NORTH HERTFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

MINUTES

Meeting of the Council held in the Council Chamber - District Council Offices, Gernon Road, Letchworth, SG6 3JF on Thursday, 16th July, 2026 at 7.30 pm

PRESENT: *Councillors: Keith Hoskins MBE (Chair), Sean Prendergast (Vice-Chair), Clare Billing, Ian Albert, Daniel Allen, Amy Allen, Matt Barnes, Ruth Brown, Val Bryant, Rhona Cameron, David Chalmers, Jon Clayden, Ruth Clifton, Sam Collins, Mick Debenham, Elizabeth Dennis, Emma Fernandes, Joe Graziano, Dominic Griffiths, Steve Jarvis, Tim Johnson, Chris Lucas, Ian Mantle, Nigel Mason, Bryony May, Caroline McDonnell, Ralph Muncer, Michael Muir, Sean Nolan, Steven Patmore, Louise Peace, Vijaiya Poopalasingham, Martin Prescott, Emma Rowe, Claire Strong, Tamsin Thomas, Tom Tyson, Paul Ward, Laura Williams, Alistair Willoughby, Stewart Willoughby, Dave Winstanley, Donna Wright and Daniel Wright-Mason.*

IN ATTENDANCE: *Isabelle Alajooz (Director - Governance and Monitoring Officer), Luca Benedito (Trainee Committee, Member and Scrutiny Officer), Rumi Bose (Churchgate Project Manager), Ian Couper (Director - Resources), Steve Crowley (Director - Enterprise), Robert Filby (Committee, Member and Scrutiny Officer), Chloe Gray (Enterprise Manager), 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 6 members of the public.*

Ben Evans, as Senior Associate Director and Neil Parlett, as Director of Planning, Development and Regeneration at Lambert Smith Hampton.

17 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Audio recording – 04 minutes 19 seconds

N.B. Councillor Martin Prescott entered the Council Chamber at 19:33.

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Tina Bhartwas, Cathy Brownjohn, Sarah Lucas, Lisa Nash and Claire Winchester.

Councillor David Barnard was absent.

18 MINUTES - 21 MAY 2026

Audio Recording – 04 minutes 37 seconds

Councillor Keith Hoskins, as Chair, proposed and Councillor Sean Prendergast seconded and, it was:

RESOLVED: That the Minutes of the meeting held on 21 May 2026 be approved as a true record of the proceedings and be signed by the Chair.

19 NOTIFICATION OF OTHER BUSINESS

Audio recording – 05 minutes 07 seconds

There was no other business notified.

20 CHAIR'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

Audio recording – 05 minutes 13 seconds

(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, everyone including Officers and Members had that in mind as they carried out their 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 would 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 announced that Karen Pullham, Accountancy Technician, had been working at North Hertfordshire for 30 years, and extended his gratitude to Karen for her services to the Council.

Councillor Keith Hoskins proposed and Councillor Sean Prendergast seconded and, following a vote, it was:

RESOLVED: That the Council placed on record its sincere thanks and appreciation to Karen Pullham for her long and valuable service to Local Government.

(7) The Chair announced that Jo Blake, Senior Officer (Council Tax), had been working at North Hertfordshire for 40 years, and extended his gratitude to Jo for her services to the Council.

Councillor Keith Hoskins proposed and Councillor Sean Prendergast seconded and, following a vote, it was:

RESOLVED: That the Council placed on record its sincere thanks and appreciation to Jo Blake for her long and valuable service to Local Government.

(8) The Chair advised that the IT Team had increased the level of security on incoming emails and that if Members would like their personal email address added to the safe sender list, they should contact IT or Committee Services with confirmation. The Chair also reminded Members that Council business should only be conducted through a North Herts Council email account.

21 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

Audio recording – 09 minutes 50 seconds

In accordance with Standing Order 4.8.10(c), one question was submitted by a member of the public by the required deadline date set out in the Constitution.

(A) <u>Letchworth Lido Toilets for Norton Common Users</u>

As Ms Crighton was unable to attend the meeting, the Chair presented the question to the Executive Member for Environment in their absence, as follows:

'Given the importance of accessible toilet facilities for disabled people, older residents, and families, how does the Council justify the absence of publicly available toilets in the green spaces it manages? Will the Council consider opening up the toilets at Letchworth Lido free for use by Norton Common visitors?'

Councillor Amy Allen provided the following response:

'I completely recognise the importance of having available facilities for people to use, especially those that are disabled, elderly, and in need. There used to be public toilets in Norton Common a very long time ago. They were inappropriately used and resulted in a lot of issues, including vandalism, and they had to be constantly repaired, closed and many years ago, there a simple discussion amongst the Safety Audit, the Police, etcetera, that the best thing we could do would be to close it because unfortunately, they were a magnet for inappropriate behaviour. As I understand it, there is not scope at the moment to in any way rebuild, reopen, or include new toilets there because of exactly how I've just explained it. As for the toilet at the Lido, it is a paid entry place. It would be incredibly difficult to safeguard and monitor members of the public just wandering in and out of it. The whole point of it set up the way it is, is to monitor the numbers, to monitor safety, and to look after the patrons that are there. So, I cannot see in any way that we would be able to open them up to become effectively public toilets. There are other public toilets in town and in the area, but regrettably we don't have any in the Common as we aren't able to provide that. I will be putting together a further, more detailed full answer to Ms Crighton upon further investigation but that is the answer.'

22 ITEMS REFERRED FROM OTHER COMMITTEES

Audio recording – 12 minutes 23 seconds

The Chair advised that Referrals 6D, 6E, 6F and 6G referred from Cabinet, the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, and the Finance, Audit and Risk Committee would be taken with the respective items on the Agenda, and that Referrals 6A, 6B and 6C from Cabinet would be considered as standalone items.

