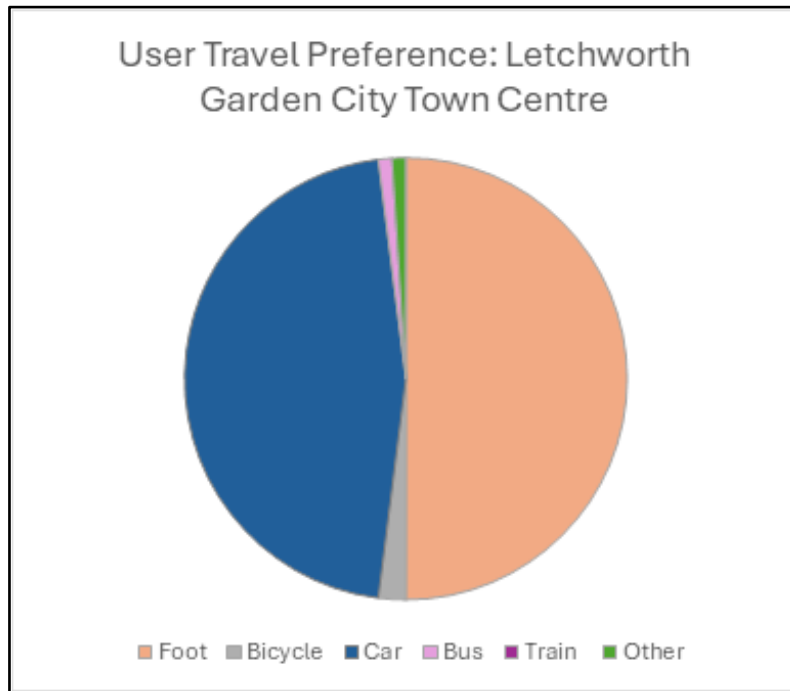
Letchworth is a Sustainable Travel Town appointed by Hertfordshire County Council. In collaboration with local town organisations, North Herts seeks to support sustainable travel within the town boundary. This stipulates that “pedestrians, cyclists and public transport users will have a greater priority than they do at present, leading to a higher level of natural enforcement and behavioural change.” North Herts Council is working with Love Letchworth BID, Herts County Council, and The Letchworth Heritage Foundation in this programme.

In 2022, Letchworth users were surveyed regarding various town centre perceptions and habits by People & Places. In relation to the built environment, the survey concluded that users wanted more convenient and cheaper parking options. Further, users shared that they travel to the town centre by foot (50%) and by car (47%), with the remaining 3% between cycling, bus or taxi. The Household Survey within the Town Centres and Retail Study (2024) pooled responses from a wide catchment area and found that the majority of respondents who visited Letchworth used the car.

**Mode of Travel:** Unique to Letchworth, the railway station is accessible and within the core town centre. The station provides direct access to London, Stevenage, Hitchin and Welwyn Garden City to the south, and Baldock, Royston and Cambridge to the north. Bus stops are located near the railway station on Station Road and Broadway and are accessible to the main shopping area. Bus routes link the centre with surrounding town, villages and neighbourhood centres.

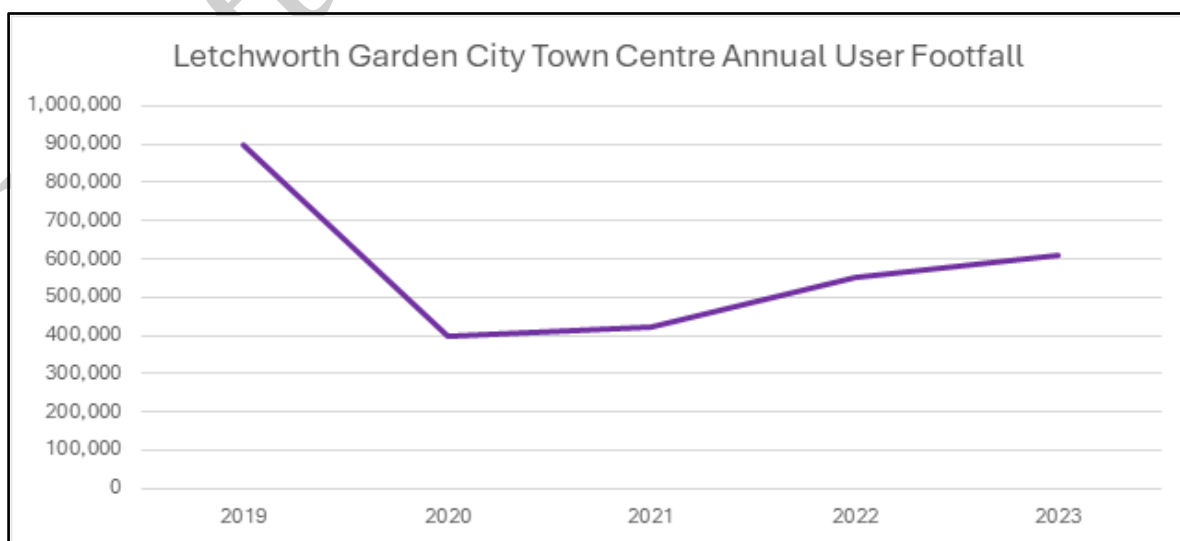
The Household Survey found that the majority of respondents who visited Letchworth in the last year used the car as the main mode of transport. Comparatively, the People & Places Recovery & Development Report (2022) found that 50% of users report their preference to travel to the town centre

by foot at 50% and by car at 47%. Based on origin of users and duration of visit, it can be concluded that locals and nearby residents (87%) visit the town centre frequently for shorter durations (under 2 hours) and are more likely to travel by foot (50%) compared to visitors traveling in from out of town (12%) who are more likely to stay for longer and use the car.



**Figure 13:** User travel preference in Letchworth town centre (People & Places, 2022)

**Footfall:** The district's HUQ footfall data indicates that Letchworth town centre has experienced the negative effects of Covid-19 pandemic with a reduced annual footfall from just about 9 million in 2019 to approximately 5 million in 2020 with a plateau in 2021 followed by a gradual uptick to approximately 6 million in 2023. Although the town centre has improved since Covid-19, it has not returned to pre-pandemic vibrancy levels using footfall as an indicator.

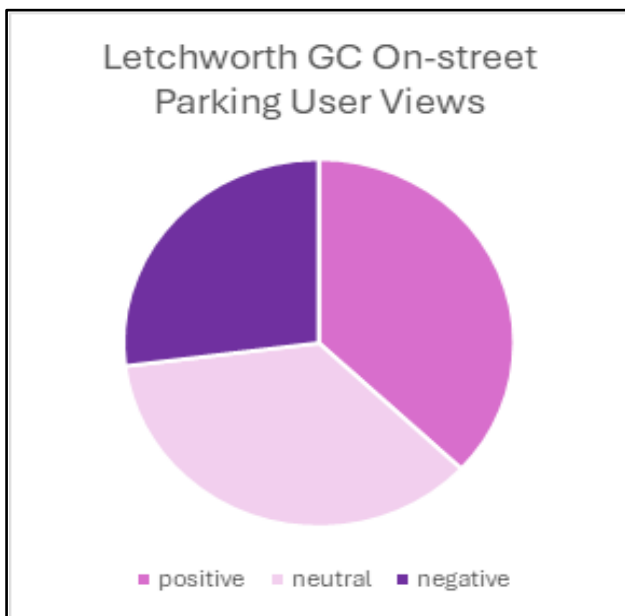


**Figure 14:** Annual footfall in Letchworth Town Centre from 2019 through 2023 (HUQ)

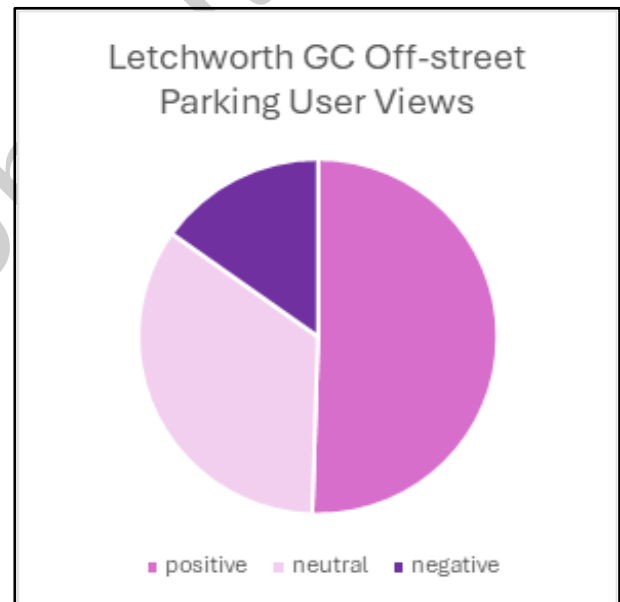


**Parking:** As the world’s first Garden City, Letchworth town centre was built with a masterplan, consisting of radiating axes and grid patterns that are interspersed with a variety of parking, public transport, and active travel options. Specific to parking, there is adequate provision with a mix of both private and council-owned lots, as well as on-street and off-street options. In general, the off-street car parks are conveniently located within the town centre and major shopping destinations; for example, the Garden Square multi-storey car park, Morrisons open car park, and The Wynd car park.

Town centre users are roughly 70% content (positive to neutral feelings) towards the on-street parking offer and roughly 80% content (positive to neutral feelings) towards the off-street parking offer. According to the Town Centres and Retail Study (2024), particularly the Household Survey, Letchworth parking availability was regarded more positively compared to parking availability in the other town centres. Unsurprisingly, as parking surveys frequently show negative responses on cost, the respondents were relatively more negative than positive for Letchworth town centre both for the parking costs and compared to other town centres.



**Figure 15:** On-street parking views by Letchworth users. Over 70% of users respond with positive or neutral views (People & Places, 2022).



**Figure 16:** Off-street parking views by Letchworth users. Users are largely positive to neutral (People & Places, 2022).

## **Community**

Letchworth has a good provision of community facilities, including Letchworth Library, Letchworth Youth Centre, and Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation, including an information centre and town history museum. These various community spaces accommodate a variety of community functions with spaces to hire for external events. Additionally, the District’s council offices are within the town centre and provide support and services. Via the North Herts’ Communities Partnership Team,



Letchworth users are welcomed to monthly Community Forum meetings to present applications for small grassroot grants and hear about important updates as well as the Town Drop-ins to express general concerns or questions.

A key stakeholder of the town centre that also contributes to the promotion and marketing is Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation (LGCHF); they seek to “manage assets and investment to generate income ... to care for the Garden City estate and support [the] local community, providing access to green spaces and a range of culture, heritage, learning and leisure facilities.

A second key stakeholder of the town centre that also contributes to the promotion and marketing is Love Letchworth BID as this organisation helps to facilitate a community culture through programming public events and building business capacity with locals. Love Letchworth BID works on four streams of projects to boost the town centre’s vitality: facilitating regular and seasonal events, bringing accessible transport and parking, marketing promotion with digital media, and improving the range and quality of social, leisure, service, and retail offer in the town centre.

Both LGCHF and Love Letchworth BID work with town centre businesses, including the Garden Square Shopping Centre, to improve user experience and look ahead to the future. At present, the Garden Square Shopping Centre is underperforming, especially regarding above ground floor units, be that commercial or residential leases. There is potential to improve the occupancy and vibrancy of the Garden Square Shopping Centre alongside a paired promotion and marketing campaign.

Considering access to resources and services, Letchworth meets all 16 aspects within the Local Needs Index. Letchworth has plentiful resources and services within the town centres, thereby supporting a robust community culture, events and programmes, along with incentivising higher footfall and longer dwell times for visitors.

Letchworth’s environment includes interactive shop facades, clear lines of sight, pedestrian paths, and opportunities for rest to create high-quality places that support community use and congregating. Leys Avenue, Broadway, Eastcheap and The Wynd promote Garden City principles through balanced design and human-scale architecture. Such design, combined with higher footfall, thus natural surveillance, deters anti-social behaviour. The open and green spaces of Broadway Gardens and Howard Park both supports community well-being to provide uses with recreational opportunities and natural features. These spaces are opportunities to foster deeper well-being for town centre users through physical health, exposure to green features and community event programming.

Arguably, the Letchworth railway forecourt poses as a challenge to public safety due to its overgrown plants, lack of lighting and underused pedestrian route through the parklet; station users are often observed walking around the parklet to the wider sidewalk routes.

# Appendix 3C: Royston Town Centre Evidence Notes

## Land use and retail

The land uses and town centre health indicators for Royston are outlined below relating to the following categories:

- mix of uses,
- vacancy rate and economic vitality,
- boundaries and frontages,
- development allocations,
- leisure,
- visit time,
- Local Needs Index and
- planning protections.

**Mix of uses:** Royston town centre's designated shopping frontages have 145 retail and service units, and the mix of uses is set out in **Table 7**, which is compared with the District and UK averages. On average, there are more restaurants, professional services and other non-retail services (such as barbers). There is a lower-than-average presence of convenience stores and pubs. Royston retail profile supports a higher dwell time for visitors that do come to the town centre for sit down meal and/or meeting for a professional service.

TYPE	# of Units	% of Units	% of Units (District avg.)	% of Units (UK avg.)
Convenience retail	5	3.4	5.6	9.5
Comparison retail	42	29.0	27.8	27.7
Financial/Professional	15	10.3	8.3	8.5
Restaurant/Café	19	13.1	12.8	10.0
Public house/Bar	3	2.1	3.0	4.9
Hot food takeaway	8	5.5	4.1	6.2
Other non-retail service	43	29.7	26.3	19.3
Vacant unit	10	6.9	12.3	13.9
TOTAL	145	100.0	100.0	100.0

**Table 7:** Mix of retail and service uses – Royston town centre (Town Centre and Retail Study, 2024).

**Vacancy rate and economic vitality:** There were 10 vacant units within the centre at the time of the Council's 2023 land use survey, equating to a vacancy rate of 6.9%, which is below the District and UK averages. This low vacancy rate suggests the supply of shop premises is in line with demand.

**Boundary and frontages:** The existing town centre boundary for Royston can be found in **Figure 17**, notably a significant area does not actively host commercial or mixed-use development (town centre area: 174,466 sq.m) within the current boundary.



**Figure 17:** Royston town centre depicting the current town centre boundary in blue and commercial retail land use in orange (town centre area: 174,466 sq.m).

**Development allocations:** Based on the Local Plan (2011 – 2031), there is one mixed use town centre allocation in Royston.

**RY12 Town Hall:** This allocation proposes that the current site is redeveloped to provide 4,000 sq.m of additional main town centre use floorspace, and provision of residential

accommodation on upper floors. The policy identifies the key considerations to be covered, including the potential retention of the Town Hall.

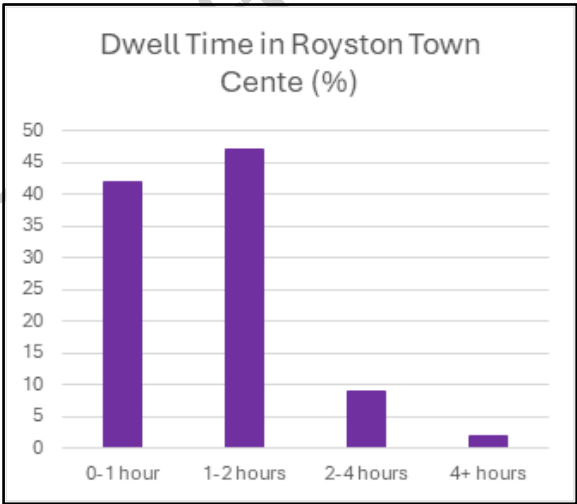
Since the time that the Town Hall site was allocated for redevelopment, the site has had limited development activity.

**Leisure:** As shown in **Table 8**, leisure in Royston is primarily oriented around food and beverage pastimes, such as frequenting restaurants, as to be expected based on the breakdown of type of service unit within the centre. By ratio, Royston has more restaurants by ratio than the UK average and the combined average of North Herts’ town centres, yet based on the household survey, a lower percentage of users frequent Royston’s cafes and pubs as a leisure pastime (34.1%) compared to the North Herts’ town centre average (46.8%).

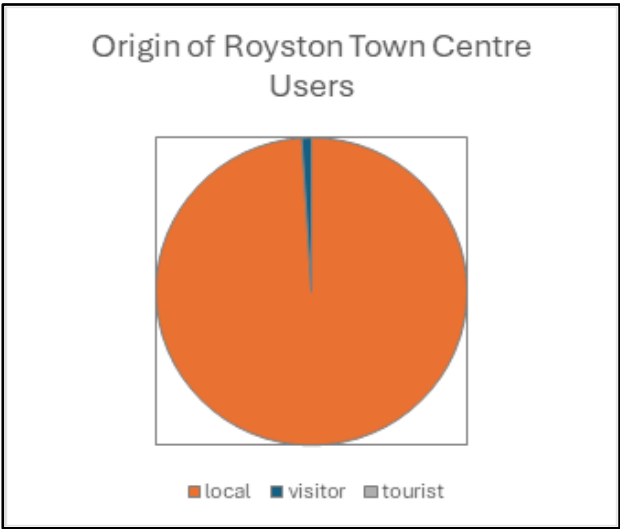
Activity	Royston %	Average % across all town centres
Go for walk	1.3	0.9
Cafe/pub/restaurant	34.1	46.8
Leisure activity	8.3	9.9

**Table 8:** Participation in leisure activities by Royston town centre users (Town Centre and Retail Study, 2024).

**Visit time:** According to the NEMS household survey (2024), 35% of respondents dwell for more than 1 hour in Royston town centre. Compared to the other town centres, Royston has the lowest frequency for dwell time for more than one hour. Similarly, in the People & Places User Survey, Royston came in last with the lowest percentage for town users to dwell for longer than an hour (58%). Although the percentages vary between NEMS (2024) and the People & Place’s survey (2022), the order remains the same. This indicates that Royston has maintained its status in relation to the other town centres but perhaps has dropped further in attraction to visitors within this order. Alternatively, as the sample populations vary, the NEMS survey is a broader sample from a wider catchment, whereas the People & Places survey engaged with more local users, the visitors are more drastically less enticed to visit Royston compared to the locals and in the context of the other towns in the district.



**Figure 18:** Dwell time for Royston town centre users in one year period from 2023 – 2024 (HUQ)



**Figure 19:** Origin of Royston town centre users. The great majority are local users (People & Places, 2022).

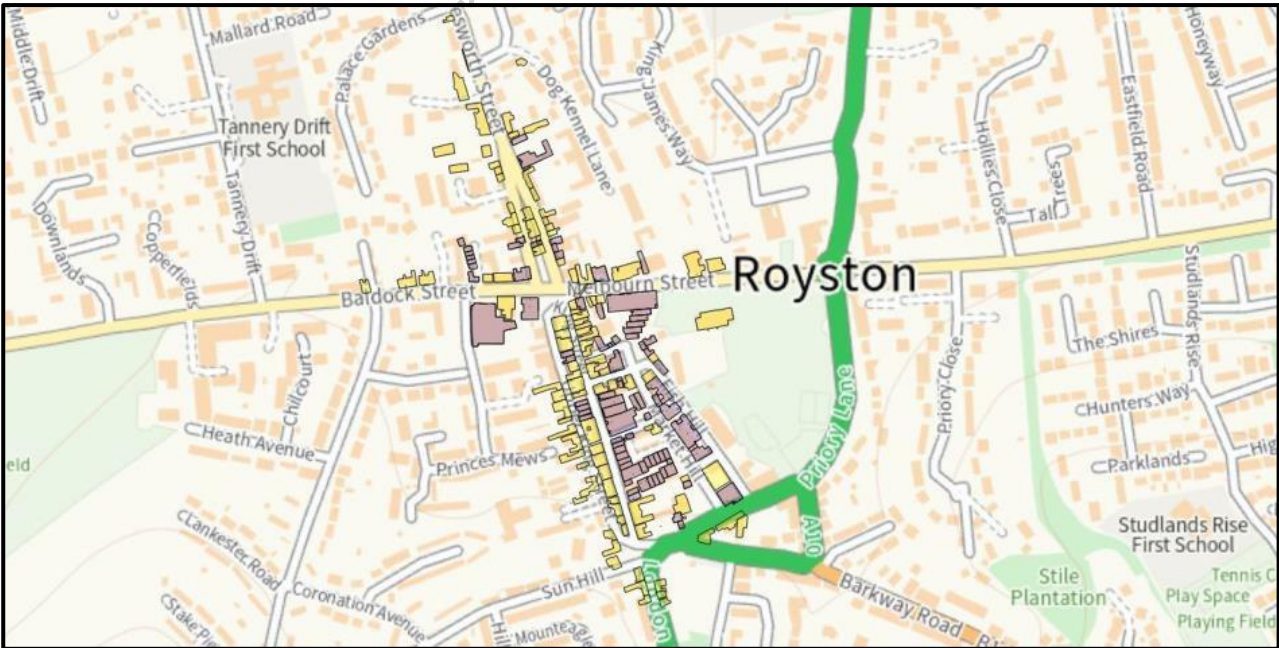


**Local Needs Index:** A standardised Local Needs Index of Royston town centre was undertaken in 2024. This exercise judges against 16 types of shops, services or community uses; Royston scored 14 out of 16, technically lacking an off-license and community hall. Whilst Royston does not have a standalone community hall, it does have community halls within several churches on the town centre periphery. Additionally, Royston Town Council premises are within the town centre and have rooms for hire; perhaps this also suffices for community convening. The Tesco Express at the top of Market Hill in the town centre likely provides a similar service to an off-license shop.

