

## NORTH HERTFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

### OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MEETING HELD IN THE COUNCIL CHAMBER, DISTRICT COUNCIL OFFICES, GERON ROAD, LETCHWORTH GARDEN CITY, SG6 3JF  
ON TUESDAY, 11TH MARCH, 2025 AT 7.30 PM

### MINUTES

**Present:** *Councillors: Matt Barnes (Chair), Tom Tyson (Vice-Chair), Jon Clayden, Elizabeth Dennis, Ralph Muncer, Louise Peace, Martin Prescott, Laura Williams, Claire Winchester, Donna Wright and Daniel Wright-Mason.*

**In Attendance:** *Ian Couper (Service Director - Resources), Philip Doggett (Principal Estates Surveyor), Robert Filby (Trainee Committee, Member and Scrutiny Officer), James Lovegrove (Committee, Member and Scrutiny Manager), Jeevan Mann (Scrutiny Officer), Robert Orchard (Culture and Facilities Services Manager), Callum Reeve (Electoral Services Assistant), Anthony Roche (Managing Director), Nigel Smith (Strategic Planning Manager), Louise Symes (Strategic Planning and Projects Manager) and Jeanette Thompson (Service Director - Legal and Community).*

**Also Present:** *At the commencement of the meeting there were no members of the public.*

*Councillor Ian Albert, as Executive Member for Finance and IT, Councillor Val Bryant, as Deputy Leader of the Council, and Councillor David Barnard were in attendance.*

#### 85 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

*Audio recording – 1 minute 36 seconds*

There were no apologies for absence.

Councillor Tina Bhartwas was absent.

#### 86 MINUTES - 4 FEBRUARY 2025

*Audio Recording – 1 minute 45 seconds*

Councillor Matt Barnes, as Chair, proposed and Councillor Tom Tyson seconded, and, following a vote, it was:

**RESOLVED:** That the Minutes of the Meeting of the Committee held on 4 February 2025 be approved as a true record of the proceedings and be signed by the Chair.

#### 87 NOTIFICATION OF OTHER BUSINESS

*Audio recording – 2 minutes 21 seconds*

There was no other business notified.

**88 CHAIR'S ANNOUNCEMENTS**

*Audio recording – 2 minutes 23 seconds*

- (1) The Chair advised that, in accordance with Council Policy, the meeting would be recorded.
- (2) 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.
- (3) The Chair advised that for the purposes of clarification clause 4.8.23(a) of the Constitution does not apply to this meeting.
- (4) The Chair reminded Members of the adopted North Herts Scrutiny Charter and the need to ensure that the meeting was conducted with independence, initiative and integrity. The full Charter was available to Members via the Scrutiny Intranet pages.
- (5) The Chair advised of a change to the order of the Agenda and Agenda Item 14 would be taken after Agenda Item 7.

**89 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION**

*Audio recording – 3 minutes 42 seconds*

There was no public participation at this meeting.

**90 URGENT AND GENERAL EXCEPTION ITEMS**

*Audio recording – 3 minutes 46 seconds*

The Chair noted two urgent items in relation to the Neighbourhood Plan Referendum for Barkway and Nuthampstead and Local Government Reorganisation – Interim Plan Submission. The Chair provided details for their urgency and advised that the full Urgency Notices for both items had been published on the Council website.

**91 MEMBERS' QUESTIONS**

*Audio recording – 6 minutes 20 seconds*

No questions had been submitted by Members.

**92 RIPA ANNUAL REPORT**

*Audio recording – 6 minutes 28 seconds*

*N.B. Councillor Laura Williams entered the Council Chamber at 19:37.*

The Deputy Monitoring Officer presented the reported entitled 'Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act ('RIPA') Update and Annual Review' and advised that:

- The report provided an overview of the compliance with RIPA and highlighted the minor amendments that had been made to the RIPA policy as part of the annual review.
- The amendments were largely administrative and included the updates to officer titles as part of the staffing restructure which would be further finessed.
- The amendments also ensured consistency with the Home Office Code of Practice and clarification on the use of social media during investigations.

- The report was being brought to the committee to maintain transparency and accountability on the use of investigatory powers.

In response to a question from Councillor Matt Barnes, the Deputy Monitoring Officer advised that all officers were made aware of the updated RIPA policy and designated officers were given proper training to make sure that collaboration with third parties took place appropriately.