6A) <u>Cabinet – Revenue Budget Outturn 2025/26 (Final)</u>

Councillor Ian Albert, as Executive Member for Resources, presented Referral 6A and advised that:

- The report, which set out the end of year, healthy position in terms of the General Fund and the main financial indicators and variances, was debated and scrutinised at both the Finance, Audit and Risk Committee and Cabinet.
- They were asking Council to approve the net transfer of £4.925M from earmarked reserves, as set out in Table 9 of the report.

- Those reserves were made up of the planned use of the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government Business Rates Reserve to support general funding, the Waste Reserve for waste contractor implementation costs, and the Waste Vehicle Reserve for new vehicles, including electric vehicles under 3.5 tonnes.

Councillor Ian Albert proposed and Councillor Val Bryant seconded and, following a vote, it was:

RESOLVED: That Council approved the net transfer from earmarked reserves, as identified in table 9, of £4.925 million.

REASONS FOR DECISION:

(1) Members are able to monitor, make adjustments within the overall budgetary framework and request appropriate action of Services who do not meet the budget targets set as part of the Corporate Business Planning process.

(2) Changes to the Council's balances are monitored and approved.

6B) <u>Cabinet – Treasury Management End of Year Review 2025/26</u>

N.B. Councillor Paul Ward left the Chamber at 19:46.

Councillor Ian Albert, as Executive Member for Resources, presented Referral 6B and advised that:

- Discussions by the Finance, Audit and Risk Committee and Cabinet were detailed within the referral.
- The Chair of the Finance, Audit and Risk Committee and its Members were thanked for their work and scrutiny.
- A good return on investments had been seen recently, but this could not be guaranteed in the long-term.
- Return on investments had been investigated carefully, and implementation of the new Ethical Investment Policy had begun.
- Actions were in place to ensure that the single breach of the strategy earlier in the year did not happen again.

Councillor Matt Barnes informed the Chair that Councillor Paul Ward had left the Chamber due to an interest on this item related to his employment.

Councillor Ian Albert proposed and Councillor Val Bryant seconded and, following a vote, it was:

RESOLVED: That Council:

(1) Approved the actual 2025/26 prudential and treasury indicators as detailed in Appendix B.

(2) Noted the annual Treasury Management Review for 2025/26 (Appendix B).

REASON FOR DECISIONS: To ensure the Council's continued compliance with CIPFA's code of practice on Treasury Management and the Local Government Act 2003 and that the Council manages its exposure to interest and capital risk.

N.B. Councillor Paul Ward returned to the Chamber at 19:47.

6C) <u>Cabinet – 2025-26 Year End Report of Risk Management Governance</u>

Councillor Ian Albert, as Executive Member for Resources, presented Referral 6C and advised that:

- This was an important area for the Council considering all things happening for local authorities currently.
- This report provided assurances that the Council was effectively managing risk.
- Discussion points were set out by the Chair of the Finance, Audit and Risk Committee in the referral.
- It was worth noting that the two highest scoring risks were related to Local Government Reorganisation and resourcing.
- There was also the addition of the Renters Rights Act to the report.
- Cabinet had considered the impacts to different service areas and the overarching risks to the Council.

Councillor Claire Strong left the Chamber at 19:49 and returned at 19:49.

Councillor Ian Albert proposed and Councillor Val Bryant seconded and, following a vote, it was:

RESOLVED: That Council noted the report.

REASON FOR DECISION: To provide assurance that the Council is effectively managing risk. The Council's Risk Management Strategy details that this annual review should be presented to Council. Cabinet have responsibility for the management of risk.

23 FINANCE, AUDIT AND RISK COMMITTEE ANNUAL REPORT

Audio recording – 20 minutes 13 seconds

N.B. Councillor Dominic Griffiths entered the Chamber at 19:51.

Councillor Vijaiya Poopalasingham, as Chair of the Finance, Audit and Risk Committee, presented Referral 6D and the report entitled 'Finance, Audit and Risk Committee Annual Report' and advised that:

- It was important to recognise that there had been a period of transition for the Committee following his appointment as Chair and new Members joining the Committee in the new Civic Year, but the Committee had maintained a strong focus on its core responsibilities.
- Thanks were put on record to Councillor Sean Nolan for chairing the Finance, Audit and Risk Committee until January this year.
- This report provided an overview of the work undertaken in the previous Civic Year reflecting on their effectiveness and setting out priorities for the year ahead.
- Assurance was given to the Council that effective processes were in place.
- The Committee had overseen a wide range of important matters and timelines for those were outlined on the grid at page 48 of the Agenda Reports Pack.
- Significant corporate risks like Local Government Reorganisation and corporate capacity had continued to be monitored, and focus had been given to manage and identify risks like these.
- Discussion at the Committee had been constructive over the year, and Members had challenged and sought clarification appropriately while working together.
- The Work Programme remained comprehensive, and they would continue to oversee the audit process and monitor financial resilience and procurement arrangements when needed.

- Members would continue to receive appropriate training to strengthen their understanding of financial governance.
- It was hoped that Members from all political groups would attend Committee meetings this Civic Year as the Committee was stronger when every group was present.
- The Independent Member, Director – Resources, Shared Anti-Fraud Service, KPMG, Executive Member for Resources and Officers were thanked for their support.
- New Members and previous Members of the Committee were also thanked for their approach to matters.

Councillor Vijaiya Poopalasingham proposed the recommendation in the report, and this was seconded by Councillor Val Bryant.

As part of the debate, Councillor Paul Ward put on record his thanks to the Independent Member for their thorough work at Committee meetings.

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

RESOLVED: That Council noted the Finance, Audit and Risk Committee Annual Report.

REASON FOR DECISION: To provide Council with assurance as to the effectiveness of the Finance, Audit and Risk Committee.

