

NORTH HERTFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

MINUTES

Meeting of the Council held in the Council Chamber - District Council Offices, Gernon Road,
Letchworth, SG6 3JF
on Thursday, 8th October, 2026 at 7.30 pm

PRESENT: Councillors: Keith Hoskins MBE (Chair), Sean Prendergast (Vice-Chair), Ian Albert, Daniel Allen, Amy Allen, David Barnard, Matt Barnes, Clare Billing, Sadie Billing, Ruth Brown, Cathy Brownjohn, Val Bryant, Rhona Cameron, David Chalmers, Jon Clayden, Sam Collins, Mick Debenham, Elizabeth Dennis, Emma Fernandes, Dominic Griffiths, Steve Jarvis, 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, Tamsin Thomas, Tom Tyson, Paul Ward, Laura Williams, Alistair Willoughby, Stewart Willoughby, Claire Winchester, Dave Winstanley and Donna Wright.

IN ATTENDANCE: Isabelle Alajooz (Director - Governance and Monitoring Officer), Luca Benedito (Trainee Committee, Member and Scrutiny Officer), Ian Couper (Director - Resources), Jamie Graham (Electoral Services Assistant), James Lovegrove (Committee, Member and Scrutiny Manager), Anthony Roche (Chief Executive), Nigel Smith (Director - Place) and Melanie Stimpson (Democratic Services Manager).

ALSO PRESENT: At the commencement of the meeting there was 1 member of the public in attendance.

31 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Audio recording – 02 minutes 01 seconds

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Joe Graziano, Claire Strong, Tim Johnson, Tina Bhartwas, Lisa Nash, Ruth Clifton, Daniel Wright-Mason and Sarah Lucas.

32 MINUTES - 16 JULY 2026

Audio Recording – 02 minutes 24 seconds

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

RESOLVED: That the Minutes of the Meeting held on 16 July 2026 be approved as a true record of the proceedings and be signed by the Chair.

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

33 NOTIFICATION OF OTHER BUSINESS

Audio recording – 02 minutes 51 seconds

The Chair advised that an urgent item of business had been accepted for consideration at the meeting concerning an extension to the six-month rule in respect of Councillor Lisa Nash, which would be considered at the conclusion of the scheduled part 1 and part 2 business.

The matter had been agreed as urgent as the next scheduled Full Council meeting would be after the six-month period had expired.

34 CHAIR'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

Audio recording – 03 minutes 12 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, 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 encouraged all Members to attend Youth Democracy Day invite on 26 November 2026 and to direct any questions about the day to Committee Services.
- (7) The Chair advised Members that nominations for his North Herts Heroes Awards would be opening soon and further information would be available through the Members Information Bulletin.

35 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

Audio recording – 06 minutes 42 seconds

There was no public participation.

36 ITEMS REFERRED FROM OTHER COMMITTEES

Audio recording – 06 minutes 46 seconds

The Chair advised that the referral from Finance, Audit and Risk Committee would be taken with the respective item on the agenda.

37 CONSTITUTIONAL REVIEW

Audio recording – 06 minutes 57 seconds

The Director – Governance presented the report entitled 'Constitutional Review' and advised that:

- The report set out proposed changes to the Constitution following discussions with the Cross-Party Constitutional Working Group.
- A key proposal was the introduction of a £75,000 financial threshold into the definition of a Key Decision, which would provide consistency, clarity and transparency when determining whether decisions were financially significant.
- Consequential amendments were proposed to the Contract Procurement Rules.
- Further amendments were proposed to Section 16 of the Constitution to better reflect existing budget-setting practices and provide a clearer process for budget setting.

N.B. Councillor Dominic Griffiths entered the Chamber at 19.45.

The following Members asked questions:

- Councillor Matt Barnes
- Councillor Paul Ward

In response to questions the Director – Resources advised that:

- Determination of whether items fell within the proposed provisions would likely be made by the Section 151 Officer and Director of Governance.
- The emphasis should be on whether amendments reflected new information rather than the scale of the change.
- The word 'minor' could be removed if Members considered that would provide greater clarity.
- The proposals sought to ensure comparable rules for both the administration and opposition groups when making budget amendments.
- Some form of judgement would be required where questions arose over whether amendments reflected new information.
- Opposition group budget proposals would be considered as complete packages.
- Where overlap occurred between proposals, each package would still be considered and voted on in turn.

Subject to the amendment that the word 'minor' be removed from paragraph 16.3.8 of Section 16 as follows:

16.3.8 The Administration Group can only make ~~minor~~ changes to their budget proposals to the extent that they reflect new information that has become available. Such changes should be provided to the Section 151 Officer as soon as is practicable, to that they can determine the impact on the budget estimates. The changes will be published as an addendum to the Council report, along with a report on the robustness of the estimates and the adequacy of the Council reserves to afford the financial impact. The Chief Finance Officer has a statutory obligation to refuse any changes that do not allow the Council to set a balanced budget.

Councillor Daniel Allen proposed and Councillor Ian Albert seconded and, following a vote, it was:

RESOLVED: That the proposed changes to Section 2, Section 16 and Section 21 the Council's Constitution, as outlined within the report and appendices, as amended, were adopted.

REASON FOR DECISION: To ensure the Council's constitution is the framework for the Council's operations and decision making – it ensures that the Council operates in a way which is efficient and transparent, ethical and accountable to local people. It is a reference point for Members, officers and the public and is a living document which must be kept up to date and legally compliant. This is an iterative process which is undertaken throughout the year by the Monitoring Officer in accordance with the 'Duty to Monitor and Review the constitution which is set out in Section 2 of the constitution and includes a combination of updates under the general housekeeping delegations in respect of minor amendments as well as more substantive amendments which are undertaken through engagement of the cross-party Constitutional Working Group.

