

# North Herts Place Narrative Appendices

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# North Herts Council Place Narrative

## Insight Report

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# **Background**

## **North Hertfordshire District**

Since being brought together as North Hertfordshire District in 1974, the towns of Hitchin, Letchworth, Baldock and Royston have each kept their distinct individuality, maintaining their own sense of community, culture and local pride.

Today, this variety is their strength. In North Hertfordshire they are not dominated by a single place, but are a mix of towns, villages and countryside that come together to make what we are greater than the sum of our parts.

While North Hertfordshire residents might identify with their own town or village before their district, they are all united by the common themes that define them: their **liveability**, their **connectivity**, and their **creativity**. They're a best-of-both location, strongly connected to London and Cambridge but with a life and soul of their own, whichever part of North Hertfordshire you call home.

## **Connectivity**

North Hertfordshire's position is its immediate selling point – we're privileged to have attractive green space and accessible open countryside all around us, yet easy links to London and across the south east.

All four North Hertfordshire towns have fast, frequent and direct train links into London, with Hitchin 33 minutes from London St Pancras, while Royston is less than 15 minutes by train to Cambridge. Next to the M1 and A1, and less than 10 miles to the M25, the district also has strong road links north and south.

This gives North Hertfordshire residents easy access to jobs and activities not just in London, but the academic, science and tech sectors in and around Cambridge and one of the UK's biggest growth areas in Milton Keynes.

## **Liveability**

But location and access to jobs is only part of the reason that people in North Hertfordshire choose not just to come, but to stay.

Our high-quality schools, good leisure facilities and strong public services and access mean everyone in North Hertfordshire can enjoy a high standard of living in what is genuinely a place for everyone – from young families to older retirees.

And liveable places are about more than services. North Hertfordshire has community and civic pride, with grass-roots events and activities taking place across our towns, and a strong desire

from local people to shape where they live, hold their elected authorities to account, and make their towns and villages the best they can be.

## **Creativity**

North Hertfordshire is a commuter belt but without the dormitory towns, benefitting from but not overshadowed by its proximity to London.

As the pioneer of the garden city movement, Letchworth has a unique history, and the utopian spirit that created it is still clear in its architectural heritage, the arts and crafts influences and the independent mindset of the community today.

Each of North Hertfordshire's towns have this sense of individuality: Hitchin is a destination in its own right, with a thriving night time economy alongside boutiques and cafes; Baldock a close-knit community with a village feel and lots of pubs, and Royston a classic English market town with a close community of independent businesses.

## **Challenges and opportunities**

There are also challenges. The flip side of their desirable location is high and increasing house prices, exacerbated by the pandemic and emphasising the inequality and deprivation that aren't always immediately visible.

Keeping the area affordable for those on the lowest incomes, those brought up there, and growing families will be difficult, and so will balancing the changes needed with the need to respect local character and ensure community support. There is also a lack of provisions for young people in the area, especially for teenagers.

Meanwhile, the long-term impact of the pandemic gives them the chance to build on some of their advantages, to use the changes in working patterns to grow the local economy even more, help the town centres to continue to thrive, and foster an even greater sense of local pride.

## **The Four C's**

Based on an overall view from all the work that has been carried out, there were four main themes which will be called "The Four C's":

- **Culture** - North Hertfordshire's towns and villages are brought to life by a year-round local cultural programme of festivals, theatre, outdoor events, and the arts. There is a huge cafe culture in the towns, which helps to bring the community together. With a heritage steeped in the radicalism of the garden city and suffragette movements, the area has attracted writers, artists, and thinkers for more than a century. North Herts also

has an outstanding leisure offer with outdoor and indoor swimming and gyms run by the Council's social enterprise contractor for the benefit of local people,

- **Community** - North Hertfordshire is a place where community matters; bound together by an ethos of citizenship and care for both place and people. It is a place where volunteering thrives, where there are active faith networks
- **Connectivity** - North Hertfordshire is accessible to London Kings Cross in 40 mins, as well connections to Cambridge and also a train from Letchworth to Brighton
- **Countryside** - A love for the natural environment brings many people to North Hertfordshire. With its network of chalk streams supporting unique biodiversity, the area has been described as 'England's rainforest'. The outstanding beauty of the district's countryside...

