

NORTH HERTFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

MINUTES

Meeting of the Council held in the Council Chamber, District Council Offices, Gernon Road,
Letchworth, Herts, SG6 3JF
on Thursday, 13th November, 2025 at 7.30 pm

PRESENT: Councillors: Keith Hoskins MBE (Chair), Sadie Billing (Vice-Chair), Clare Billing, Tina Bhartwas, Ian Albert, Daniel Allen, Amy Allen, Matt Barnes, Ruth Brown, Cathy Brownjohn, David Chalmers, Jon Clayden, Sam Collins, Mick Debenham, Emma Fernandes, Joe Graziano, Dominic Griffiths, Steve Jarvis, Tim Johnson, Chris Lucas, Sarah Lucas, Ian Mantle, Nigel Mason, Bryony May, Caroline McDonnell, Ralph Muncer, Michael Muir, Lisa Nash, Sean Nolan, Steven Patmore, Louise Peace, Vijaiya Poopalasingham, Sean Prendergast, Martin Prescott, Emma Rowe, Tom Tyson, Paul Ward, Laura Williams, Alistair Willoughby, Claire Winchester, Dave Winstanley, Donna Wright and Daniel Wright-Mason.

IN ATTENDANCE: Isabelle Alajooz (Director - Governance and Monitoring Officer), Ian Couper (Director - Resources), Robert Filby (Trainee Committee, Member and Scrutiny Officer), Susan Le Dain (Committee, Member and Scrutiny Officer), James Lovegrove (Committee, Member and Scrutiny Manager), Anthony Roche (Chief Executive) and Melanie Stimpson (Democratic Services Manager).

ALSO PRESENT: At the commencement of the meeting there were 2 members of the public, including registered speakers.

47 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Audio recording – 1 minute 10 seconds

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Clare Billing, Val Bryant, David Barnard, Rhona Cameron, Ruth Clifton, Elizabeth Dennis, Claire Strong, Stewart Willoughby and Tamsin Thomas.

48 NOTIFICATION OF OTHER BUSINESS

Audio recording – 1 minute 31 seconds

There was no other business notified.

49 CHAIR'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

Audio recording – 1 minute 35 seconds

N.B. Councillor Sam Collins entered the Council Chamber at 19.32.

- (1) The Chair advised that, in accordance with Council Policy, the meeting would be recorded.
- (2) The Chair reminded Members that the Council had declared both a Climate Emergency and an Ecological Emergency. These are serious decisions, and mean that, as this was an emergency, all of us, Officers and Members had that in mind as we carried out our various roles and tasks for the benefit of our District.

- (3) 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.
- (4) The Chair advised that the normal procedure rules in respect of debate and times to speak will apply.
- (5) The Chair advised that 4.8.23(a) of the Constitution did not apply to this meeting. A comfort break would be held at an appropriate time, should proceedings continue at length.
- (6) The Chair advised Members to encourage parish councils within their respective wards to respond to the consultation on Developer Contributions sent out by the Task & Finish Group before the deadline on 20 November 2025.
- (7) The Chair advised Members to submit their comments on the Polling District Review consultation by 30 November 2025 and that Full Council would designate polling places at the meeting in January.
- (8) The Chair encouraged all Members to attend Youth Democracy Day on 20 November 2025 and to direct any questions about the day to Committee Services.
- (9) The Chair advised Members that the Council would be supporting White Ribbon Day 2025 by holding a White Ribbon Pledge Event and Bake Sale on 25 November 2025 at the Council Offices and that all Members were welcome to attend.