38 NATIONAL SCHEME OF DELEGATION

Audio recording – 17 minutes 32 seconds

Councillor Daniel Allen, as Executive Member for Governance, presented the report entitled 'National Scheme of Delegation, and advised that:

- The National Scheme of Delegation was a new requirement introduced by the Government and would come into force on 31 October 2026.
- The Council was required to amend its Constitution to comply with the new legal framework.
- Approximately 96% of planning applications were already determined under delegated powers.
- The new scheme set out which applications must be determined by officers and which may be considered by the Planning Control Committee.
- Existing councillor call-in arrangements, including those linked to parish council objections, would no longer continue under the new arrangements.
- Applications would fall into two categories, with some required to be determined by officers and others capable of referral to committee where they raise issues of genuine planning significance.
- Determination of which applications were referred to committee would be made by the Chair of the Planning Control Committee and the Development and Conservation Manager, with substitute arrangements available where required.
- Parish and Town Councils would remain statutory consultees and their views would continue to be taken into account.
- Ward Councillors would continue to support residents and represent local concerns.
- The report sought approval of the constitutional changes required by law together with the proposed Scheme of Management and supporting guidance.
- An additional recommendation was proposed requesting the Director of Place to consider amendments proposed by Members to the Planning Scheme of Management and Planning Control Committee Additional Guidance prior to publication.

The following members asked questions:

- Councillor Matt Barnes
- Councillor Ruth Brown

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

- It was confirmed that Recommendation 2.3 would enable proposed amendments from Members to be considered before the guidance documents were finalised and published.
- It was confirmed that the appendices did not form part of the constitutional amendments requiring approval and that Member comments would be considered through the proposed additional recommendation.
- That the Constitution would take precedence in the event of any conflict.

Councillor Ralph Muncer proposed an amendment, as detailed in the published Supplementary Documents, which sought to establish a Planning Panel that would consider applications and make non-binding recommendations determined under delegated powers. Councillor Steven Patmore seconded the amendment.

The following Members took part in the debate on the amendment:

- Councillor Martin Prescott
- Councillor Donna Wright
- Councillor Ruth Brown
- Councillor Alistair Willoughby
- Councillor Sam Collins
- Councillor Nigel Mason
- Councillor Amy Allen
- Councillor David Barnard
- Councillor Martin Prescott
- Councillor Ian Mantle
- Councillor Vijaiya Poopalasingham

The following points were made as part of the debate on the amendment:

- Supported the principle of a Planning Panel, having experience of similar arrangements in another authority. Such panels could provide residents, parish councils and local businesses with an opportunity to express their views in a forum separate from the formal Planning Committee process.
- Opposed the amendment as a non-binding panel would have no decision-making powers or accountability. It could slow decision-making, increase bureaucracy and place additional demands on planning officers and Council resources, without changing where the final decision-making responsibility lay.
- The changes would result in a loss of local decision-making powers under the national scheme but recognised that the Council was required to comply with the law. The proposed amendment had been submitted too late for Members to consider it fully and proposed that the matter be referred to the Constitutional Working Group for further discussion.
- Expressed concern that an advisory panel could place pressure on planning officers and risk politicising decisions for which officers remained accountable.
- Considered that residents should have the opportunity to be heard but that the amendment had been submitted in insufficient time to be able to be properly assessed.
- Expressed concern about the additional workload for planning officers and questioned the practical value of establishing a non-binding panel when the decision-making arrangements would remain unchanged.
- Noted that Members could already engage directly with residents and discuss their concerns about planning applications without the need to establish a separate committee.
- Supported the principle of providing residents and parish councils with an opportunity to address a panel, notwithstanding that its recommendations would not be binding.
- Reiterated that the purpose of the proposal was to ensure that residents felt their views had been heard, rather than to change the formal decision-making process.
- Residents could continue to make representations directly to Planning Officers.
- Emphasised the importance of submitting amendments in sufficient time to allow Members to consider them properly and work towards a shared position.

Having been proposed and seconded and, following a vote, it was **LOST**.

Councillor Ruth Brown subsequently proposed a further amendment, which requested that the Director – Place, in consultation with the Monitoring Officer, be asked to explore whether additional arrangements for Member and public engagement in planning applications determined under delegated authority could lawfully be introduced, having regard to the requirements of the National Scheme of Delegation and associated statutory guidance. Any proposals requiring constitutional amendments would be brought back to Full Council for consideration.

Councillor Ruth Brown emphasised the importance of providing residents with opportunities to speak in person and to feel that their views had been heard, rather than relying solely on written representations through the planning portal.

Councillor Sam Collins seconded the amendment.

The following Members took part in the debate on the amendment:

- Councillor Martin Prescott
- Councillor Claire Winchester
- Councillor Ralph Muncer
- Councillor Vijaiya Poopalasingham

The following points were made as part of the debate on the amendment:

- Supported the amendment, stating that public engagement was important even where a panel or forum had no formal decision-making powers and considered that residents should have an opportunity to express their views on matters affecting their communities.
- Supported further consideration of the arrangements, noting that the National Scheme of Delegation represented a significant change.
- Alternative approaches could be explored to improve public engagement and the planning process, to that proposed in the first amendment.
- Considered that it provided a useful starting point for further work.
- Members would participate in any review intended to strengthen the voice of local communities in the planning process.
- Reiterated the importance of bringing proposals forward in good time so that Members and officers could consider them properly and work collaboratively towards a solution.

Having been proposed and seconded and, following a vote, it was **TIED**.

