

NORTH HERTFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MEETING HELD IN THE COUNCIL CHAMBER, DISTRICT COUNCIL OFFICES, GERONON ROAD, LETCHWORTH GARDEN CITY, SG6 3JF
ON TUESDAY, 3RD FEBRUARY, 2026 AT 7.30 PM

MINUTES

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

In Attendance: *Rumi Bose (Churchgate Project Manager), Steve Crowley (Director - Enterprise), Philip Doggett (Principal Estates Surveyor), Robert Filby (Trainee Committee, Member and Scrutiny Officer), James Lovegrove (Committee, Member and Scrutiny Manager), Robert Orchard (Culture and Facilities Services Manager), Anthony Roche (Chief Executive) and Rachael Rooney (Interim Strategic Planning Manager).*

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

Councillor Val Bryant, as Leader of the Council, Councillor Tamsin Thomas, as Executive Member for Enterprise, and Councillor Donna Wright, as Executive Member for Place were in attendance.

52 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Audio recording – 1 minute 39 seconds

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Elizabeth Dennis and Dominic Griffiths.

Councillor Cathy Brownjohn was absent.

53 MINUTES - 6 JANUARY 2026

Audio Recording – 1 minute 49 seconds

Councillor David Chalmers proposed an amendment to include the following sentence under Minute 46, and this was seconded by Councillor Sadie Billing:

'Members raised concerns that Hertfordshire Police not participating in Pride events would damage the much-needed trust between them and the LGBTQ+ Community and impact the reporting of LGBTQ+ hate crimes.'

Following a vote, the amendment was **CARRIED**.

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 6 January 2026, as amended, be approved as a true record of the proceedings and be signed by the Chair.

54 NOTIFICATION OF OTHER BUSINESS

Audio recording – 4 minutes 29 seconds

There was no other business notified.

55 CHAIR'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

Audio recording – 4 minutes 37 seconds

- (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.

56 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

Audio recording – 5 minutes 40 seconds

There was no public participation at this meeting.

57 URGENT AND GENERAL EXCEPTION ITEMS

Audio recording – 5 minutes 43 seconds

No urgent or general exception items were received.

58 CALLED-IN ITEMS

Audio recording – 5 minutes 48 seconds

There were no called-in items.

59 MEMBERS' QUESTIONS

Audio recording – 5 minutes 51 seconds

No questions had been submitted by Members.

60 LGA CORPORATE PEER CHALLENGE FOLLOW UP

Audio recording – 5 minutes 57 seconds

Councillor Val Bryant, as Leader of the Council, presented the reported entitled 'Corporate Peer Challenge Follow Up' and advised that:

- The Council undertook a Corporate Peer Challenge between 4 and 7 November 2024, where they were visited by a peer team supported by the Local Government Association.
- A feedback report from the visit was presented to Cabinet on 14 January 2025, and an Action Plan to respond to the recommendations from this was approved by Cabinet on 23 March 2025.
- An update on progress against the Action Plan was also given to Cabinet on 23 September 2025.
- The peer team made a one-day follow up visit on 15 December 2025 and had issued a report on this, which was attached at Appendix A.
- The report contained a review of the progress made by the Council in the last year, and suggestions from the peer team on future steps.

The following Members asked questions:

- Councillor Jon Clayden
- Councillor Paul Ward
- Councillor Daniel Wright-Mason
- Councillor Ralph Muncer

In response to questions, Councillor Val Bryant advised that:

- Officers had expressed a preference to receive questions from Members in advance of meetings, which would help to improve Member-Officer relations.
- Cabinet would determine which actions would be focused on and for how long.
- Except for Royston Learner Pool, nothing new would be added to the Council Delivery Plan before it ended.
- There would be continuity despite a change in the Leader of the Council, which would ensure that Officers and Members worked together to ensure the best delivery of a new unitary authority.

In response to questions, the Chief Executive advised that:

- New protocols which referenced Member-Officer interaction had been adopted at the last Full Council meeting.
- Member-Officer relations were built on communication and the acknowledgement that they were part of the same Council, which served various communities.
- The progress against the Action Plan was similar when compared to other local authorities.
- They were committed to continuous improvement, but progress against the Action Plan would cease before Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) to enable focus on that.
- Decisions on what the Council would deliver before LGR would be made through the Council Delivery Plan and budget setting.
- Members and Directors were in constant dialogue over what was achievable for the Council and what should be prioritised in the face of capacity constraints.
- The Council would focus on making the right decisions between now and May 2027, rather than driving to meet all possible decision points prior to the creation of Shadow Authorities.

The following Members took part in the debate:

- Councillor Ralph Muncer
- Councillor Jon Clayden

The following points were made as part of the debate:

- It was reassuring that progress had been made as stated in the report, and that they had identified areas of improvement to ensure resilience for day-to-day services through LGR.
- The progress made had been excellent considering LGR, and everyone at the Council should be congratulated for this.