50 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

Audio recording – 5 minutes 41 seconds

The Chair invited Mr Ben Smithson to provide Council with a verbal presentation on Item 5 – Local Government Reorganisation in Hertfordshire – Submission of Final Proposals. Mr Smithson thanked the Chair for the opportunity and highlighted the following:

- He wished to thank everyone involved with the development and assessment of the options for Local Government Reorganisation in Hertfordshire.
- The proposed boundaries in the option for four unitary authorities would move Arbury Ward into the East Unitary Authority and separate it from Baldock.
- This would remove the benefits of the four unitary option for Arbury Ward residents as both greater local representation and a truer alignment of physical geography would not be felt by them.
- Baldock formed part of the identity of Arbury Ward as many of its residents used services and undertook leisure activities there. They were also represented on the Baldock & Villages Community Forum.
- Many families had expressed their intention to leave if the four unitary option was chosen as their children would no longer be given priority places at The Knights Templar School in Baldock and would likely have to attend schools that were further away.
- This would lead to the loss of thriving communities and failure of local businesses.
- Arbury Ward residents would also lose their ability to influence how the expansion of Baldock would affect their area.
- Options that failed to balance populations while preserving communities should be ruled out.
- The Council should write to the Secretary of State to request boundary changes if the four unitary option was chosen.

In response to points raised in the verbal presentation, Councillor Daniel Allen advised that:

- The schooling system under the new unitary authorities had not yet been decided and children from one area could currently attend schools in others like those that lived in Great Ashby and attended schools in Stevenage.
- Should the four unitary option be the preferred option by Cabinet, it would be submitted with the current boundaries of North Hertfordshire with a recommendation for a boundary review which residents would be able to have input on.

The Chair thanked Mr Smithson for his verbal presentation.

51 LOCAL GOVERNMENT REORGANISATION IN HERTFORDSHIRE - SUBMISSION OF FINAL PROPOSALS

Audio recording – 11 minutes 50 seconds

The Chair advised that Council would debate the item and pass an indicative resolution that would express a preferred option and that Cabinet would be required to give due regard to any resolution passed by Council, but could not be legally bound by that resolution. Cabinet Members could participate in the debate and express a lawful preference but not commit in advance to follow the resolution of Full Council.

The Chair additionally advised that dual hatter County and District Council Members could also participate in the debate and express a lawful preference without unlawful predetermination in the debate at the Full Council meeting at Hertfordshire County Council on 19 November 2025.

To ensure that the Council met the required deadline for submissions on 28 November 2025, the Chair advised that the Cabinet decision on this item would be urgent and therefore not subject to call in. Formal notice of this, including the reasons for urgency had been published on the Council website.

The Chief Executive presented the report entitled 'Local Government Reorganisation in Hertfordshire – Submission of Final Proposals' and advised that:

- The submission document was a culmination of several months of work from local authorities across Hertfordshire and it was recognised that Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) had and would continue to impact workloads in the coming years.
- Authorities in Hertfordshire had remained united throughout discussions on LGR and the relationships built between them would help in the upcoming stages.
- A single submission document had been produced that met all the criteria set by the Government with options for two, three, and four unitary authorities contained within.
- It was acknowledged that each option would work better for some areas of Hertfordshire than others as they each had their advantages and disadvantages.
- Modernisation, better service delivery, removal of silos and resetting relationships with communities were just some of the potential benefits that could come from LGR.
- Shared ambitions that underpinned the submission were set out at paragraph 8.5 of the cover report.
- The six criteria that would be used by the Government to judge submissions were set out at paragraph 7.3 and they would be equally weighted.
- All options that met the criteria would go to statutory public consultation in 2026.
- The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) stated that the recent decision on LGR in Surrey would not be an indication of how decisions would be made on LGR elsewhere.
- The submission document was as accurate and evidence based as possible as the proposals were necessarily based on assumptions with detail to follow as explained in paragraph 8.8 onwards.