The Chair exercised their casting vote, and it was:

RESOLVED:

- (1) That the amendments to Section 8.4 of the Constitution, attached as Appendix 1, were approved for implementation from 31 October 2026.
- (2) That the Planning Scheme of Management, attached as Appendix 2 and guidance in relation to committee briefings and site visits, attached as Appendix 3, were noted.
- (3) That the Director: Place be requested to consider any amendments proposed by Members to the Planning Scheme of Management relating to the guidance on committee briefings and site visits before those documents are finalised and published.

- (4) That the Director: Place, in consultation with the Monitoring Officer, be requested to explore whether additional arrangements for Member and public engagement in planning applications determined under delegated authority could lawfully be introduced, having regard to the requirements of the National Scheme of Delegation and associated statutory guidance, with any proposals requiring constitutional amendments brought back to Full Council for consideration.

REASONS FOR DECISION:

- (1) A mandatory, National Scheme of Delegation (NSD) takes effect from 31 October 2026. Statutory Government guidance states that authorities' Constitutions must be amended to give effect to these new requirements in time.
- (2) Alongside the constitutional changes, operational guidance – the Planning Scheme of Management - will also be published. This sets out arrangements by which schemes for potential referral to Planning Control Committee are considered, as well as operational delegations to officers to make decisions in accordance with the NSD.
- (3) A report was published for Full Council to consider the committee briefings and site visit guidance at its meeting in April 2026. This item was deferred from consideration.
- (4) Subsequent legal advice, as well as good practice guidance published to assist with implementing the NSD, is now that additional and administrative guidance should not be constitutional. This enables it to be updated more efficiently and responsively.
- (5) This guidance is presented to provide broader context to the operational implications and procedural changes that are being introduced.

N.B. Following the conclusion of this item, there was a break in proceedings to resolve IT issues being experienced and the meeting reconvened at 20.36.

39 CHANGES TO THE CONTRACT PROCUREMENT RULES

Audio recording – 01 hour 06 minutes 30 seconds

Councillor Stewart Willoughby presented the referral from the Finance, Audit and Risk Committee (Referral 6A) and the report entitled 'Changes to the Contract Procurement Rules' and advised that:

- New Contract Procurement Rules were adopted by the Council in 2025 following implementation of the Procurement Act 2023.
- Minor amendments had been made under delegated authority since their adoption.
- The report proposed more substantial changes requiring approval by Full Council.
- One proposed change was to increase the threshold at which more than one quotation is requiring from £10,000 to £25,000, which would better target Officer time and procurement resources. Officers would still be encouraged to obtain multiple quotations where it was likely to provide better value for money.
- A second proposed change would allow below-threshold procurements to be restricted to local suppliers, small and medium enterprises, and voluntary, community and social enterprises.
- The changes had been supported by the Finance, Audit and Risk Committee.

N.B. Councillor Val Bryant and Councillor Amy Allen entered the Chamber at 20:37.

The following points were made as part of the debate by Councillor Ruth Brown:

- The inclusion of voluntary, community and social enterprises and the application of the Go Local Policy were welcomed.
- The changes would help support local businesses and local voluntary sector organisations.
- The increase in the quotation threshold from £10,000 to £25,000 was sensible and she supported the proposal.

Councillor Stewart Willoughby proposed and Councillor Ian Albert seconded, and following a vote, it was:

RESOLVED: That Council adopted the changes to the Council's Contract Procurement Rules detailed in the report.

REASON FOR DECISION:

- (1) The increase in the threshold for single quotes reflects the impact of inflation and that not changing them creates additional work for Officers.
- (2) The introduction of geographical and supplier type restrictions gives the opportunity for procurements to be better aligned with policy objectives.

N.B. Councillor Cathy Brownjohn entered the Chamber at 20.39.

40 USE OF URGENCY IN RELATION TO CALL-IN FOR DECISIONS ON AWARDING UK SHARED PROSPERITY FUND (UKSPF) ALLOCATIONS

Audio recording – 01 hour 09 minutes 55 seconds

The Director – Resources presented the report entitled 'Use of Urgency in relation to Call-in for Decisions on Awarding UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) Allocation' and advised that:

- To ensure compliance with the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, the allocated funding was required to be spent by 30 September 2026.
- The Chair of the Council had been consulted regarding the use of urgency provisions to enable the funding decisions to be made within the required timescale.
- The use of urgency powers was in accordance with the Constitution.
- The report was presented to inform Council that the urgency provisions had been used.

N.B. Councillors Alistair Willoughby, Emma Rowe and Michael Muir declared an interest in this item due to their roles at the Baldock Community Hub which had been a recipient of the UKSPF Funding and left the Chamber for the duration of this item.

As part of the debate Councillor Ruth Brown made the following points:

- Welcomed the distribution of the remaining UK Shared Prosperity Fund allocation and considered the approach taken to be fair.
- Hoped that funding would be used for the intended purposes and noted that the funding had been allocated within the required timescale.

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

RESOLVED: That Council notes the use of urgency provisions in relation to the decisions on the award of UKSPF funding attached at Appendix A.

REASONS FOR DECISION:

- (1) Urgency provisions were used to ensure that the funding was allocated and spent by the 30th September deadline.
- (2) This is reported to Council to comply with the requirements of the Constitution.

N.B. Councillors Alistair Willoughby, Emma Rowe and Michael Muir returned to the Chamber at 20:42.

41 APPOINTMENT OF VICE CHAIR - FINANCE, AUDIT AND RISK COMMITTEE

Audio recording – 01 hour 14 minutes 06 seconds

The Democratic Services Manager presented the report entitled 'Appointment of Vice Chair – Finance, Audit and Risk Committee' which proposed that:

- Councillor Elizabeth Dennis be appointed as a Member of the Finance, Audit and Risk Committee.
- Councillor Nigel Mason be appointed as a Substitute Member of the Finance, Audit and Risk Committee.
- Councillor Stewart Willoughby be appointed as Vice-Chair of the Finance, Audit and Risk Committee.