## Methodology

We carried out various focus groups with a range of people in the North Herts district. This included senior leadership such as the Chief Executive and Politicians, businesses and residents, plus Settle and North Herts College.

Sessions were done via virtual online meetings and face to face meetings in Hitchin and Letchworth, as well as some online feedback.

We asked slightly different questions in the focus groups with the Chief Executive and Senior Leaders, as opposed to the focus groups with residents and businesses.

# **Residents and businesses**

## **Tell us what's great about North Herts?**

- Each individual town has a lot of history and are unique in their own way
- A great place to bring up a family, with good schools and education
- Vast amount of countryside and landscape
- Excellent connection links to London, Cambridge, Brighton
- Sense of community in each town
- Very diverse district
- Events that go on throughout the year
- Airport connections - Drive to Luton and Stansted, crossrail to Heathrow

## **How has the impact of COVID affected North Herts?**

- More people moving to the district, especially to Letchworth
- Some people don't feel that much has changed since before and after the pandemic
- Loss of jobs on the high street
  - Hitchin lost 28 businesses since March 2020, but has gained 48 new businesses in that time
  - Letchworth lost a lot of comparison stores and smaller businesses, but saw a growth in independent stores
  - Lots of unemployment, but slowly getting back to normal
  - 25% down on footfall pre-pandemic
- Lots of community groups have lost emphasis
- House prices have increased - Baldock has the highest price increase in the whole of the UK
- Older generations are more cautious about going out and mixing
- Loss of community events
- Towns are busier in the evenings and weekends and quieter in the daytime
  - Markets are busier on weekdays

## **What are the challenges the area faces?**

- Disconnection between the towns
  - Residents tend to stay in their own towns and don't visit others very often
  - Royston more so as it is very disconnected from the other three
  - Lots of competition between towns
- Quite a wealthy district, although it has pockets of deprivation, but prices can be a challenge for many to afford to move there
  - Deprived areas are quite separate from the rest of the town
  - Letchworth has 3 main pockets of deprivation
  - Hitch has 2 main pockets of deprivation
  - Letchworth has 10% private rentals and 32% social housing rentals
  - Not enough social housing
  - Need for more affordable housing

- Employment
  - Big skills shortage, e.g. catering, construction
  - Hospitality industry is suffering due to lack of staff
- Lack of opportunities
  - Some feel that those who live on an estate have less opportunities
- Infrastructure
  - Very car dependent to get around North Herts
  - No easy way to get to each town by train
- Teenagers
  - No youth clubs anymore
  - Not a lot for young people to do
  - No 6th Form in Royston
- Decline of the high street
  - Many shops have gone and a massive surge of cafes have been put in their place

### **What makes North Herts unique?**

- Each town has its own identity
- Excellent connections to London, Milton Keynes, Brighton
- When people move to North Herts they tend to stay for a long time
  - Quoted as “A great place to live
- Lots of countryside
- Places to visit:
  - Henry Moore Studios and Garden - Perry Green
  - John W Mills Sculpture - Baldock
  - Royston Caves
  - Hitchin Lavender Farm
  - Baldock Charter Market
  - Knebworth House
  - North Herts Museum
  - The British Schools Museum - Hitchin
- Heritage:
  - First people to bring Rembrandt to Hertfordshire
  - Letchworth - Sir Ebenezer Howard - Founder of first garden city in the world in 1903
  - Letchworth - First roundabout in the UK in 1909

### **If you could change one thing....**

- Better integration of Royston into Hertfordshire
- More affordable housing
  - Reasonable housing for startups
  - Housing opportunities
  - Affordable housing
- Young persons