Centre	Hierarchy Classification	Local Needs Index Score (out of 16)
Hitchin	Town Centre	15
Letchworth	Town Centre	16
Royston	Town Centre	14
Baldock	Town Centre	12

**Table 9:** Local Needs Index Summary of North Herts’ town centres (Town Centre and Retail Study, 2024).

**Planning protections - Article 4 Directions and Listed Buildings:** Alongside balancing controls in planning, such as the existing Listing Building designation to protect building heritage and historic integrity, the immediate Article 4 Directions was made to protect the commercial uses in town centres. The Article 4 Directions mandates special controls for planning teams to assess approval for commercial land uses to turn to residential, as this could create a weakening in commercial opportunities and can also create dead frontages within town centres. The Article 4 Direction applies to the current Primary and Secondary frontage designation in the 2022 Local Plan, and importantly, follows to 2022 Local Plan approach to prioritise main uses in town centres first.



**Figure 20.** Planning protections in Royston town centre; Article 4 Directions (purple) protect main town centre uses in town centres first and Listed Buildings (yellow) protect building heritage and historic integrity.

## **Built environment**

The built environmental conditions for Royston are outlined below relating to the following categories:

- design and the public realm,
- historic character and
- open and green spaces

**Design and public realm:** Royston town centre is located in the northeast of North Herts, southwest of Cambridge. It is smaller than Hitchin and Letchworth and primarily serves the day- to-day shopping, food, beverage, and service needs of local residents, although the out-of-centre Tesco Extra, Aldi, and M&S stores serve wider catchment areas. The structure of the centre is linear, stretching over 500 metres north-south with narrow streets and a slight hill incline north-south. The quality of the public realm in terms of maintenance, street furniture, and safety is good. Throughout the town centre, there are several signs and plaques to depict the heritage and history of Royston, especially related to the Royston Cave and King James I hunting expeditions.

**Historic character:** As a town dating back to late 12th century, Royston holds significant heritage significance. Both the current and proposed town centre boundaries are entirely within the wider Conservation Area, as shown in Figure X.

As noted in the Conservation Area Townscape Analysis and Conservation Area Statement, the town layout is medieval in its pattern with buildings set adjacently to the road on long narrow plots, with the narrowest end onto the street. This arrangement is typical of the medieval period and plots of this shape are known as 'burgage' plots. The main buildings (houses or shops) were positioned closest to the thoroughfare with workshops and outbuildings in the plots behind.

Importantly, the medieval market was situated at the main crossroads of the historic roads known as The Cross, in a wide part of Ermine Street to the north and south of the crossroads. Over time, the stalls occupying these areas became permanent resulting in an island of buildings within Kneesworth Street and the High Street forming Upper and Lower King Streets. The High Street is a relatively narrow, with a slight slope, but straight street, reflecting its origins as the direct route through the town to and from London. The town centre streets are narrow with narrow pedestrian paths; the streets lack trees and are paved with similar materials: York stone and brown/grey bricks. This results in a cold feeling public realm and certain sections of the town, primarily the narrow alleys linking High Street to Upper King Street, are shaded. Buildings are often two storey and date back to the 18th and 19th centuries.

There are numerous listed buildings within Royston town centre, frequently located on Fish Hill, Baldock Road, Kneesworth Street, and King Street. Important buildings or sites include: The Priory, King James' Palace and Royston Cave.

In accordance with Historic Environment Policy HE1 - Designated heritage assets from the Local Plan 2011 - 2031, historical assets such as designated Scheduled Monuments, Listed Buildings, Conservation Areas and Registered Parks and Gardens must continue to be protected and maintained. Further, any future development must respect an overall emphasis on the preservation and enhancement of the

existing fabric in order to maintain continuity throughout the town; and where new building takes place, the design, layout, scale, material and colours should blend with the established character.

**Open and green spaces:** The layout of Royston town centre has evolved from a medieval market town and has major crossroads with narrow streets, pedestrian paths and plots. The narrow and compact nature of the town centre affords limited open or green spaces. At the base of High Street, an area called The Cross, there is a small recreation area including info boards, benches, a statue, and tree landscaping with views towards north and south. Additionally, Fish Hill has an enclosed square with benches and trees oriented toward the historic Courthouse that has been repurposed as a restaurant.

There is one formal green open space within Royston town centre boundary, the Priory Memorial Gardens; it is located south of Melbourn Street on the eastern side of the town. This green resource is adjacent to the Town Hall and Royston Police Station, and it wraps around the Saint John the Baptist Church. Future interventions should ensure strong access and connections to the Priory Memorial Gardens to offer town centre visitors recess in green space.

## **Transport, access and movement**

Transport, access and movement conditions for Royston are outlined below relating to the following categories:

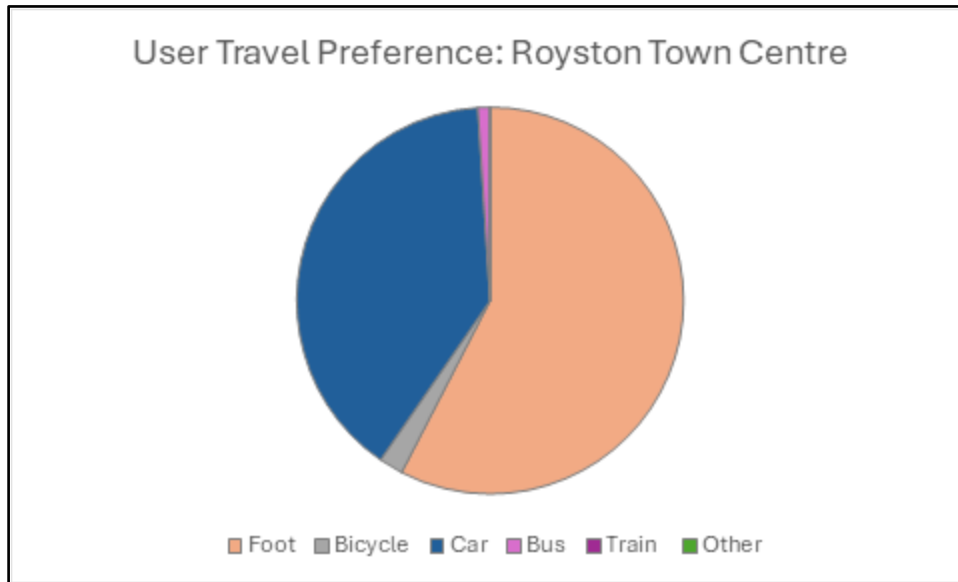
- access and movement,
- parking,
- mode of travel and
- footfall.

**Access and movement:** Royston, like Letchworth, is part of the Sustainable Travel Town programme, which is bringing together Herts County Council, North Herts District Council, Royston Town Council and Royston First Business Improvement District (BID) in a collaboration to develop and deliver plans to support sustainable travel in and around the town. One of the programme's objectives is that "pedestrians, cyclists and public transport users will have a greater priority than they do at present, leading to a higher level of natural enforcement and behavioural change."

The town centre is linear in structure whilst High Street, Market Hill and linking streets provide a natural circuit for pedestrians. Pavements are generally well maintained but narrow, particularly on Kneesworth Street and parts of the High Street. Cycle parking is available. The volume of through-traffic along Baldock Street/Melbourn Street acts as a barrier to pedestrian movement between the High Street and Kneesworth Street. Further west and east there are zebra crossings.

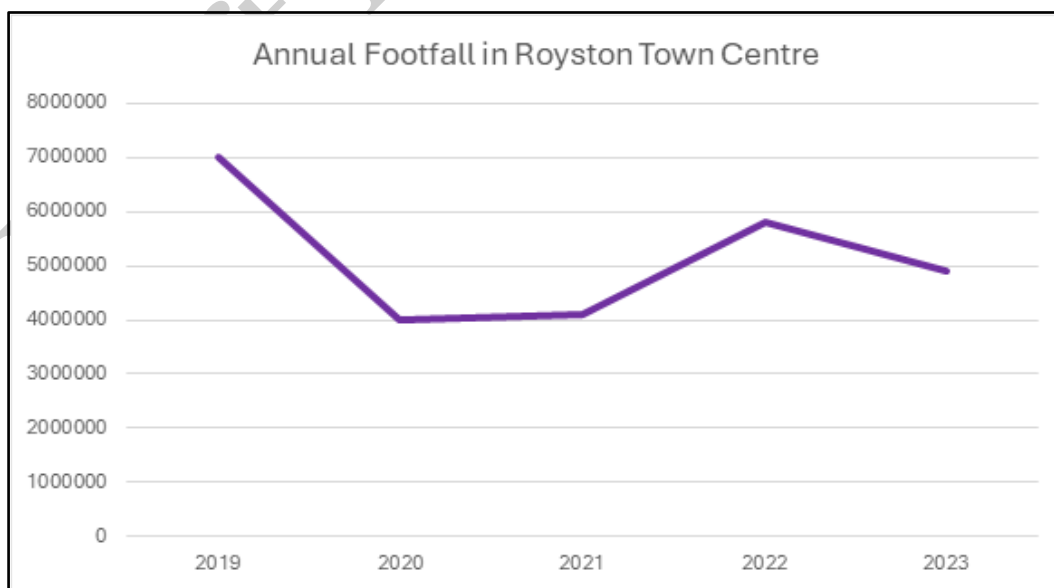
**Mode of Travel:** Royston Railway Station is about 600 metres (approximately 9 minutes to walk) north of the Baldock Street and Melbourn Street junction.

Based on NEMS Household survey, the majority of visitors use a car to reach Royston. Additionally, based on the People & Places Report User Survey, 58% of Royston users surveyed travel to the centre by foot, and 39% travel by car; this sample population was made up of 99% locals and 1% visitors (living outside the postcode, but within a 30-minute drive). This indicates that locals are more likely to walk to the centre, whereas respondents from the wider Study Area will arrive by car.



**Figure 20:** User travel preference into Royston town centre (People & Places, 2022).

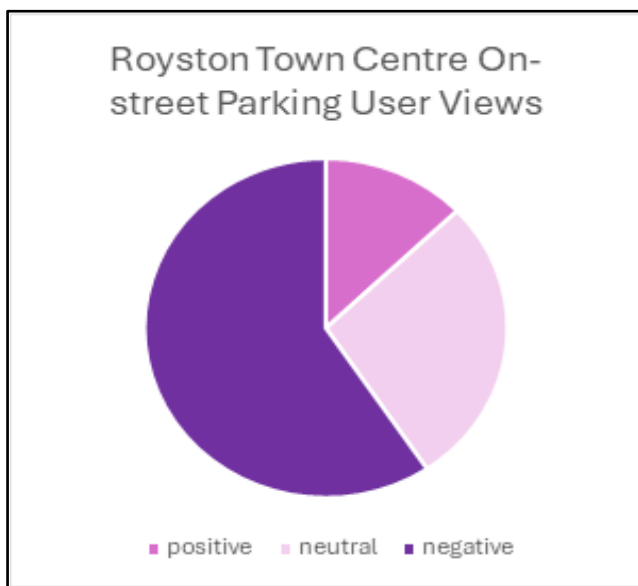
**Footfall:** Royston town centre's annual HUQ footfall data indicates that this town is no different from the other 3 town centres of the district in that it has negatively experienced the effects of Covid-19 pandemic. In 2019, the annual footfall went from roughly 7 million to 4 million in 2020 and stays relatively constant to 2021. A brief bounce back from the pandemic shows the footfall increasing in 2022 to just shy of 6 million, to then drop back down in 2023 to below 5 million. Interestingly, Royston's trend to bounce back in 2022 and reduce again in 2023 is similar to Baldock's annual footfall data.



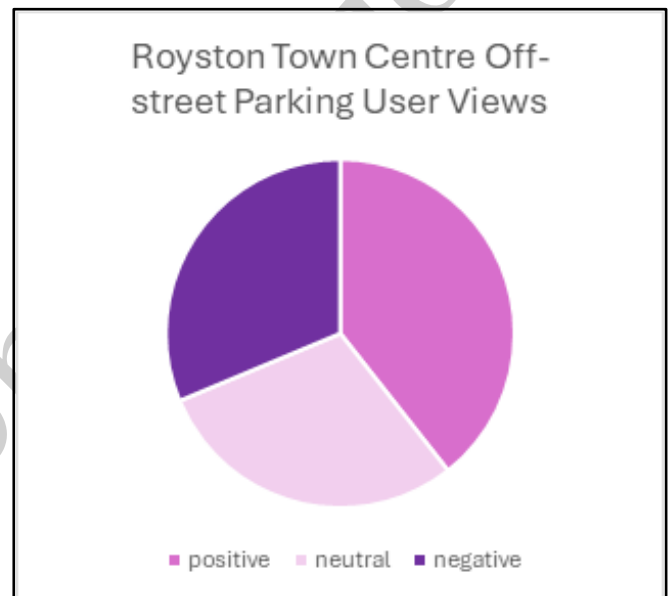
**Figure 21:** Annual footfall in Royston Town Centre from 2019 through 2023 (HUQ).



**Parking:** Royston town centre car parks are accessible to the main shopping area, but provision is relatively fragmented with four of the six car parks providing less than 35 spaces. According to Lichfields' 2024 study, respondents who visit Royston responded relatively more negatively to parking offer, availability and cost, than any other town centre. Similarly, in the People & Places 2022 Recovery and Development Plan, Royston users share negative perceptions on parking especially on-street offer (approximately 85% have neutral to negative views for on-street parking and 65% have neutral to negative views for off-street parking). Due to the physical layout of the town, there is limited ability to provide car parking directly on town centre streets. Interestingly, these same users report positive opinions on both road links and pedestrian access throughout the town centre.



**Figure 22:** On-street parking views by Royston town centre users. 60% of users respond with negative views (People & Places, 2022).



**Figure 23:** Off-street parking views by Royston town centre users. Users are generally evenly split between positive, neutral and negative views (People & Places, 2022).

## **Community**

For a town centre of its size, Royston has a good provision of community facilities with a library, police station, town hall, and health centre within the core. As previously referenced, users have access to community halls surrounding the town centre via local churches, and further rooms for hire within Royston Town Council. These are essential to the functioning of the town and provide much-needed spaces for communal gatherings and events. Via North Herts' Community Partnerships Team, Royston users are welcomed to monthly Community Forum meetings to present applications for small grassroots grants and hear about important updates, and also Town Drop-ins to express general concerns or questions.

Royston holds a unique historic market town character defined by its medieval street layout, compact size, and heritage, featured on the Royston Town Trail, interspersed between local shops, cafes and restaurants.

Royston is unique compared to the other three towns, as it is the only town in the district with a local town council, Royston Town Council. Royston First, the town's Business Improvement District founded in 2009, often collaborates with the town council to improve the status of Royston town centre. In this aim, Royston First applies the business levy back into local area through 5 key areas: town investment (such as the Youth Employment Initiative), events (local business awards), welcome and security (ShopSafe app), business support (first aid training), and marketing (digital signage).

Royston was awarded the badge of Sustainable Travel Town to pilot active travel mechanisms for overall public health and climate action. These different groups, Royston Town Council, Royston First and Royston Sustainable Travel Town consortium work to promote the profile Royston town centre. While Royston is within North Herts, it borders Cambridgeshire Country Council, and experiences competition in market expenditure to Cambridge.

The health centre, Granta Market Hill Surgery operated by the NHS, is located along Market Hill and is an important resource for community health. This amenity also draws in visitors to the town centre to either trip chain alongside their appointment, or for carers, family members etc. (who have travelled in with the Granta Market Hill patient) can visit the town centre during the appointment.

Whilst Royston town centre has a handful of long-term challenges related to its historic morphology, main vehicle road bisecting the town centre, and topography sloped hill, the main High Street offers users a pleasant experience with good design, such as prioritising pedestrians, interactive facades, and opportunities to rest with natural surveillance. The open space at The Cross and at the intersection of Jepps Lane and Fish Hill are good opportunities to facilitate community programming and spaces for recreation.

Baldock Street / Melbourn Street bisect the town centre and positions users in competition with a major vehicle road to cross safely. This road also arguably acts as a perceptual barrier to disconnect Kneesworth Street and Lower King Street from the rest of the town centre. Further, along these streets, the pedestrian paths are extremely narrow with major traffic going by and in some locations very dark.

# Appendix 3D: Baldock Town Centre Evidence Notes

## Land use and retail

The land uses and town centre health indicators for Baldock are outlined below relating to the following categories:

- mix of uses,
- vacancy rate and economic vitality,
- boundaries and frontages,
- development allocations,
- leisure,
- visit time,
- Local Needs Index and
- planning protections.

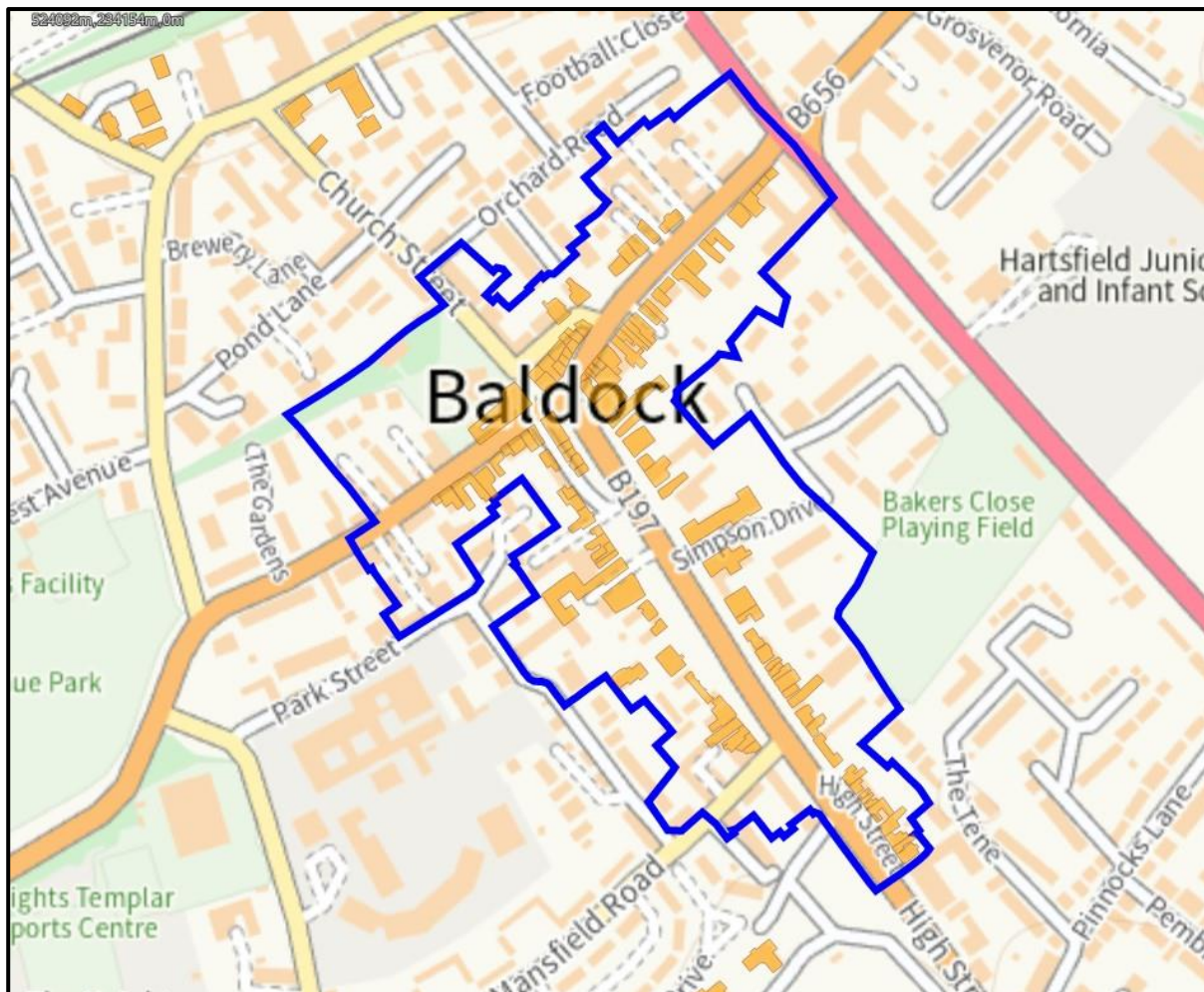
**Mix of uses:** There are 73 retail and service units within Baldock town centre's designated shopping frontages; the mix of uses is set out in Table 10 below, which is compared with the District and UK averages.

TYPE	# of Units	% of Units	% of Units (District avg.)	% of Units (UK avg.)
Convenience retail	5	6.8	5.6	9.5
Comparison retail	13	17.8	27.8	27.7
Financial/Professional	3	4.1	8.3	8.5
Restaurant/Café	12	16.4	12.8	10.0
Public house/Bar	4	5.5	3.0	4.9
Hot food takeaway	5	6.8	4.1	6.2
Other non-retail service	25	32.9	26.3	19.3
Vacant unit	7	9.6	12.3	13.9
TOTAL	73	100.0	100.0	100.0

**Table 10:** Mix of retail and service uses – Baldock town centre (Town Centre and Retail Study, 2024).

**Vacancy rate and economic vitality:** Of the 73 total retail and service units within the town centre, there were 7 vacant units at the time of the Council's 2023 land use and monitoring survey. This equates to a vacancy rate of 9.6%, which is below the District and UK averages (12.3% and 13.9% respectively). The number of vacant units recorded in 2015 was similar with 6 vacant units. The relatively low vacancy rate suggests the supply of shop premises is broadly in line with operator demand and provides opportunity for churning retail spaces for current and potential occupiers.