- Work on LGR would continue to evolve with the acknowledgement that the new unitary authorities would be responsible for future decision making once created.
- Community engagement on LGR options in Hertfordshire took place in September and was referenced within the submission document and summarised at paragraphs 8.14 and 8.15 of the cover report.
- Devolution was mentioned within the submission, however, MHCLG had made it clear that this would be a separate process despite their non-commitment to a timeline on this.
- In response, a collective letter from all local authorities in Hertfordshire had been sent to the Secretary of State as detailed at paragraph 7.9.
- Herts Leaders Group had committed to work together to implement the decision made by the Government in 2026, and a statement on this could be found within the submission.
- Work had already begun on the Transition Programme as detailed at paragraph 8.16 and Members would be kept updated on this as well as the public where relevant.
- The importance of LGR to Members was recognised, hence why the options had been brought to Council for debate and for an indicative resolution to be made.
- A decision on the preferred option would be taken at Cabinet on 19 November.

N.B. Councillor Dominic Griffiths entered the Chamber 19.55.

The following Members took part in the debate:

- Councillor David Chalmers
- Councillor Amy Allen
- Councillor Ruth Brown
- Councillor Sadie Billing
- Councillor Paul Ward
- Councillor Daniel Wright-Mason
- Councillor Tom Tyson
- Councillor Ralph Muncer
- Councillor Matt Barnes
- Councillor Steve Jarvis
- Councillor Emma Fernandes
- Councillor Chris Lucas
- Councillor Jon Clayden
- Councillor Nigel Mason
- Councillor Donna Wright
- Councillor Joe Graziano
- Councillor Tim Johnson
- Councillor Vijaiya Poopalasingham
- Councillor Sam Collins
- Councillor Ian Albert
- Councillor Steven Patmore
- Councillor Claire Winchester
- Councillor Ian Mantle
- Councillor Emma Rowe
- Councillor Daniel Allen

The following points were made as part of the debate which for ease of comprehension have been summarised under the heading they refer to, rather than the order of the debate:

General:

- The Council should choose the model that provided clarity, stability and the best value for residents.

- LGR presented an opportunity for greater coordination and the improvement of services such as waste collection and disposal.
- The consultation was hardly representative of North Herts residents as only 587 responded with 390 having expressed a preference out of a possible 135,000 district population.
- Once representation through local government was lost, it could not be regained.
- It had not been possible to include all the financial details of each proposal in the consultation, therefore, residents had not been able to make informed responses.
- The consultation response rate had been approximately 0.6% in Hertfordshire and of this percentage, 7% came from councillors and staff, and nearly 25% stated that they knew a lot about LGR already which skewed the response towards those who were politically active and aware.
- There were less than two percentage points between those who expressed preference for the two unitary option and the four unitary option.
- Decisions of this magnitude should be made by Full Council, not Cabinet.
- A fixation on costs would mean a loss of service quality.
- Representation came from the quality of councillors, not the size of the authority.

Two unitary option:

- The two unitary option offered simplicity, financial resilience to sustain vital services, and a structure that would support the long-term ambitions of communities in North Herts.
- Residents had expressed their desire for less duplication, fewer layers and a system that was easier to understand which the two unitary option would provide.
- Financial and workforce pressures had intensified, and the two unitary option would allow investment into prevention and long-term infrastructure.
- Relationships with partners such as the NHS, Police and skills providers would be strengthened by the two unitary option and it would also provide the most robust platform for a strategic authority to secure funding from Devolution.
- Community forums, town and parish councils and neighbourhood partnerships would also be strengthened as they would become key partners in shaping services.
- Services would become standardised under the two unitary option and community voices would be erased.
- Two unitary authorities would provide the simplest, least disruptive approach and would deliver the same representation as three unitary authorities.
- More resources would be available in the two unitary option to create more area committees and strengthen town and parish councils.
- Two unitary authorities would cover areas that were too large and would not reflect communities.
- As detailed in the submission document, £366M would be saved over ten years by the two unitary option compared to the four unitary option that would lose £1M in the worst-case scenario over the same period.
- The payback period of the two unitary option would also be 7 years less than the four unitary option, which would present less of a financial risk.
- Current Council priorities such as Churchgate were not guaranteed to be a priority in a new unitary authority, especially if only two were formed.
- Representation would be fairer and more effective in the two unitary option when looking at councillor to ward ratios as some wards would have double the representation of others in the four unitary option which would create an imbalance.
- There would be a democratic deficit in the two unitary option as only one out of four North Herts towns would have a town council to provide local representation.
- The two unitary option would create the most centralised decision-making model.
- Tiers of governance and senior management would be removed in the two unitary option which could risk staff talent retention.
- Democracy and localism would not be lost if the unitary authorities covered a larger area as connectivity was greater than it had ever been before.