24 ANNUAL REPORT OF THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE 2025/26

Audio recording – 25 minutes 31 seconds

Councillor Jon Clayden, as Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, presented Referral 6E and the report entitled 'Annual Report of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee 2025/26' and advised that:

- 30 items had been considered by the Committee during the Civic Year.
- There had been good online engagement with 750 views of the committee meetings throughout the year on the YouTube channel.
- Thanks were put on record to the Chair and Members of the S106 Task and Finish Group for their investigations on S106 contributions, and 8 recommendations had been made by the group to Cabinet for their consideration.
- Thanks were also put on record to Councillor Claire Winchester as the Chair of the Committee in the previous Civic Year, the Scrutiny Officer for their support, Members of the Committee for their apolitical scrutiny on a wide view of Council functions, and Officers for their attendance and contributions at Committee meetings.
- It was hoped that the Committee would continue to provide effective scrutiny at the right time.

Councillor Claire Strong advised that her name was spelt incorrectly on page 64 of the Agenda Reports Pack and asked for this to be corrected.

Councillor Jon Clayden proposed the recommendation in the report, and this was seconded by Councillor Ralph Muncer.

As part of the debate, Councillor Ralph Muncer highlighted that:

- The quality of scrutiny had improved over recent years and would continue to improve through the new Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.
- Thanks were put on record to the Scrutiny Officer for facilitating good quality scrutiny since they had joined the Council.

- The S106 Task and Finish Group should be proud of the work they had carried out, and they looked forward to the possibility of empowering communities in the planning process and seeing how the recommendations from the group would be taken forward.

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

RESOLVED: That Council noted the Annual Report of the Overview and Scrutiny 2025/26, attached as Appendix 1.

REASON FOR DECISION: To enable Council to consider and comment on the report of the Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee regarding the work of the Committee in the 2025/2026 Civic Year.

25 EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC

Councillor Keith Hoskins proposed and Councillor Sean Prendergast seconded and, it was:

RESOLVED: That under Section 100A of the Local Government Act 1972, the Press and Public were excluded from the meeting on the grounds that the following report will involve the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in Paragraphs 3 and 4 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the said Act (as amended).

26 PART 2 MINUTES - 21 MAY 2026

Councillor Keith Hoskins, as Chair, proposed and Councillor Sean Prendergast seconded and, it was:

RESOLVED: That the Part 2 Minutes of the meeting held on 21 May 2026 were approved as a true record and signed by the Chair.

27 CHURCHGATE REGENERATION PROJECT UPDATE & NEXT STEPS - PART 2

N.B. This item was considered in restricted session and therefore no recording was available.

Councillor Tamsin Thomas, as Executive Member for Enterprise, presented Referral 6F and the report entitled 'Churchgate Regeneration Project Update & Next Steps – Part 2'.

Councillor Tamsin Thomas proposed and Councillor Val Bryant seconded and, following a vote, it was:

RESOLVED: That Council approved the additional revenue funding referred to in section 10 of the report to support the next steps of the project, as set out in the Part 1 report.

REASON FOR DECISION: to proceed with the Procurement stage referenced in Part 1 of this report, the Council requires additional funding to support this work. These funds were not originally set out in the budget, as the need has been identified since the original budgets were set. The funds will be enough to cover the required package of work with the selected developer for the next phase and continue to support the regeneration project in progress to delivery.

28 CHURCHGATE REGENERATION PROJECT UPDATE & NEXT STEPS - PART 1

Audio recording – 55 minutes 08 seconds

Councillor Tamsin Thomas, as Executive Member for Enterprise, presented Referral 6G and the report entitled 'Churchgate Regeneration Project Update & Next Steps – Part 1' and advised that:

- The project would deliver a redeveloped shopping centre and market, revitalised public spaces around the River Hiz, and vital footfall and housing to the area.
- Thanks were put on record to the Churchgate Project Board, Overview and Scrutiny Committee and Cabinet for their input on this stage.
- Full Council were being asked to approve funding to procure regeneration expertise to undertake detailed analysis for the project in this phase.
- Work undertaken in the last 12 months had put the project into a fundamentally more stable position as a financial and technical evidence base had been produced and a greater insight into other factors had been achieved.
- Churchgate was close to full occupancy for the first time in a while, which mirrored the strong developer confidence shown in soft market testing, but it was also recognised that it was a complex and finely balanced scheme where specialist regeneration expertise would be needed to derisk the project and remove cost elements while maintaining overall control.
- A masterplan would be formulated in this phase from the completed feasibility study, which would allow them to progress the project in a measured and controlled way while further testing viability and deliverability.
- Any uncertainty of deliverability would be decreased through this phase before a long-term decision on the project was taken.
- The ambition to deliver a high-quality regeneration scheme that secured the long-term success of Hitchin Town Centre remained unchanged.

Councillor Tamsin Thomas proposed the recommendation in the report, and this was seconded by Councillor Val Bryant.

The following Members took part in the debate:

- Councillor Sam Collins
- Councillor Ralph Muncer
- Councillor Val Bryant
- Councillor Ian Albert
- Councillor Claire Strong
- Councillor Tim Johnson
- Councillor Matt Barnes

The following points were made as part of the debate:

- Hitchin residents were fed up with the amount of time that had been spent on project planning and consultancy.
- The final part of the project was the riskiest, and they should not lose sight of what was right for the district and its residents in their approach.
- There had been a £200K overspend on consultants for the project and the administration was seeking to request substantial funding for this phase.
- The Council was fast approaching a tipping point where any future spending would be absorbed, regardless of the financial burden.
- All options including site disposal or no affordable housing provision as part of the regeneration would need to be considered to reduce the cost to the taxpayer.