**Boundary and frontages:** The existing town centre boundary for Baldock can be found in **Figure 24**; notably, there are pockets or areas that exist within the boundary that do not actively host commercial or mixed-use development (town centre area: 109,968 sq.m).



**Figure 24:** Baldock town centre, depicting the current town centre boundary in blue and retail land use in orange (town centre area: 109,968 sq.m).

**Development allocations:** The 2022 Local Plan does not allocate any town centre mixed use allocations for Baldock, nor does it have any active allocations, this is due to the highly historic nature of the town centre and proximity to neighbouring Letchworth.

The Growing Baldock scheme for residential-led use and associated employment and community facilities is being progressed. A Strategic Masterplan was approved in Summer 2025. The site policy in the Local Plan envisages 1,500 square metres of retail uses being provided within the land north of the railway (Site BA1) that satisfies the immediate needs of residents and will not be a competition to the local economy of the town centre.

Additionally, adjacent to the town centre lies allocated employment land to meet the needs of Functional Economic Market Area, east of Baldock BA10 (19.6ha). This was set out in the 2022 Local

Plan and is currently under review. Advantageously, employment land near town centres can have positive impact on the footfall into the centre and the local economy.

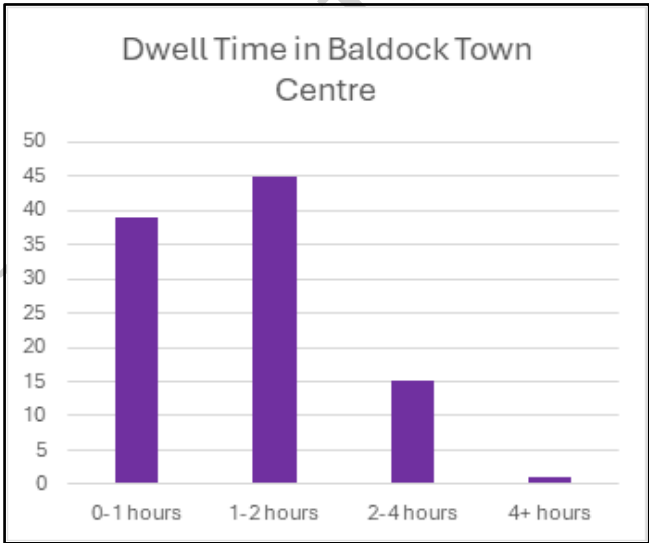
**Leisure:** As shown in **Table 11**, leisure in Baldock is primarily oriented around food and beverage pastimes, such as frequenting cafes, pubs or restaurants. By ratio, Baldock has more restaurant/cafe and public house/bar units than the other town centres in North Herts’ and across the UK. While there is the potential for a distribution of 1,400 square metres of leisure space to develop within the town centres of North Herts, such as a cinema, gyms or escape room, it is less likely to be placed in Baldock town centre considering its limited size, number of listed buildings and low number of vacant units.

Activity	Baldock %	Average % across all town centres
Go for walk	1.3	0.9
Cafe/pub/restaurant	52.6	46.8
Leisure activity	4.9	9.9

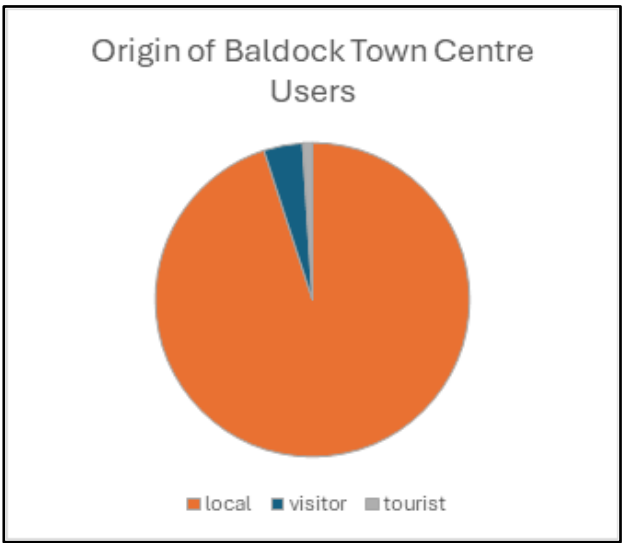
**Table 11:** Participation in leisure activities by Baldock town centre users (Town Centre and Retail Study, 2024).

**Visit time:** According to the NEMS Household Survey (2024), 41% of respondents dwell for more than 1 hour in Baldock town centre. Compared to the other town centres, Baldock dwell time is in the middle, with more users dwelling for an hour or longer than Royston, but less than Letchworth and Hitchin. Further, in this survey, respondents shared that visited Baldock in the last year for food shopping (46%) and cafes/pubs (53%): the respondents could select multiple options.

Similarly, in the Recovery & Development Plan (2022), 68% of Baldock users shared that they visited the centre for longer than 1 hour. In comparison to the other town centres, Baldock again sits in the middle, with higher percentage than Royston and lower than Letchworth and Hitchin for dwell time of 1 hour or more. Within this survey, research concludes that users often spent their time on comparison shopping (47%), such as food shopping, and for leisure activities (37%).



**Figure 25:** Dwell time for Baldock town centre users within a 1 year period spanning 2023 - 2024. It is relatively uncommon for users to dwell longer than 2 hours. (HUQ)



**Figure 26:** Origin of Baldock town centre users. The large majority are locals (People & Places, 2022).

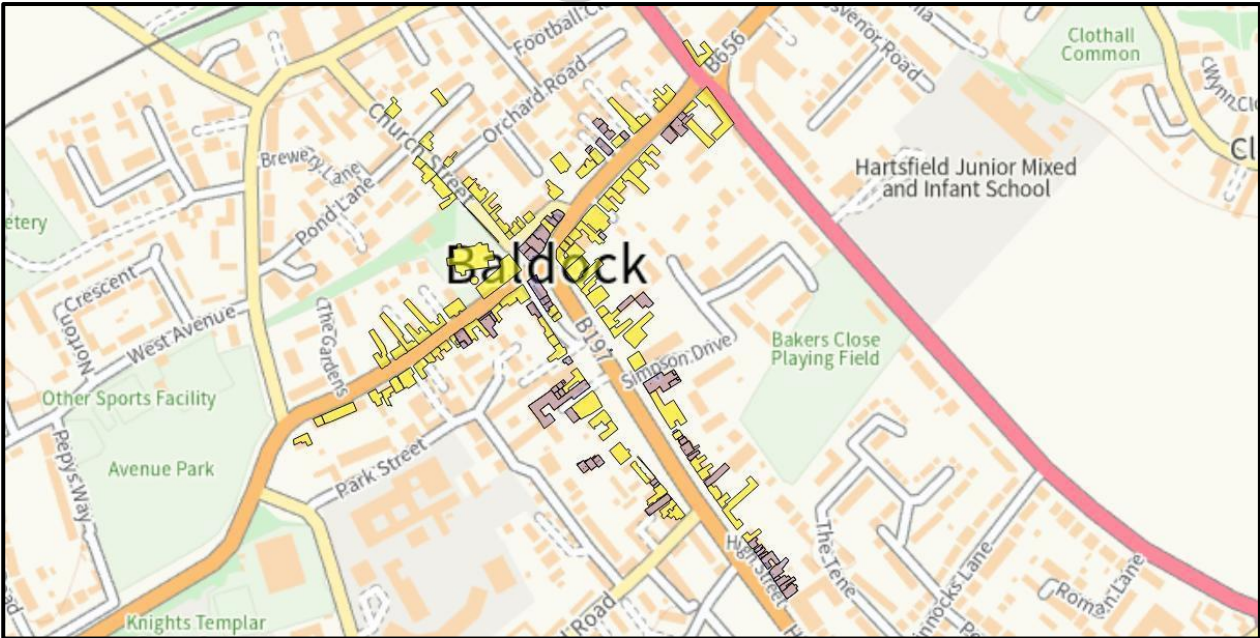


**Local Needs Index:** A standardised Local Needs Index for town centres was undertaken in 2024. This exercise judges against 16 types of shops, services or community uses; Baldock scored 12 out of 16, only lacking a bank, newsagent, florist and off-license. The Tesco Extra, located on the edge of the town boundary, provides some of these missing services within the defined town centre boundary.

Centre	Hierarchy Classification	Local Needs Index Score (out of 16)
Hitchin	Town Centre	15
Letchworth	Town Centre	16
Royston	Town Centre	14
Baldock	Town Centre	12

**Table 12:** Local Needs Index Summary of North Herts’ town centres (Town Centre and Retail Study, 2024).

**Planning protections - Article 4 Directions and Listed Buildings:** Alongside balancing controls in planning, such as the existing Listing Building designation to protect building heritage and historic integrity, the immediate Article 4 Directions was made to protect the commercial uses in town centres. The Article 4 Directions mandates special controls for planning teams to assess approval for commercial land uses to turn to residential, as this could create a weakening in commercial opportunities and can also create dead frontages within town centres. The Article 4 Direction applies to the current Primary and Secondary frontage designation in the 2022 Local Plan, and importantly, follows to 2022 Local Plan approach to prioritise main uses in town centres first.



**Figure 27:** Planning protections in Baldock town centre; Article 4 Directions (purple) protect main town centre uses in town centres first and Listed Buildings (yellow) protect building heritage and historic integrity.

## **Built environment**

The built environmental conditions for Baldock are outlined below relating to the following categories:

- design and the public realm,
- historic character and
- open and green spaces.

**Design and public realm:** Baldock town centre is characterised by wide main streets enclosed by continuous frontages and narrow side streets. The streets widen towards the junction of High Street, Whitehorse Street and Hitchin Street. This widening of the streets creates spaces for the public realm and community uses. This strategy recommends that the historic layout should be preserved, and the width of the streets should be retained. The town's pedestrian permeability, achieved through a network of footpaths, should be protected and enhanced.

New buildings should enhance the existing fabric through similar materials and sympathetic designs, scale, height, massing and proportions. The buildings are two, three or four storeys with some consistency in height. There are a large number of townhouses which are built on burgage plots, creating continuous frontages which should dictate the scale and typology of new development in the town centre. High density may be acceptable with a mix of commercial on the ground floor with residential above.

Coach arches are common within the town centre and these often open out into small courtyards. These could accommodate mews type development (a row of stables with living quarters above them, set back from the street and accessed through an archway), small commercial units and conversions. Rear walled gardens are important to retain.

The public realm is a sensitive area for new architecture and enhancements because of the quality of the historic buildings.

Any enhancements to the public realm or new buildings should ensure that the character and high quality of the historic fabric is maintained and be thematically linked to the town centre enhancements.

**Historic Character:** As an historic market town, Baldock has a significant number of listed buildings throughout its town centre. Further, the Conservation Area spans beyond the current town centre boundary and thus includes the entire town centre within it. The overall character of this Conservation Area is largely that of 18th Century buildings. There are large Georgian Town Houses, such as Clare House, The Manor House and Holford House as well as many other older buildings also having been re-fronted in brick in the style of this time.

In accordance with [Historic Environment Policy HE1 - Designated heritage assets](#) from the 2022 Local Plan, historical assets such as designated Scheduled Monuments, Listed Buildings, Conservation Areas and Registered Parks and Gardens must continue to be protected and maintained.

**Open and green spaces:** The historic layout of Baldock town centre creates wide open streets with two and three storey buildings that frame the area and support local events and a cafe culture. For

example, the town's core square, it includes a memorial garden and recreational seating at the meeting of Bell Row and High Street. High Street spans about half a mile and provides a clear view, east and west with green leafy trees between the pedestrian paths and buildings. This scale and design of open space creates a positive public realm and further inspires walking.

Both the width of the streets and surrounding buildings, as well as the pedestrian permeability, and the network of footpaths, should be retained and protected. Street furniture exists throughout the centre, although they are currently in need of repair due to weathering, they offer users frequent opportunities to sit and relax in the open space. While pedestrian footpaths exist throughout the centre, there are limited zebra crossings on High Street; there is one to the north-west on High Street near Hitchin Street, and one to the south-east on High Street near Manfield Road.

St. Mary's Parish Church offers a protected small green space with views of the historic building dating to the 12th century. It is conveniently adjacent to the open seating area on Sun Street, and nearby High Street's activity. Tesco Extra, and the Tesco Memorial Gardens, while not within the existing town centre boundary, are located directly adjacent to the town on the southwestern side of High Street. This area is a green buffer between the large car park and the pleasant town centre open realm, this strategy recommends improving the overall quality and connectivity to High Street.

Considering North Herts's register for formal open and green spaces, there are three near Baldock town centre: Avenue Park, Ivel Springs and more distantly, Weston Hills. While none of these exist within the current town centre boundary, it is beneficial to maintain and promote their quality for town centre users' recreation, as well as trip chaining for visitors to also use the town centre.

## **Transport, access and movement**

Transport, access and movement conditions for Baldock are outlined below relating to the following categories:

- access and movement,
- mode of travel,
- footfall and
- parking.

**Access and movement:** Following Baldock's Town Centre Enhancement Scheme in 2006, significant changes to the street scene and infrastructure have enabled better pedestrian permeability and flows of movement. This was achieved through widening the pedestrian paths, which has enabled wider walking access and space for traders to use the open realm for outdoor seating. The completion of the Baldock (A505) Bypass has aided this through the diversion of traffic around the town centre.

The [Baldock, Bygrave and Clothall Neighbourhood Plan](#) was published in 2021 and supports walking and cycling infrastructure, with a specific aim to improve infrastructure. This report also states the importance to reduce congestion and air pollution, thereby supporting walking and cycling journeys within Baldock.

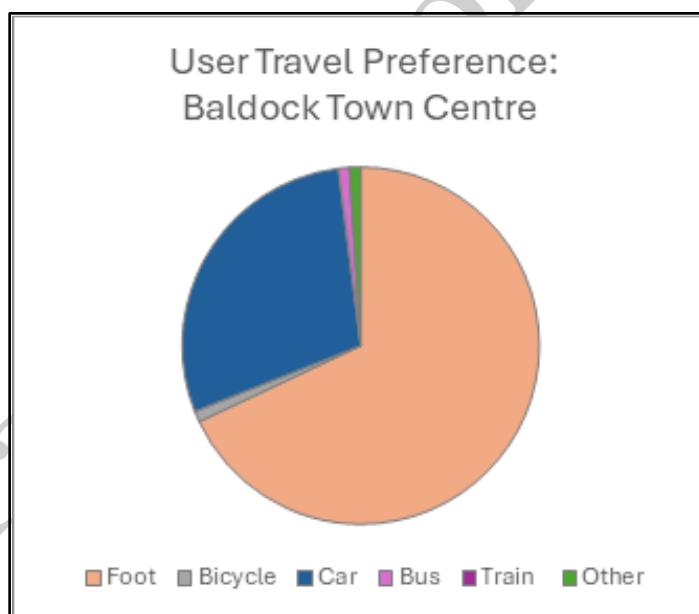
Of relevance to Baldock town centre, connections that have been identified (by the Local Cycling Walking and Infrastructure Plan) to be improved include Hitchin to Baldock via Letchworth and



Baldock connectivity to rail stations and development sites, with a desire to improve the A505 transport corridor. For example, a segregated cycle infrastructure on this route has been proposed, with lower speed limits for motorised vehicles on respective roads. To improve pedestrian flow between Letchworth and Baldock, the A1(M) Pedestrian Bridge would require minimal changes, surfacing, lighting, bollards and vegetation management, to return high impact. Additionally, the [Local Cycling Walking and Infrastructure Plan](#) determined Core Walking Zones to understand trips that can be optimised for increased walkability. Baldock is considered a Core Walking Zone with routes between its town centre and railway station as Key Walking Routes.

**Mode of Travel:** The Baldock Railway Station is located about 550 metres (under 10 minutes' average walk) to the northeast of the town centres' market square. Despite this, the household survey within the 2024 Town Centre and Retail Study suggests that few Baldock shop customers arrive by train.

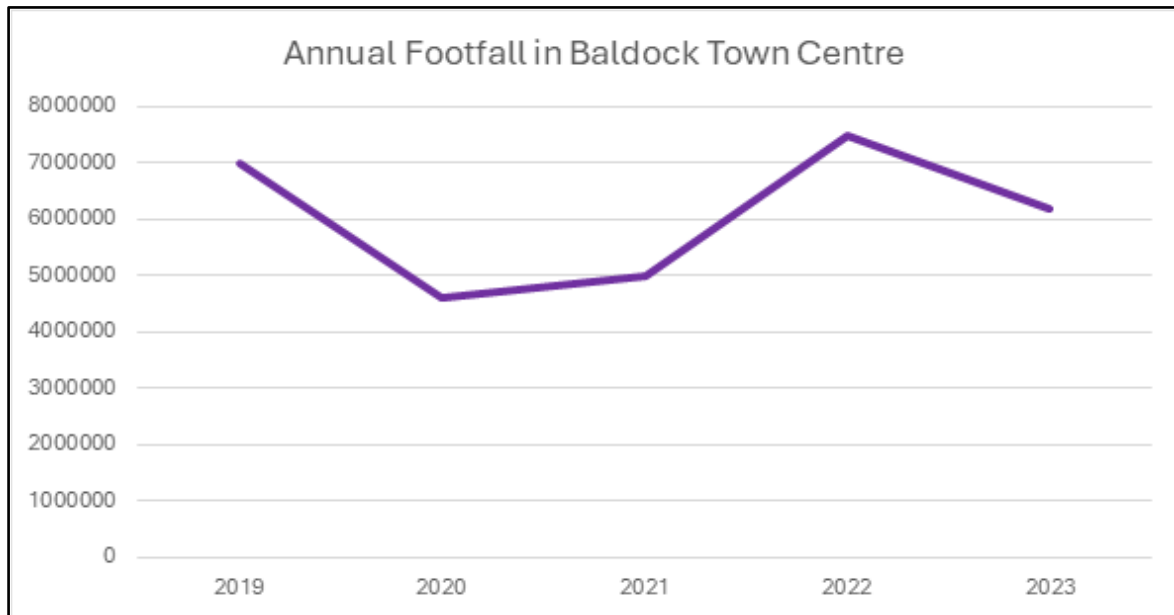
Based on NEMS Household survey, the majority of visitors to Baldock arrive by car. Additionally, based on the People & Places Report User Survey, 68% of Baldock residents surveyed travel to the centre by foot, and 33% travel by car; this sample population was made up of 95% locals and 5% visitors (living outside the postcode, but within a 30-minute drive). This indicates that locals are more likely to walk to the centre, whereas respondents from the wider Study Area will arrive by car.



**Figure 28:** User travel preference in Baldock town centre (People & Places, 2022).

**Footfall:** The district's HUQ footfall data indicates that Baldock town centre has experienced the negative effects of Covid-19 pandemic with a reduced annual footfall from roughly 7 million in 2019 to

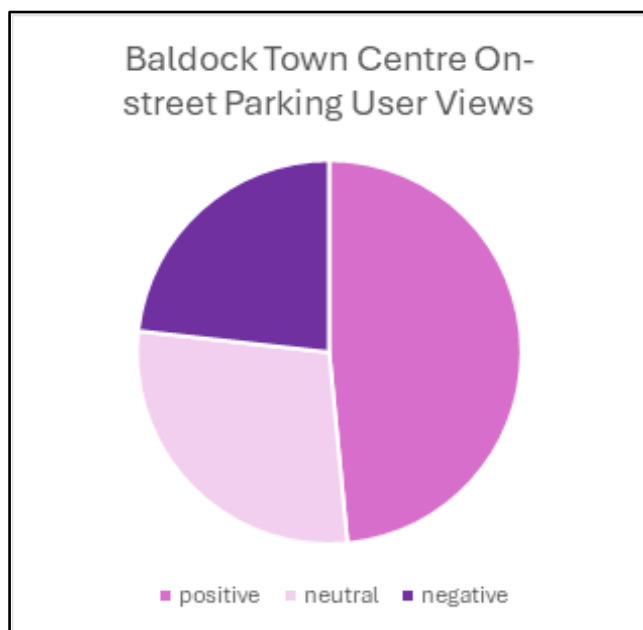
4.7 million in 2020. Recovering from physical isolation measures, the town centre’s annual footfall rose slightly in 2021, and more significantly in 2022 to above the 2019 frequency (7.4 million). Interestingly, in 2023, Baldock town centre’s footfall decreases again to just above 6 million visitors annually.



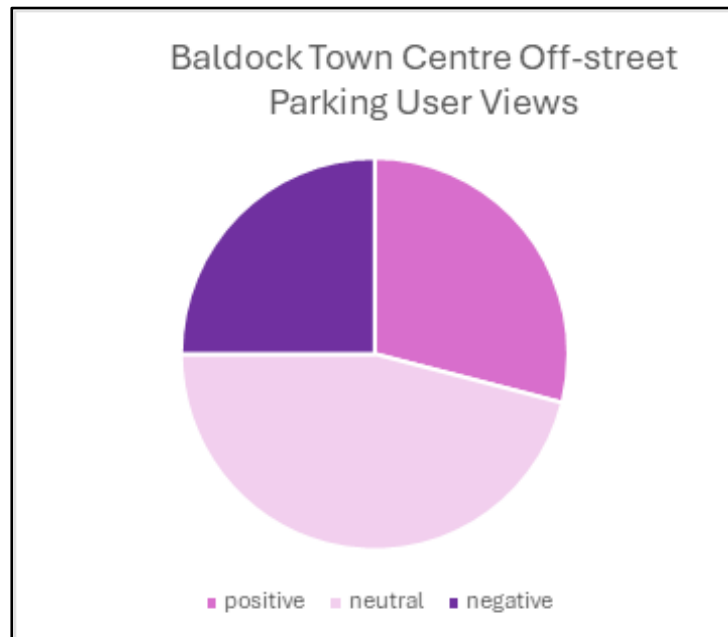
**Figure 29:** Annual footfall in Baldock Town Centre from 2019 through 2023 (HUQ).