Councillor Val Bryant proposed and Councillor Daniel Allen seconded and, following a vote, it was:

RESOLVED:

- (1) That for the remainder of the civic year 2026-2027 the following Member and Substitute were appointed to the Finance, Audit and Risk Committee:
 - Councillor Elizabeth Dennis as a Member of the Committee; and
 - Councillor Nigel Mason as a Substitute Member of the Committee
- (2) That Councillor Stewart Willoughby was appointed as the Vice Chair of the Finance, Audit and Risk Committee for the remainder of the civic year, 2026-2027

REASONS FOR DECISION: To comply with the provisions of 4.8.1 (a) (viii) and (ix) of the Council's Constitution following Councillor Sarah Lucas resigning as Vice Chair and from the Committee.

42 NOMINATION OF REPRESENTATIVES ON OUTSIDE ORGANISATIONS

Audio recording – 01 hour 15 minutes 28 seconds

The Democratic Service Manager presented the report entitled 'Nomination of Representatives on Outside Organisations' and advised that:

- The report sought Council approval for the nomination of one representative to the Baldock Community Centre Association 2025.
- The report also noted the removal of two Outside Organisations, the Bedford and River Ivel Internal Drainage Board and Letchworth Garden City Town Twinning Association, from future appointments as they were no longer active.

Councillor Val Bryant proposed and Councillor Daniel Allen seconded and, following a vote, it was:

RESOLVED:

- (1) That Council nominated and approved Councillor Mick Debenham to the outside organisation Baldock Community Centre Association 2025.
- (2) That Council noted the Bedford and River Ivel Drainage Board and the Letchworth Garden City Town Twinning Association were no longer active and therefore be removed from the list of appointments the Council makes.

REASONS FOR DECISION: To comply with the provision of Standing Order 4.4.1(h) of the Council's Constitution.

43 EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC

Audio recording – 01 hour 16 minutes 46 seconds

Councillor Keith Hoskins, as Chair, proposed and Councillor Jon Clayden 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).

44 PART 2 MINUTES - 16 JULY 2026

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

Councillor Keith Hoskins, as Chair, proposed and Councillor Val Bryant seconded and, it was:

RESOLVED: That the Part 2 Minutes of the meeting held on 16 July 2026 were approved as a true record and signed by the Chair.

45 QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS

Audio recording – 01 hour 20 minutes 22 seconds

In accordance with Standing Order 4.8.11, five questions had been submitted by the required deadline set out in the Constitution.

(A) Councillor Resignation if Breach of Nolan Principles

Councillor Ruth Brown to Councillor Val Bryant, Leader of the Council:

‘Does the Leader agree that a Councillor who has demonstrably breached the Nolan Principles should resign as a Councillor?’

Councillor Val Bryant provided the following response:

‘The Nolan Principle are embedded in the North Hertfordshire Council Constitution and form the basis of the Council's Code of Conduct. If it is considered that a Councillor has breached the Code of Conduct, a complaint may be made to the Monitoring Officer. Details of the complaints procedure are available on the Council's website.’

Councillor Ruth Brown asked a supplementary question, as follows:

‘On the 31st of August 2026, the Guardian reported the Court of Appeals ruling that a rate mitigation scheme enabling businesses to avoid tax was unlawful. This practice was promoted by a company whose co-owner and financial director is a Labour member of this council. The scheme has cost councils, in particular London Boroughs, hundreds of millions in lost revenue over more than a decade. Will you ask the member of your group who promoted this practice to resign as a councillor?’

Councillor Val Bryant responded:

‘We have the Standards Committee next week and I have just looked at the papers and at this moment there are no outstanding complaints that have not been dealt with so we don’t actually have an outstanding complaint against a councillor.’

(B) Update on Steps Taken to Implement Recommendations of Section 106 Task and Finish Group Report

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

‘To ask the Leader of the Council to provide an update on the steps taken by the administration to implement the recommendations of the Section 106 Task and Finish Group Report which was presented to Cabinet in April 2026.’

Councillor Val Bryant responded:

‘At this stage, the Overview and Scrutiny Committee’s recommendations have not been approved by the Cabinet for implementation. An update will be presented to Overview and Scrutiny at its November meeting at the request of the Scrutiny Officer.’

Councillor Ralph Muncer asked a supplementary question, as follows:

‘I thank the Leader of the Council for that response and I look forward to that coming back to Overview and Scrutiny in November. But as she will recall at the meeting of Cabinet in April, there was an indication that the implementation of the recommendations of the Section 106 task and finish group may not occur as a result of Local Government Reorganisation. Now that Local Government Reorganisation has been paused, can she commit to those recommendations being implemented by and until the end of this council? And will she also further commit to ensuring that the budget is found for those recommendations to be implemented even if that means that’s not currently contained within this year’s budget allocation.’

Councillor Val Bryant responded:

‘The Community Partnership team are aware of the recommendations set out in the Task and Finish report. But as the Overview and Scrutiny recommendations have not been approved by Cabinet for implementation, they have not yet been discussed with Community Forum or Parish Council Chairs. Once this has been approved then I’ll make sure these discussions take place with Nigel’s [Director – Place] assistance and with the action owner. The revenue will be put into the budget workshops for recommendations.’

N.B. Councillor Dominic Griffiths entered the Chamber at 20.58.