- Support and activities for younger people
  - More play areas in Letchworth
- Economic development - Inclusive growth - ways to improve employment opportunities
- Bus and cycle routes - Better routes and more of them
- Diversity of shops and local economy
- To keep evolving and changing
- Strategic planning
- Working together between areas
- Less car dependence
- Strictness of regulations – planning/licensing
- Deprivation – “bridge the gap”
- Openness to outsiders
- Better retail – an anchor store
- Pedestrianisation in town centres
- Royston - bigger event space
- Public transport within the district
- More government funding
- Broadway Gardens - Could be developed. Very little around it and would benefit from cafes etc. Remove shrubbery around the station.
- Cost of travel
- More accessible events



# **Chief Executive and Senior Leaders**

## **North Herts - describe the place to us**

- 4 market towns that are all unique
- Lots of villages and farmland
- Lots of commuters - People live here but don't work here
- Lack of skills for high tech jobs
- No one identifies themselves as coming from North Herts
  - Lack of common identity
- Royston has its own town Council

## **What are its strengths, opportunities, and key challenges?**

- 4 core towns that do different things
  - No central population centre
- Jobs and skills
  - Falling behind in terms of industry and economics
- Residents
  - Lots of people live here in the area, but do not work here or spend much time here.
  - Many commute to work in London and spend time outside North Herts.
- Growing need for skills
  - High tech jobs - IT and Science
- Residents would not associate with North Herts
  - They would state that they live in a certain area or may say Cambridge for example
- Issue with a common identity
  - What is it that unites North Herts?
- Young person, young adult, working age person gap

## **What do you want it to do for you? The place narrative**

- To be more than just a Council
  - Increase the identity
  - Make North Herts stand out
  - Focus on the wider district rather than certain areas
- Regeneration
  - High streets
  - Tourism strategy
- Market the industry
  - To compare against others
- Increase economic and skill based growth

- Poor relations - Need to do more:
  - Work together
  - Collaboration
  - Promote each other
  - Sharing of good stories
  - Learn from each other
  - Share resources
- Less parochialism
  - Too much attention on certain areas
  - Lack of identity in the wider district

**Tell us about the economy of North Herts? What are the growth opportunities here?  
Who are your key business stakeholders?**

- Largest employer
  - Johnson Matthey - Chemicals company
- Letchworth
  - Emerging Biotech industry
- Hitchin
  - Lots of retail
    - No large companies
    - Small independent shops
  - Fancy coffee shops
  - Liverpool Victoria (LV) call centre
  - Dog medicine company
    - Outskirts of Hitchin
  - Creative industry
    - Expanding
    - Manifesto and strategy being built to enhance the creative industry
- Automotive industry
- North Herts college - 16+
  - Good local partner
- Housing
  - Market reacts in the same way as London.
  - Overwhelming demand for properties
- Growing rural economy
  - Small businesses
  - Conservation projects
- AstraZeneca - Cambridge University

**What about the people who live here? How do they feel about the place? How would they describe it?**

- Deprivation

- Hertfordshire ranked 135 of 151 of the upper tier local authorities with the most deprivation
- Wealth overlooks deprivation
- No Council housing
  - All managed by Housing Associations
  - Approximately 3000 people on the social housing waiting list
- Large elderly population
  - Residing in old arms housing, retirement properties
  - Good community set of programmes at centres and charitable services that reach out
- High skills sectors
  - People feel like they can't get into the industry, or they don't want to work in that area so the options are not available for them other than retail on the high streets
- Letchworth
  - In the top 20 most deprived areas in England
  - In the top 6 most deprived areas in Hertfordshire
- Royston
  - Fairly affluent town
  - Has pockets of deprivation
  - Approx. 18,000 population
  - Residents would say
    - Nothing affordable to buy
    - Difficult to buy locally
    - Being rehoused in different parts of the district
    - No social housing
- Ethnicity
  - More diverse than years ago
    - Royston
      - 13 years ago was 99% white or white British.
    - Hitchin
      - Always been more diverse
  - Turkish, Polish, Black and other ethnic minority groups increasing in North Herts

**Thinking about the people who live in North Herts, how strong is the connection? Pride of place, identity**

- Hitchin and Letchworth
  - Strong sense of identity
    - Either being from or living in - Proud of the place they live
  - Lots of history
  - *"Location defines the person rather than the person defining the place"*
- Residents
  - More likely to say they live in Hertfordshire than North Herts
- Royston