**Parking:** For local traffic, following Town Enhancement Scheme, work has been done to “organise parking to enable new open public spaces, provide short-term parking on the high street, and improve parking appearance.” Now, on-street car parking is available along the west and east sides of High Street, along Whitehorse Street, Hitchin Street and Sun Street, and is free for up to two hours. Off-street public car parking is located near Baldock Community Centre. The Tesco Extra store also provides car parking spaces for customers. with improved wayfinding, if an appropriate partnership was formed between the district and Tesco Extra, this could be an opportunity to motivate Tesco patrons to walk and enjoy town centre businesses and public realm as well.

The quantity of on- and off-street parking within walking distance of the town centre is sufficient to meet current demand, and there are good pedestrian routes traversing the town. In the [People & Places Baldock Town Centre Recovery and Development Plan \(2022\)](#), users surveyed reported positive (79%) and neutral (18%) views, totalling to 97% combined, towards pedestrian access, with only 3% reporting negative attitudes on this aspect. Regarding on-street parking, users were relatively satisfied (positive and neutral) with the provision, with only 23% reporting negative attitudes. For off-street parking, there were fewer positive reports (29%), but a similar percentage of negative attitudes (25%).



**Figure 30:** On-street parking views by Baldock town centre users. Over 75% of users respond with positive or neutral views (People & Places, 2022).



**Figure 31:** Off-street parking views by Baldock town centre users. Users are generally split, with many neutral views (People & Places, 2022).

## Community

Baldock town centre has a good provision of community facilities, with a library, community centre and arts and heritage centre within the core. The community centre accommodates a variety of community functions with spaces to hire for external events. The library programmes a range of activities with combined walking and reading discussion groups and meetings with Police Community Support Officer. Additionally, and linked to promoting the town centre's offer, the Baldock Events Forum helps facilitate a community culture through managing the weekly outdoor market. Via the North Herts' Communities Partnership Team, Baldock users are welcomed to monthly Community Forum meetings to present applications for small grassroots grants and hear about important updates, as well as Town Drop-ins to express general concerns or questions.

To entice visitors into the town centre, Baldock should promote its strong offer for cafes, restaurants and pubs with charming historic market town character and pedestrian access.

Design-wise, Baldock Primary Shopping Area follows good design to deter anti-social behaviour using natural surveillance, interactive shop facades, clear lines of sight, and wide pedestrian paths. The public realm and small-town characteristic of Baldock facilitates visitors to walk the high street and interact with familiar neighbours, shop workers or the community in general, especially near the open public space at Bell Row and High Street.

Considering community safety and roads, High Street is the major artery of Baldock town centre, followed by Whitehorse Street; these streets intersect at a roundabout with a pedestrian crossing. There is one other pedestrian crossing on High Street within the town centre and it is a quarter mile south near Mansfield Road, approximately 4 minutes walking one direction. From officer site visits, users of the town centre are often observed crossing the road at unmarked spots and in-between moving cars to access the main town shops sitting directly across from each other. This behaviour is a hazard and highlights the disfunction of the pedestrian infrastructure.

Draft for Consultation

## OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY 11 NOVEMBER 2025

### \*PART 1 – PUBLIC DOCUMENT

#### **TITLE OF INFORMATION NOTE: MOBILISATION OF WASTE, RECYCLING AND STREET CLEANSING CONTRACT**

INFORMATION NOTE OF THE SHARED SERVICE MANAGER, WASTE AND RECYCLING

EXECUTIVE MEMBER – ENVIRONMENT

PRIORITY – SUSTAINABILITY

#### **1.SUMMARY**

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to provide an update to the committee regarding the mobilisation of waste, recycling and collection services from the start of the new contract in May 2025, primarily focusing on the roll out of the new waste and recycling services from August 2025.

#### **2 INFORMATION TO NOTE**

- 2.1 At its meeting on 9 July 2024, Cabinet agreed to award the new waste, recycling and street cleansing contract to Veolia UK Ltd. This contract has subsequently been mobilised with the contract beginning on 4 May 2025. Service changes introduced as part of the new contract commenced on 4 August
- 2.2 As reported at the 10 June 2025 meeting of Overview and Scrutiny, the initial mobilisation of the contract went well, with minimal disruption to collection and cleansing services. Keeping existing services and frequency at the start of the new contract allowed a bedding in period for the new contractor, with minimal disruption to residents.
- 2.3 As both the procurement of the contract and mobilisation of the service changes are large projects, a project team was established in August 2022, with officers from both councils. The team created a programme of works to oversee the procurement of the contract and subsequently the mobilisation of the contract including depot requirements, EV infrastructure, customer service and digital requirements, and communication.
- 2.4 A joint Project Board was also created to have strategic oversight of the procurement and subsequently the mobilisation of the contract and service

changes. A risk register was created and monitored at board meetings. Relevant Cabinet / Executive Members and Senior officers sit on the board.

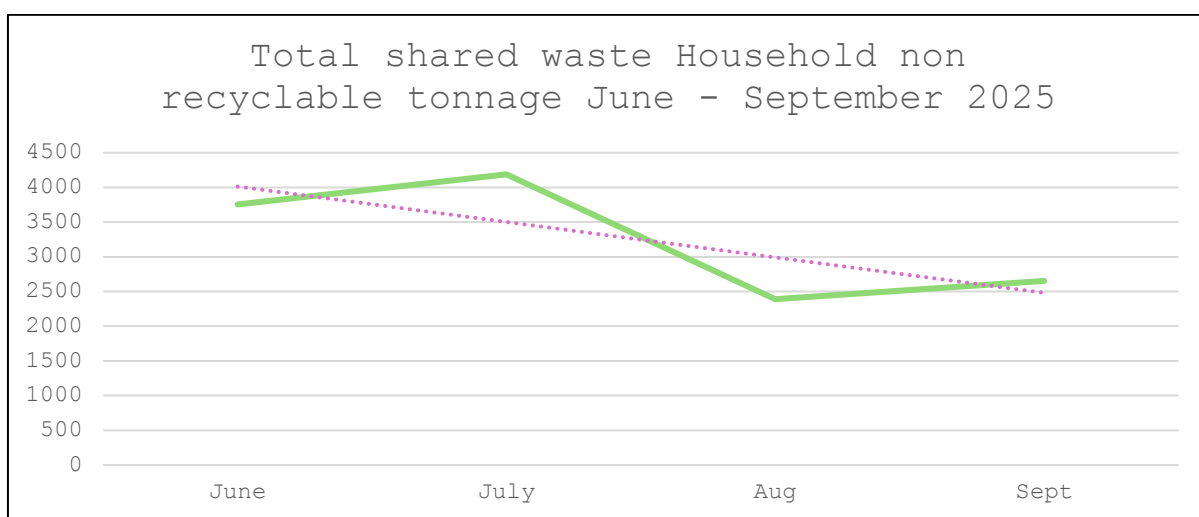
2.5 The new service was rolled out from 4 August across both districts. Key changes include:

- Non-recyclable waste, mixed recycling and cardboard and paper bins have moved to a new alternating three-week collection cycle.
- Inclusion of soft plastics in the mixed recycling bin
- New collection days for some residents to improve route efficiency.
- Weekly food waste collections continued for North Herts and introduced in East Herts.
- Garden waste continues to be collected fortnightly for subscribers.

2.6 The new service has been designed to make recycling easier and more efficient for residents, while aligning with the Government's 'Simpler Recycling' environmental requirements. Although these changes are scheduled for national implementation from 2026, we have chosen to introduce them earlier as part of the new contract procurement. This proactive approach ensures we operate as efficiently and effectively as possible throughout the duration of the contract.

#### Initial collection data:

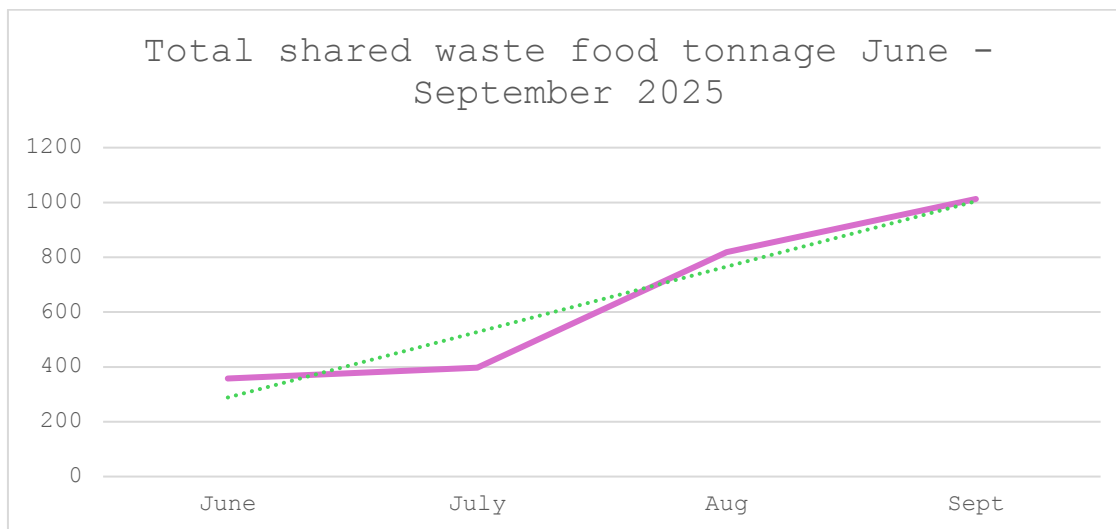
- The service changes in August have shown a significant impact on tonnages, particularly a big decrease in the amount of general waste being collected. The initial drop in tonnage aligns with the impact of the 3-weekly collections and the introduction of food waste collections in East Herts—diverting organic waste away from residual bins.



Graph 1  
Table 1

<b>Tonnage</b>	<b>June</b>	<b>July</b>	<b>Aug</b>	<b>Sept</b>
Total Household non-recyclable	3755.44	4188.25	2388.88	2653.27

- There has been a large uptake of the new food waste services in East Herts and a further increase in participation in the food waste service in North Herts.

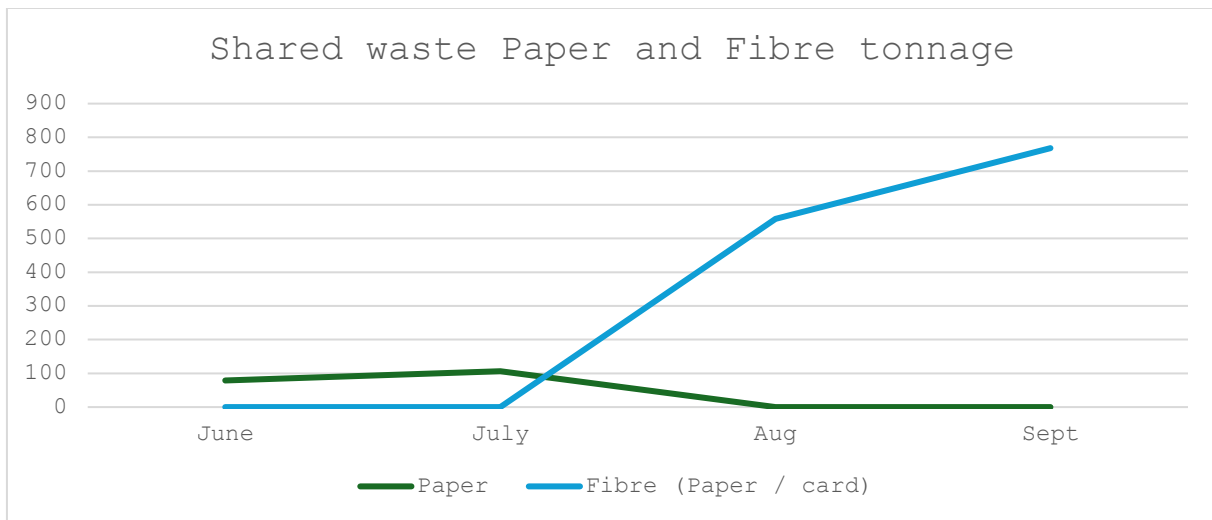


Graph 2

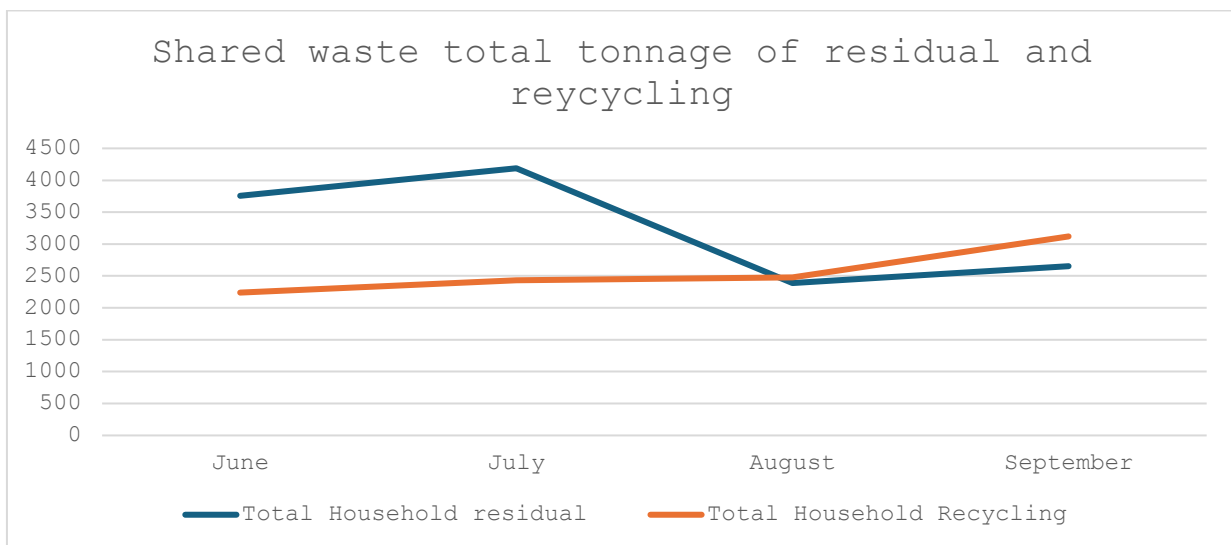
<b>Tonnage</b>	<b>June</b>	<b>July</b>	<b>Aug</b>	<b>Sept</b>
Food	357.75	396.72	818.5	1012.73

Table 2

- The inclusion of soft plastic into the mixed recycling has been welcomed by residents, the removal of card from this waste stream gives enough space in the recycling bin for the extra soft plastic volume to be captured. It is important to note that the inclusion of soft plastics recycling adds volume, but not significant weight.
- There was a significant increase in capture of fibre (paper and cardboard) in August, due to the inclusion of cardboard in this waste stream.



- Overall, the data is showing positive signs of behavioural shift: residual waste is decreasing, food waste is increasing, and recycling streams are adjusting. While soft plastics may inflate bin volume, the tonnage data helps clarify actual material tonnage recovery.
- The overall tonnage of general waste is showing a decrease of just under 43% compared to July's data (data supplied in recent O&S and council meetings were based on interim figures available at the time)
- A waste composition analysis is being carried out in Spring 2026, which should give further insight into the material being collected in each bin and opportunities to further target communications activity.



Graph 3

**2.7 Container deliveries:** In May, the process of delivering over 230,000 containers for the new service changes began, starting initially in North Herts, then from



June in East Herts. Veolia commissioned the UK market leader to deliver the bins for the new service

- 2.8 In North Herts this involved the introduction of a new 240l blue lidded bin for cardboard and paper, removing the card from the mixed recycling stream.
- 2.9 East Herts was more complex as the introduction of the new service required the following new containers to be delivered and other existing containers to be repurposed:
- Refuse - New 180-litre purple lidded bin delivered to kerbside properties to replace the previous 240-litre grey bin.
  - Mixed Recycling (plastic including soft plastic/glass/cans) - Black lidded 240-litre bin (formerly refuse bin) repurposed as a recycling bin.
  - Paper/cardboard - Blue lidded 240-litre bin (formerly mixed recycling bin) repurposed as cardboard and paper only bin.
  - Food waste - New 23-litre (kerbside) and 5-litre (kitchen) caddies delivered to kerbside properties as part of introduction of weekly food waste collection
  - Communal - services were expanded to mirror the collection offering for kerbside residents, including food waste, capacity adjustments continue to be carried out.
- 2.10 The delivery schedule was built based on the property data being used to build the new waste collection rounds, this had been provided by the client team from the previous contract dataset. The Client team had advised of reserved confidence in the dataset and additional checks were to be carried out by Veolia.
- 2.11 Deliveries in North Herts commenced in May, as here only one additional container was required and there was less change to current set up. The distribution company required at least a three-month window due to the quantity of deliveries required to be carried out across the full shared waste service.
- 2.12 East Herts bin deliveries commenced in June, with the expectation that all deliveries would have been completed by mid-July, allowing a two-week window ahead of service change to carry out any rectifications/oversight deliveries.
- 2.13 Although the delivery teams aimed to deliver to 468 households per day, this progress was slowed due to several factors.
- 2.14 There was a change to the originally identified bin storage site which added an extra 20 minutes to journey times, which were planned initially from the County Hall site in Hertford. This reduced productivity, as some teams were unable to reload vehicles as frequently during the day as planned.
- 2.15 Delivery staff had limited local knowledge, this did pose some issues with the delivery routing, very rural properties without street numbers and cross boundary errors.

- 2.16 Upon completing the list of deliveries, the team began working through the rectifications. It was then established that around 1,671 addresses in East Herts had been overlooked due to a data error. The data had been cleansed to remove commercial units and unfortunately the 1671 residential properties had also inadvertently been captured by this. Veolia has taken full accountability for this oversight and apologised for the issues it caused.
- 2.17 Due to IT system incompatibilities between Veolia, the council and the distribution company, this led to delays in real time data updates. This led to lack of oversight, a delay in responding to queries, and in some cases duplication of deliveries being carried out.
- 2.18 Despite this, as of 3 August, 53,488 residents (or 97%) in East Herts had received their new containers and were set up to start the new service from day one. North Herts deliveries had been completed to the delivery list by 4<sup>th</sup> August; however subsequent rectifications and deliveries were also carried out.
- 2.19 To address the issue Veolia brought in additional delivery crews during the week and at the weekends throughout August and into September to help deliver bins. The cost of this additional resource has been fully absorbed by Veolia.
- 2.20 Unfortunately, this issue led to an uplift in contact for both customer services team, this was especially noticeable in East Herts, due to the delay in some container deliveries. Problems with integration of bin request e-forms in East Herts also exacerbated the issue.
- 2.21 To address outstanding deliveries and reduce pressure on Customer Service Centre (CSC) teams, Veolia implemented a bespoke webform, accessible via both the North Herts and East Herts websites. This form allowed residents to report missing bin deliveries directly. In the interim, residents were advised to continue recycling using suitable containers until their bins were delivered. The table below shows the contacts received via the webform.

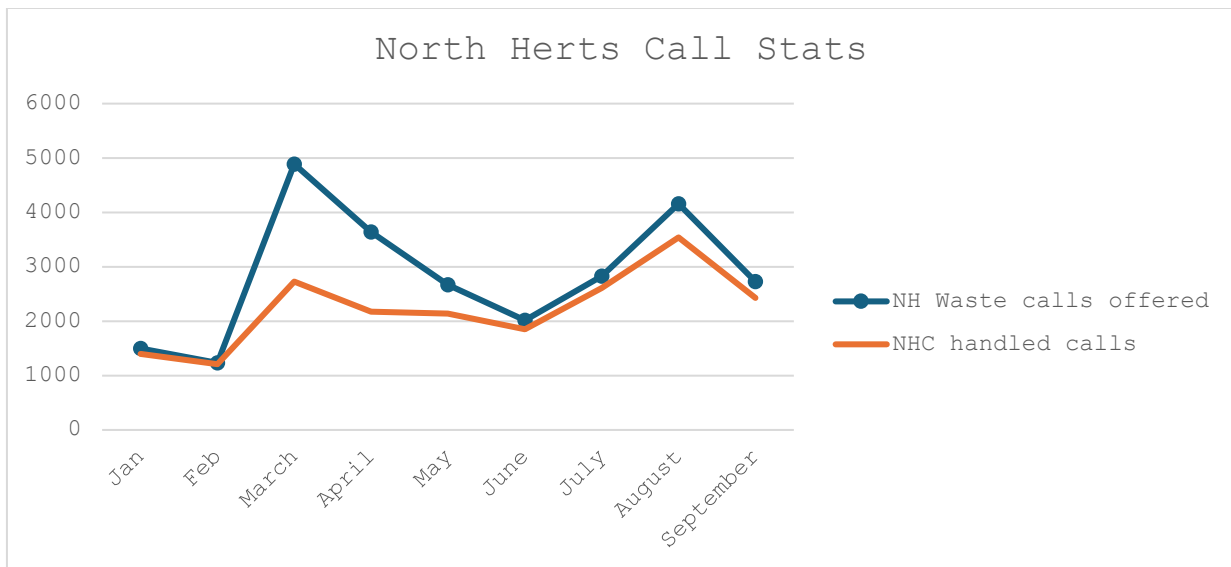
	East Herts	North Herts
<b>Missed delivery</b> as part of container rollout for service change	1454	395
<b>Damaged container(s)</b> (replacement delivered as part of this request)	435	57
<b>Remove container(s)</b> (delivered in error)	139	92
<b>Total</b>	<b>2028</b>	<b>544</b>

- 2.22 Although in North Herts residents have been participating in a weekly food waste collection since 2018, the new service change prompted a significant and unexpected demand for new food waste caddies. Due to long lead times of previously ordered stock, there was a short period in which there was no availability of caddies to be delivered to residents.