(C) Cost of Paused Local Government Reorganisation Process for the Council

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

'To ask the Leader of the Council what the cost of the now paused Local Government Reorganisation process has been to this Council.'

Councillor Val Bryant to respond:

'It was published in the Members Information Bulletin last Friday.'

Councillor Ralph Muncer asked a supplementary question, as follows:

'Does the Leader of the Council really think that £50,000 wasted as a result of yet another Labour government U-turn is a good and effective use of taxpayers money here in North Hertfordshire?'

Councillor Val Bryant responded:

'Yes we have spent some money on this process. But if you think of it in terms of what we have been doing, we're trying to replace the present system which is 50 years old with a local government system which will take us through the next 40 or 50 years. And in doing that we have been working with our other 10 local councils.

The officers have been working together and it actually has been quite an exciting time because they've been able to look into the future, compare ways of working, look at what we do, what other people don't do, look at other unitaries and to see how they've tackled problems, particularly things to do with health and social care and so on.

So yes, money has been spent, but I don't think that all the work involved and the officer time has actually been wasted. I think it's actually that certainly some officers will think that they feel they've been developed by this.

(D) Staff Recruitment for Local Government Reorganisation and Cost for North Herts District Council

Councillor David Chalmers to Councillor Val Bryant, Leader of the Council:

'Can the Leader give details of the number of staff who have been recruited to NHDC specifically to work on Local Government Reorganisation and the resulting cost to NHDC?'

Councillor Val Bryant responded:

'We haven't actually specifically recruited any staff to work on LGR. We do have a handful who have been recruited to provide additional capacity to enable others to work on LGR. And from last week's MIB, the figures are that as part of the setting of budget for 26/27, we allocated £2 million of funding towards LGR program and up to £1 million in 26/27 and £1 million to 27/28. There's a Cabinet report in June 2026 that detailed how this would be allocated.

In 26/27 we've actually incurred up to September spend of around £14,000 for additional capacity in the HR team. These are additional two posts referenced in the Cabinet report and the expectation is that these two fixed term posts will continue. The Cabinet report also approved two additional IT posts. One post has been recruited and due to start next week. Recruitment to the other post is also in progress for both the HR and IT posts. They'll usefully support the council even if there is significant change to LGR. Future announcements on LGR will determine whether there is a future budget proposal for these roles to be extended.

The question of where we'll go forwards with staffing overall with the 11 councils will be looked at the next Hertfordshire Leaders Group.'

Councillor David Chalmers asked a supplementary question, as follows:

'How many roles will be managed going forward in a way that provides value for the Council while respecting their rights as employees?'

Councillor Val Bryant responded:

'Nothing else to add.'

(E) Council Procedure for Unauthorised Development

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

'To ask the Executive Member for Place to outline the Council's procedure when responding to unauthorised development taking place in North Hertfordshire.'

Councillor Donna Wright responded:

'The Council's procedures for dealing with unauthorised development are already clearly set out in our corporate enforcement policy and on the website and regular updates are provided to Planning Control Committee. Enforcement statistics are also publicly available.

So I'm not entirely sure what information he's seeking that isn't already in the public domain. If the question is about day-to-day operational matters, those are best directed to officers rather than the Executive Member. I don't personally administer the enforcement process or have detailed knowledge of the hundreds of cases that may be under investigation across the district at any given time. And if this relates to a specific case, I don't think it's appropriate to discuss individual enforcement in open Council.'

Councillor Ralph Muncer asked a supplementary question, as follows:

'The Executive Member may well be aware of the situation a number of weeks ago in Buntingford where unauthorised development was halted through an injunction because Hertfordshire County Council and East Herts District Council and the Parish Council there joined together in order to apply for that injunction. So, the question I have for the Executive Member is can she provide assurance to me tonight that this authority has a clear contingency plan to respond to other authorised development taking place in out of hours in North including on a bank holiday and will she commit to sharing this plan with Parish Councils across the district?'

Councillor Donna Wright responded:

'We do have established procedures to respond to unauthorised developments encampment. Where it's on council owned land we can take action through our own legal powers in accordance with our corporate enforcement policy. Where anything's happening on private land without the necessary planning permission we will investigate promptly.'

46 NOTICE OF MOTIONS

Audio recording – 01 hour 35 minutes 04 seconds

In accordance with Standing Order 4.8.12, two motions had been submitted by the required deadline set out in the Constitution.

(A) Paternity Leave

Councillor Dominic Griffith proposed the motion as follows:

'This council, like many public sector organisations, faces ongoing challenges with staff recruitment and retention. These challenges can directly affect service delivery and organisational resilience.

The UK offers some of the weakest statutory paternity and second parent adoption leave in Europe: just two weeks at a flat statutory rate of £194.32 per week from 6 April 2026. This is equivalent to around 40% of the national minimum wage. For many households, this level of pay is not financially viable.

According to a 2023 TUC poll, over half (53 per cent) of families struggle financially when fathers and second parents take paternity leave. One in five fathers and second parents (21 per cent) are forced to return to work early because they cannot afford to stay off. Around 1 in 3 fathers take no paternity or adoption leave at all.

Children with more involved fathers have improved outcomes across education, cognitive development, and emotional wellbeing. They are less likely to experience emotional or behavioural problems as teenagers and adults and are better able to regulate stress. Paternity leave plays a crucial role in establishing this early involvement.

Better paternity leaves also benefits mothers. New mothers are currently left without support while recovering from birth, including the 40 per cent of births that end in caesarean section. Research shows that enabling both parents to take leave together reduces maternal postnatal depression by 26 per cent.