Councillor Matt Barnes proposed and Councillor Jon Clayden seconded and, following a vote, it was:

**RESOLVED:** That the Committee noted the content of the report.

**RECOMMENDED TO CABINET:** The adoption of the amended RIPA Policy (Appendix A – include updated titles within the appendix to the Policy).

**REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATION:** To comply with the best practice guidance and the Committee's terms of reference.

## 93 CALLED-IN ITEMS

*Audio recording – 8 minutes 52 seconds*

Councillors Ralph Muncer, David Barnard and Martin Prescott presented the Called-In item from the Cabinet meeting on 11 February 2025 entitled 'Proposed Parking Tariffs for 2025/26' and advised that:

- Councillors Joe Graziano and Steven Patmore were unable to attend this meeting.
- Within the Budget announced in October 2024 by the government, National Insurance for Employers had been increased. This would directly impact local businesses and in turn employees who would be likely to see their wages reduced as a result of cost cutting measures by businesses. Because of this, North Herts residents would have less disposable income to spend in the district and town centres.
- High streets had only recently recovered from significant economic events in recent times such as the COVID Pandemic and the Ukraine War.
- The increase to National Insurance for Employers would be yet another significant economic challenge that would further hinder the recovery.
- The decision to increase car parking charges would add to the pressures and challenges which independent local businesses already faced from increasing business rates, rents, and inflation.
- A 10p increase to parking charges in some car parks did not sound like a lot, however, it could mean the difference in people choosing to visit towns in North Herts and this could have a negative impact on local businesses if the parking charges decreased footfall in town centres.
- Car parking charges across the district should be frozen in the 2025/26 financial year to support businesses who were already faced with multiple challenges as a result of the policies of the current Government.
- The 30-minute tariff in Knebworth should be abolished to allow free parking for up to 30 minutes in the St Martin's Road Car Park which would not only support local businesses on this road and in the High Street, but would alleviate current and future congestion pressures in the village ahead of approximately 600 proposed homes being built.
- The proposed parking tariffs were not discussed by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee before Cabinet took the decision on them, and it was important for Members across North Herts Council to be able to scrutinise the decisions that the minority administration made.

- The increase in car parking charges and the ongoing possibility of on-street charges would be a tax on rural communities who had limited or no access to public transport.
- Rural shoppers were a major contributor to town centres and the increase to parking charges would be an unfair financial attack on them.
- Increasing parking charges may encourage people to shop at bigger greenfield sites with free parking rather than town centres and high streets.
- The decision on increasing parking charges should be reconsidered and withdrawn if the right solution could not be found.

The following Members asked questions:

- Councillor Elizabeth Dennis
- Councillor Daniel Wright-Mason
- Councillor Jon Clayden
- Councillor Matt Barnes

In response to questions, Councillors Ralph Muncer, David Barnard and Martin Prescott advised that:

- Statistics on the percentage of elderly and disabled residents that would be affected by the proposed increase to parking charges were not available at the time. However, these communities would certainly feel the impact of the proposed increases and this had been considered when calling in the item.
- Specific studies on the effects of increased car parking charges could not be named at the time. However, other authorities had carried out studies and increasing car parking charges had been a detractor from town centres. For example, footfall in Harpenden Town Centre had decreased significantly because of the car parking charges that were implemented by St Albans City and District Council.
- Encouraging footfall and supporting local businesses should be a priority for the Council.
- Cabinet should have considered the economic circumstances of local businesses in the current climate when they made the decision.
- As a scrutiny committee, they should be able to make recommendations for local communities and businesses and seek to support Cabinet in making decisions that would promote growth for the benefit of residents.
- The increase had been debated at Cabinet in terms of the Medium-Term Financial Strategy. However, since then, developments had taken place in which the economy had not performed well and the budget had impacted local businesses. Therefore, the decision should be looked at within the scope of the new developments that had taken place.
- They were supportive of Knebworth Parish Council and Royston Town Council progressing discussions with North Herts Council on 30-minutes free parking in St Martin's Car Park in Knebworth and the Free After Three scheme in Royston respectively. However, they believed that North Herts Council had greater ability and resilience than both the Parish and Town Councils to freeze car parking charges, and therefore North Herts Council should freeze them to allow the Parish and Town Councils to spend money elsewhere on benefiting their communities in other areas.
- One of the benefits of calling in the item for discussion at the Overview and Scrutiny Committee was that Members of all political parties across the Council had a chance to give their input on the issue.
- Businesses needed support immediately rather than one year from now.