- 2.23 All deliveries relating to the new service roll out were completed by mid-September (this was mainly caddies due to stock shortage)
- 2.24 **Communications:** In July, Individual letters were sent to all domestic households advising of the change of frequency and collection day as required – letters also detailed their upcoming collection days for the first collection of each waste stream. Over 20 permutations of letters were sent out to over 107,000 households across both districts, this detailed specifics of their changes and any additional collections which were being provided. Each permutation required information to be mail merged covering address details, collection days and dates. These were sent by Royal Mail.
- 2.25 Residents already receiving an extra capacity service also received a bespoke letter advising them of the enhanced collection frequency that they would be on under the new service.
- 2.26 A detailed communications plan was produced, and communications channels utilised included e-newsletter updates, press releases, social media posts, including a Minecraft video to advise residents of the new service design, in addition to the letter, service leaflet and stickers which they received.
- 2.27 A poster was also designed and distributed to parishes and libraries to display for residents as a further visual aide.
- 2.28 Due to vacancies within the team, a limited in person events were held, however the Hitchin eco day was attended, also a small number of area forums, giving further advice and answering queries.
- 2.29 Monthly Cllr drop-in sessions were organised for Cllrs to join online and raise any concerns with the waste team. Whilst sessions were readily available and promoted in advance, attendance was low, which reduced opportunities for direct engagement and feedback.
- 2.30 Regular updates were communicated to Members via MIS /MIB.
- 2.31 Collection Day change communications: To enable the new three-weekly collection regime to operate as efficiently as possible, collection days changes were required for approximately 70% of residents across the two districts.
- 2.32 A delay in receiving the new design round data from Veolia impacted on the timing of the letter mail out, due to the complex set of permutations, which took time to batch and organise the delivery.
- 2.33 A corrupted batch of letters was also discovered, but once identified, corrected letters were resent out to those affected residents. There was also a delay in letters reaching some residents despite them being sent 1<sup>st</sup> class. This was outside of the client team's control.

### **3. CUSTOMER SERVICE AND DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION**

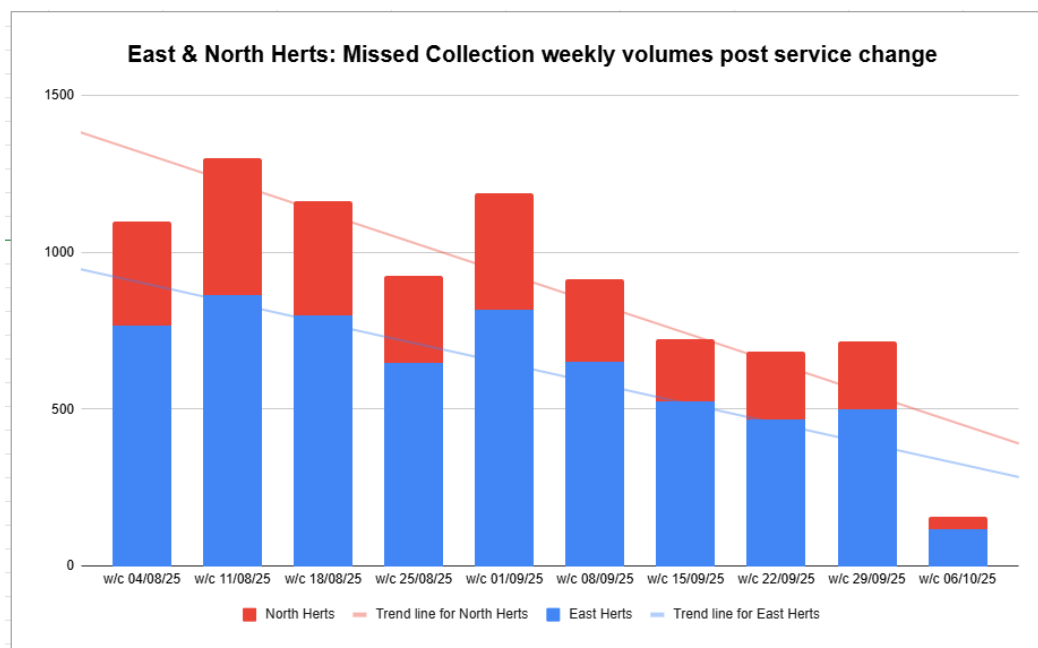
- 3.1 The successful implementation of customer service setup has been a critical part of the success or otherwise of the mobilisation of services. Not only does this ensure that residents can access the councils easily and efficiently, but it also ensures that should operational issues arise there is the capacity to manage a higher number of contacts. Operational issues will always create a higher number of contacts, but if business as usual contacts can be managed online effectively it frees up customer service agents to manage other issues
- 3.2 In North Herts, the rollout of new service changes has been a collaborative effort between the Customer Service Centre (CSC) and the Digital Transformation team, with a strong focus on improving customer experience, operational efficiency, and digital accessibility.
- 3.3 Drawing on lessons from previous service changes, the CSC recruited up to six additional temporary staff on a rolling basis to manage anticipated spikes in contact volumes, particularly during peak periods such as the garden waste subscription window and the main service change in July and August.
- 3.4 NHC Digital Services team developed and launched a new garden waste portal, fully integrated with the waste contractor's system. This enabled residents to set up and manage subscriptions via the portal, which feeds directly into the contractor's waste system, reducing pressure on the CSC and streamlining the customer journey.
- 3.5 Both teams worked together to redesign and streamline processes, ensuring that digital solutions were as efficient and effective as possible. This included the development of a suite of waste web forms, rolled out in phases to support the new contract and service launch.
- 3.6 The North Herts CSC experienced significant spikes in contact, especially around key service change dates. This was mitigated by additional staffing and by encouraging customers to use the new digital channels.
- 3.7 To support customers in using the new online digital tools, the CSC provided guidance and digital assistance, ensuring that those less confident with technology could still access services effectively.
- 3.8 The below graph shows the calls offered and handled by the customer service team in North Herts – the early spike in March shows the increased contact due to the garden waste subscription period. The subsequent rise in contact is seen at the end of July and continued to rise throughout August, with a decrease now being seen in September.



Graph 4

#### 4. COLLECTIONS ISSUES

- 4.1 As with any major service change, some level of disruption was always anticipated. There was an uplift in missed collection reporting across all services over the first few cycles of the new service. This was due to the bedding in of new crews, getting used to new rounds and areas. Although many staff are experienced, this was not on all rounds, there are also a lot of new staff, particularly in East Herts, where the new food waste service began. The below graph shows the number of missed bins since the new service and the overall downtrend as services have bedded in.



Graph 5

- 4.2 Veolia had also planned additional vehicles and crew to support the teams over the initial new service period – these additional crews focused on the anticipated uplift of missed bins and general crew support to ensure daily completion.
- 4.3 It was also anticipated that the three-weekly cycle would encourage more reporting from residents who previously would manage if they missed a collection under the fortnightly scheme. As the service beds in and staff learn the rounds, missed collections should reduce.

#### Food waste

- 4.4 Food waste crews in East Herts experienced issues with the high volume of waste presented. Even after the initial first few weeks of the new service the tonnages remained high. Unfortunately, on occasion, this has led to some roads not being able to be completed due to driver hours, or the disposal location closing.
- 4.5 This was continuously monitored by Veolia and the client team, with assisted crews helping where possible, crews also working overtime and weekend work, making every effort to complete.
- 4.6 Due to continued challenges faced with those crews, Veolia have now taken the decision to provide an additional crew to support the food waste service on a permanent basis as of Mid-October 2025.

#### Narrow/farm Round

- 4.7 Efficiencies introduced by Veolia, merged the previously separate narrow and farm rounds from both authorities together, this regrettably led to issues around knowledge of the mostly rural areas, and presentation of containers.
- 4.8 The specific layout and access constraints of properties previously served by the narrow round presented unforeseen challenges for crews operating under the new configuration. This resulted in a pattern of missed and repeated missed collections for affected households.
- 4.9 Veolia acknowledged the operational difficulties this caused, and in response, the properties impacted by the merger have now been realigned under separate depot supervision. This realignment ensures that crews familiar with the area are assigned to these rounds, and that routing is tailored to the unique requirements of the locations involved.

#### Communal collections

- 4.10 A data error was identified affecting container sizes at several blocks of flats. As a result of this error, these properties were incorrectly scheduled for a three-weekly domestic collection, rather than the appropriate communal service frequency. This affected 3.77% of communal residents (897 residents) of East Herts and 6.7% (1166 residents) of North Herts communal residents.
- 4.11 Once identified, the issue was promptly investigated and corrected. An interim schedule was put in place, defaulting affected locations to weekly collections to prevent further overflow and ensure continuity of service.

- 4.12 Additional crews were deployed to service the impacted communal areas, and operational adjustments were made to ensure bins were collected reliably
- 4.13 Locations continue to be monitored closely by Veolia management and the waste team, any further issues identified are resolved promptly and data amended swiftly, with crews also being given extra guidance. The waste team are working with Veolia to ensure that data accuracy and service consistency are maintained going forward.
- 4.14 The waste team are currently also visiting all communal locations to ensure that correct signage is placed on both containers and wall space, bespoke communal leaflets are also being delivered to residents advising them of the services.

## **5. VEHICLES & GARAGE**

- 5.1 The vehicle workshop has now been relocated to the Buntingford depot, installation of the equipment was delayed due to the EHC grounds maintenance contractor moving off site late, originally proposed February, and the area not being vacant until contract start.
- 5.2 Delays on receiving landlord permission also impacted on the scheduled works.
- 5.3 Due to a manufacturing recall, all but one of the planned electric vehicles was delayed. The new EV vehicles will be arriving between October and December 2025. Diesel fuelled vehicles were used at the commencement of the contract.
- 5.4 Due to the delayed exit of other contractors on sites, the installation of new bunded tanks and the use of hydrotreated vegetable oil (HVO) was delayed until October 2025. This is now fully operational with all non-EV vehicles using HVO, reducing the carbon emissions of the fleet by appx 90%

## **6 CAPACITY IN THE SHARED WASTE TEAM**

- 6.1 During the new service change, the client team carried vacant posts (as identified in Risk log Appendix 1). This included three contract officer posts, and the waste communications post. More recently we have seen the departure of a further contract officer, and the Shared Waste Service manager, and our performance and project officer job share.
- 6.2 Although the Service manager post has now been filled, this has left a further gap of the Contract manager role, which is currently being recruited to, along with the Performance and project officer post.
- 6.3 Those periods of vacant post have led to further pressure on the team during an extremely busy time for the team.

## **7. NEXT STEPS**

- 7.1 A bedding in period is usual practice for a contract of this type, as a transition of wholesale services from one provider to another including a service change is complex. A “grace period” was observed following the introduction of new services, however the Performance Management Regime (PMR) for the contract will be commencing in full as of 1<sup>st</sup> November.
- 7.2 The PMR will be reviewed by the Service Manager on an ongoing basis with Veolia management team, in line with the terms of the contract.
- 7.3 Resource issues in the shared waste team - The Service manager position has now been filled as of 1 September 2025; the Contract Manager post is currently being recruited to.
- 7.4 Additional temporary support has been recruited until November to assist in the management of flats communication and audit.
- 7.5 A new app is being released early November, for residents of both East & North Herts to use, enabling them to set notification of the collection’s days, alongside other search functions enhancing the use for residents.
- 7.6 Street transformation program to be fully integrated over the coming months, seeing the use of E-trikes in the main town centres, looking at further efficiencies and enhancements.
- 7.7 The continued use of HVO, seeing carbon efficiencies throughout the service, providing both councils with environmental benefits to meet their aspiration of Net Zero 2030. The SWS are currently working with both East and North teams on the reporting of this data. The new electric vehicles are due to arrive before the end of the year.
- 7.8 Further work with East digital team to progress on the outstanding webforms with an anticipated completion of December 2025.
- 7.9 Looking ahead to the Christmas period, further communication and support to residents will be given to manage the additional waste and recycling produced over this period.
- 7.10 Social value will be monitored through the life of the contract, this includes local staff employed by the contract, apprenticeship programmes, support of local community projects, support of local economy.
- 7.11 As part of the project close-down process, a lesson learnt meeting will be convened to evaluate the delivery approach, highlight what worked well, and identify any areas for refinement. This will ensure that learning is captured and applied to future rollouts.



## **8. APPENDICES**

Appendix 1 Risk log  
Appendix 2 Work packages  
Appendix 3 Work Programme  
Appendix 4 Waste service change – activity plan

## **9. CONTACT OFFICERS**

- 9.1 Jeanette Lowden, Shared Service Manager, Waste and Recycling  
[Jeanette.lowden@north-herts.gov.uk](mailto:Jeanette.lowden@north-herts.gov.uk)
- 9.2 Chris Jeffery, Customer Service & Digital Transformation Manager  
[chris.jeffery@north-herts.gov.uk](mailto:chris.jeffery@north-herts.gov.uk)
- 9.3 Sarah Kingsley, Director – Environment  
[sarah.kingsley@north-herts.gov.uk](mailto:sarah.kingsley@north-herts.gov.uk)

## **10. BACKGROUND PAPERS**

None

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## **Appx 1- WORK PACKAGES**

Below is the list of completed work packages

<b><u>Work Package</u></b>	<b><u>Completion Date</u></b>
Agreement of lease for storage area for bin procurement	April 2025
Award of MRF tender	April 2025
Finalisation of Letchworth Depot lease	May 2025
Finalisation of Buntingford Depot lease	July 2025
Condition survey Buntingford Depot	June 2025
Condition survey Letchworth Depot	April 2025
Landlord permission for EV infrastructure at Letchworth Depot.	April 2025
Communication to Extra Capacity customers	May 2025
Finalisation of communication pack for bin deliveries	April 2025
Transfer of DD data base EHC	July 2025
Final data sets for ECHO	April 2025
NH Direct Debit run for garden waste	April 2025
Finalisation of bin delivery schedule	April 2025
Finalisation of day changes	June 2025
Landlord permission for site alterations and EV infrastructure at Buntingford Depot.	May 2025
EH Direct Debit run for garden waste	August 2025
Signing of MRF Contract	September 2025
Service leaflet and day change letters	July 2025
New Service Implementation	August 2025

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**Project Name:** Waste, Recycling & Street Cleansing Contract Mobilisation and Demobilisation

Risk No.	Date Raised	Risk Owner	Title	Description	Category	Impact	Probability	I/P Score	Proximity	Last Review Date	Key Affecting Impacts	Completed Risk Mitigating Actions	Ongoing Risk Mitigating Actions	Action Owner(s)	Status of Actions
2	22/07/2024	Chloe Hipwood	Skills shortage due to staff leaving.	There is a risk that the project cannot be delivered successfully due to lack of staff, skills and experience in the client team as a result of staff leaving.	People, Operational, Reputation	2	3	7	Immediate	01/10/2025	Morale	Contract Officer Post recruited to Maternity cover post recruited to Communications officer recruited to	Regular 1-2-1's Regular team meetings New team members undergoing training Recruitment for replacement Comms officer - now completed and in post 1 x New vacancy - Contract Officer recruitment ongoing - due to start late Oct *Shared Service Manager Vacancy - in post Sept 25 *Shared contract manager - currently recruiting to post *Service performance and projects officer - currently recruiting to post	JL	Ongoing
14	22/07/2024	Sarah Kingsley/ James Ellis	Insufficient staff resource	There is a risk that the project has insufficient staff resources because of the necessity to maintain business as usual	Financial, Operational, People, Reputation,	2	3	7	Immediate	01/10/2025	Resource, Budget	IT projects managed corporately	Prioritisation of work streams Vacancies and volume of resident contacts are impacting on contract monitoring.	JL	Ongoing
27	22/07/2024	Adam Staples	Availability of online services - EHC	There is a risk that the online web services are not set up for self serve in sufficient time for the start of the contract	Financial, Information, Operational, People, Reputation, Strategic	2	3	7	1-3 months	01/10/2025	Time, Resource, External Factors	Early engagement meetings BPM completed for core services Meetings held with Veolia IT Timeline for IT development established Additional customer service support allocated. Direct entry into ECHO by customer service agents rather than via online forms Some forms integrated with ECHO, bin day look up, missed bin reporting, bulky (as of 17/10)	IT system set up and testing Allocation of sufficient resources	SM, AS	Ongoing
34	22/07/2024	Geoff Hayden/ Anna Osbourn	Buntingford Repairs	There is a risk that Buntingford is not handed back to EHC with dilapidation repairs complete or EHC works not complete e.g. vehicle wash.	Financial, Operational,	2	2	5	Immediate	01/10/2025	Time, Resource, Budget	Walls in transfer shed have been repaired. Veolia completed schedule of condition. Toilet block removed Roller shutter door now installed Garage fully functional	Estates to arrange a dilapidations survey A-frame replacement still to be carried out early 2026 Transfer shed washing - partially complete.	GH, JL	Ongoing
35	22/07/2024	Michael Clark/Phil Doggett	Letchworth Repairs	There is a risk that Letchworth is not handed back to NHC with dilapidation repairs complete or NHC works not complete	Financial, Operational,	2	2	5	Immediate	01/10/2025	Time, Resource, Budget	Dilapidations survey received. Veolia completed schedule of condition. Tarmac has been completed further asbestos report to be carried out to assess internal roofing with a view to securing with netting	Estates to determine dilapidations costs for FCC. Work to be completed by the council TBC continued discussion with estate and Veolia to progress with works	MC, JL,PD	Ongoing

Project Name: Waste, Recycling & Street Cleansing Contract Mobilisation and Demobilisation

Risk No.	Date Raised	Risk Owner	Title	Description	Category	Impact	Probability	I/P Score	Proximity	Last Review Date	Key Affecting Impacts	Completed Risk Mitigating Actions	Ongoing Risk Mitigating Actions	Action Owner(s)	Status of Actions
41	24/07/2024	Geoff Hayden	Glendale Move	There is a risk that Glendale do not vacate the Buntingford Depot in time for the new provider to move in. This may also impact on the ability to install EV charging infrastructure.	Operational, Financial, Reputation	1	1	1	Immediate	14/07/2025	Budget, Resource, External Factors	New site cleared Glendale approached Planning applications being developed Glendale moved off site	Some small items at Buntingford still to be cleared	GH	Completed
42	08/08/2024	Anita Higgs	Trade Direct Debits - EHC	There is a risk that the trade waste direct debit implementation creates additional work at a critical time during the mobilisation of the waste contract and that team capacity is affected if not implemented due to new EPR reporting requirements	Operational, Financial, Reputation	2	1	3	>6 months	28/05/2025	Resource	Reassurance provided by finance		AH	Ongoing

Ref	Project Title	Project Description	Dependant Projects	NHC Directorate/ Service Lead	EHC Department Lead	Project Lead Officer	Waste Service Officer Lead	Other departmental involvement/ stakeholders	Start Dates	End Date	Revised Start Date	Revised End Date	Status	Original Risk Likelihood	Original Risk Impact	Original Risk Score 1-9	Current Risk Likelihood	Current Risk Impact	Current Risk Score 1-9	Notes W/B 03/03/25		Notes 1/10/25
WM4	Flats - recycling provision refresh	Review of existing recycling and residual capacity Identify weekly residual waste services which can move fortnightly Determination of needs - case by case Engagement with Managing agents - case by case Bin procurement Bin delivery Resident engagement		Shared Waste Service	Shared Waste Service	JL/KLW	JL/KLW	Housing Associations Managing Agents	Jan-24	Dec-24	Jul-24	Feb-25	In Progress	Medium	Low	2	Medium	Low	2	Ongoing	Rounds incomplete on ECHO following day change. Updates and checks ongoing.	2 x agency staff assisting with signage and capacity checks
WM6	Commercial Food Waste	Set pricing structure Agree disposal arrangements with HCC Agree a delivery programme and capacity with Urbaser Marketing Business sign up Mobilisation	WM13 WM21 WM31	Shared Waste Service	Shared Waste Service	LO	LO	EHC Finance NHC Finance EHC Comms team NHC Comms team	Jan-24	Mar-25	Nov-24		In Progress	Low	Low	1	Low	Low	1	Pricing agreed	To be advertised further following bedding in of food rounds and determination of capacity pockets.	To be promoted further following bedding in of food rounds and determination of capacity pockets.
WM7	Planning guidance update	Identification of changes required to SPDs Development of new guidance and standard conditions Updates to websites		Shared Waste Service	Shared Waste Service	JL	JL	EHC Planning NHC Planning	Jan-24	Dec-24	Aug-24		In Progress	Low	Low	1	Low	Low	1	No further update	All agreed but needs adding to EH website	
WM13	Recruitment of Trade Officer	New job description Job evaluation Advert and recruitment Training		Shared Waste Service	Shared Waste Service	LO	LO	Communications teams NHC HR	Jun-24	Jan-25	Jan-25	Apr-25	Not Started	Low	Low	1	Low	Low	1	No further update		to be done by Xmas
WM16	Garden Waste Portal - EHC	Development of specification Design of new portal Build of new portal Integration with finance systems for DDs Integration with card payment system Integration with waste management IT system System testing Soft launch user testing New subscription year - go live	WM17 WM19	N/A	Transformation	AS	SM/GB	Stevenage Procurement EHC Finance Stevenage IT EHC Legal EHC Customer Service Urbaser Digital Peanut	May-24	Dec-24			In Progress	High	High	8	High	High	9	Card payments being manually reconciled with some challenges identified. No other updates.	Portal ready but EH CSC have declined to publish.	Ready to go live - awaiting date from digital team
WM17	Set Up Integrated Online Forms - EHC	Identify data capture requirements and reporting needs Set up forms Integration with waste management IT system Integration with card payment systems System testing Soft launch user testing Mobilisation - go live	WM16	N/A	Transformation	AS	LO	EHC Customer Service	Jun-24	Feb-25			In Progress	Medium	High	8	Medium	High	8	Funding request to enable work to progress.	Bulky, and replacement bins ready but not yet published online. Streets in test.	Bulky is now live as of Oct 25. other webform to still be progressed by digital - EH moved away from granicus for support of this