Inadequate paternity leave is also damaging to men's mental health. Research by The Dad Shift and November found that 45 per cent of UK fathers experience multiple symptoms of depression or anxiety in their baby's first year. Eighty-two per cent of fathers said that improving paternity leave is the single biggest action the government could take to support new dads' mental health. Poor mental health is a leading driver of absenteeism at work: better paternity leave could reduce this pressure on fathers employed by this council.

A review from the Leeds University Business School found a strong corporate consensus that generous, enhanced parental leave acts as a vehicle for talent management. Employers who invest in these policies reap measurable rewards in long-term staff loyalty and retention rates improve.

This Council believes that offering enhanced paternity and adoption leave for second parents will strengthen this council's reputation as a modern, family-friendly employer and help address longstanding workforce retention issues.

As one of the largest employers in the area, this Council has an opportunity to lead by example and promote better working standards for second parents.

Therefore, Council resolves:

1. To request that the Cabinet explore, with the aim of introducing enhanced paternity leave and adoption leave for second parents for council employees, offering a minimum of six weeks paid paternity or adoption leave at a minimum 90% of their salary for all eligible fathers and second parents.
2. That the Leader of the Council writes to the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Secretary of State for Business and Trade urging the Government to introduce a minimum of six weeks' paid (at a minimum of 90% of their salary) paternity leave nationally.'

Councillor David Chalmers seconded the motion.

An amendment was proposed by Councillor Ian Albert, which had been published in the supplementary paper circulated to Members. Councillor Albert thanked Councillor Griffiths for bringing forward the motion and expressed support for improving Paternity Leave provision. It was noted that recent changes to employment legislation would strengthen parental rights, but that further improvements were needed to reflect modern family life and provide meaningful time for parents to spend with their children.

The amendment sought to strengthen the motion by introducing timescales and requiring Officers to work with the relevant Executive Member to prepare a discussion paper for the Joint Staff Consultative Committee, and consultation with staff and trade unions. The intention was to establish clear expectations for the proposed improvements.

Councillor Dominic Griffith confirmed that he was happy to accept the amendment.

The following Members took part in the debate:

- Councillor David Chalmers
- Councillor Jon Clayden
- Councillor Amy Allen
- Councillor Sadie Billing
- Councillor Tom Tyson

The following points were made as part of the debate:

- The first weeks following the birth of a child were important for parents to develop their parenting skills and establish shared responsibilities for childcare.
- Additional paternity leave would provide practical and emotional support to mothers recovering from childbirth, particularly following caesarean sections, and help both parents adjust to family life.
- Greater support during the early weeks could benefit the mental health and well-being of both parents and help reduce postnatal depression and anxiety.
- Research referred to during the debate suggested that enhanced paternity leave could have longer-term benefits for relationships and the sharing of household responsibilities.
- Members highlighted the financial barriers that could prevent employees from taking parental leave and noted that only two male Council employees had taken parental leave during the previous year.
- Improving paternity leave provision could help the Council recruit and retain staff by demonstrating its commitment to employee welfare and family-friendly employment.
- Other local authorities, including Ealing, Islington and Lewisham, were cited as examples of councils that had introduced enhanced paternity leave provision.
- Members shared personal experiences of the limited paternity leave available to them when their children were born, including circumstances where additional support was required following caesarean sections.
- Members expressed support for extending leave to enable fathers and second parents to play a greater role in caring for their children and supporting their partners.

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

RESOLVED: That Council:

- (1) Request Officers work with the Executive Member – Resources to explore eligible Council employees to receive further enhanced paternity and adoption provision for second parents, including consideration of an offer of six weeks paid paternity or adoption leave at a minimum of 90% of their salary. A paper will be produced in time for a wider discussion at the January Joint Staff Consultative Committee, as well as a consultation with our staff and trade union.
- (2) Requested that the Leader of the Council writes to the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Secretary of State for Business and Trade urging the Government to introduce six weeks' fully paid paternity leave nationally.

N.B. Following this conclusion of this item, there was a break in proceedings and the meeting reconvened at 21.29.

(B) Local Government Reorganisation

Councillor Chris Lucas proposed the motion as follows:

'This Council welcomes the Government's decision, announced by Angela Rayner MP, on 7 September 2026 to halt implementation of its deeply flawed four-unitary model for Hertfordshire, but condemns the Government's shambolic handling of Local Government Reorganisation and the substantial waste of public money, officer time and resources caused by the process. Council further calls for full transparency over the costs already incurred and for the Government to ensure that North Hertfordshire taxpayers are not left to pick up the bill for a reorganisation process imposed upon councils and then abruptly halted.

Council notes:

1. That the Government required councils across Hertfordshire to devote substantial political, managerial, financial and officer capacity to Local Government Reorganisation (LGR), culminating in its decision on 16 July 2026 to impose a four-unitary model on Hertfordshire, with four new authorities due to take over services from April 2028.
2. That North Hertfordshire District Council established an LGR budget of £2 million across 2026/27 and 2027/28, including provision for county-wide costs, additional staffing, staff backfill and training, with £450,000 allocated to four additional HR and IT posts to deal with LGR workload pressures.
3. That councils, officers and partners were instructed to proceed at pace with preparations for implementation, including transition arrangements and May 2027 shadow authority elections. The Government has now halted this work pending its review, acknowledging the risk of councils undertaking "nugatory work".
4. That the proposed May 2027 elections to the new shadow unitary authorities will consequently not take place, with elections instead proceeding for the existing councils on their existing boundaries. This represents a major reversal of the implementation timetable and creates further disruption and uncertainty for councils, officers, councillors, prospective candidates and residents.