- More likely to say Cambridgeshire than Royston
- 2 groups of people
  - Those who have lived there for a long time
    - More likely to moan about the changes to the area
    - Don't want to see the changes
  - Those who are newer to the area
    - Do not know what it was like before
    - More attraction to the area as it is now
- People moving from London as it is more affordable to buy a home in Royston
- Fantastic place to raise a family
  - Attracts young families
- Good primary schools

### **What are your ambitions for the place?**

- Finding a way to perceive the issue around deprivation, jobs, skills.
- Everybody to have access to skills and break down the barriers
  - Creating the access to the skills
    - biggest is the college, but needs more options
  - Apprenticeships
  - Creative skills
  - All good having skills, but they need jobs to feed into simultaneously.
- We want to sell something to the outside world -
  - This is who we are and be part of the success story.
- Connection between opportunities and people
- Community cohesion
  - Everyone feels that they belong, no matter how long they have been here it is still their place - background, language, it doesn't matter
  - Are there opportunities for younger people to stay in the district?
- Finding what we are gonna do for the next 50 years
  - Used to be a rural economic district, but for the last 20-30 years it has been a commuter belt - has its positives and negatives
  - *"If we are just where people live, you don't work here, socialise here, spend your weekends here, it becomes a bit of a soulless place."*
  - Trying to work out what we need to be to see us through this next period
  - Pandemic
    - Has changed things, created opportunities, but found that sense of purpose. Without it, we will just be housing with everyone commuting out, which is not sustainable.
  - Sustainable future - need more opportunities locally
- Council role is to facilitate
  - Don't have much budget
  - Community leadership
  - Putting strategies in place for others to lead on it

- No big assets - trying to buy in the town centre

**If you were advertising a job in your senior team, how would you sell yourselves as a place and an organisation?**

- Place
  - Attractive
    - visually attractive across the whole district, pretty villages, the hills
  - Ambitious
    - changed in the last few years in the way we weren't before
  - More outward looking
    - too much focus on ourselves
  - Communities come together
  - Growing cultural centre
  - Access to London and Cambridge - great commuting route to two big cities, good train system.
- 340 employees in the Council
- Future is looking quite positive
- People first
  - Internal and External communications
  - Wanting everyone to feel at the same level
  - Selling the local place
- Lots of crossover between the 4 market towns
  - Almost like one conservation. But they have their unique identities.

**Visitor and tourist offer - What am I coming for?**

- Hitchin
  - Theatre offerings
- Letchworth
  - First world's garden city
  - Broadway Cinema
  - Greenway
- Knebworth
  - Big music events, summer programme (outdoor and drive in cinema)
- Royston
  - Independent cinema
  - In need of a skatepark, to keep kids local as well
  - Royston caves - very unique
- Lots of outdoor stuff
  - Draw in our local residents
- Sharing resources and good practice to try and attract people to the district.
- Good quality facilities so able to get in good national tourings

# Settle and North Herts College

## Where in North Hertfordshire do you live?

- Hitchin - 2 participants
- Letchworth - 2 participants
- Letchworth (Jackmans estate) - 1 participant
- Little Wymondley - 1 participant
- Hitchin (Westmill) - 2 participants
- Baldock - 1 participant

## What are the 3 words that best describe the area to you?

- Born
- Busy
- Clean
- Community
- Friendly
- Green
- Letchworth
- Lost
- Mess
- Nice
- Paradise
- Peaceful
- Pleasant
- Quiet
- Rural
- Safe
- Safe
- Shabby
- Social
- Ugly

## What do you like about the area?

- Walkable distance to Walsworth Common. Soon a new gym again which will be walkable. Pubs/restaurants
- I like its lovely towns and villages.
- Not much at the moment
- I love the quietness of living in a village, we have a very strong sense of community spirit and the area is unspoilt with plenty of green spaces.
- close to town and the countryside
- Space, Upkeep of green spaces
- Friendly and green spaces
- Hitchin is a really nice place to live
- I like the fact it is quiet and peaceful