Councillor Val Bryant, as Deputy Leader of the Council, provided a response and advised that:

- The proposed increase to parking charges was the lowest sensible inflationary amount in order to try and minimise the effects on local businesses.

- The effect of parking charges was anecdotal and there was no data on the effect that increased parking charges had on local businesses. Hitchin Town BID had not provided any figures for this during the consultation process, but this may be something that needed looking at.
- As a resident of North Herts who used public transport, she thought that the small increase to parking charges would not make a difference to residents living in rural areas.
- Data collection on the effects of increased parking charges on rural residents was not available but should be looked at in the future.

The Service Director – Regulatory provided a response and advised that:

- Proposed increases were on existing parking tariffs, there were no proposals for additional tariffs outside of those that already existed.
- Area Forums and Business Improvement Districts had been consulted, representing both a scrutiny and economic development perspective when considering increased parking charges and they had provided responses to the proposals.
- Royston First BID had proposed an amendment to the original proposed tariff increases and this had been adopted by the Cabinet in its decision.
- A productive meeting with Royston Town Council and Royston First BID had taken place earlier that day and subject to their approval processes they would likely be putting forward a funding option to seek to continue the Free After Three scheme. They were also supportive of the new parking machines which required car park users to 'tap in' and 'tap out' as they needed to understand whether the scheme would meet their aspirations in the future.
- Knebworth were still looking to subsidise the 30-minutes free parking in St Martin's Car Park.

The following Members asked questions:

- Councillor Jon Clayden
- Councillor Elizabeth Dennis
- Councillor Martin Prescott
- Councillor Ralph Muncer

In response to questions, the Service Director – Regulatory advised that:

- Royston Town Council had likely taken the decision to seek to continue the Free After Three scheme with St Mary's Primary School in mind as there was limited parking at the school itself.
- By asking people to tap in and tap out of car parks, they would be able to track data on footfall and inform the Town Council and BID of the impact of their funding dedicated to the scheme in the future.

In response to questions, the Service Director – Resources advised that:

- There was no evidence to suggest that increasing parking charges resulted in a drop in revenue immediately after, or in the financial year when the increases were announced.
- There was an error on Appendix A where the higher tariff proposals were not in line with the inflationary increase. These would be recalculated and put into the figures to be considered by Cabinet.

In response to questions, the Strategic Planning & Projects Manager advised that the inflationary changes were rounded to the nearest 10p as they had moved away from 5p increases in the past.

In response to questions, Councillor Val Bryant advised that:

- From her experience, car parks in Hitchin were at maximum capacity after 3pm daily.
- Knebworth Parish Council had made no comments on the increase in parking tariffs, they simply wished to keep the 30-minutes free parking in St Martin's Road Car Park.

Councillor Ian Albert, as Executive Member for Finance and IT advised that:

- There had been no increase to season tickets for car parks in North Herts.
- The Town Centre Manager for Hitchin raised a number of concerns about any future Sunday parking and evening charges, but not around the proposed increase to existing tariffs.

Councillor Ralph Muncer highlighted that in order to abolish the 30-minute tariff in St Martin's Car Park in Knebworth, it would cost £3,000 annually.

Councillor Ralph Muncer proposed, and Councillor Martin Prescott seconded the following recommendation to Cabinet:

- (1) That Cabinet should freeze parking charges in the 2025/26 Financial Year.
- (2) That Cabinet should remove the 30-minute parking charge in St Martin's Road Car Park, Knebworth.

The following Members took part in the debate:

- Councillor Ralph Muncer
- Councillor Elizabeth Dennis
- Councillor Matt Barnes

The following points were raised as part of the debate:

- The measure to freeze parking charges would aim to support local businesses who would face challenges presented by the increase to National Insurance.
- The proposed parking charges could have been debated at a previous Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting to avoid the call in process altogether, however the discussion that had taken place at the meeting today had been valuable and Cabinet should note the importance of Overview and Scrutiny in helping it to reach robust policy decisions.
- The consultation with the relevant BIDs and Area Forums had been extensive and the agenda for recent Overview and Scrutiny Committee meetings had been lengthy, hence why it had not been brought to the Committee before it went to Cabinet.