- Residents of other towns and villages would be questioning whether their communities would receive a multi-million investment in a project in their area as well.
- It was desired for the project to succeed, but not at any cost.
- The project had shown transparency as there was a project board, Hitchin residents had been consulted, and 3 member briefing sessions had already taken place.
- A weekly project timetable was in place to take it into a favourable position before the creation of the new unitary authorities.
- Overspend on consultants totalled £137K, not £200K.
- A quick outcome for the project was desired, but a careful approach was needed and being taken on this fantastic opportunity.
- Reports on the Churchgate project had been given regularly at Hitchin Community Forum.
- Feasibility work proposed in this phase would inform the right choice for the project.
- The project had already cost a lot of money and would cost more going forward.
- Various feasibility studies had been undertaken in the past, and various developers had failed to develop the site and its surroundings.
- The project would have progressed a lot quicker if a developer had undertaken it.
- So many questions were unanswered and exact plans were still yet to be seen.
- This project was huge, expensive, and would be made viable through a loss of parking and housing.
- Problems relating to parking had not been sufficiently addressed, and these would need solving before progression to phase two.

In response points made during the debate, the Chair advised that this phase would ensure that the Council understood the options available to them.

In response to points made during the debate, Councillor Tamsin Thomas advised that:

- Market conditions were much different since the regeneration of Churchgate was first considered 31 years ago.
- There was evidence of a viable development route, and this should be explored.
- Hitchin was thriving, and they had an evidence base for a viable route to develop and regenerate the area.
- Members should stop worrying about what had happened in the past and focus on the future.

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

RESOLVED: That Council approved the additional capital/revenue funding set out in the Part 2 report to support the single competitive procurement, comprising of two phases of a partner to assist the Council with the next stage of the Churchgate Regeneration Project.

REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATION:

(1) The Council has undertaken significant technical work, specialist studies and preliminary market engagement to inform the next stage of the Churchgate Regeneration Project.

(2) The findings indicate that further feasibility, viability and delivery planning work is required before future decisions can be taken regarding the preferred delivery model and implementation of the regeneration proposals.

(3) Approval is therefore sought for the additional funding required to undertake this next phase of work, enabling future decisions to be informed by robust technical, commercial and financial evidence.

29 QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS

Audio recording – 01 hours 15 minutes 58 seconds

In accordance with Standing Order 4.8.11, five questions had been submitted by the required deadline set out in the Constitution. However, following publication of the Agenda, question (B) had been withdrawn.

(A) Charnwood House, Hitchin Vacancy Period

Councillor Chris Lucas to Councillor Tamsin Thomas, Executive Member for Enterprise:

'In the Members Information Service (MIS) bulletin released on 3rd July, I read with interest that BTG Eddison's have been appointed to undertake a new market campaign for Charnwood House, Hitchin this summer.'

Can the Portfolio Holder for Enterprise explain how long the property has been vacant?'

Councillor Tamsin Thomas provided the following response:

'For the benefit of colleagues who may not know the building's history, Charnwood House was generously donated to the community by a local family in 1937 and it served us incredibly well as the home of the Hitchin Museum until those services were relocated to our modern facility on Brand Street. The doors closed to the public in 2012 for the decade that followed but the building served as an additional storage area for the Museum's collection while we worked on a long-term plan to bring it back into active use. Following the election of the joint administration, the Cabinet formally decided to retain Charnwood House rather than dispose of it in 2020 and set aside £400,000 to help achieve this. To prepare the building for its next chapter, in 2022, Officers successfully relocated the stored museum artifacts and items and carried out essential safety works, which included asbestos removal and weather proofing etc. We then ran two separate efforts under the joint administration to find a community occupier. While we had interested parties, neither round ultimately resulted in a successful tenancy. When our new Estates Lead joined the Council, as the Executive Member, I asked for a clear lessons learned review on those previous rounds so we could understand what held those bids back, and this led to an options paper in 2025 focused entirely on delivering on that 2020 promise of community use. As a direct result, we have appointed BTG Eddison's as the marketing agent due to their track record in marketing community and heritage assets, something we think was part of the gap on past efforts to help us finally secure the right future for Charnwood House. I think everyone in this Chamber would have liked to have seen this resolved much sooner but heritage buildings are notoriously difficult to bring back into use. Everyone wants projects to be delivered fast, well and cheaply and my experience is that you can often manage just two of those, but never all three. We must demonstrate value for our taxpayers, and we must deliver a high-quality result for our residents. Doing both of those things well means unfortunately that it is taking us time to get it right.'

N.B. Councillor Emma Rowe left the Chamber at 20:49.

Councillor Chris Lucas asked a supplementary question, as follows:

'Could the portfolio holder explain why she thinks the previous market campaign failed to produce a lease? It was interesting to hear that you mentioned about lessons learned, so perhaps you could summarise those lessons learned and explain to us why the previous marketing campaign failed to produce a lease resulting in Charnwood House remaining vacant for the best part of 14 years.'

N.B. Councillor Emma Rowe returned to the Chamber at 20:50.

Councillor Tamsin Thomas responded:

‘It has not been vacant, it has been in use as a storage facility for much of that time. It's only since 2022 and the removal of the museum items that it has been vacant in that sense. I don’t want to comment on any individual bid as I don’t think that would be right but I will say that a general challenge has not been an absence of interested parties, nor has it been a lack of people who could really make that building thrive as a community centre. The challenge is one that many heritage buildings face in that they require the capacity to generate significant funding through grant applications and to have an estates management capability to maintain a heritage building. Even with preferential rent terms, that is quite challenging and that’s why we’ve partnered with BTG Eddison’s who have got expertise and a proven track record in this area.’

(B) Thomas Bellamy House, Hitchin Vacancy Period

The Chair advised that this question had been withdrawn.