5. That the halt follows a series of legal challenges to LGR decisions elsewhere in Essex, Hampshire, Norfolk, Suffolk and Portsmouth. By June, three quarters of the county councils affected by the reorganisation process had signed a letter demanding that the Government disclose the evidence and departmental analysis behind its decisions. Hertfordshire County Council subsequently issued a Pre-Action Protocol letter seeking disclosure of the evidence, analysis and financial assessments underpinning the Government's decision to impose four unitary authorities in Hertfordshire.
6. That this is particularly significant because published financial modelling indicated that the proposed Central Hertfordshire authority, which would include most of North Hertfordshire, could begin with an estimated £22 million budget deficit in its first year.
7. That Hertfordshire modelling estimated savings of up to £418 million over ten years under the two-unitary model compared with up to £124 million under the four-unitary model.
8. That this Council last year voted against the four-unitary model, which would divide the existing North Hertfordshire district between Central and Eastern Hertfordshire, with Royston and surrounding villages separated from the rest of the district, and removed the Council Leader when he acted against that decision.

Council believes:

3. That the decision to halt implementation of the four-unitary model is welcome, but the Government's handling of LGR has been chaotic and wasteful, creating unnecessary uncertainty for residents and council staff while diverting significant resources and officer time away from frontline services and other council priorities.
4. That abandoning the planned May 2027 shadow authority elections, after councils had already been instructed to prepare for them, demonstrates the scale of the disruption caused by the Government's reversal and raises serious questions about the future viability and timetable of the reorganisation process.
5. That the decision to halt the process only weeks after announcing the four-unitary model, raises serious questions about whether the financial, legal and practical implications were adequately considered before councils were instructed to begin implementation.
6. That council officers should not have been expected to design new structures, recruit, train, procure and prepare for transition, while planning their own futures, without confidence that the Government's decisions were financially sustainable, legally robust and capable of being delivered.
7. That the four-unitary model was the wrong option for North Hertfordshire because of concerns about financial sustainability, the division of existing communities, additional transition costs and the ability of the proposed authorities to protect essential local services.
8. That it is unacceptable for local taxpayers to bear the costs of a process driven forward at speed before the Government had established that its decisions were financially credible, legally robust and deliverable.

Therefore, Council resolves to:

1. Request the Chief Executive of North Hertfordshire District Council to provide a full accounting of the costs already incurred by the Council as a result of LGR, including additional staffing, officer time, consultants' fees, legal advice, recruitment, training, project management and other transition costs.

2. Request the Leader of North Hertfordshire District Council to write to Angela Rayner MP, the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government to:
 - a. demand publication of the full rationale, evidence, financial assessments and departmental analysis underpinning the decision to select four unitary authorities for Hertfordshire.
 - b. seek an explanation of how ministers assessed the financial sustainability of the four-unitary model, including the projected £22 million first-year deficit for Central Hertfordshire.
 - c. seek a commitment that councils will be fully compensated for reasonable and demonstrable costs incurred as a direct consequence of the Government's LGR programme and its subsequent halt.
 - d. seek immediate clarity and reassurance for council officers whose employment, structures, reporting arrangements and career prospects have been thrown into uncertainty.
 - e. seek clarity on the Government's intentions and timetable for the future of Local Government Reorganisation in Hertfordshire following the cancellation of the May 2027 shadow authority elections; and
 - f. demand that North Hertfordshire District Council is fully consulted before any further decision is taken, with that consultation involving representatives of all political groups on the Council and not solely the administration.
3. Call on the Government to ensure that any future proposals for local government in Hertfordshire put financial sustainability, effective public services, community links and the interests of residents, council taxpayers and frontline staff ahead of arbitrary ministerial timetables.
4. Call on the Government to learn the fundamental lesson from this process: councils should never again be required to spend millions of pounds, consume thousands of hours of officer time and destabilise local government before the Government has established that its proposals are financially credible, legally sound and capable of being delivered.

Councillor David Chalmers seconded the motion.

Councillor Ralph Muncer proposed an amendment as published in the Supplementary Documents which sought to include consideration of devolution and the proposed strategic authority arrangements for Hertfordshire. The amendment referred to the establishment of a Foundation Strategic Authority and widened the scope of the motion to reflect the relationship between local government reorganisation and devolution.

Councillor Steven Patmore seconded the amendment.

The following members debated on the amendment:

- Councillor Elizabeth Dennis
- Councillor Steve Jarvis
- Councillor Sean Nolan
- Councillor Val Bryant

The following points were made as part of the debate:

- Questioned the purpose of the amendment and the opposition position on the proposed reorganisation model and the pause to the process.
- Observed that local government reorganisation and devolution should not be rushed.
- Considered that further information would become available following Parliament's return from recess.
- Criticised the Government for reaching a decision on reorganisation before discovering that aspects of it could not legally be implemented.

- Highlighted the financial cost and the diversion of officers' time from delivering services to North Hertfordshire residents.
- Raised concerns about whether the amendment, as drafted, was consistent with the current legislative framework for strategic authorities.
- Supported the four-unitary model for Hertfordshire.
- Questioned the basis for a single-unitary proposal, noting that it had not been modelled or costed in the same way as the existing proposals.
- Referred to the work undertaken by the Hertfordshire Leaders Group in developing the four-unitary proposal.

In response to points made in the debate, Councillor Ralph Muncer replied:

- That his original proposal had been more extensive but had been ruled out of order following advice from the Monitoring Officer.
- His intention was to broaden the amendment to address the relationship between local government reorganisation and devolution.

Having been proposed and seconded and, following a vote, the amendment was **LOST**.