Councillor Matt Barnes proposed the amendment, and these were seconded by Councillor Tom Tyson, as follows:

- (1) Remove the consideration to freeze parking charges in the 2025/26 Financial Year.
- (2) Replace the recommendation to remove the 30-minute parking charge in St Martin's Road Car Park, Knebworth with an amendment for Cabinet to reconsider proposed on-street and off-street charging tariffs in Royston and Knebworth in light of the information received at the meeting.
- (3) That Cabinet considers the increase in parking charges based on the updated modelling, specifically around the 4% increase in charges, where this had not been applied to all charges.

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

- Councillor Jon Clayden
- Councillor Ralph Muncer
- Councillor Tom Tyson

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

- It made sense for Cabinet to reconsider the increase to all parking tariffs by the inflationary rate of 4% in light of the recalculation that would need to be made to the higher tariff charges.
- Knebworth and Royston were very different communities and considering them together in the proposal would not be helpful.
- Cabinet would consider each area individually in detail when making a decision on funding for parking schemes.

Following a vote, the amendments were **CARRIED**.

Councillor Elizabeth Dennis proposed an amendment to be included in the motion that Cabinet notes the importance of Overview and Scrutiny in supporting Cabinet in reaching robust policy decisions and works with the Chair of the Committee to effectively facilitate this.

Councillor Ralph Muncer accepted the amendment into the substantive motion. This was also accepted by Councillor Martin Prescott as seconder.

Councillor Ralph Muncer took part in the debate on the substantive motion and highlighted his concern with the amendments made as they did not support the removal of the 30-minute tariff charge in St Martin's Car Park.

#### VOTE TOTALS:

YES	:	7
ABSTAIN	:	2
NO	:	2
TOTAL	:	11

#### THE INDIVIDUAL RESULTS WERE AS FOLLOWS:

Cllr Matt Barnes	YES
Cllr Jon Clayden	YES
Cllr Elizabeth Dennis	YES
Cllr Ralph Muncer	ABSTAIN
Cllr Louise Peace	YES
Cllr Martin Prescott	ABSTAIN
Cllr Tom Tyson	YES
Cllr Laura Williams	YES
Cllr Claire Winchester	YES
Cllr Donna Wright	NO
Cllr Daniel Wright-Mason	NO

**RECOMMENDED TO CABINET:** That the Overview and Scrutiny Committee recommends that:

- (1) Cabinet reconsiders the proposed on-street and off-street charging tariffs in Royston and Knebworth in light of the information received at the meeting.
- (2) Cabinet considers the increase in parking charges based on the updated modelling, specifically around the 4% increase in charges, where this had not been applied to all charges.
- (3) Cabinet notes the importance of Overview and Scrutiny in supporting Cabinet in reaching robust policy decisions and works with the Chair of the Committee to effectively facilitate this.

## 94 PLANNING AND TRANSPORT PORTFOLIO UPDATE

*Audio recording – 1 hours 4 minutes 48 seconds*

The Service Director – Regulatory presented the report entitled 'Planning & Transport Portfolio Update' and advised that Building Control was the only area under Planning & Transport that was not covered within the report. He invited Members to ask any questions that they may have.

The following Members asked questions:

- Councillor Ralph Muncer
- Councillor Donna Wright
- Councillor Elizabeth Dennis
- Councillor Jon Clayden
- Councillor Martin Prescott
- Councillor Matt Barnes
- Councillor Louise Peace
- Councillor Tom Tyson

In response to questions, Councillor Val Bryant advised that:

- The Interim Executive Member for Planning & Transport had given their apologies for this meeting.
- The appointment of a permanent Executive Member for Planning & Transport could be expected to take place around the time of the Annual Council meeting.
- Discussion around using the Community Safety Budget to upgrade lampposts to smart lampposts had taken place. These would house CCTV cameras and EV charging points and they would try to account for as many lampposts as possible before undertaking this to spread the costs of the project.

In response to questions, the Strategic Planning & Projects Manager advised that:

- Consultants had been commissioned to investigate access options to Hitchin Station not just from the eastern side, but under the bridge to the station as well. The options had been presented to Network Rail and they were waiting for them to respond. Once a response had been received, they would be able to provide an update and narrow down the options to take forward.
- The Senior Transport Policy Officer worked with both the Master Planning Team at North Herts Council and the County Council. When planning applications were received, they would advise the Planning Development Team on recommendations that could be made to facilitate the Local Transport Plan.