(C) Charnwood House and Thomas Bellamy House, Hitchin Maintenance and Security Costs

Councillor Chris Lucas to Councillor Tamsin Thomas, Executive Member for Enterprise:

‘Could the Portfolio Holder for Enterprise please explain how much money has been spent on maintenance and security for Charnwood House, Hitchin and Thomas Bellamy House, Hitchin since they have been left vacant?’

Councillor Tamsin Thomas provided the following response:

‘I repeat that particularly in the case of Charnwood that the building has not been left vacant for much of that time, its recent asbestos has been cleared. So, the total costs for Thomas Bellamy House have been £85,000, and the total costs for Charnwood House have been £68,000. That includes within it, capital expenditure for Thomas Bellamy House of £60,0000 and Charnwood of £30,000. The holding costs for Thomas Bellamy House have been £25,000 and for Charnwood House, £38,000.’

Councillor Chris Lucas asked a supplementary question, as follows:

‘Does the Portfolio Holder for Enterprise think that this is a good use of public money give that both properties have been left dormant for such a ridiculous length of time or could both properties not have been used for better use by the public within Hitchin?’

Councillor Tamsin Thomas responded:

‘I hope that my initial remarks showed that through the entire period of vacancy, the Council has been engaged in an active process to resolve the long-standing use of Charnwood House, including ensuring it serves the public in some form through museum storage. No one in this Chamber needs me to talk about the challenges of museum storage for the residents of North Herts and why we need additional space. We are the custodians of those facilities and a quick route to resolving this would be disposal or would be to leverage options around a very loose understanding of community use to get someone in. I don’t think that’s the right approach, I think that the facilities are heritage buildings, listed buildings, and it is right that we take a measured approach to, one, ensuring that they don’t degrade, which they would if they were dormant, and they are being maintained, hence the cost. But also, that Officers are working as proactively as they can to ensure that they remain in the public realm and they remain in community use for many decades to come. It is incredibly frustrating, I share with Councillor Lucas’s concern about time, but I come to the point that you can get things cheap, you can get things fast, but you can’t get them done well if you’re aiming for that. So, I think that Officers have been taking an appropriate approach to ensuring that both buildings remain in good standing and that they are returned in as measured a pace as we can manage back into public use.'

(D) Impact of the Planning and Infrastructure Act on North Hertfordshire

Councillor Ralph Muncer to Councillor Val Bryant, Leader of the Council:

'To ask the Leader of the Council what assessment has been made as to the impact of the Planning and Infrastructure Act 2025 on North Hertfordshire?'

Councillor Val Bryant provided the following response:

'First of all, the background. The Government intends to play a key role in unlocking more housing and infrastructure across the country and supporting sustained economic growth. The act is being rolled out in stages via secondary legislation, such as the National Scheme of Delegation (NSD). There are five overarching objectives, delivering faster and more certain consenting processes for critical infrastructure. Two, introducing a more strategic approach to nature recovery. Three, improving certainty and decision making in the planning system. Four, unlocking land and securing public value for large scale investment, and five, introducing effective new mechanisms for cross-boundary strategic planning. The key operational and structural changes affecting North Hertfordshire, first of all, committee streamlining. The National Scheme of Delegation will encourage more delegated decision making with the aim of limiting committee involvement to the most significant developments that are of wide public interest, thereby freeing up resources, allowing committees to concentrate on those applications that have the greatest impact upon the residents and businesses within North Herts. This will be addressed through the constitutional review and the first sub stream meeting is scheduled for Friday 17 July. Any decisions that are made after 31 October and not in accordance with the NSD, which is the National Scheme of Delegation, will be susceptible to judicial review or complaints to the Local Government Ombudsman, so it is something that we've got to bring in. It is anticipated that it will result in a reduction in the number of Planning Control Committee meetings and/or the length of meetings. Mandatory training for Planning Control Committee Members. We already undertake mandatory Member training although this is a statutory requirement, and Members and will be required to successfully complete training to obtain a valid completion certificate, without which, they will not be able to sit on the Planning Control Committee. Planning Committees will be limited to no more than 13 Members. This will not affect North Herts as currently, the Planning Control Committee has 12 Members. Localised Planning Fees, North Herts will have great autonomy to set application fees. Currently, it is intended to liaise with other authorities on fees following the impending decision on Local Government Reorganisation (LGR). Strategic spatial planning reintroduces a requirement for North Herts to plan more strategically across wide regional areas with the aim of ensuring that housing growth aligns with infrastructure needs. Environmental delivery plans to change how developers protect and enhance our environment when building by financing habitat restoration and pollution reduction measures such as river cleanups. Finally, compulsory purchase order powers. North Herts will be able to assemble land quickly and cheaply for public interest projects. Hope value can be bypassed when acquiring land, and then there's the question of compensation.'

Councillor Ralph Muncer asked a supplementary question, as follows:

'Who does she think is best suited to take decisions as to the future of our communities? Is it the locally elected representatives in this Chamber or is it the faceless bureaucrats in Whitehall?'

Councillor Val Bryant responded:

‘I'm on the Planning Committee, I've been on the Planning Committee for many years and I think that many of the applications that we look at are very worthy, and others you sit there and think ‘What are we doing here looking at these?’, and I do think that there needs to be a new look at what comes to planning and if you look at the details of the legislation, it is in fact not as clear cut as you’re talking about with bureaucrats, etcetera. But hopefully, there will be a more common-sense approach and I think it will shake down and give it a chance, and I think you’ll find it will work well.’

(E) Approach to Active Travel

Councillor Ralph Muncer to Councillor Donna Wright, Executive Member for Place:

‘To ask the Executive Member for Place to set out the Administration’s approach to Active Travel policy ahead of the Local Plan Review and the upcoming consultation on Hertfordshire County Council’s Local Transport Plan 5?’