The following members took part in the debate on the original motion:

- Councillor David Chalmers
- Councillor Laura Williams
- Councillor Ruth Brown
- Councillor Sean Nolan
- Councillor Sam Collins
- Councillor Val Bryant
- Councillor Nigel Mason
- Councillor Paul Ward
- Councillor Vijaiya Poopalasingham

The following points were made as part of the debate:

- Clarified that the Liberal Democrats were not opposed to local government reorganisation in principle but objected to the process followed and the proposed four-unitary model.
- Highlighted the projected £22 million first-year deficit for the proposed Central Hertfordshire authority.
- Raised concerns about the potential division of North Hertfordshire, including Royston and surrounding villages.
- Called for transparency regarding the costs incurred, the Government's decision-making and the potential impact on local taxpayers.
- Stated that any future reorganisation should be financially sustainable, protect public services and take account of local communities.
- Acknowledged the frustration surrounding the process and accepted that some of the concerns raised were reasonable.
- Defended the wider devolution programme and the four-unitary proposal.
- Questioned the criticism of the financial modelling.
- Recognised the potential benefits of unitary authorities, including joining up services and achieving financial savings.
- Raised concerns about the resources and officer time already committed to the process.
- Highlighted the uncertainty experienced by staff and its potential effect on morale.
- Supported the pause and called for the Council to make its concerns about the process clear.
- Questioned whether the financial modelling remained current in light of changes to council funding.
- Observed that updated financial information could affect the assumptions underpinning the earlier proposals.
- Criticised the reorganisation process as poorly managed and costly.

- Highlighted the uncertainty about the total cost to the public purse.
- Supported seeking financial transparency and assurances that North Hertfordshire taxpayers would not be disadvantaged.
- Some support was reiterated for the four-unitary model.
- Argued that the proposed Central Hertfordshire authority would provide a coherent area and help ensure that residents retained access to local facilities.
- Referred to the work undertaken to develop and assess the four-unitary proposal.
- Criticised what was considered to be inconsistencies in the political positions taken on the scale of local government reorganisation.
- Referred to concerns about the proposed electoral boundaries and the potential political implications of the different models.
- Drew attention to the projected difference in savings between the two-unitary and four-unitary models.
- Raised concerns about the implications of lower savings for local services and public expenditure.
- Argued that decisions on reorganisation should be based on the needs of residents and the quality of services, rather than financial modelling alone.
- Supported seeking clarity about costs and staff arrangements but criticised the motion as being used for political purposes.
- Defended the four-unitary proposal.

In response to points raised during the debate, Councillor Chris Lucas advised:

- He was not opposed to local government reorganisation, unitary authorities or devolution, but considered that the issues should not be conflated.
- He called for the Government to publish its rationale and financial modelling, address the costs incurred and ensure that political parties and independent members were consulted before further action was taken.

Having been proposed and seconded and, following a vote, it was **TIED**.

The Chair exercised their casting vote, and it was:

RESOLVED: That Council:

- (1) Requested the Chief Executive of North Hertfordshire District Council to provide a full accounting of the costs already incurred by the Council as a result of LGR, including additional staffing, officer time, consultants' fees, legal advice, recruitment, training, project management and other transition costs.
- (2) Requested the Leader of North Hertfordshire District Council to write to Angela Rayner MP, the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government to:
 - a) demand publication of the full rationale, evidence, financial assessments and departmental analysis underpinning the decision to select four unitary authorities for Hertfordshire.
 - b) seek an explanation of how ministers assessed the financial sustainability of the four-unitary model, including the projected £22 million first-year deficit for Central Hertfordshire.
 - c) seek a commitment that councils will be fully compensated for reasonable and demonstrable costs incurred as a direct consequence of the Government's LGR programme and its subsequent halt.
 - d) seek immediate clarity and reassurance for council officers whose employment, structures, reporting arrangements and career prospects have been thrown into uncertainty.
 - e) seek clarity on the Government's intentions and timetable for the future of Local Government Reorganisation in Hertfordshire following the cancellation of the May 2027 shadow authority elections; and

- f) demand that North Hertfordshire District Council is fully consulted before any further decision is taken, with that consultation involving representatives of all political groups on the Council and not solely the administration.
- (3) Called on the Government to ensure that any future proposals for local government in Hertfordshire put financial sustainability, effective public services, community links and the interests of residents, council taxpayers and frontline staff ahead of arbitrary ministerial timetables
- (4) Called on the Government to learn the fundamental lesson from this process: councils should never again be required to spend millions of pounds, consume thousands of hours of officer time and destabilise local government before the Government has established that its proposals are financially credible, legally sound and capable of being delivered.

33 NOTIFICATION OF OTHER BUSINESS

Audio recording – 02 hours 41 minutes 09 seconds

Councillor Ruth Brown, as Liberal Democrat Group Leader, presented the report and requested an extension for Councillor Lisa Nash due to ongoing personal circumstances and current absence from work due to illness. It was noted that Councillor Nash had hoped to attend the Council meeting but was unable to do so.

Councillor Ruth Brown proposed the recommendation that Council approve an extension to the six-month rule for Councillor Lisa Nash for a further six-month period, until 21 May 2027, for the reasons set out in the report.

The motion was seconded by Councillor Jon Clayden, and following a vote it was:

RESOLVED: That Council approved an extension of the six-month rule for Councillor Lisa Nash, for the reasons outlined within the report, for an additional six-month period, until 21 May 2027.

REASONS FOR DECISION:

- (1) Section 85 of the Local Government Act 1972 states that 'if a member of a local authority fails throughout a period of six consecutive months from the date of his last attendance to attend any meeting of the authority, he shall, unless the failure was due to some reason approved by the authority before the expiry of that period, cease to be a member of the authority'.
- (2) The recommendation is required to enable Cllr Nash to continue to serve as a District Councillor.

The meeting closed at 10.12 pm

Chair