- The County Council were prioritising some of the more important routes in the Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plans (LCWIP) and s106 contributions would be directed to these going forward.

In response to questions, the Service Director – Regulatory advised that:

- A Project Prioritisation Programme was in place and timelines for projects were led by statutory and grant deadlines. Everything else that was not dictated by one of these deadlines was done in discussion with the portfolio holder.
- Highways were responsible for pavements across the district, and they had been awarded £6.7 million of Local Electric Vehicle Infrastructure Funding (LEVI) for on-street charging purposes. The Council would be presenting their case for their share of the funding along with the other ten District and Borough Councils across the County.
- Most lampposts were located at the back of pavements, therefore solutions such as retractable bollards may need to be implemented to facilitate on-street EV charging where this was the case.
- It would not be financially viable for most EV charging companies to install charging points in rural areas, therefore the Council would allow the installation of EV charging points in their car parks to increase the availability of EV charging points to rural residents when visiting towns in North Herts.
- Within the Local Plan, there was a stepping stone approach to Town Centre Strategies. Draft work on these had been taken to the Strategic Planning Project Board, with the view from the Board to take them forward as a single document. Officers were proceeding with that as quickly as possible and stakeholder workshops around the strategies with the BIDs and local businesses had taken place.
- The Draft Town Centre Strategy was targeted to be presented at Cabinet in June as part of the Forward Plan.
- The Strategic Planning Project Board were presented with a detailed assessment of the retail need within the new strategy. However, not as much floor space was needed on retail as initially thought due to the post-COVID rise in online shopping and the evidence base to support this had been presented to local businesses and the BIDs.
- The previous estimates provided by Network Rail on station access through a tunnel for a grant application were estimated in excess of £20M. Because of this, it would be key to work with Network Rail on an eastern access point as s106 money would never be able to cover this project.
- Luton Airport expansion was a project of national significance dealt with by the Planning Inspectorate. A decision had not been made yet regarding this project, however, there would be ongoing works for the Council if the project was approved to assist the airport with monitoring its green infrastructure growth plans.
- When local government reorganisation came into effect and the creation of a unitary authority took place, the aim would be to keep the Local Plan for North Herts and align it with the local plans of other District and Borough Councils that would be absorbed by the unitary authority.
- Planning Performance Agreements were entered into whereby the applicant paid 100% of the additional fees or costs that were incurred by the Council for processing large scale or complex applications.
- Two agency staff had been employed under planning performance agreements, and in the current financial year, £135K had been given by developers towards this and other consultants. An additional £175K had been spent on agency staff and consultants where there were vacancies within planning and transport departments, however, this spending had been within existing budgets.
- Two officers within the Strategic Planning Department were on 5-year contracts and would be expiring soon but their contracts would be made permanent as part of the budget proposals.
- A budget growth bid had also been submitted to recruit an additional Transport Officer to assist the Senior Transport Policy Officer.

- Until the terms of reference for the S106 Task and Finish Group were agreed and government planning policies were published, officers could not predict how the findings of the S106 Task and Finish Group would link with the Local Plan Review.

In response to questions, Councillor Ian Albert advised that:

- Investigation on access options for Hitchin station had been initiated by the Council with the former MP for Hitchin, Bim Afolami, and the work had been continued by the current MP, Alistair Strathern who had met with Network Rail and other stakeholders last week to look at the access options for the site. The wider options for the site would also be looked into with the view to relocate the aggregates company currently occupying the site so that it could be developed, and HGVs could be rerouted away from the town centre.
- The County Council did not have the funding for a station access project, and they were yet to persuade Network Rail of the importance of the land they occupied. In addition, they would have to negotiate with Govia Thameslink to staff the new station access point.
- Better pedestrian and cyclist access on Walsworth Road would also be explored as part of this project.
- The County Council were reluctant to put funding towards pavement solutions to address the problems that would arise from EV charging through smart lampposts.
- Network Rail had carried out costings for a station access project in conjunction with the Levelling Up Fund, but these estimates had been more than £10M which was excessively more than s106 contributions would be able to cover. Therefore, the Council would continue to work with Network Rail to look at some of the alternative options that had been presented to them.

Councillor Dennis highlighted that the railway bridge on Cambridge Road was a significant pinch point for all forms of traffic and that any work on the project would be welcomed.