Councillor Donna Wright provided the following response:

‘I think firstly, I do have to admit that I haven’t yet read the County Local Transport Plan 5. I’ve been on holiday and it was only circulated to district councils a couple of weeks ago, so I haven’t had a chance to look at it. But obviously, it’s on my list and we will, as a Council, be responding to the consultation in September when the final draft has been produced. In terms of our approach to active travel, the Labour Party strongly supports active travel as part of its wider goals on public health, economic growth, cleaner air, decarbonisation, and sustainable transport. The Government’s Active Travel Strategy, anchored by the third Cycling and Walking Investment Strategy and led by Transport Secretary, Heidi Alexandr features a £4.5bn investment over five years to build 5,000 new routes and 10,000 safer crossings. Our approach tends to focus more on active travel being integrated with other modes of transport rather than replacing them entirely, recognising that many journeys involve a combination of walking, cycling, bus and rail. So, this is where we might differ from some other parties. In practice, this mean prioritising infrastructure and planning that make active travel safe, convenient, and attractive whilst ensuring it is integrated with wider transport networks. People should have more transport choices, but we also recognise that cars will continue to be necessary for many journeys, particularly in rural areas and for people with mobility needs, etcetera. This is reflected in Labour’s broader transport policy, which continues to invest in roads alongside public and active transport. So, in summary, we aim for a balanced, integrated approach with strong support for active travel, where appropriate.’

Councillor Ralph Muncer asked a supplementary question, as follows:

‘Could I ask the Executive Member, will she commit to advocating for and enshrining within the next iteration of the Local Plan, a more pragmatic and realistic approach to active travel policy implementation in regard to planning applications proposed within our rural communities here in North Hertfordshire?’

Councillor Donna Wright responded:

‘I think in answer to the previous question, I’ve already outlined our approach, and we will take a balanced approach, and we do recognise that cars are still needed for many journeys, particularly in rural areas. So, we will take a balanced, integrated approach.’

In accordance with Standing Order 4.8.11(d)(ii), one urgent question had been submitted and accepted by the Chair.

(A) <u>Widespread Disruption from Iron Maiden concert at Knebworth House</u>

Councillor Paul Ward to Councillor Mick Debenham, Executive Member for Regulatory:

‘Last weekend’s Iron Maiden concert at Knebworth House caused unusual levels of widespread congestion in the main Knebworth village, other nearby villages and Stevenage. There were several issues with traffic management, with reports of residents stuck for hours and ticket holders abandoning their journeys.

Can the Portfolio Holder for Regulatory please explain what action is being taken to learn lessons from this to make future events safe and successful?’

Councillor Mick Debenham provided the following response:

‘The Iron Maiden concert at Knebworth was a major event that attracted many thousands of visitors to North Hertfordshire. While many people enjoyed the concert, I recognise that some residents, businesses and attendees experienced significant disruption, particularly due to traffic congestion and extended journey times. I would like to reassure Members that North Hertfordshire Council, working with the event organisers, Knebworth Estate, emergency services, highway authorities and other partner agencies, is already undertaking a formal post-event review through the Safety Advisory Group (SAG) process. This review will examine all aspects of the event, including traffic management, transport planning, vehicle and pedestrian movements, communications and the wider impact on local communities. The SAG met several times before the event and carried out a site visit shortly beforehand. During the concert itself, the Council and partner agencies also took part in operational planning and event control arrangements. Prior to the event, all relevant organisations were satisfied that the plans submitted met the required standards and appropriately addressed the risks identified at the time. However, a key purpose of the SAG process is to learn from experience. We are therefore gathering feedback from residents, attendees, councillors, partner organisations and event staff. This is being considered alongside information provided by the organisers and emergency services, as well as commentary shared on social media. We have already received a wide range of comments and suggestions relating to traffic management, pedestrian safety, communications and routing arrangements. These will all be considered as part of the review. It would not be appropriate to pre-empt the findings before all the evidence has been assessed. However, I can assure Members that any lessons identified will be discussed with organisers and partner agencies and will help shape planning for future events at Knebworth. Our shared objective is clear, to ensure that future events are safe, well managed and successful whilst minimising disruption to local residents and communities.’

Councillor Paul Ward asked a supplementary question, as follows:

‘Can Councillor Debenham confirm he’s willing to work with the organisers, the Officers and the SAG to update the Council with an appropriate summary of the improvements once those investigations are concluded, noting that some of the details have to remain confidential for security reasons?’

Councillor Mick Debenham responded:

‘Yes.’

N.B. Following the conclusion of the item, there was a break in proceedings at 21:08 and the meeting reconvened at 21:19. During the break, Councillors Ruth Clifton and Dominic Griffiths left the Chamber and did not return.

30 NOTICE OF MOTIONS

Audio recording – 01 hours 50 minutes 07 seconds

There were three motions submitted in accordance with Standing Order 4.8.12.

(A) Objection to the National Scheme of Delegation for Planning Applications

Councillor Steve Jarvis proposed the motion as follows:

‘Council regrets the decision of the Government to introduce a "National Scheme of Delegation" for planning applications.

It believes that:

a) Planning decisions should continue to be made by locally elected councillors rather than being increasingly determined by officers under national rules.
b) the Secretary of State is being given excessive power to dictate council constitutions and planning procedures.

Council resolves:

To instruct the Leader of the Council to write to all North Herts MPs setting out these views.’

Councillor Ruth Brown seconded the motion.

