

**HITCHIN COMMITTEE**  
**12<sup>th</sup> OCTOBER 2021**

**\*PART 1 – PUBLIC DOCUMENT**

**TITLE OF INFORMATION NOTE: UNEMPLOYMENT, FURLOUGH, VACANCIES AND TOWN CENTRE ACTIVITY IN HITCHIN**

INFORMATION NOTE OF SERVICE DIRECTOR – REGULATORY

EXECUTIVE MEMBER: EXECUTIVE MEMBER FOR ENTERPRISE, THE ARTS & TRANSPORT

PRIORITY: ENABLE AN ENTERPRISING AND CO-OPERATIVE ECONOMY

**1. SUMMARY**

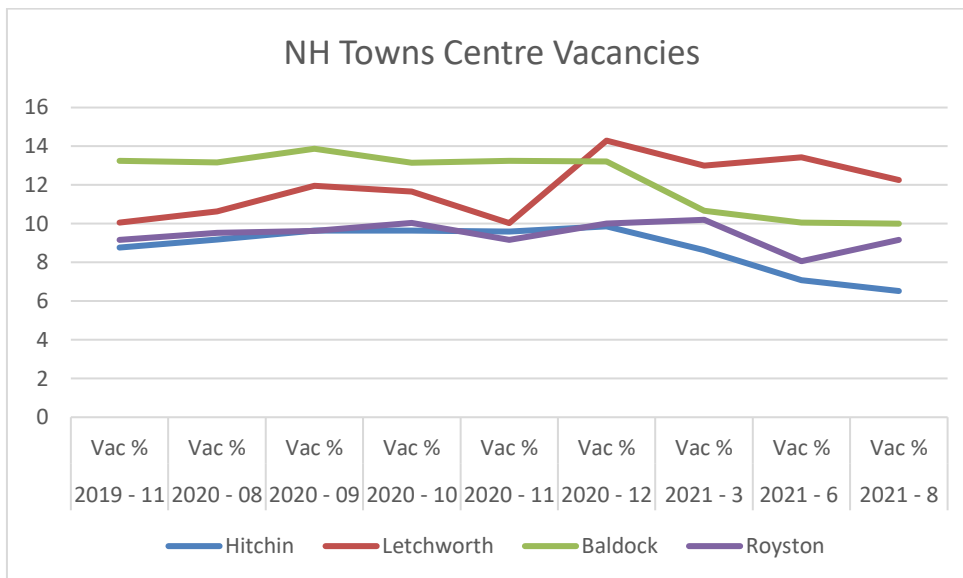
1.1 NHDC Economic Development Officer has been asked by the Hitchin Committee to prepare a report into the effect of COVID on the North Herts / Hitchin Town Centre Economy

**2. INFORMATION TO NOTE**

**Vacancies**

2.1 The Pandemic has, to date, had little noticeable effect on the town centre vacancy rates. Indeed, as of end August 2021, the vacancy rate for Hitchin as drawn from the NHDC Rates Listings (number of empty premises/total premises) was the lowest since pre-October 2019, at 6.52%. (See Fig 1 for town comparison). A rate of 6 – 9 % is generally regarded as healthy and a result of natural turnover of businesses and liquidity in the market.

Figure 1: North Herts Town Centre Vacancies Nov 2019 – Aug 2021



- 2.2 The use breakdown shows that 15 Shops, 22 Offices and a restaurant in Hitchin town centre were vacant as at the end of August 2021.

### **Footfall**

- 2.3 We have been conducting Footfall Surveys during the pandemic for the reporting purposes of the Reopening the High Streets Safely and Welcome Back Funds across all four of our town centres. These counts are undertaken under the High Streets Task Force methodology and we do not have comparable pre pandemic footfall statistics.
- 2.4 The footfall in Hitchin has improved and is now steady, helped by the market, and BID events and activities. The closure and restrictions on the hospitality sector have obviously had an effect but the trend is encouraging. See Appendix 1.
- 2.5 By their very nature, the manual counts are subject to externalities (e.g., the weather on the count day) which may affect counts. NHDC are investing in a new automated footfall count system using the Welcome Back Fund which should give us more reliable figures and other information, such as demographics, and where people are travelling from and by mode to our town centres which will help us build our evidence base for the future. This automated system will also provide us with comparable pre-pandemic figures to Jan 2019.

### **Unemployment**

- 2.6 The Official statistics available relate to North Herts and may relate to residents or to businesses in different cases.
- 2.7 The Nomis reports on the link below relate to 2020/21 and indicate North Herts to be relatively healthy in comparison to the East of England and England as a whole. The jobs types show a higher level of professionals and managers than the average, which is perhaps what one would expect.

<https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/reports/lmp/la/1946157226/report.aspx#workless>

- 2.8 The ONS (experimental) Unemployment claimant count shows North Herts at the lower end of the range in Hertfordshire and reducing. See Appendix 2
- 2.9 It should be noted that “Under Universal Credit a broader span of claimants is required to look for work than under Jobseekers Allowance. As Universal Credit Full Service is rolled out in particular areas, the number of people recorded as being on the Claimant Count is therefore likely to rise.”

### **Furlough**

- 2.10 The number of people on furlough in North Herts has consistently been below the Herts average and the figures are some of the best in the Herts range. The rate dropped from 12% to 9% between March and April. See Appendix 3.
- 2.11 The September (experimental) figures reveal a further fall to 3500 (6%) in June and then 2900 (5%) in July (see Appendix 3a table 12). The distribution is fairly even across ages and genders (See Appendix 3a Table 14a).

[Please see the notes page on the spreadsheet for statistical details and caveats].

### **3. NEXT STEPS**

#### **Future Activity**

- 3.1 The Hitchin town centre statistics compared to the other towns in North Herts towns suggest that the town centre has come through the pandemic in a relatively strong position. Although covid has accelerated the decline of some large chains of shops nationally, Hitchin with its many independents and high footfall has been not been hit as hard as some larger town and city centres. Concern remains over the vacancies in office space where the owners may look to convert to residential and we will look to encourage office use where possible to maintain the daytime footfall in the town.
- 3.2 We are aiming to use the Welcome Back Fund not only to fund immediate smartening-up activities such as graffiti removal but also to prepare Hitchin and the other North Herts towns to be in a stronger position to bid for future larger capital funding opportunities.
- 3.3 To this end, we are funding town centre activity monitoring systems (24/7/365) to gauge footfall, density, loyalty, demographics and other visitor parameters to build an evidence base for future bids. We are also to fund consultants to assist towns to produce medium- and longer-term development plans, or other more specialised strategies (e.g., tourism) if they so wish backed by the evidence. This is to demonstrate that future bids for funding fit within an overall strategy for the town and thus make them more compelling and improve the chances of success.
- 3.4 This evidence base will also be useful for the work to commence on reviewing our town centre strategies once the Local Plan is adopted.

### **4. APPENDICES**

- 4.1 Appendix 1 – Town Centre Footfall Counts
- 4.2 Appendix 2 – SE Unemployment Figures Sept 2021 (extract)
- 4.3 Appendix 3 – CJRS Statistics June 2021 – Table employments on furlough by country, region, local authority and gender (SE extract)
- 4.4 Appendix 3a – CJRS Statistics June 2021 – Table 14a employments on furlough by local authority and age and gender (SE extract)  
  
(Original documents available on request)

### **5. CONTACT OFFICERS**

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### **6. BACKGROUND PAPERS**

N/A