In response to questions, the Strategic Planning Manager advised that:

- The requirements in the latest National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) stated that the Council had to deliver almost 1000 homes annually and the long-term annual average was currently just 350.
- The current Local Plan would start taking steps towards this and larger applications for strategic sites were being progressed, however, it would be difficult for the Council to consistently hit the annual target until multiple large sites were under construction at the same time.
- Thousands of homes would be delivered as part of the future Baldock expansion scheme but only 800-1,000 of these would be in construction over each five-year period.
- They were on target with the Local Plan, however the future progress of this was contingent on government regulations as announcements on further consultation of the NPPF were pending, as well as new national development policies that the Council would not be allowed to replicate in their Local Plan.

Councillor Ralph Muncer put on record his thanks to the Service Director – Regulatory for his contributions to the Council over the last 35 years and wished him well in retirement.

Councillor Matt Barnes also thanked the Service Director – Regulatory for his service to the Council.

Councillor Matt Barnes proposed and Councillor Tom Tyson seconded and, following a vote, it was:

**RESOLVED:** That the Overview & Scrutiny Committee note the report and its appendices.

**REASON FOR DECISION:** This report was following the request of the Committee for an update on the Planning and Transport portfolio.

**95 EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC**

*Audio recording – 1 hour 47 minutes 59 seconds*

Councillor Matt Barnes proposed and Councillor Jon Clayden seconded and, following a vote it was:

**RESOLVED:** That under Section 100A(4) of the Local Government Act 1972, the public and press be excluded from the meeting for the following item of business on the grounds that it involves the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in Paragraph 3 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the said Act (as amended).

*N.B. Following the conclusion of this item, there was a break in proceedings and the meeting reconvened at 21:28. During the break Councillor Martin Prescott left the Chamber and did not return.*

**96 MUSEUM STORAGE OPTIONS - PART 2**

*N.B. This item was considered in restricted session and therefore no recordings were available.*

Councillor Val Bryant, as Deputy Leader of the Council, presented the report entitled 'Acquisition of Unit 1 City Park, Letchworth Garden City for the Museum Storage Facility'.

Councillor Matt Barnes proposed and Councillor Jon Clayden seconded and, following a vote it was:

**RECOMMENDED TO CABINET:** That the Overview and Scrutiny Committee recommends that: Cabinet approve the acquisition of Unit 1 City Park, Letchworth Garden City on the terms set out in the Part 2 report and noting the detailed Budget Cost Plan for adapting, fitting out and upgrading the building for museum storage at Appendix A.

**REASON FOR RECOMMENDATION:** A limited number of modern buildings of this age and size become available to purchase or lease in Letchworth Garden City and surrounding area, particularly one on a long lease at a peppercorn rent for the full term, with an expiry date in 2150. Unit 1 includes land fronting Works Road and to the side of the unit, plus a large part of the car park with the ability to erect a fence to separate the area from the rest of the car park used by adjoining units. In addition, the Council already owns the long leasehold interest in Unit 3 City Park, Letchworth Garden City, having acquired it in June 2016 with that building being used for general archive storage, IT servers, offsite disaster recovery, careline business continuity and legal department storage.

**97 MUSEUM STORAGE OPTIONS - PART 1**

*Audio Recording - 2 hours 22 minutes 13 seconds*

Councillor Val Bryant, as Deputy Leader of the Council, presented the report entitled 'Acquisition of Unit 1 City Park, Letchworth Garden City for the Museum Storage Facility' and advised that:

- The storage facility was an open plan, modern warehouse in the main commercial area of Letchworth Garden City.

- If they acquired the facility, the Council would receive rent from Citysprint (UK) Limited until January 2026 and the tenant would be responsible for repairs, maintenance and business rates, giving officers time to plan the future conversion of the facility.
- A favourable Pre-Purchase Report from Brown & Lee Property Consultants and a Full Building Survey from Hollis confirming the soundness of the facility had been received.
- Significant investment would be required to ensure the environmental sustainability and efficiency of the facility and the preservation of the museum collection.
- This was an opportunity to acquire a long-term storage space at a decreased cost.
- The sale of the current storage site at Bury Mead Road in Hitchin would have the potential to raise up to £500,000.
- The acquisition of Unit 1 would alleviate storage pressures at Broadway Gardens in Letchworth.