### **What do you dislike?**

- Dangerous, uneven footpaths which I have tripped up and fallen a couple of times. No proper cycle paths like Stevenage. Constant traffic 24/7 where I live. Maintenance and up keeping of flats where I live. Going downhill and looking grubby/dirty.
- I don't like that it seems to be becoming part of the London suburbs.
- Rubbish everywhere. Drugs everywhere. Kids on Motor bikes riding around the park. Unhealthy living conditions.
- I dislike that a proposed plan is in effect to build 300 houses on our green belt. This will not only take away our green belt but also increase the risk of flooding, increase traffic and overrun an already oversubscribed school!
- the lack of respect people have for their homes and surroundings. Ruining it for others. Gardens are a mess. Also too many cats. There should be a limit. You can't have pets if you rent privately so why can't there be a limit for social housing? And fines for those who do not keep gardens in good condition.
- I am starting to dislike the unkempt Social housing garden , containing household appliances dumped in the gardens, unkempt hedges and fence , and lack of community. Rubbish in the streets, unkempt green spaces by railway. And rudeness of the local children and attitudes by their parents
- Nothing (Very Happy where I live)
- Nothing - I like living in Hitchin
- Nothing I can think of

### **Do you think North Hertfordshire is a good place to grow up/be young?**

- To an extent - I like where I live but there are no activities for young people
- Yes

## Appendix B – Existing Hertfordshire Place Narratives

Herts County Council:	County of opportunity
Stevenage:	<b>Stevenage better</b>
Watford:	Built on heritage. Focused on fairness
East Herts:	A place to grow
Welwyn Hatfield:	Where history keeps on being made



Appendix C North Herts Place Narrative branding

Super brand



Bringing **Communities** Together

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Sub-brands



Bringing **Businesses** Together

## **Appendix D North Herts Place Narrative master brand copy**

Located less than 40 miles north of central London, North Herts is a place where people come first and where community matters.

From families whose generations have always lived in North Herts, to those who move into the area for access to open countryside, to businesses building on our history of creativity, a whole range of communities are drawn to North Herts for the quality of life we offer, our stunning natural landscape, outstanding schools, and unrivalled connectivity to London and Cambridge.

A mix of distinctly individual vibrant market towns, beautiful villages and accessible, open countryside, that come together to make a sum greater than its parts, North Herts was home to Paleolithic, Neolithic and Bronze Age settlements and the place where the Garden city movement was pioneered. It remains home to three of the World's incredibly rare chalk streams and Therfield Heath, a site of Special Scientific Interest nestled on the chalk escarpment just north of Therfield village.

North Herts is the place where everyone can be active in their own way. From our two, treasured, outdoor pools, to our lively leisure centres, parks, playgrounds and sports pitches, there really is something for everyone. Miles of walking and cycling routes connect our places with our unique landscape, which current and future generations will continue to value the mental and physical benefits of living in such a place of incredible natural beauty.

With a heritage steeped in the radicalism of the Garden city and Suffragette movements, our pioneering spirit continues in global leaders such as Johnson Matthey in Royston; leading financial services mutual Liverpool Victoria in Hitchin; and the emerging biotech industry in Letchworth. The arts, culture and hospitality industries flourish in North Herts. From museums to coffee shops and heritage centres to award-winning pubs and restaurants, the business leaders of North Herts continue to lead the way in attracting and retaining the best of talent to the area.

There are challenges in North Herts, as there are everywhere, and we will continue to be open about these. Desirable locations have driven house prices up, we need to provide more for teenagers to do, and there is inequality that isn't always visible. However, the communities of North Herts, as they have always done, will continue to come together, face these challenges head on and thrive.

North Herts is also the place where communities come together through a strong and diverse voluntary sector, faith communities and a vibrant programme of community events. Bound together by an ethos of citizenship and care for both people and place, North Herts is proud to be a place of inclusivity.