The Chair summarised discussions and noted the need to improve Officer-Member relations, as well as the need to carefully prioritise and reflect on findings in the face of LGR.

Councillor Jon Clayden proposed and Councillor Daniel Wright-Mason seconded and, following a vote, it was:

RESOLVED:

- (1) That the findings of the CPC follow up report were noted.
- (2) That the progress against the CPC Action Plan was noted.

REASON FOR DECISIONS: To ensure that the Council responds to the matters identified within the CPC follow up report, ensuring that the benefits of the CPC process are realised.

61 ENTERPRISE PORTFOLIO UPDATE

Audio recording – 25 minutes 22 seconds

Councillor Tamsin Thomas, as Executive Member for Enterprise, presented the report entitled 'Enterprise Portfolio Update' and advised that:

- The initiation phase for the Churchgate project had been completed, with a comprehensive programme of viability assessments and market due diligence having taken place.
- The project had been taken through the acquisition and initial public consultation phases to explore viable options that were being scrutinised by the Project Board.
- There had been delays to the viable options report to achieve the right level of scrutiny. However, it would ideally be presented to the appropriate committees in springtime.
- Viability included balancing elements such as housing delivery and future ownership, while understanding which elements would contribute financially in the long-term.
- Appointment of a Churchgate Project Manager had strengthened their capacity.
- The Economic Development Strategy (EDS) and its evidence base had been approved, and the upcoming Budget would help with its implementation.
- A recent Member workshop on the EDS had been productive and highlighted opportunities in the district.
- North Herts Museum had exceeded 30,000 visitors last year and had delivered 6 exhibitions over the last two.
- Event bookings at Hitchin Town Hall had increased on the previous year to 668.
- Inflationary pressures on Cultural Services had been offset by the increased income and efficiencies they had produced.
- The Estates Team managed over £30M in Council assets that generated roughly £1.8M in net income per year.

- They had modernised leasing arrangements and progressed long-standing projects such as The Arena, supported projects like the Museum Collection Facility, and were bringing forward option papers for projects such as Charnwood House and Riverside Walk.
- A strategic portfolio review would also be undertaken to seek opportunities on asset disposal.
- The Property Services Team oversaw 76 premises, responded to approximately 1,400 service requests and completed over 9,000 compliance checks annually.
- They had modernised their systems through new facilities and compliance tools and made major repairs at several sites such as Baldock Community Centre.
- They had also worked on decarbonisation of Council assets through the installation of Solar PV and EV charging points at the District Council Offices.
- Budget projections showed a 1% increase on the net position of the directorate on the previous year.
- Expenditure had increased due to Churchgate resourcing but income had also increased due to rent settlements and improved performance at Churchgate.
- The Enterprise Directorate were currently resourced at 87% capacity, with four vacancies to be resolved.
- 50 projects were live and the majority were on track.
- A filled vacancy in the Estates Team had accelerated progress on projects, and they anticipated that filling other vacancies in February would have a similar impact.
- The highest risk projects were Churchgate and the Museum Collection Facility which were managed through established risk management and project governance frameworks.
- All Project boards followed 'PRINCE 2' framework, and larger projects like Churchgate were governed by a project board comprised of Members and Senior Officers.
- The role of project boards was to build the business case for projects, before referring them to committees for consideration to allow Member involvement and the opportunity for added value.

The following Members asked questions:

- Councillor Claire Winchester
- Councillor Paul Ward
- Councillor Ralph Muncer
- Councillor Martin Prescott
- Councillor Daniel Wright-Mason
- Councillor David Chalmers
- Councillor Jon Clayden
- Councillor Sadie Billing

In response to questions, Councillor Tamsin Thomas advised that:

- A topline exercise had been conducted to prioritise projects that would benefit from acceleration before Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) took place.
- Projects like Charnwood House could be progressed on different timelines to LGR.
- It would be important to address vacancies to ensure the delivery of major projects.
- New access to business databases would help to build relationships with businesses in the district.
- The EDS would ensure that economic opportunities from projects like Churchgate would be realised.
- An estimated cost for Churchgate could not be provided due to the range of variables across the proposed options. However, the project had been approved on the basis that it would be financially viable and worthwhile over a 40-year period.