Ref	Project Title	Project Description	Dependant Projects	NHC Directorate/ Service Lead	EHC Department Lead	Project Lead Officer	Waste Service Officer Lead	Other departmental involvement/ stakeholders	Start Dates	End Date	Revised Start Date	Revised End Date	Status	Original Risk Likelihood	Original Risk Impact	Original Risk Score 1-9	Current Risk Likelihood	Current Risk Impact	Current Risk Score 1-9	Notes W/B 03/03/25		Notes 1/10/25
WM19	Migration of Garden Waste Direct Debit EHC Customers	Determination if list transfer possible Determination of system to be used System setup Testing Communication with subscribers Re-signup	WM16	N/A	Finance	AH	LO	EHC Finance Stevenage IT EHC Customer Service Urbaser	Aug-24	Mar-25			In Progress	High	High	9	High	High	2	Compelted	New contract with Interbacs managed by EH finance. DD's yet to be taken for 25/26.	completed - first DD taken 1/10/25
WM21	Trade Waste Software	Identification of capabilities of Provider solution Determination of any outstanding system needs Decision on existing Whitespace solution Re-procurement System set and and configuration System integration with finance systems X 2 System testing Data migration Soft launch testing	WM6	Shared Waste Service	Shared Waste Service	SM	SM	EHC Finance NHC Finance EHC Customer Service NHC Customer Service	Jul-24	Mar-25			In Progress	Medium	Medium	5	Medium	Medium	5	Negotiations ongoing with Whitespace	Whitespac e extended for 1 year. New online functionality in developme nt for NH. Yet to be progressed in EH.	no update
WM22	De-mobilisation	Demobilisation of Letchworth depot Demobilisation of Butingford depot Stock checks Asset checks and maintenance Condition survey Letchworth depot Condition survey Buntingford depot Data transfer/deletion as appropriate Novation of contracts		Shared Waste Service	Shared Waste Service	JL	JL	EHC Property Services NHC Property Services	Jul-24	Apr-25			In Progress	Medium	Medium	5	Medium	Medium	4	No update	Final contract payments to be agreed . Delapidati ons yet to be agreed - being progressed by property services.	ongoing disucssions with FCC & Veolia with NH property team
WM23	Mobilisation	See separate preferred bidder spreadsheet	WM22	Shared Waste Service	Shared Waste Service	CH	CH	All	Jul-24	Apr-25			In Progress	Low	High	6	Low	High	1	Crew drop in and training dates agreed. Dates for crew 1-2-1s agreed All workstreams progressing		completed
WM24	Procurement of MRF contract	Soft market testing Decision cycles Specification drafting Procurement exercise Evaluation Decision cycle Mobilisation		Shared Waste Service	Shared Waste Service	CH	CH	NHC Procurement EHC Finance NHC Finance EHC Legal NHC Legal HWP	Sep-24	May-25	May-25		In Progress	Medium	High	8	Low	High	1	Tenders due back 12 March	Contract still to be signed.	completed, sealed & signed Sept 2025



Ref	Project Title	Project Description	Dependant Projects	NHC Directorate/ Service Lead	EHC Department Lead	Project Lead Officer	Waste Service Officer Lead	Other departmental involvement/ stakeholders	Start Dates	End Date	Revised Start Date	Revised End Date	Status	Original Risk Likelihood	Original Risk Impact	Original Risk Score 1-9	Current Risk Likelihood	Current Risk Impact	Current Risk Score 1-9	Notes W/B 03/03/25		Notes 1/10/25
WM25	EH Garden Waste Subscriptions 25/26	Agree pricing for 25/26 System set up DD sign up Subscription year communications Exception management	WM16 WM17 WM19	N/A	Shared Waste Service	LO/SM	LO/SM	EHC Finance	Sep-24	Jan-25			In Progress	Medium	High	8	Medium	High	6	Small numbers of card payers contacted to encourage resubscription. Reconciliation challenges being addressed.	Direct debits yet to be taken	DD's now in place - awaiting update on 25/26 pricing update from EHC finance
WM28	Data cleansing and IT system configuration	Data cleansing of existing data set Determination of files for transfer to Provider Agreement of system assets set up Agreement of field configuration Business Process Mapping System set up	WM23	Shared Waste Service	Shared Waste Service	SM	SM	EHC Customer Service NHC Customer Service EHC Transformation Team NHC IT team	Dec-24	Mar-24			In Progress	Medium	Medium	5	Medium	Medium	5	Ongoing	Work ongoing following round change to manage flats, trade and streets impacts.	no further updates
WM29	Caddy & Bin Roll Out	Organisation of storage Determination of delivery sequence Communication messages to residents Writing of schedules Writing of FAQs Issues management Deliveries management	WM23	Shared Waste Service	Shared Waste Service	GB	GB	Communications teams NHC Customer Service EHC Customer Service Provider	Jan-25	Jul-25			In Progress	Medium	High	8	Medium	High	1	not due	Almost	completed
WM31	Trade Waste Direct Debit	System set up System testing Notification to customer base Customer set up Invoice run Communication to outstanding customer base	WM6	N/A	Finance	AH	LO	EHC Customer Service EHC Finance Team EHC IT Team	Jan-24	Oct-24	Jun-24	Jan-25	Not Started	High	Medium	7	High	Medium	7	No update		no update
WM34	Transfer or closure of Buntingford Toilet	Decision regarding refurbishment, new cleaning contract or closure		N/A			CH	Communications team Members Property Services Buntingford Town Council	Sep-24	Apr-25	Jan-25		Not Started	Low	Low	1	Low	Low	1	Variation to NHC toilet contract being prepared. Toilet refurbishment completed	Ongoing issues with vandalism on. Future TBC. Ongoing cleansing covered by DANFO contract for the medium term.	no further update



#### **Appendix 4 - 2025 Waste Service Change – headline external communications plan**

##### **Key messages:**

**New waste and recycling collection service launch:** North Herts and East Herts Councils launched a new waste and recycling service on 4 August 2025, offering more recycling options and a more efficient service.

**More recycling options:** The new service increased the range of materials that can be recycled at home, including increased capacity for cardboard and paper, and the addition of plastic bags and wrapping recycling.

**Collection frequency changes:** Collections are on an alternating three-week cycle for non-recyclable waste, mixed recycling, cardboard and paper, while food waste will continue to be collected weekly and garden waste fortnightly for subscribers. Flats with communal bins were to remain on their current collection cycle.

**Bin deliveries:** New bins were delivered to households, this started in May, with instructions not to use them until 4 August.




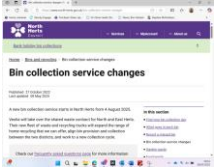

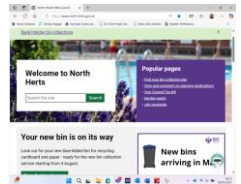
**Government recycling targets:** The changes are designed to meet the Government's 'Simpler Recycling' requirements which call for the separate collection of cardboard and paper and the recycling of soft plastics.











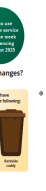
**Public consultation:** The decision to change the collection cycle and align services between North and East Herts follows a public consultation held in Summer 2022 and a competitive contract procurement process.









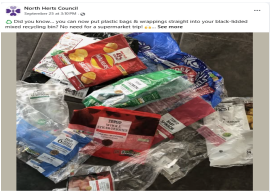
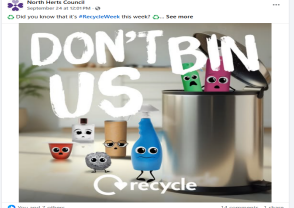
**Support for extra capacity households:** Households with special medical needs, multiple babies in nappies, and larger households received separate communication regarding extra support.

**Communication of changes:** Information about the changes was communicated to residents across both digital and non-digital channels (see overleaf) over several months.

Headline External Comms plan:

Month	Activity	Item
<b>OCTOBER 2022</b>	<b>Changes to bin collections coming in 2025</b> (non-digital & digital) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Press - featured in printed version of The Comet plus digital version of other local papers.</li> <li>E: Newsletter inclusion</li> <li>Social media promotion</li> </ul>	
<b>SEPTEMBER 2024</b>	<b>Veolia announcement and three-weekly reminder</b> (non-digital & digital) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Press - featured in printed version of The Comet &amp; Royston Crow plus digital version of other local papers.</li> <li>E: Newsletter inclusion</li> <li>Social media promotion</li> </ul>	
<b>2025</b>		
<b>MARCH</b>	<b>Introducing the changes A5 leaflet</b> (non-digital & digital) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Printed and distributed to all homes who have their Council Tax bill posted to them</li> <li>Sent digitally to all homes who receive their Council Tax bill by email</li> </ul>	
<b>PUBLISHED OCT 22, THEN ONGOING</b>	<b>FAQs/Service change webpage</b> (digital)	 
<b>MARCH LAUNCH, THEN ONGOING</b>	<b>Website homepage promotion</b> (digital) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>MAY – reminder re new bins arriving/changes</li> <li>JUNE – introducing the changes film</li> <li>JULY – countdown</li> <li>AUG – go live</li> </ul>	

<p><b>MARCH LAUNCH, THEN ONGOING</b></p>	<p><b>Press releases issued to local media</b> (non-digital &amp; digital)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>MARCH – introducing the changes</li> <li>MAY – reminder re new bins arriving/changes</li> <li>JULY – final – service changing on 4 August</li> </ul>	<p><b>Three-weekly bin cycle to be rolled out</b></p> <p><b>Countdown to bin collection changes</b></p> <p>New contract starts in North Herts</p>  	<p>East Herts Council updates householders about new refuse and recycling regime</p> <p>By Sarah Cox - seniorcorrespondent.co.uk</p> <p>Published: 13.33, 22 July 2023   Updated: 14.06, 22 July 2023</p> 
<p><b>MARCH LAUNCH, THEN ONGOING</b></p>	<p><b>Social media promotion</b> (digital)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>MARCH – introducing the changes</li> <li>MAY – reminder re new bins arriving/changes</li> <li>JULY – countdown</li> <li>AUG – go live</li> </ul>	 	
<p><b>MARCH LAUNCH, THEN ONGOING</b></p>	<p><b>E: Newsletter countdown</b> (digital)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>MARCH – introducing the changes</li> <li>MAY – reminder re new bins arriving/changes</li> <li>JULY – countdown</li> <li>AUG – go live</li> </ul>	 	
<p><b>MARCH LAUNCH, THEN ONGOING</b></p>	<p><b>Parish and Town Council updates</b> (digital &amp; non-digital)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>MIS/MIB (digital)</b> – Regular updates •</li> <li><b>Letters</b> – sent w/c 9 June</li> </ul>		
<p><b>APRIL &amp; ONGOING</b></p>	<p><b>Extra Capacity letter</b> (non-digital)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Printed and distributed to all homes with extra capacity needs. 1000+ sent (based on the data we hold)</li> </ul>		
<p><b>MAY</b></p>	<p><b>Reminder of the changes leaflet</b> (non-digital)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Printed and distributed to all homes alongside their new blue-lidded/Purple lidded bibs and caddies, East Herts residents has an additional food waste leaflet.</li> </ul>	 	

<b>MAY</b>	<b>Poster (non-digital)</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A3 poster created for Parishes/Libraries/council-owned buildings</li> <li>To be displayed at all future Cllr surgeries and Forums too</li> </ul>	
	<b>MAY Email footer added to external emails North (digital)</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Staff and Cllr emails – with click-through to service change webpage.</li> </ul>	
	<b>Town event pop-ups (in-person)</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>10 May – Hitchin Eco Day</li> </ul> <b>Bin deliveries with stickers and info</b> Delivery of 200k+ containers	
<b>JUNE</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>In-person attendance at Area Forums (in-person)</b></li> <li><b>Vehicle naming competition launches 'Tag that truck' (digital &amp; non-digital)</b></li> <li><b>Introducing the changes (graphical) film (digital)</b></li> <li><b>Detailed service change leaflet distributed to homes (non-digital)</b></li> <li><b>Outlook magazine double page spread (non-digital)</b></li> </ul>	 
<b>JULY</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Minecraft video for social media explaining the changes</b></li> <li><b>Day change letters and Service Leaflet to residents (non-digital)</b></li> <li><b>Stakeholder packs (Cllrs, Customer service, Community Partnerships, Media) emailed (digital)</b></li> </ul>	 
<b>AUGUST</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>4 AUGUST GO LIVE</b></li> <li>Updates to web pages to reflect new collection information.</li> <li>Significant increase in customer contact to Customer Services and client team</li> </ul>	
<b>SEPTEMBER</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>New service social media and comms posts</li> </ul>	
<b>OCTOBER</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Still to come: Results of vehicle naming competition</li> <li>Resident collections app</li> </ul>	

## OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

11 November 2025

### \*PART 1 – PUBLIC DOCUMENT

#### **TITLE OF REPORT: LEISURE AND ACTIVE COMMUNITIES CONTRACT YEAR ONE OVERVIEW**

REPORT OF: Director - Environment

EXECUTIVE MEMBER: Environment, Leisure and Green Spaces

COUNCIL PRIORITY: THRIVING COMMUNITIES

#### **1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- 1.1 This report seeks to update Overview and Scrutiny on the first year of the Leisure and Active Communities contract, which commenced on 1 April 2024.

#### **2. RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 2.1 That Overview and Scrutiny note and comment on the Leisure and Active Communities Contract performance for 2024/2025.

#### **3. REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 3.1 To enable Overview and Scrutiny the opportunity to scrutinise year one of the Leisure and Active Communities contract.

#### **4. ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS CONSIDERED**

- 4.1 None.

#### **5. CONSULTATION WITH RELEVANT MEMBERS AND EXTERNAL ORGANISATIONS**

- 5.1 This report is an update and therefore does not require consultation. The Executive Member – Environment is kept up to date on the performance of the contract and regular Partnership Board meetings are held between the Council and Everyone Active.

#### **6. FORWARD PLAN**

- 6.1 This report does not contain a recommendation on a key Executive decision and has therefore not been referred to in the Forward Plan.

## **7. BACKGROUND**

- 7.1 This report has been written to update Overview and Scrutiny on the first year of the Leisure and Active Communities contract, which commenced on 1 April 2024.
- 7.2 On 12 December 2023, Cabinet agreed to award the Leisure and Active Communities Contract to Sports and Leisure Management Ltd (Everyone Active). The contract length is 10 years with the option to extend by up to 5 years, the contract value is £150M.
- 7.3 The contract includes management of North Herts Leisure Centre (NHLC) in Letchworth, Hitchin Swimming and Fitness Centre (HSFC), Royston Leisure Centre (RLC), Letchworth Lido and the sports centre at Fearnhill School.

## **8. RELEVANT CONSIDERATIONS**

- 8.1 During mobilisation of the contract we faced some challenges around the implementation of the new booking system and changes in operational policy, however these have subsided as users are more familiar with the new systems.
- 8.2 Everyone Active have carried out substantial capital investments over year one of the contract. These include the installation of pool drown detection systems at NHLC, HSFC and RLC. Gym refurbishments have been carried out at NHLC and HSC, new spin studios completed at RLC and HSFC, designated reformer Pilates studio at HSFC and café refurbishment at Letchworth Lido. There have also been capital investments made by the Council, which include refurbishment of the gym changing rooms at RLC and reception toilet refurbishment at HSFC. These investments ensure the leisure facilities are fit for purpose, continue to deliver high levels of customer satisfaction and drive membership growth.
- 8.3 Contract performance is monitored through a set of agreed performance indicators which are reviewed annually to ensure continuous improvement. The previous operator did not collect usage data in the same format as Everyone Active, and therefore we are unable to compare like for like. As a result, the first year of the new contract has been a baselining exercise. It should be noted that due to the decarbonisation project, and the multiple closures required, year two data will not be compared against year one data. Year three should provide a good comparison and this data will be used to set future performance indicator targets. Regular contract meetings are held with Everyone Active and any performance issues identified and rectified.
- 8.4 The following performance indicators were agreed for year one of the contract.
  - Total Members
  - Gender breakdown
  - Age breakdown
  - Accidents & Incidents
  - Booking statistics
  - Utility consumption
  - Total Casual Users
  - Total throughput broken down by specific activities
  - North Herts/ Non-North Herts Residents
  - Customer Feedback
  - Sales and retention



- 8.5 The following table details year one usage data. Appendix A – 2024.25 EA Y1 Overview provides detail of year one statistics.

2024/25	NHLC	Fearnhill	Letchworth Lido	HSFC	RLC	Total
April	54,435	2,526		35,523	24,534	117,018
May	54,709	4,030	1,763	45,124	28,231	133,857
June	48,502	4,416	14,029	55,791	25,651	148,389
July	52,568	4,530	18,324	61,572	28,973	165,967
August	52,235	1,281	17,471	59,636	27,338	157,961
September	53,823	2,816	2,663	49,793	28,455	137,550
October	56,005	2,129		51,713	30,002	139,849
November	53,590	1,818		37,235	34,872	127,515
December	79,114	1,373		54,111	43,106	177,704
January	58,281	1,137		50,360	29,372	139,150
February	58,895	1,825		51,713	26,094	138,527
March	56,199	1,835		54,114	28,417	140,565
<b>Total</b>	<b>678,35</b>	<b>29,716</b>	<b>54,250</b>	<b>606,68</b>	<b>355,04</b>	<b>1,724,052</b>

- 8.6 Skate Letchworth returned in November 2024, the rink was 20 per cent larger, providing even more space for skaters to enjoy the seasonal experience. To make the experience more inclusive, Everyone Active introduced a variety of new sessions. These included quiet sessions suitable for individuals with special educational needs and disabilities as well as dedicated sessions for seniors. The total usage figure for the three-month season was 15,683.
- 8.7 The contract requires Everyone Active to collate customer satisfaction feedback. During the first year of the contract, specific areas of repeat complaints were regarding poor hygiene, cancelled classes, price increases, and the booking system.
- 8.8 Everyone Active address complaints according to their complaints procedure, their aim is to provide a full response and resolution within 7 days. When the complaints are about new policy changes, they provide extra information to clarify. Complaints about cleanliness are investigated and responded to by the individual site management teams. In addition, officers from the Leisure and Active Communities team undertake unannounced inspections of the facilities monthly to monitor and review service delivery.
- 8.9 Monthly contract meetings are held to review operational and contract matters. Senior management attend quarterly contract meetings where a review of performance data takes place. Bi-annually Strategic Partnership Board meetings take place where finance, contract performance, service improvement opportunities and other strategic matters are discussed.
- 8.10 The Social Value Portal is used to quantify the social value benefits the Leisure and Active Communities contract delivers. On a regular basis, Everyone Active upload data that relates to key Themes, Outcomes and Measures (TOMs) which include.
- No. of local people (FTE) on contract employed through your supply chain
  - No. of staff hours spent on local school and college visits (inc. prep. Time)
  - No. of weeks of training opportunities on the contract - Level 2, 3 or 4+

- No. of weeks of apprenticeships on the contract - Level 2, 3 or 4+
- No. of hrs supporting unemployed people into work
- Total amount (£) spent with VCSEs within your supply chain
- Total amount (£) spent in local supply chain through the contract
- Equality, diversity and inclusion training for staff & supply chain (online core training for all staff completed annually)
- Initiatives in the supply chain to identify & manage risks of modern slavery
- Initiatives to engage the community in health or wellbeing initiatives
- Initiatives to support older, disabled and vulnerable with community networks
- Donations or in-kind contributions to local community projects (£ & materials)

8.11 The following table demonstrates that the Leisure and Active Communities contract has delivered £460,632 of social value to date, which relate to the TOMs above.

**Leisure and Active Communities Contract  
Social Value**

<b>Contract Value</b>	£150,000,000
<b>Committed Social Value</b>	£3,461,725
<b>Delivered Social Value</b>	£460,632
<b>% Progress</b>	13.31%
<b>% Social Value Add</b>	0.31%

8.12 The new contract included a scope of services for an Active Communities Programme. During the first year of the Active Communities Programme, Everyone Active, in partnership with North Herts Council and various local partners, have delivered an activity and wellbeing service, supporting the Active North Herts Strategy. The programme has focused on increasing participation in physical activity, reducing health inequalities, and improving wellbeing through a varied programme of initiatives delivered both in leisure centres and within the community.