The following Members took part in the debate:

- Councillor Donna Wright
- Councillor Tom Tyson
- Councillor Daniel Wright-Mason
- Councillor Paul Ward
- Councillor Daniel Allen
- Councillor Ruth Brown
- Councillor Ralph Muncer
- Councillor Elizabeth Dennis
- Councillor Martin Prescott
- Councillor Tim Johnson
- Councillor Nigel Mason
- Councillor Matt Barnes

The following points were made as part of the debate:

- Concerns from Members were understood, but they must acknowledge that the current arrangements were deeply flawed and inconsistent between authorities and did not serve residents or applicants well, and the new scheme was designed to improve this.
- Planning Control Committees would continue to have an important role as large applications would be considered by them.
- Some Planning Control Committees were politically charged under the current setup, which meant that some applications were not decided on their merits.
- The Council should be able to trust Planning Officers with professional expertise to make independent, evidence-based judgements.
- Reform to the scheme would help Members to focus on other areas where they added the most value such as setting visions and establishing policy frameworks.
- The country faced a housing crisis and a critical need for new infrastructure, and growth in the economy was also needed, which a fair planning system would address.
- The scheme would take away community voices and the democratic oversight that members of the public gave on decisions taken by Planning Control Committees.

- The perception that the Government imposed development on residents without accounting for local concerns would be reinforced, and public trust in the planning system would be eroded.
- Shifting the responsibility of decision-making onto Officers was undemocratic.
- Service delivery for homes had experienced a fundamental failure in recent years, which North Herts district had been part of as their share of national housing delivery had declined by a third in the last 25 years.
- The Government were trying to correct decades of service failure and under delivery in an area of great importance, and those who were in desperate need of housing, including those on the housing register and in temporary accommodation deserved this response.
- These reforms would place an onus on the limited number of Planning Officers.
- Members would have a vote on this scheme at the next Full Council meeting, so the motion was pointless.
- Neither the broken planning system nor the social housing required across the country would be addressed by the scheme.
- The UK had a developer-led planning system, where developers only built homes if they were viable in term of profit, and this scheme would not change that or the problems it presented where developers sought to legally challenge financial contributions.
- Taking decision-making powers from Members would not lead to more homes being built.
- This motion represented a centralisation of power as the role of the Planning Inspectorate would be increased, and the comments made by Chris Hinchliff MP about empowering residents and not disregarding their concerns were agreed with.
- The Secretary of State already had the powers to set this important regulatory framework as local authorities were governed by statute.
- Planning Control Committee meetings were long and frequent under the current system, and this scheme would contribute towards resolving this.
- This scheme would not take power from Members as they would still be able to perform their democratic function in decision making by communicating with Planning Officers and expressing concerns on behalf of residents.
- The Planning Control Committee was not driven by political imperatives.
- It was condescending and patronising and they fully supported the motion.
- The Council would not have a Planning Control Committee if they did not pass the scheme into their Constitution at the Council meeting later in the year.
- Going forward, Members should work with Planning Officers and the Planning Control Committee to make wise decisions and make the new scheme work.
- What remained of the democratic planning system would be demolished by these reforms and the removal of public voices would drive public outrage.
- It was outrageous for this scheme to be forced through, and Government Ministers should work with Members to put power back into communities.

Councillor Steve Jarvis replied to the debate and advised that:

- It was agreed that Planning Officers were experts and their valuable advice should be considered, but the democratic element of their decision making was questioned.
- Planning applications should not be determined in the same way across the county as local considerations should be accounted for.
- This scheme showed a lack of trust by the Government in councillors.
- No evidence supported the notion that this scheme would result in more housing being built as there were thousands of unimplemented applications across the country due to developers not proceeding until they were able to obtain the right level of profit.

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

RESOLVED: That Council instructed the Leader of the Council to write to all North Herts MPs setting out the views in the motion.

Councillor Nigel Mason advised that there were no political Members on the Planning Control Committee and that Members of the Committee were there to do things well, not represent their parties.

(B) Mimram Valley Landscape Designation Project

Councillor Ralph Muncer proposed the motion as follows:

‘The River Mimram runs from its source near Whitwell to join the River Lea at Hertford and is one of only 260 chalk streams that exist in the world.

Earlier this year, the Mimram Valley Local Landscape Designation steering group submitted an outline case for a Local Landscape Designation (LLD) for the Mimram Valley to be included in the next iteration of the Local Plan, with this proposal being submitted to North Hertfordshire District Council, Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council and East Hertfordshire District Council.

A LLD protects areas considered by the Local Planning Authority to be of particular landscape value to the local area and if granted, the designation would ensure this precious natural and heritage-rich environment is sustained by making landscape impact a primary consideration in planning decisions.

The designation would also play an important role in developing an awareness of the landscape qualities that make the Mimram Valley distinctive, promote awareness amongst the various communities in the valley and help to strengthen local rural economies.

Therefore, Council resolves:

1. To express its support for the Mimram Valley being granted Local Landscape Designation status.

2. To instruct Officers engage in discussions with the Mimram Valley Local Landscape Designation Project steering group in order to progress the ambition of the Mimram Valley being granted Local Landscape Designation status in the upcoming revision of the North Hertfordshire Local Plan

3. To instruct the Leader of the Council to write to the Leader of Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council and the Leader of East Hertfordshire District Council calling on their respective Councils to support the Mimram Valley being granted Local Landscape Designation status within their Local Development Plans.’

Councillor Joe Graziano seconded the motion.

The following Members took part in the debate:

- Councillor Val Bryant
- Councillor Joe Graziano

The following points were made as part of the debate:

- This designation had already been included in the Draft Local Plan Review to ensure that all chalk streams in North Herts, including the River Mimram were locally valued landscapes. The Strategic Planning Board would consider this soon and public consultation would take place on this as part of the Local Plan Review if approved by Cabinet.

- The River Mimram was an internationally rare chalk stream, and the Mimram Valley connected many communities and provided important landscape for wildlife, recreation, heritage and wellbeing.
- It faced water abstraction, pollution, habitat loss, and development pressures.
- The Council must ensure that the valley was enhanced for future generations.
- This designation would ensure future planning decisions would give greater weight to conserving the character, nature assets and biodiversity of the valley, and ensure an additional layer of safeguarding from inappropriate development.
- The Council should work with landowners to preserve the ecological health of the River Mimram and heritage of the Mimram Valley as they were irreplaceable.