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- The Council were seeking an organisation that would be able to uphold the community covenants associated with Charnwood House.
- A decision on the viable options for Churchgate was scheduled to be made at the next Project Board meeting on 27 February.
- Small businesses in rural villages were supported by the Council through the administration of the Shared Prosperity Fund and the encouragement of initiatives like Herts Futures.
- The EDS recognised that the economy of the district extended beyond its boundaries, as acknowledged by the 'Looking in' and 'Looking out' framework.
- Support had been given to small businesses in the form of response schemes and grants during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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

- There had been slippage on the action areas within the EDS, but additional officers would help to deliver on these once recruited.
- Funding for digital car parking signage in Hitchin would be within the proposed 2026/27 Budget, which would improve the clarity of parking spaces available in Hitchin, and aim to promote the usage of Lairage Multi-Storey Car Park.
- A Member briefing on Churchgate would be held before the viable options report was presented to Cabinet.
- There may be an opportunity for the report to be presented to the Committee prior to consideration by Cabinet, depending on the outcome of the next Project Board meeting.
- Opportunities for Member and public involvement on Churchgate via consultation would be plentiful throughout the course of the project.
- More detail on the work to promote growth of small businesses in rural areas would be provided once recruitment to the Economic Development Team had taken place.
- The Community Lottery grant funding in 2024/25 had been a one-off opportunity but they would continue to look for more opportunities like this.

In response to questions, the Principal Estates Surveyor advised that:

- 8-9 sites had been put forward in response to a Call for Sites exercise as part of the Local Plan Review, and those would be reviewed with the Planning Team in due course.
- The development on Radburn Way had been deemed financially unviable due to no secure site access, therefore, the site had been allocated as an open space habitat reserve.
- The proposed development on The Snipe in Weston had not been progressed as the developer had been unable to deliver on the formula within the conditional contract. There were ongoing discussions with the adjoining landowner to progress the site in alternative ways.
- An Options Paper for Charnwood House was being produced, and the likely preferred option would be to go back to market to obtain a fully costed offer from a partner to deliver an acceptable community project. However, there was more work to do before conclusions could be drawn from this.
- There were interested parties who would be kept informed of Charnwood House going forward.

In response to questions, the Churchgate Project Manager advised that:

- They were working with the Parking and Planning Teams to ensure that Churchgate would be aligned with Council initiatives to embrace active travel and climate resilience.
- It was recognised that Churchgate would provide immense economic value and regenerative benefits, despite it still being in its early stages.
- While there was an urgency to progress the project before LGR, there was also priority given to structuring the risk and delivery of the project properly to ensure its viability.

- Timeframes for the delivery of the project would be clearer after the next phase.
- The next stage of public engagement for Churchgate would be likely to take place alongside a public announcement on the next stage of the project.

In response to questions, the Chief Executive advised that:

- Constraints would be placed on the Council once a new Shadow Authority was live as financial decisions over a certain threshold would need approval from them, therefore, this would need to be factored into timelines for Churchgate.
- The District Council Offices would continue to be used in the short-term after LGR, however, until they knew the structure of unitary authorities in Hertfordshire, its medium to long-term use would be unknown.

In response to questions, Councillor Paul Ward advised that:

- There were 5,500 enterprises in the district, and 90% of those employed 0-9 people, as referred to in the EDS.
- 8,800 people were self-employed in the district.

Councillor Ralph Muncer highlighted the importance of building resilience into the proposed parking signage in Hitchin.

Councillor Paul Ward advised that the Economic Development Team should reach out to Members to utilise their knowledge on small businesses in their respective areas.

Councillor Martin Prescott highlighted that local authorities could be doing more to support small businesses.

Councillor Jon Clayden proposed and Councillor Paul Ward seconded and, following a vote, it was:

RESOLVED: That the Committee noted the report.

REASON FOR DECISION: The report followed the request of the committee for an update on the progress of the Enterprise Directorate and is for information only.

N.B. Following the conclusion of this item, there was a break in proceedings and the meeting reconvened at 21:12.

62 LOCAL PLAN REVIEW

Audio recording – 1 hour 39 minutes 6 seconds

Councillor Donna Wright, as Executive Member for Place, presented the report entitled 'Local Plan Next Steps' and advised that:

- The report asked the Committee to note the report that was presented to Cabinet on 20 January, which outlined the new local plan making system and the adoption of the Local Plan by the end of 2028.
- A timetable had originally been agreed for adoption by the end of 2027. However, this had stalled due to delayed government guidance and legislative changes.
- The local plan adoption process had been streamlined by the Government to include a 30-month examination process that was preceded by a 4-month 'Get Ready Period'.
- A revised timetable for the Local Plan based on new requirements was shown in Appendix A to the report, with the aim to submit the Local Plan for examination prior to Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) in April 2028.

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- The revised timetable had been approved by the Strategic Planning Board in December, and they would continue to scrutinise the Local Plan as it progressed.
- The delivery of the Local Plan would be subject to filling vacancies in the Strategic Planning Team, which would take place soon.
- If the team was not fully staffed, the timetable would be kept in line with resource availability and updated as appropriate.
- Thanks were put on record to the Strategic Planning Team for managing the process around the Local Plan despite the uncertainty on legislation and guidance.
- Members were also asked to note the broad direction of travel pending formal laying and the enactment of legislation.