8.13 Key projects have included Walking Sports, Menopause Support Sessions, Quiet Swims, Pickleball, and targeted Community Health projects. Programmes such as Exercise on Referral, Men's Health Clubs, Parkinson's Memberships and Care Experienced Memberships have supported priority groups in working towards improved health and wellbeing. Sessions are provided at low or no cost to ensure inclusivity and accessibility. During the disruption of the Decarbonisation project, most activities have been maintained through outdoor and alternative venues. See Appendix B 2024/25 Active Communities Programme.

8.14 Key learnings have been to improve scheduling, strengthen marketing, and widening booking access through the introduction of a central booking line and the creation of outreach maps. Looking ahead, the programme will strive to increase participation, enhance community engagement, and build on the successes and learnings in the first year of creating opportunities for healthy, active lifestyles for residents across North Hertfordshire.

8.15 On 14 January 2025 Cabinet agreed to enter into an Agency Agreement with SLM (Everyone Active) whereby they now act as our agent for delivering leisure services, as a means of improving the VAT position between the operator and the council. The agency agreement commenced on 1 May 2025 and will see a guaranteed additional

annual surplus of £270k to the council (reduced for 2025/26 given the May start date). There have been no impacts to customers on the services provided at the facilities.

## **9. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 9.1 This report is an update report and therefore does not have any legal implications.
- 9.2 However, as Members are reviewing performance under the new Agency Agreement, it is appropriate to note that the arrangement was entered into under the Council's powers in section 1 of the Localism Act 2011 (general power of competence) and section 19 of the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1976, which enable the Council to provide leisure services either directly or through an appointed agent.
- 9.3 The Agency Agreement, implemented in May 2025, was designed to optimise the Council's VAT position following HMRC's revised guidance on the treatment of local authority leisure services. The legal framework requires that the parties continue to operate in accordance with the agreed agency principles—specifically that the relationship reflects the substance and reality of a true agency arrangement as recognised by HMRC.
- 9.4 Members' role through Overview and Scrutiny is to review whether the contract is performing as intended and that governance and reporting arrangements remain compliant with the agreed structure.

## **10. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 10.1 The service is delivering income in line with the contract, including adjustments for the agency arrangement. Income in the current year will be affected by closures due to the decarbonisation works. These income reductions are in line with the contract, and have been detailed in financial monitoring reports and specific committee reports on the decarbonisation project.

## **11. RISK IMPLICATIONS**

- 11.1. Good Risk Management supports and enhances the decision-making process, increasing the likelihood of the Council meeting its objectives and enabling it to respond quickly and effectively to change. When taking decisions, risks and opportunities must be considered.
- 11.2 This report does not include any risks to be considered. The Leisure and Active Communities contract determines the responsibilities of the contractor, and the risk that they take on from the Council.

## **12. EQUALITIES IMPLICATIONS**

- 12.1. In line with the Public Sector Equality Duty, public bodies must, in the exercise of their functions, give due regard to the need to eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation, to advance equality of opportunity and foster good relations between those who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.
- 12.2. The primary focus of the Active Communities programme is to engage individuals who are currently sedentary and inactive. These groups are typically most affected by health

inequalities. Therefore, when designing programmes, particular consideration is given to groups with protected characteristics who may face greater barriers to physical activity. These groups include but are not limited to, people with disabilities and long-term health conditions, older adults, black and minority ethnic groups, refugees and asylum seekers, pregnant and nursing mothers, LGBTQ+ and gender.

### **13. SOCIAL VALUE IMPLICATIONS**

- 13.1. The Social Value Act and “go local” requirements do not apply to this report.
- 13.2 Social value on the Leisure and Active Communities contract is monitored through the Social Value Portal.

### **14. ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 14.1. There are no known Environmental impacts or requirements that apply to this report.

### **15. HUMAN RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS**

- 15.1 There are no known HR impacts that apply to this report.

### **16. APPENDICES**

- 16.1 Appendix A 2024/25 EA Y1 Overview
- 16.2 Appendix B 2024/25 Active Communities Programme

### **17. CONTACT OFFICERS**

- 17.1 Sarah Kingsley, Director - Environment, [sarah.kingsley@north-herts.gov.uk](mailto:sarah.kingsley@north-herts.gov.uk)
- 17.2 Louise Randall, Leisure and Active Communities Manager, [louise.randall@north-herts.gov.uk](mailto:louise.randall@north-herts.gov.uk)
- 17.2 Ian Couper, Director – Resources [ian.couper@north-herts.gov.uk](mailto:ian.couper@north-herts.gov.uk)
- 17.3 Isabelle Alajooz, Director - Governance [isabellealajooz@north-herts.gov.uk](mailto:isabellealajooz@north-herts.gov.uk)
- 17.4 Reuben Ayavoo, Policy & Community Manager [reuben.ayavoo@north-herts.gov.uk](mailto:reuben.ayavoo@north-herts.gov.uk)

### **18. BACKGROUND PAPERS**

# EVERYONE ACTIVE & NORTH HERTS COUNCIL - YEAR 1 OVERVIEW

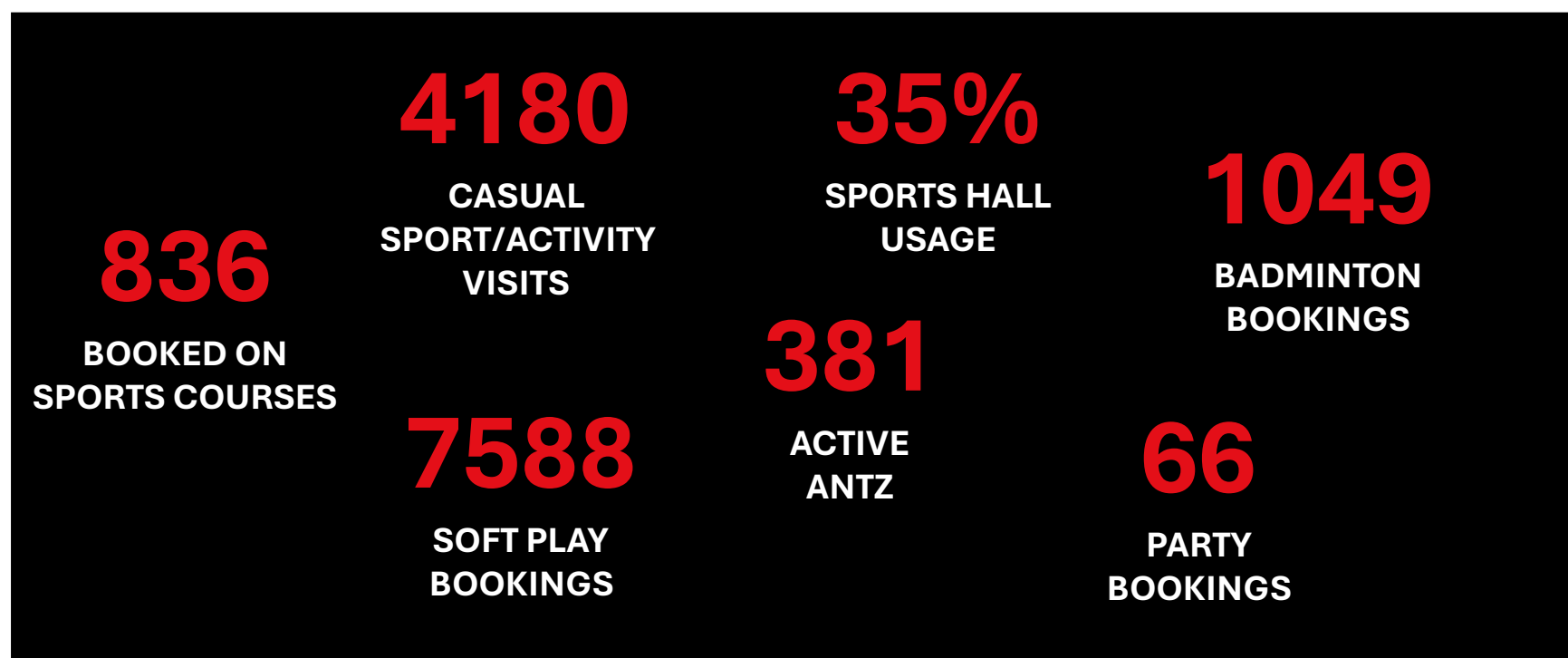


APRIL 2024 – MARCH 2025

# SPORT & ACTIVITY STATISTICS

## APRIL 2024 – MARCH 2025

Page 194



everyone **ACTIVE**

# COMMUNITY HEALTH & WELLBEING

## APRIL 2024 – MARCH 2025

**93**

GP EXERCISE  
REFERRALS

**12**

SPORTING  
CHAMPIONS

**19**

CARERS

**72**

PARKINSON'S  
MEMBERSHIPS



**15**

CARED FOR  
CHILDREN  
MEMBERSHIPS

everyone **ACTIVE**

# SWIMMING STATISTICS

## APRIL 2024 – MARCH 2025

**28,253**

BOOKED ON  
SWIM LESSONS  
FOR WEEK



**120,385**

CASUAL  
SWIM VISITS

**98%**

SWIM LESSON  
MEMBERS ON DD

**504**

PRIVATE  
LESSONS

**42%**

LANE SWIMMING  
OCCUPANCY

**51%**

FAMILY  
SWIMMING  
OCCUPANCY

**1,520**

SWIM FITNESS  
MEMBERSHIPS

everyone **ACTIVE**

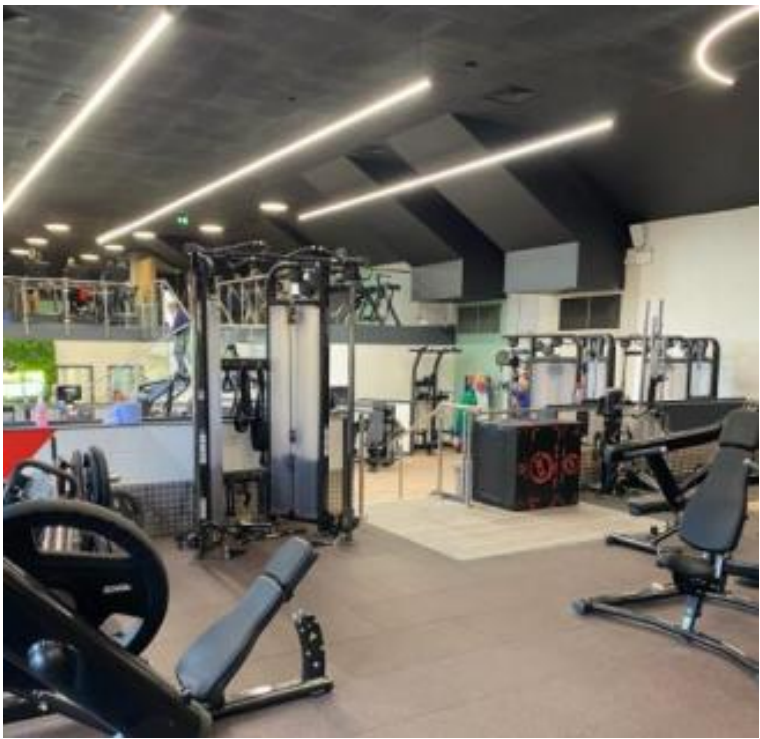


# APRIL 2024 – MARCH 2025 CAPITAL PROJECTS









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Appendix B - 2024/25 Active Communities Programme

Initiative	Summary of initiative	Target Demographic / Group	Date covered / Launch Date	Location/ Centre or Venue	KPIs	Comments
Gymnastics Sports School	Gymnastics sports school for a wide range of ages offering fun, exercise, and engaging activities that include ongoing and targeted progression for all genders, helping develop physical, social, and emotional well-being.	Juniors	Ongoing	MALC and Repton	Repton attendance - 1704	813 children (88% at North Herts Leisure Centres, 227 at Repton Leisure Centre) attended the scheme. Memberships have been frozen while members join the Decommissioning project. Additional sessions were put on at Kingsley, Toppur Sports Centre to mitigate any impact as possible. All of October sessions have been rescheduled at North Herts Leisure Centres and Repton Leisure Centre, after the Decommissioning works. Repton Leisure Centre had a closure for 7 weeks, and memberships were frozen. Before the closure 200 children on the scheme and were now 108, but not willing to increase this again. Since having lost Colindale as a venue Repton generated new bookings in September and 15 North Herts generated new bookings in October and 23
Junior Football Sessions	A football club in a safe, fun and friendly environment. Equipment is all provided and a wider range of games and activities to help juniors learn how to play and the value of football.	Juniors		Repton Leisure Centre and North Herts Leisure Centre	Attendance - 6 per session	Unfortunately despite lots of marketing, this session has not taken off at either venue. We will wait to see if there is a demand in the future when provision is school going. We do however want to increase in demand so will push out and a coach has been able to meet the demand, with 1 session running weekly across the contract. We have also seen the contribution of parents in Repton ability to fill the gaps in the coaching sessions.
Soft Play & Inclusion Sessions	A relaxed, social hour from 10am-11am for children.	Juniors	Ongoing	MALC	Attendance - average 30 participants per session	Sessions planned when softplay was closed for September, during Decommissioning project. This has now opened back up as a Softplay and we have increased additional sessions to support children's learning this action play and literacy.
Home Education Swimming	Swimming Sessions for home Education group - running Friday	Juniors	Ongoing (term time only)	Repton Leisure Centre	Attendance - average 12 participants per session	Term time only sessions delivered with a level 2 instructor, supporting children in obtaining their 25 metre distance badge. Sessions started in January 2024 and have been well received.
Active Arts	Activities and Games for children 7-11, Taster and Thursday Show & Learn	under 11's	Ongoing	Repton Leisure Centre	Attendance - average 40 participants per session	Active Arts was put on an hold whilst decommissioning works happened at Repton. Now activities resumed, which has been great. Interim training on Tuesday sessions are quiet, but Thursday sessions are busy. Working on new marketing to extend the new activity to class members of the session. Held in readiness for next time due to the building works, but the sessions will continue throughout this.
Careed for Children and Cam experienced Membership	Provide free access to sports, gym and classes for those who have been referred by Cam's Respite/Health. Cam's for children membership available to those under 18, and carers/experienced membership available to those between the ages of 18-25.	North Herts Residents	Ongoing	Herts County Council	Memberships - 34	17 come experienced (18-25 years) and cared for children is 17
Springing Champions	Support springing athletes from North Herts to become springing champions offering free use of facilities and mentoring days with renowned athletes.	Talented and aspiring athletes - North Herts residents.	May 2025 - membership lasts 12 months	N/A	Memberships - 31	
Escape Pals	Escape Pals is a class to support those with stress, high back pain, neck pain, MS, conditions	Seniors or those with MS conditions	Ongoing	North Herts Leisure Centre	Presently, we are 20% towards our goals.	Numbers are pretty low but this is a class which GP's advise refer members to can access. Engage & follow are reviewing the class and providing mentoring and promotion of the session due to low numbers. We currently have 2 proper marketing, also find the class beneficial.
Men's Club	To provide free access to those who are men's health, health, physical activity, mental conditions specifically for men, awareness, back health and inclusion for those who are men's health.	New aged 18+	Ongoing	All main leisure centres sites	5 x clubs	Due to the building works at Repton, we don't have a room to run activities there currently. The courses have been successful, without a building work closure, we would have been able to run the sessions. Held in readiness for next time due to the building works, but the sessions will continue throughout this.
Parkinson's Activities	Parade (MALC) walking/football, (R) Fitness class, (R) Parkinson's Memberships, offering classes for those who are Parkinson's, offering classes for those who are Parkinson's, offering classes for those who are Parkinson's.	People with Parkinson's	Ongoing	MALC and Repton	Memberships - 88	88 members, this includes access to community membership including gym and classes, as well as Parkinson's Physical. There are 55 cards linked to the Parkinson's accounts.
Menopause Wellness for HCC employees and care leavers	Monthly workshop for menopause women who need support	Women aged 30 - 50	Sep-25			Two separate sessions for HCC employees and NHS. Little Northamptonshire.
Menopause Support Group	Monthly workshop for menopause women who need support	Women aged 30 - 50	Ongoing	Witchin Fitness and wellness, North Herts Leisure Centre	Attendance - average 6 participants per session	The workshops were cancelled during the Summer due to decommissioning works and will resume in October.
Men's Health Webinar	Working in partnership with the NHS to deliver education to improve mental and physical wellbeing of men	New aged 18+ in North Herts	Sep-25	Online	Attendance - 50 participants	Will be presenting again in November and in the New Year covering nutrition and diabetes and physical activity
Exercise on Referral	To provide physical activity sessions to those who are inactive and/or at least one medical condition to help improve status for their medical condition in a safe environment with the support of qualified instructors	Adults in North Herts with long term health conditions, and those with acute conditions.	Ongoing	Witchin Fitness and wellness, North Herts Leisure Centre, Repton Leisure Centre	Over Q1 and Q2 across the contract we have received 230 referrals, with 420 clients.	There have been a number of barriers with receiving referrals from medical professionals. Initially the session link which we have present in one area, through the decommissioning, and finally information. The next generation of the form seems to be a concern for GPs, so we are working on Q3 to ensure support in referring after they have been prescribed exercise.
Beginner Football	2 x Beginner classes for Football players looking for a bit of teaching to help improve their game and understanding of the rules.	Older adults	Ongoing	MALC and Repton	Repton Leisure Centre - Average 30 participants per session North Herts Leisure Centre - Average 10 participants per session	5 x sessions running for Football across the contract to the future for adults, and a new club constituted at Repton.
Carex Football	Inter-club competition for those who are members to have fun and play against others for a longer time than having to be in a court.	Adults in North Herts	Ongoing	MALC and Repton	Attendance - Average 14 participants per session	Beginner sessions with a coach providing more support. However we cannot increase our offering of this structured session currently due to building works and sports hall closures. This is something we will look into further in the new financial year.
Community Outreach - Senior Circles, Strength and Mobility	Increase overall levels of participation in physical activity by providing full and adequate engagement of activities for the community through	NI Residents	Ongoing	Witchin, Alderton, Baldock, Wilbury Hall,	Q1-Q2 - 120 sessions delivered 34 bookings and 187 unique members	New outreach sessions delivered for 5 weeks throughout the summer - women only at Baldock Road Recreation Ground, Outdoor Football and walking were also doing quite well for incorporation into the scheme, and also current players. Another Football was held at North Cammer and Oad Trench side at Repton. Walking was held at Alderton Park in Lechworth. New entry can session run by GP medical coordinator at Baldock Community Centre. Sessions are currently free and access 5 sessions are held at Wilbury Hall, with 13 unique attendees. We have had 3 booked circuits at Wilbury Hall as of October. We have also introduced outdoor paths, and instructions on how to use, maps of the local area, and new players.
Offering free outdoor fitness classes at Colindale and recreation park	3 sessions a week, Monday, from September to Thursday 20th Sep 2025, 40 minute classes of outdoor fitness equipment	NI Residents	Sep-25	Baldock and recreation park	Attendance - 0	This was delivered throughout September to support with the decommissioning works in the centres. Unfortunately despite lots of marketing, this session was not popular and we made the decision to allow them to resume back in centre.
Extra Care session	Kingsley Temple does not have room to accommodate exercise either in a social other than to the gym, which limits what we can do to offer to residents. These sessions are held in the community.	Those with medical conditions	Sep-25	Baldock Community Centre	Attendance - Average 6 people per session	Sessions are currently free and access 5 sessions were held 48 bookings, with 13 unique attendees. People can still attend this in November.
Health Action Day	Examined local partners offering a day full of activity based sessions and opportunities to help residents to promote health and wellbeing services in the community and offer to active health.	NI Residents	Jan-25	Repton Leisure Centre	Attendance - approximately 100 participants	Will arrange another one after the decommissioning works has finished.
Tackling physical inactivity for young children and families through holidays	Summer Family Campaign for low cost activities and swimming	Families of North Herts	Summer holidays 2025	Whole Contract	Self play attendance - 140 participants Family swimming attendance - 300 participants	Will reschedule Summer 2026.
Women's Rounders sessions	Delivering women's rounders sessions at Baldock and recreation park	Women and girls	July-Sep-25	Whole Contract	Attendance - 40	Will look to do this next year, and either in the year to capture the good weather. Really successful.
Walking Sports	Walking Football and Walking Football sessions delivered for senior members of the community	Seniors	Ongoing	MALC and Repton	Walking football - Average 10 participants per session Walking football - Average 10 participants per session	Recruitment of new football coaches, we will increase marketing, and a meet and greet of the new coach.
Adult Quiet Swimming	Engage a small number of adults with no swim in the pool. These sessions are designed to be a social time for those who are unable to swim in the pool.	Seniors	Ongoing	Whole Contract	Attendance - average 12 participants per session	
Community Club	A 3 hour community club for senior members of the community to engage in social activities before or after their session as we can try to link with the three outdoor sport sessions on a Thursday afternoon.	Seniors	Ongoing	MALC	12 attendees each week.	Chloe's team we could not follow this community club, but we are looking to restart in the near future. Before the classes sessions were running with an average of 20 participants each week. Really important for socialisation and mental well-being.
Outdoor Fitness Sessions	Buggy workouts and Outdoor Fitness	Adults	Ongoing	Repton Leisure Centre	Bug Session - average 5 participants per session Outdoor Fitness - average 5 participants per session	We have tried to create a pathway from buggy runs to active runs, to increase numbers and participation. Buggy Workout has increased in November.