Councillor Ian Albert, as Executive Member for Finance and IT, advised that:

- Due to the nature of the building, extensive fitting would be required to repurpose it for museum storage purposes. However, the total cost of investment would come to £2.5 million which was well within the £4 million earmarked for the acquisition of museum storage space.
- The leasehold for the facility had 125 years left on it.
- £64,000 in rent would be received from the existing tenant until January 2026, allowing the Council to collect income until then.
- Facilities of this size were not on the market very often.
- The contract procurement rules were followed when investigating alternative options for museum storage.
- If the purchase did not go through, other options would continue to be explored such as grant funding towards another facility.
- The time scales for acquiring the building would not allow for the Council to obtain grant funding towards the purchase, however, they would investigate obtaining grants towards project staff and the refitting.
- A partnership solution was being explored by Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation who sought input from the Council towards a feasibility study over Vantage Point in Letchworth. However, the viability of this facility was not guaranteed and the initial cost projections of this were £137,000 higher than the acquisition of Unit 1 over its lifetime.
- However, if these projections changed, there would be the possibility to re-explore this option.

The following Members asked questions:

- Councillor Jon Clayden
- Councillor Matt Barnes
- Councillor Ralph Muncer

In response to questions, the Culture and Facilities Service Manager advised that:

- There was a possibility of exploring income from Unit 1 through the commercialisation of the building, however, this would need further research as the property coming to market was a recent development.
- Unit 1 came with a great deal of office space and welfare facilities would be built which would allow for the potential of the storage facility being open to the community. The income stream from this would be nominal, but this had been considered as part of the acquisition.
- The location of the new facility in Letchworth would allow the museum to have a greater presence across the district as the Museum itself was in Hitchin and it was marketed as a district-wide museum.

- There would be security concerns over the museum collection if the surplus storage space designed to futureproof the growth of the collection was granted to third parties on a temporary basis.

In response to questions, Councillor Ian Albert advised that:

- The extensive archives would be available to the general public through behind-the-scenes tours. The Bury Mead Road facility did not have allow for these to be carried out.
- As this would form part of the Council Delivery Plan, they would need to keep the project under review by setting up a project board to review the project and its progress.

In response to questions, Councillor Val Bryant advised that:

- There was social value from moving to Unit 1 as there would be space for a classroom, and there was already a car park large enough to fit approximately 30 vehicles. Therefore, there would be scope for visits from the public and outside organisations.
- The North Herts Museum collection had many different items with different storage needs and they expected the collection to grow from the archaeology expedition that was taking place in Baldock.
- The Museum Storage project would have a recognised project manager and project management structure to ensure that it was delivered within the budget and timescales as discussed previously.

In response to questions, the Principal Estates Surveyor advised that additional Council departments and outside voluntary organisations utilising the surplus storage space would be a future possibility, however, ensuring the preservation of the museum collection was the first priority.

In response to questions, the Service Director – Resources advised that if a project board was set up to follow through with the museum storage project, it would go through the project management framework which would have both Executive Member and Member involvement. Given the capital size of the project, this would be the recommended action to take.

The following Members took part in the debate:

- Councillor Matt Barnes
- Councillor Ralph Muncer

The following points were raised as part of the debate:

- It would be prudent to consider the refurbishment work and continue to explore grant funding towards this and the relocation of the project costs.
- This solution would be cost effective, and the project had been delayed in the past, therefore it was long overdue that it was commenced.

Councillor Matt Barnes proposed and Councillor Claire Winchester seconded and, following a vote it was:

**RECOMMENDED TO CABINET:** That the Overview and Scrutiny Committee recommend: That Cabinet approve the acquisition of Unit 1 City Park, Letchworth Garden City on the terms set out in the Part 2 report and noting the detailed Budget Cost Plan for adapting, fitting out and upgrading the building for museum storage.

**REASON FOR RECOMMENDATION:** A limited number of modern buildings of this age and size become available to purchase or lease in Letchworth Garden City and surrounding area, particularly one on a long lease at a peppercorn rent for the full term, with an expiry date in 2150. Unit 1 includes land fronting Works Road and to the side of the unit, plus a large part of the car park with the ability to erect a fence to separate the area from the rest of the car park used by adjoining units. In addition, the Council already owns the long leasehold interest in Unit 3 City Park, Letchworth Garden City, having acquired it in June 2016 with that building being used for general archive storage, IT servers, offsite disaster recovery, careline business continuity and legal department storage.