- While the two unitary option was financially attractive, it would be a bureaucratic nightmare.
- Fewer services would overlap in the two unitary option which would mean more consistent service delivery for Education, Highways and Planning, and more funding for frontline services where every pound mattered.
- Councillors would still be visible in communities and not simply disappear under the two unitary option.

Three unitary option:

- Population sizes would be unequal in the three unitary option and the opportunity to bring the garden cities together would be lost.

Four unitary option:

- The four unitary option would replicate senior structures, statutory functions and have more disaggregation and fragmentation which would lead to higher public spending and this was indefensible when residents already faced cost of living struggles.
- Members should listen to residents as they favoured the four unitary option which would keep their communities intact.
- North Herts had different priorities, challenges and communities to those in other areas of Hertfordshire which the four unitary option recognised.
- The central authority in the four unitary option would start with a £22M budget deficit in year one and it was not guaranteed that the Government would assist with this.
- Boundaries changes in the four unitary option would be problematic as Royston would be affected and the A10 corridor would rely heavily on vehicle use rather than active travel which contradicted the Climate Emergency declared by the Council.
- The four unitary option would provide balance as it would be big enough to maintain resources to deliver services but be small enough to preserve community connections and keep decision making accountable.
- Arbury Ward residents would be separated from services in Baldock, Letchworth and Stevenage in the four unitary option and if Cabinet chose this, it would confirm that they did not care for those residents.
- Territory transfer in the four unitary option was merely to ensure a balance of numbers and had nothing to do with communities.
- Community connections would not be reflected in the four unitary option as areas like Royston and Cheshunt in the eastern authority had very few similarities.
- Even with dramatic cuts, the central authority would not be able to deliver statutory services as it was likely that it would be bankrupt within ten years.
- The central unitary authority would contain 35% of the most deprived areas in Hertfordshire, the highest number of children looked after or with special needs and disabilities and households on social housing wait lists, and the highest requirements for social care which would put unsustainable pressure on services and residents.
- If Cabinet did not back the will of Council, there would be questions of the Administration to deliver for the people of North Herts.
- The four unitary option would safeguard the shared ambition for high quality services.
- Three or four unitary authorities would compete rather than collaborate and weaken their ability to facilitate regional growth and attract investment.
- Economic growth through tech industries along the A1 corridor would be encouraged by the four unitary model.
- Smaller councils would make decision making more visible and responsive and make councillors more accessible.
- The four unitary option would be a half-way house between the two unitary option and the current local government structure in Hertfordshire.
- Assumptions had been made in the submission document to favour the financial modelling of the two unitary option such as the transition costs which had been equally

weighted across all options when they were likely to be less in the three and four unitary options.

- Service delivery was not the main purpose of a local government, it was about making decisions for the community and bringing local ideas into this which the four unitary option would allow the most of.
- Baldock would be split from nearby rural communities that relied on it for everyday services and choosing the four unitary option would weaken these community networks.
- Even with a generous settlement from the Fair Funding Review, the four unitary option would have a gap in finances which rising care demands and inflation would push further.
- Stronger representation in the four unitary option was not true as area committees where local decisions could be made would still be present in the two unitary option.
- Residents had expressed a clear preference for four unitary authorities both in the consultation and in-person as it would keep power local.
- Dacorum, Broxbourne and East Herts had all backed the four unitary option which showed the decision was not political and that common ground could be found when finding the best solution for residents.
- The four unitary option would be based on district wards rather than county divisions which had much smaller footprints, meaning that councillors would be closer to their communities.
- It would also be more practical, fair and rooted in the communities that councillors served.