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<b>OVERVIEW &amp; SCRUTINY COMMITTEE</b>
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<b>11 NOVEMBER 2025</b>
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<b>*PART 1 – PUBLIC DOCUMENT</b>
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**TITLE OF REPORT: SOLAR FOR BUSINESS PROJECT CLOSURE REPORT**

REPORT OF: Climate Change and Sustainability Project Manager

EXECUTIVE MEMBER: Environment

COUNCIL PRIORITY: SUSTAINABILITY

**1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The purpose of the report is to provide an overview of the key lessons learned and project closure reasons for the Solar for Business pilot project.

**2. RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 2.1. For Overview and Scrutiny to consider and note the findings of the Solar for Business Project Closure Report (Appendix A).

**3. REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 3.1. To enable the Committee to scrutinise the reasons for closure of the project.

**4. ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS CONSIDERED**

- 4.1. None.

**5. CONSULTATION WITH RELEVANT MEMBERS AND EXTERNAL ORGANISATIONS**

- 5.1 The Executive Member for Environment (then Environment and Leisure) was consulted prior to the decision on project closure. A report was presented to the internal Political Liaison Board of the Executive and the Leadership team, on 6 May 2025, presenting an overview of the Solar for Business Project Closure Report (Appendix A) for their information.

**6. FORWARD PLAN**

- 6.1 This report does not contain a recommendation on a key Executive decision and has therefore not been referred to in the Forward Plan.

**7. BACKGROUND**

- 7.1. At the March 2024 Cabinet meeting, £518,725 capital funding alongside £95,000 from the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) was allocated to support testing a pilot Solar for Business scheme in North Herts.
- 7.2. The project aim was to successfully pilot installing solar panels on the roofs of at least five businesses in the district, with an installed capacity totalling 750 kWp and to have a power purchase agreement in place with businesses on use of the generated electricity, providing revenue to NHDC over 25 years. There were two intended benefits from the project: firstly, generation of renewable energy aligned with the council's sustainability priority, contributing to the council's goal of a net zero district by 2040; and secondly, installations also needed to generate revenue for the council, paying back the investment over time. Both benefits needed to be realised for this scheme to be considered viable.
- 7.3. The pilot was based on and adopted similar principles to a successful project delivered by West Suffolk District Council, which had led to installations on over 70 businesses in their district. The project aims were based on delivering a similar scheme, targeting businesses with larger roof spaces and high electricity usage, to generate the most renewable electricity that is used on site. Officers engaged with West Suffolk throughout the project and West Suffolk shared expertise and materials to inform the pilot project. It was not possible to replicate West Suffolk's scheme exactly with differences further discussed in section 8.3.
- 7.4. Wider input was sought during project development, meeting with Warrington Borough Council as they had trialled this scheme on a single commercial property, to learn from their experiences. No other local authority has been identified that has successfully delivered this scheme. Conversations with West Suffolk and Warrington highlighted potential challenges, including having to agree both long-term power purchase agreements and lease agreements with businesses and potentially their landlords for up to 25 years. There were also concerns in relation to subsidy control. Further external feedback was provided later in the scheme, discussed in 8.1.
- 7.5. As the project was defined as a medium sized project, a Project Oversight Group provided project governance in line with the council's project management guidance. The group met every two months over the duration the project with an additional meeting in December 2024. Members of the group included the Director for Environment, Director for Resource, Director for Enterprise, as well as representatives from Legal, Policy & Strategy and Estates. This group brought relevant expertise related to revenue generating projects alongside knowledge of building leases and legal agreements. The Project Oversight Group provided adequate governance of the project, advising on issues as they emerged, reviewing and updating risks, and taking decisions when required. The Project Team consisted of the Climate Change and Sustainability Project Manager with support from officers in the Policy & Strategy, Enterprise and Legal teams.
- 7.6. Identified project requirements included identifying suitable businesses, reaching legal agreements, confirming the viability of sites and then undertaking tender for installations. The revenue budget for the project and a small proportion of the capital budget was from UKSPF, which placed a time constraint on the project of spending this element of the budget by the end of March 2025.
- 7.7. Due to the project aims, the focus was identifying business premises with large roof spaces and high electricity usage to ensure any installations were financially viable. The project team initially identified likely suitable buildings using mapping tools and business



rates information, as well as information provided by the Estates team on leased buildings owned by North Herts Council. Following this desktop analysis, the council reached out to 27 businesses directly, primarily based in industrial estates. A press release was also sent out to promote the scheme, supported by social media posts. In total 22 businesses submitted expressions of interest, with four coming from the targeted outreach and 18 through the general release.

- 7.8. A shortlisting matrix was used to identify the businesses that were most suitable to take forward for the pilot. Key inputs included the amount of generated electricity that would be used by the business, the need to generate a return for the council and then prioritisation of businesses with long leaseholds or ownership of the building. From the 22 interested businesses, seven were shortlisted. 11 were ruled out due to building size or limited on site electricity use making installations unviable. A further four were ruled out due to short leases on buildings.
- 7.9. Of these seven businesses, one withdrew before a formal offer was issued, while a further two were ruled out during financial background checks, and one was put on hold, due to being a listed building and concerns about timings. A formal offer was made to three businesses using a Power Purchase Agreement and Lease Agreement that had been developed by the legal firm Sharpe Pritchard LLP based on agreements provided by West Suffolk.
- 7.10. NHDC negotiated with the three businesses on the agreements offered, including the rate that businesses would be charged to use generated electricity. The three businesses withdrew from the scheme for reasons including: not making sufficient savings on their electricity bills compared to if they invested directly in solar panels, concerns about the cost of roof reinforcements to support solar panels and an intention to pursue solar panels directly. One business also highlighted they considered the length of lease too long. The outcome of the pilot project was that no businesses signed up for installations through the scheme.
- 7.11. At the Project Oversight Group meeting on 16 December 2024, an action was taken to create a lessons learnt / project closure report and to reallocate the vast majority of UKSPF funding. A lessons learnt document was presented to the Project Oversight Group on 4 March 2025. This document was updated and presented to the council's Political Liaison Board on 6 May 2025 (see Appendix A).

## **8. RELEVANT CONSIDERATIONS**

- 8.1. As set out in appendix A, the Project Oversight Group concluded that continuing with the pilot project would not constitute best use of resources, due to the challenges of attracting suitable business interest and businesses being able to take up our offer. The oversight group's view was that there are other actions which could have a greater direct impact on emissions that we should be using our limited resources on, particularly in relation to the council's operational emissions. This also reflected feedback we received from consultants at APSE Energy, who emphasised focusing on adding solar PV to our own buildings, as we are doing through the leisure decarbonisation project and decarbonisation phase 2.
- 8.2. Further insights have been identified during a review of the scheme. One of those is an increasing willingness from businesses to invest directly in solar panels. Two of the seven businesses shortlisted have now installed solar panels on their roofs. For

businesses lacking the capital to invest, other groups such as commercial entities and, in some areas, community energy organisations, are making similar offers to businesses. A learning from the project has been to consider conducting further pre-market engagement with businesses prior to going out to market.

- 8.3. It was not possible to exactly replicate the West Suffolk project. Differences include that West Suffolk has a larger industrial base, the council owns more, modern commercial buildings suitable for solar, and they have greater in-house experience delivering renewables projects (including owning a solar farm). A practical difference was that our buildings insurance provider would not extend insurance to cover solar panels that would have been installed on a third-party building. However, NHDC did agree options to address this issue and it was not raised as a barrier in negotiations.
- 8.4. Other key project constraints included: limited available capacity for project delivery due to competing priorities for the staff resource allocated, tight timescales related to use of UKSPF which prevented further outreach to businesses after the initial shortlisting, and the need for closer relationships with businesses in North Herts to enable better direct communication (identified as a possible action in the new Economic Development Strategy and Plan).
- 8.5. There have been useful learnings and outputs from the pilot project. The project provided useful insights in terms of what role the council can and should play to support businesses becoming more environmentally sustainable. The learnings informed the Sustainable Communities Grant which was open to applications from businesses as well as community groups. The council will build on these insights to identify further steps that can be taken under the action in our Sustainability Strategy 2025-2030 to “[e]xplore providing support for businesses to take up low carbon technologies and reduce their emissions, including consideration of grants or sharing of good practice”. The drafting of templates for lease agreement and power purchase agreements by subject experts related to installation of solar panels on third party roofs could also be useful for future projects.

## **9. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 9.1. As the project has closed, there are no current legal implications. Both internal and external legal support was provided throughout the pilot project.

## **10. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 10.1. As the project has already closed, there are no current financial implications. The project budget was split £563k capital and £51k revenue with £95k of the total allocated from UKSPF. The pilot project incurred £8,220 in revenue costs. After project close, the remaining UKSPF budget was reallocated and the capital budget removed from the capital programme.
- 10.2. For our revenue budget we did not assume that there would be any net savings arising from Solar for Business. We put in a revenue saving equal to the cost of capital as that would have been the absolute minimum threshold for any agreements with businesses. This was a prudent assumption, and we would have updated the savings if we had been successful in reaching agreements with businesses. As part of updating the budget for 2026/27 we will remove the saving and also update the costs of capital forecasts. This will have a net nil impact.

- 10.3. The agreements with businesses had to consider the Subsidy Control Act. This meant that any agreement we reached with businesses had to be broadly on market terms.

## **11. RISK IMPLICATIONS**

- 11.1. Good Risk Management supports and enhances the decision-making process, increasing the likelihood of NHDC meeting its objectives and enabling it to respond quickly and effectively to change. When taking decisions, risks and opportunities must be considered.
- 11.2. In line with NHDC project management guidance, a risk register for the project was maintained throughout the project. This was overseen by the Project Oversight Group and as part of monitoring of projects on the council delivery plan.
- 11.3. The top risks during project delivery were businesses dropping out delaying scheme / failure to attract sufficiently large business premises, unable to spend UKSPF allocation due to delays to the scheme, and longer-term risks around businesses leaving premises or not achieving return on investment. The risk of businesses dropping out was realised and led to the end of the project. There are continuing reputational risks to the council from not delivering this scheme but through lessons learned, NHDC continues to act on climate change and identify how best to support businesses reduce their emissions.

## **12. EQUALITIES IMPLICATIONS**

- 12.1. In line with the Public Sector Equality Duty, public bodies must, in the exercise of their functions, give due regard to the need to eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation, to advance equality of opportunity and foster good relations between those who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.
- 12.2. There are no equalities implications arising from this report.

## **13. SOCIAL VALUE IMPLICATIONS**

- 13.1. The Social Value Act and “go local” requirements do not apply to this report.

## **14. ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 14.1. There are no known environmental impacts or requirements that apply to this report as the decision to close the project has already been taken.
- 14.2. If the project had been successful, the ambition of the Solar for Business pilot project was to save 92.21 tonnes CO<sub>2</sub>e in year one and up to 1844.23 tonnes over 20 years. However, a benefit of taking the decision to close the project has been releasing capacity to support other climate change projects. This includes decarbonisation phase 2 which is anticipated to directly save 100 tonnes CO<sub>2</sub>e annually and delivery of Warm Homes: Local Grant, a government funded scheme to install energy efficiency and clean heating measures in low-income homes.

## **15. HUMAN RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS**

- 15.1 There are no current human resources implications as the decision to close the project has been taken. As highlighted in section 7.2, the project team included the Climate Change and Sustainability Project Manager with support from members of the Policy & Strategy team, legal and enterprise. A benefit of taking the decision to close the project has been releasing capacity to support other projects.

## **16. APPENDICES**

- 16.1 Appendix A – Solar for Business Project Closure Report

## **17. CONTACT OFFICERS**

- 17.1 James Lees, Climate Change and Sustainability Project Manager, [james.lees@north-herts.gov.uk](mailto:james.lees@north-herts.gov.uk); ext 4183
- 17.2 Sarah Kingsley, Director – Environment, [sarah.kingsley@north-herts.gov.uk](mailto:sarah.kingsley@north-herts.gov.uk) ext 4552

## **18 CONTRIBUTORS**

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- 18.4 Ian Couper, Director – Resources, [ian.couper@north-herts.gov.uk](mailto:ian.couper@north-herts.gov.uk) ext 4243

## **19. BACKGROUND PAPERS**

- 19.1 None

## Solar for Business Project Closure Report

Project Name	
Solar for Business Pilot Project	
Project Manager	
James Lees	
Date of Board Report:	15 April 2025

Overview
<p>At the March 2024 Cabinet meeting, £518,725.00 capital alongside £95,000 of UKSPF was allocated to support testing a pilot Solar for Business scheme in North Herts, based on a successful project delivered by West Suffolk District Council. The project aim was to successfully pilot installing solar panels on the roofs of at least five businesses in the district, with an installed capacity totalling 750 kWp and to have a power purchase agreement in place with businesses on use of the generated electricity, providing revenue to the Council over 25 years. The focus of the project was to generate renewable energy aligned with the council's sustainability priority and particularly contribute to the council's goal of a net zero district by 2040.</p> <p>The outcome of the pilot project was that we were unable to get any businesses signed up for installations through the scheme. As discussed below the key reasons were that we were unable to get broad enough interest from target businesses in the scheme and then the businesses we shortlisted had either further complications or declined our offer. The project was time constrained due to use of UKSPF to cover the revenue budget and staff resource constrained throughout, due to competing priorities, which limited our ability to go back out for further business engagement.</p> <p>The project oversight group has concluded that continuing with the pilot project of Solar for Business would not constitute best use of resources, due to the challenges of attracting suitable business interest and businesses being able to take up our offer. Particularly as the focus of the project was to contribute towards our emissions targets, it is the oversight group's view that there are actions with better carbon outcomes in the sustainability strategy that we should be using our limited resources on.</p> <p>Conversations with West Suffolk Council and the legal firm Sharpe Pritchard to review the scheme and APSE Energy mid-delivery have provided insights to identify where the council can add value, such as adding solar PV to our own buildings.</p> <p>This document provides a project closure report of the pilot project.</p>

Original Aims of the project
To successfully pilot installing solar panels on the roofs of at least five businesses in the district with an installed capacity totalling 750 kWp and to have a power purchase agreement in place with businesses on use of the generated electricity, providing revenue to the Council over 25 years. Completion of some buildings by 31 March 2025 to meet UKSPF requirements and all remaining buildings by June 2025.
Did the project meet all the aims of the Project?
No installations were completed and so the project aims were not achieved.

Performance Indicators		
During the Project- as set out in the Project Plan		
What was measured	Target value	Actual performance
Shortlist of businesses	5 confirmed options, ideally 10 in shortlist	3 confirmed options, 7 shortlisted
Legal agreements	5 lease agreements and 5 PPAs agreed	No formal agreements reached
Costs for installation	£750.00 per kW installed	Estimated costs for installation across the three offered businesses were in this region
Completed installations	5	None

Risk scores	
Original overall risk score	Average risk of 5 - medium likelihood/medium impact
Original Target risk score	Target average risk score of 3 - (low likelihood/medium impact)
Final risk score	Average risk of 5 - medium likelihood/medium impact
If final risk score is higher than the target score, then explain why, and how the remaining risk will be managed?	The key risk that couldn't be mitigated, leading to not being able to deliver the scheme was businesses drop out delaying scheme / failure to attract sufficiently large business premises

**How effective was the project scope?**

Based on the information that was available prior to initiating the project, the aim to install on five businesses appeared realistic and achievable. The pilot was based on a project (with the same name) delivered successfully by West Suffolk Council, where the council had installed solar panels on over 70 businesses in their district.

Prior to initiation, further consideration could have been given to the number of appropriate businesses in our district compared to West Suffolk, and therefore whether we would have a large enough sample size to deliver the project. We have a much smaller commercial and industry base than West Suffolk. We conducted targeted and untargeted outreach to businesses to encourage them to participate. We ended up with 22 interested businesses, 11 of which were identified as too small and a further 3 had very short leases, reducing the pool to shortlist from.

While external expertise was sought and local authorities that had delivered similar projects had been engaged, further efforts could have been made to bring in external expertise on the local need for this intervention ahead of initiating the project. Conversations with experts such as APSE Energy, Sharpe Pritchard and West Suffolk Council, as well as feedback from businesses have highlighted businesses increasingly looking to do this themselves, due to the short payback period.

Of the seven businesses we shortlisted, one of the businesses had solar panels installed in early 2025, while another committed to installing solar panels itself. Two of the businesses which declined our formal offer were also looking into self-funded installations. Increasingly, other groups such as community energy organisations and commercial entities are making similar offers to businesses to Solar for Business. So it may be that this offer is best provided by community energy groups.

We made formal offers to three businesses, none of which signed up to the offers made. Key sticking points were cost savings for businesses compared to electricity rate from the grid insufficient to offset against any restrictions / disruption and the length of lease was considered too long. A learning from the project has been to consider conducting further pre-market

	engagement with businesses prior to going out to market.
<b>Has the project delivered everything that it aimed to achieve?</b>	No, as no businesses agreed to participate in the scheme.
<b>What benefits have been achieved already? How can these be evidenced?</b>	<p>There have been some useful outcomes from the project, including drafting of templates for lease agreement and power purchase agreements related to installation of solar panels on third party roofs. These template documents could be useful for future projects, such as solar on our leisure centres, or working with our green space contractors.</p> <p>We also have draft procurement documents related to procurement of solar on commercial building roofs, which again could be useful for future projects.</p> <p>We have also built relations with around 20 businesses in the district which could be valuable for future engagement.</p>
<b>How effective was the Project Team's performance?</b>	<p>The project team consisted of the project manager - the Climate Change Project Manager - with support from the Policy and Strategy team, Economic Development and Legal.</p> <p>As highlighted below, there were competing priorities for the staff resource allocated, which at times limited available capacity for project delivery.</p> <p>Input was sought during the project from communications, procurement and insurance.</p> <p>For building relationships with businesses, the project could have benefited from the existence of a business communications network and closer relationships with businesses in North Herts via the Economic Development function – facets that are included in the new Economic Development Strategy and Plan.</p> <p>The project oversight group included directors from resources, enterprise and environment, as well as legal and estates. The oversight group provided detailed and broad expertise to complement the project team.</p>



**How realistic was the original Project Plan, in terms of budget, resources and timescales?**

The financial resources allocated were a revenue budget of £51,285 from UKSPF and a capital allocation of £562,500 with around £44,000 from UKSPF. This financial resource would have been sufficient to deliver the project based on the estimated costs of installation for the shortlisted options.

A limitation of the resources allocated was competing priorities for the staff resource allocated which at times limited available capacity for project delivery.

A limitation of the project plan that prevented further outreach to businesses were tight timelines for delivery of the pilot, due to use of UKSPF to cover revenue costs for the pilot. These timescales were necessarily tight, due to funding available, but meant that we had less opportunity to go back out to businesses. The use of UKSPF allocation for this project also meant that when businesses withdrew from the scheme, the budget had to be reallocated to other projects and not all of the allocation was then spent by the end of the financial year.

Requiring businesses to sign up to a 25-year commitment can take time. Feedback from West Suffolk when reviewing the project highlighted that the installations they are currently working on are from leads generated back in 2021, with it taking time for businesses to commit to a long-term partnership. We did not have that flexibility.

<p><b>Did any unexpected risks or opportunities become known during the project?</b></p>	<p>This pilot project was new to the council and so while we consulted West Suffolk Council and others in detail ahead of the initiating the project ourselves, there were unforeseen risks during the project delivery.</p> <p>These included considering alternative charging regimes for businesses for the electricity used, an issue with our insurance (whereby our insurers would not cover insuring panels installed whereas the insurers used by West Suffolk covered panels installed, reducing barriers for businesses), as well as time taken to finalise draft agreements.</p> <p>A conversation with APSE Energy mid-delivery also raised issues around the council's role in delivering this kind of project, which provided further learnings as highlighted in the lessons learnt section.</p>
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<b>What were the key lessons learnt during the project?</b>	
Use the lessons learnt log to identify the key lessons only	
<b>Detail of lesson learnt</b>	<b>Action taken or recommended action to take</b>
Role of targeted comms and engagement to maximise pool of interested, suitable businesses.	Work closely with comms to ensure all comms messages are aligned and targeted for key audience - in this case businesses on industrial estates with large roof space.
Need for pre-market engagement with target businesses to understand whether our offer would be competitive and pricing structure attractive to potential users. Sticking points were length of lease and amount charged.	Further engagement with possible local businesses in advance of launching may have provided insights around length of lease and anticipated savings.
Fit of Solar for Business pilot as a scheme for UKSPF grant - Requiring businesses to sign up to a 25-year commitment is at odds with the short-term wins needed for UKSPF such as a grant to install a measure	Consideration when allocating UKSPF in terms of projects that can realistically be delivered in funding year.
Allow realistic contingencies in timings for project milestones, and defined cut offs for when alternative uses of funding should be considered.	As a UKSPF supported project, there is a need for a defined cut off for reallocation of funding to allow for it to be spent – this could be set out by the UKSPF officer lead during the project initiation.

<p>Limited staff resource to maximise opportunities for engaging with target audience and planning for need of external resource.</p>	<p>Assess capacity of resource to ensure adequate urgency is met for timelines. Utilise project planning process to identify likely areas where external support would be needed and then ensure the need is clear and then approach early to maximise benefit for the project.</p>
<p><b>Describe how the results of the project will be transferred to Business As Usual?</b></p>	<p>The Project Oversight Group concluded that continuing with the pilot project of Solar for Business would not constitute best use of resources due to the challenges of attracting suitable business interest and businesses being able to take up our offer.</p> <p>However, lessons learnt and materials produced will be considered for future projects.</p>

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