The following Members asked questions:

- Councillor Donna Wright
- Councillor Ralph Muncer
- Councillor Paul Ward
- Councillor Daniel Wright-Mason

In response to questions, Councillor Donna Wright advised that the timetable may need to be revised depending on when the new legislation was received, therefore, it was hard to predict the timeline for scrutiny outside of the Strategic Planning Board.

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

- Regular Member Workshops on scoping, policy development and site allocation in the Local Plan would continue.
- There would be opportunities for the Committee to scrutinise the Local Plan prior to decisions being made by Cabinet.
- Most local plans being made under the new system would be finished after LGR in April 2028.
- Only the Planning Inspectorate could withdraw their Local Plan under the guidance, and it was understood that the Government would introduce regulations to ensure that a new unitary authority would take the plan forward.
- Five-yearly reviews of local plans would continue to take place after LGR.
- It was understood that local plans produced by existing authorities would come together to cover the geographical areas within a new unitary authority until a new Local Plan that covered the new geographical area was prepared.
- If there was no Local Plan in place by the end of 2028, the new unitary authority may be open to speculative development.
- The proposed timeline would be challenging to meet if legislation was delayed further.
- Sites identified from the Call for Sites exercise would be made public after a sieving process had taken place, and the legislation system had been received.

In response to questions, Councillor Val Bryant advised that the recommendations from the S106 Task and Finish Group would be looked at before guaranteeing that they could form part of the policies within the new Local Plan.

The following Members took part in the debate:

- Councillor Ralph Muncer
- Councillor Claire Winchester

The following points were raised as part of the debate:

- This work would be vital in shaping the future of the district regardless of LGR.

- It would be important to engage the public as soon as possible to ensure that sensitivities were addressed to ensure better outcomes for communities.
- They were looking forward to wider engagement through consultation taking place, in addition to the opportunity to discuss this further at future Committee meetings.

Councillor Jon Clayden proposed and Councillor Sadie Billing seconded and, following a vote, it was:

RESOLVED: That the Overview and Scrutiny Committee noted the broad 'direction of travel' for the Local Plan Review pending formal laying and enactment of the relevant legislation and regulation; and provided any commentary as required.

REASON FOR DECISION: To ensure the Council is well-positioned to progress preparation of the Local Plan as quickly as possible once the new plan-making system comes into effect. Cabinet previously first resolved, in principle, that a review of the Local Plan should take place in January 2024. However, the Council did not progress on the review which was held back due to the delays in the publication of the regulations and guidance on the new Local Plan system.

63 OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME

Audio recording – 2 hours 0 minutes 14 seconds

The Committee, Member and Scrutiny Manager presented the report entitled 'Overview and Scrutiny Work Programme' and advised that:

- The Decisions and Monitoring Tracker was attached at Appendix C to the report.
- Referrals made by the Committee to Cabinet on the Council Delivery Plan 2025-26 Q2 Update and Council Tax Reduction Scheme were considered with the respective reports at Cabinet, and the recommendations for both were approved.
- The Work Programme was attached at Appendix A to the report.
- The report on Digital Transformation and Inclusion would be postponed to the next Committee meeting in March due to a miscommunication with officers.
- Other items scheduled for the next Committee meeting were the RIPA Annual Report, Council Delivery Plan 2025-26 Q3 Update and S106 Task and Finish Group report.
- Suggestions for future discussion topics should be made to the Scrutiny Officer by Friday 13 February.
- The Forward Plan for 16 January was attached at Appendix B to the report.
- Members should submit questions in advance of meetings to allow Executive Members and Officers time to prepare answers.
- An in-person Scrutiny Session as part of Member Development Week would take place on 12 May at 7pm and would include a chance to draft the 2026-27 Work Programme.
- There was an additional recommendation for the Committee to note the Decisions and Monitoring Tracker as attached at Appendix C to the report.

The following Members asked questions:

- Councillor Tina Bhartwas
- Councillor Ralph Muncer

In response to questions, the Committee, Member and Scrutiny Manager advised that:

- The Chair, Vice-Chair and Scrutiny Officer would meet later this week to consider topics for discussion at the next Committee meeting.
- An update to the Annual Safeguarding Review had been circulated to Members.

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- Draft Developer Contributions SPD could be considered as one of the topics for discussion at the next Committee meeting.

The Chair and Councillor Paul Ward thanked Executive Members and Officers for the thorough and informative presentations that they had provided to the Committee.

Councillor Sadie Billing proposed and Councillor Ralph Muncer 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, determined 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, suggested a list of items to be considered at its meetings in the coming civic year.
- (3) That the Committee noted the Decisions and Monitoring Tracker, attached as Appendix C to the report.

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 effectively 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 9.39 pm

Chair