## Appendix E - Embedding the North Herts Place Narrative

Basic (no financial cost, just officer time)	Mid (some cost but only for Point of sale items and only when reprints required anyway)	Advanced (funding would be required for these options)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>NHC website – homepage and individual page</li> <li>North Herts Museum and Hitchin Town Hall websites</li> <li>Partner websites</li> <li>Email footers</li> <li>Letterhead – ours and partners</li> <li>Incorporate what makes North Herts special into our everyday comms e.g. chalk streams ‘did you know?’</li> <li>Use straplines as social media hashtags</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To inform relevant strategy (i.e. Tourism) and contract procurement docs (see Leisure eg below)</li> </ul> <div data-bbox="936 485 1319 512" style="background-color: #4a7ebb; color: white; text-align: center; padding: 2px;">SECTION 1 – INFORMATION FOR CANDIDATES</div> <div data-bbox="936 528 1319 579" style="background-color: #ffff00; padding: 2px;">North Hertfordshire is a mix of distinctly individual vibrant market towns, beautiful villages and accessible open countryside, that come together to make a sum greater than its parts. One of ten districts in Hertfordshire, North Hertfordshire is located to the north side of the County.</div> <p data-bbox="936 587 1319 660">The district was formed on 1<sup>st</sup> April 1974 by the amalgamation of the urban districts of Baldock, Hitchin, Letchworth, Royston and the Hitchin Rural District. In addition to this, North Hertfordshire also includes most of the development of Great Ashby, north-east of Stevenage. North Hertfordshire is made up of 24 wards, the largest of which geographically is Hitchwood, Offa and Hoo, making up 27.36% of the North Hertfordshire area.</p> <p data-bbox="936 671 1319 745">The latest 2021 ONS Census records a resident population of 133,200 in North Hertfordshire with 56,700 households and 58,480 dwellings. 51.4% of the population were women and 48.6% men. 45.4% of families had one or more dependent children and 54.6% of families had no dependent children. Of the total population of North Hertfordshire, 18% were children aged under 15, 62.7% were adults aged 15-64, 19.4% were aged 65 and over and 2.9% were aged 85 and over.</p> <p data-bbox="936 756 1319 802">North Herts Council launched an ambitious five-year plan in 2022 which focuses on our vision to put people first and deliver sustainable services, to enable a brighter future together. Our plan features three key priorities which we believe will help us deliver our ambitions for North Herts. These are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li data-bbox="936 813 1319 845">• <b>People First</b> - People make North Herts work. We value all our residents, businesses, staff, contractors, councillors, and other partners, and place them at the heart of everything we do.</li> <li data-bbox="936 850 1319 896">• <b>Sustainability</b> - We recognise the challenges our towns and district face and are committed to delivering services which are relevant and sustainable. In doing so we will place our environmental responsibilities, as well as sound financial planning, at the centre of our policy making.</li> <li data-bbox="936 901 1319 932">• <b>A brighter future together</b> - We are far-sighted and plan for the long term to secure the best outcomes for our people, towns and villages, and the local economy, ensuring North Herts continues to thrive.</li> </ul> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Museum use when applying for grants/bidding for an exhibition etc</li> <li>Partners use in funding bids</li> <li>Outlook magazine</li> <li>Include in external event Point of Sale over time when re-prints required (ie surgeries, local festivals, events)</li> <li>Campaigns i.e. ‘I love North Herts’; ‘Bench conversations’; ‘Share your North Herts stories’ etc</li> <li>Use to enter and stand out in free ‘Best Place to live’ awards/surveys</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Welcome to North Herts video (to attract people to live/visit/invest/work in North Herts). Could be created with other partners (ie North Herts College/BIDs) and used on our website, partner websites and housing developer sites etc.</li> <li>Welcome to North Herts website (micro site on existing website?)</li> <li>A digital welcome pack for new businesses (signposting them to support)</li> <li>Sponsor an existing North Herts event and raise our profile – think the Cala Homes Snowman trail that made it to The Guardian ‘festive things to do’ guide.</li> <li>Encourage a North Herts cultural programme e.g. joint exhibitions across our museums</li> </ul>