Councillor Laura Williams, as proposer, replied to the debate and made the following points:

- All options were viable, deliverable and offered real benefits to residents as backed by the facts and figures in the submission document.
- They supported the four unitary option as preferred by residents and all Members should do the same.
- The options for two and three unitary authorities contained boundaries based on current County Council division which provided a lack of representation in some areas.
- Disaggregation had been costed but aggregation had not been factored properly, therefore, basing a decision on the financial assumptions was problematic.
- This resolution was just the beginning of LGR and Members should work together to ensure a successful transition once a decision was made by the Government on LGR in Hertfordshire next year.

In response to points raised in the debate, the Chief Executive advised that it was the collective decision of all eleven Hertfordshire Leaders to withdraw the option for one unitary authority.

Having been proposed and seconded and, following a vote (a recorded vote having been requested for recommendation 2.2 only), it was:

RESOLVED:

- (1) That Council noted the content of the report and the draft Hertfordshire submission document at Appendices A - E which formed the proposed collective submission to Government on Local Government Reorganisation.
- (2) That Council indicated its support for a preferred option, to be considered by Cabinet as part of its deliberations on 19 November 2025, was to submit the proposal and identify a two unitary option as preferred.

REASON FOR DECISIONS: On 5 February 2025, the Minister of State for Local Government and English Devolution wrote to all leaders of two-tier councils to formally invite them to develop proposals for a single tier of local government in their counties. Cabinet is legally responsible for deciding whether, and in what form, to respond to this invitation. However, in order to ensure transparency and give all councillors the opportunity to contribute, Full Council was invited to debate the matter and to indicate a preferred option. This indicative, nonbinding vote will be considered by Cabinet as part of its formal decision-making process on 19 November 2025.

VOTE TOTALS:

| | | |
|---|---|----|
| A (preference for two unitary option) | : | 24 |
| B (preference for three unitary option) | : | 0 |
| C (preference for four unitary option) | : | 17 |
| D (no preference) | : | 1 |

| | |
|-----------------------------|---|
| Cllr Ian Albert | C |
| Cllr Amy Allen | C |
| Cllr Daniel Allen | C |
| Cllr Matt Barnes | A |
| Cllr Tina Bhartwas | A |
| Cllr Sadie Billing | C |
| Cllr Ruth Brown | A |
| Cllr Cathy Brownjohn | C |
| Cllr David Chalmers | A |
| Cllr Jon Clayden | A |
| Cllr Sam Collins | A |
| Cllr Mick Debenham | C |
| Cllr Emma Fernandes | C |
| Cllr Joe Graziano | A |
| Cllr Dominic Griffiths | A |
| Cllr Keith Hoskins | D |
| Cllr Steve Jarvis | A |
| Cllr Tim Johnson | A |
| Cllr Chris Lucas | A |
| Cllr Sarah Lucas | C |
| Cllr Ian Mantle | C |
| Cllr Nigel Mason | C |
| Cllr Bryony May | A |
| Cllr Caroline McDonnell | A |
| Cllr Michael Muir | A |
| Cllr Ralph Muncer | A |
| Cllr Lisa Nash | A |
| Cllr Sean Nolan | C |
| Cllr Steven Patmore | A |
| Cllr Louise Peace | A |
| Cllr Vijaiya Poopalasingham | C |
| Cllr Sean Prendergast | A |
| Cllr Martin Prescott | A |
| Cllr Emma Rowe | A |
| Cllr Tom Tyson | A |
| Cllr Paul Ward | A |
| Cllr Laura Williams | C |
| Cllr Alistair Willoughby | C |
| Cllr Claire Winchester | A |
| Cllr Dave Winstanley | C |
| Cllr Donna Wright | C |
| Cllr Daniel Wright-Mason | C |

Thursday, 13th November, 2025

The meeting closed at 9.15 pm

Chair