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

RESOLVED: That Council:

(1) Expressed its support for the Mimram Valley being granted Local Landscape Designation status.

(2) Instructed Officers to engage in discussions with the Mimram Valley Local Landscape Designation Project Steering Group in order to progress the ambition of the Mimram Valley being granted Local Landscape Designation status in the upcoming revision of the North Hertfordshire Local Plan. Thursday, 16th July, 2026.

(3) Instructed the Leader of the Council to write to the Leaders of Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council and East Hertfordshire District Council calling on their respective Councils to support the Mimram Valley being granted Local Landscape Designation status within their Local Development Plans.

(C) Future of Land Holdings South of the A505, Royston

N.B. Councillors Steve Jarvis and Chris Lucas declared an interest on this item due to their positions as Members of Cabinet at Hertfordshire County Council and left the Chamber for the duration of the motion.

Councillor Ralph Muncer proposed the motion as follows:

‘On 17 June, the Cabinet at Hertfordshire County Council declared land holding to the South of the A505, Royston to be “surplus to operational requirements” and took the decision to dispose of the land.

The Land North of Roysia School was acquired in the 1980s using statutory compulsory purchase powers for education purposes and whilst the land in question has been allocated for residential development within the North Herts Local Plan, the decision of the County Council to dispose of this land has not adequately addressed the cumulative impact of significant additional housing on the existing highway network, particularly the single point of access that already serves over 1,000 homes in the surrounding area.

Additionally, there is no evidence that any public consultation has been undertaken with local residents, community groups or stakeholders in Royston regarding the proposed disposal and the residential development it will facilitate, particularly in light of existing pressures on local infrastructure.

Whilst the County Council has concluded there is “no current or future need” for the land for County Council service delivery, it does not appear to have fully considered whether retention of all or part of the land could deliver alternative public or community benefits, for example sports facilities of which there are a significant shortage within the town, and whether the proposed joint disposal strategy with the Highfield Land Trust represents the option that best serves the wider public interest.

Therefore, Council Resolves:

1. To instruct the Leader of the Council to write to the Leader of Hertfordshire County Council requesting that the Cabinet examines, again, its decision to dispose of the land in question and fully considers if the proposed joint disposal strategy with the Highfield Land Trust best serves the wider public interest or whether retention of the land could deliver alternative public/community benefits, for example, the health and wellbeing benefits from additional sports/recreational facilities, of which there are a significant shortage within the town.

2. To instruct the Officers at North Hertfordshire District Council to work with Hertfordshire County Council in order to identify the best possible future community use of this land.’

Councillor Martin Prescott seconded the motion.

Councillor Tim Johnson proposed an amendment to be included in the motion to instruct Officers at North Herts to investigate ways this land could be acquired to provide additional sporting facilities for Royston.

Councillor Ralph Muncer, as the proposer, accepted the amendment into the substantive motion and this was also accepted by Councillor Martin Prescott as seconder.

In response to a question raised by Councillor Sadie Billing, Councillor Ralph Muncer advised that:

- The proposal had gone through the committee process at Hertfordshire County Council (HCC) and Members had raised concerns through this.
- There was a worrying trend on the disposal of land allocated for key community infrastructure by HCC and other authorities, which was the key principle for this motion.

The following Members took part in the debate:

- Councillor Ruth Brown
- Councillor Ian Albert
- Councillor Martin Prescott
- Councillor Matt Barnes
- Councillor Alistair Willoughby
- Councillor Tim Johnson
- Councillor Val Bryant
- Councillor Laura Williams

The following points were made as part of the debate:

- The decision taken by HCC could have been called-in as it was taken by Cabinet.
- Even though the site had been allocated for 100 homes in the Local Plan, there was no reason why it could not be reallocated for sports provision.
- Roysia School had been shut in 2019 by the administration at the time, and neither they nor the current administration had done anything to address this.
- There had been numerous opportunities to comment on the disposal of land at HCC meetings, but no comments had been made.

- Acquiring land for sports facilities would be ideal, but it was not viable for the Council to do this, and sending a letter to HCC was not likely to make a difference.
- Residents attending Royston & Villages Community Forum had expressed a dire need for more sports facilities in the town and it would be nice for funding to go towards this.
- This motion failed to mention the Outdoor Sports Strategy published by the Council, which gave high priority to working with multiple organisations to develop a new multi-sports facility to address shortfalls for sporting provision in Royston.
- Sports provision could be delivered on this land as it was undeveloped and flat, and the amendment played a tangible role in delivering on the Outdoor Sports Strategy.
- This proposal could have been included in the Work Programme at the Overview and Scrutiny Committee at HCC as it could have carried more weight there.
- A Council meeting was not the right place for this issue to be resolved, and they could easily talk to the Leader of the Council outside the meeting about this.
- There were opportunities to work with Royston Town Council to investigate how they could acquire the land.
- There was no indication of how much the land would cost.

In response to points raised by Councillor Ian Albert, the Monitoring Officer advised that the motion was reasonable as it would not commit funding at this stage.

In response to points raised by Councillor Ian Albert, the Chief Executive advised that every motion could have implications on Officer time.

Councillor Emma Rowe left the Chamber at 22:31 and returned at 22:32.

Councillor Ralph Muncer replied to the debate and advised that:

- Matters decided by other authorities such as HCC should be subject to debate by the Council as they had an impact on their communities.
- Debating this motion gave Members a chance to raise issues of concern and made sure that HCC were held accountable for their decisions.

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

RESOLVED: That the motion, as amended, was ***LOST***.

The meeting closed at 10.36 pm

Chair