The Chair thanked Members and officers for their work on the Museum Storage Project so far.

## 98 CORPORATE PEER CHALLENGE REPORT AND ACTION PLAN

*Audio recording – 2 hours 44 minutes 40 seconds*

*N.B. Councillor Laura Williams left the Chamber at 22:15 and did not return.*

The Managing Director presented the report entitled 'Corporate Peer Challenge Report and Action Plan' and advised that:

- The Corporate Peer Challenge Review took place at the beginning of November and the final report was received before Christmas. It was noted at the Cabinet meeting in January with a delegation to produce the Action Plan, which would then be presented to Cabinet at a later meeting, following comments from this Committee.
- Within the report, there were ten recommendations made to the Council. The Action Plan would respond to these alone and any other useful information that had been picked up from the report would be looked at separately.
- Some of the recommendations from the report were quite narrative and in response, several of the actions within the Action Plan were also narrative.
- As the response in the Action Plan was refined in more detail, the actions would become more time specified.
- The first recommendation mentioned the golden thread which was a term used to describe the link between the overarching corporate policies, included in the Council Plan, and how these linked to the operational delivery of services.

The following Members asked questions:

- Councillor Ralph Muncer
- Councillor Donna Wright
- Councillor Matt Barnes
- Councillor Claire Winchester

In response to questions, the Managing Director advised that:

- In the medium to long-term, it was not certain that the District Council would exist due to local government reorganisation.
- The Corporate Peer Review took place before the Devolution White Paper was published.
- If North Herts did not exist, priorities that were mapped out in the Action Plan would have to be changed. They did not have the funding or staff resources to do everything, therefore they would have to prioritise certain actions, especially with the future proposed structure change of the Council.
- The process around Regular Performance Reviews and One-to-Ones would be reviewed as part of the Action Plan, and this would involve engagement with senior managers to embed new processes.

- The Local Government Association required an Action Plan to be published within 3 months of the report being published.
- The Action Plan had some useful short-term actions for the Council to undertake in addition to other projects that would help the Council for whatever came next such as the Digital Transformation Update.
- Local Government reorganisation was looking very likely which meant that recommendations that had been made in the report and the Action Plan would not necessarily be relevant in the future.

In response to questions, Councillor Val Bryant advised that:

- Modernisation was listed as one of the recommendations and in response to this, the Digital Transformation Update had already begun and this could save resources and money for the Council.
- The narrative on Place within the Action Plan had unfortunately been overtaken since the announcement of the Devolution White Paper.

The following Members took part in the debate:

- Councillor Ralph Muncer
- Councillor Matt Barnes

The following points were raised as part of the debate:

- Both documents should be welcomed to conduct best practice within the industry and it would be irresponsible to discharge responsibilities prior to reorganisation taking place.
- The Action Plan could be summarised in two terms, pressures and prioritisation.
- Digital Transformation would be pivotal in the coming years, it would have a major impact on members of staff in their jobs and it would be beneficial for this to be maintained.
- It was important for staff briefings to continue to take place to drive the direction on what should be achieved in times of uncertainty.

The Chair thanked the Managing Director for their report.

Councillor Matt Barnes proposed and Councillor Tom Tyson seconded and, following a vote, it was:

**RESOLVED:** That the content of the Corporate Peer Challenge report and its recommendations were noted.

**RECOMMENDED TO CABINET:** That the Overview and Scrutiny Committee commented on the proposed Action Plan, and referred it onto Cabinet, to be considered on 18 March 2025.

**REASON FOR RECOMMENDATION:** To ensure that the Council responded to the matters identified within the CPC report, ensuring that the benefits of the CPC process are realised.

## 99 OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME

*Audio recording – 3 hours 8 minutes 13 seconds*

The Scrutiny Officer presented the report entitled 'Overview and Scrutiny Work Programme 2024-25' and advised that:

- Members would be invited to a Work Programme training session on 13 May which would contain training from the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny and a workshop

with the Scrutiny Officer and the Committee, Member and Scrutiny Manager to begin looking at items for the 2025/26 Overview and Scrutiny Work Programme.

- Appointments to the S106 Task and Finish Group had been made and the draft scope had been reviewed by the Chair and sent to both officers and the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny to ensure that it had been well defined. Comments on the draft scope were due back on Tuesday 18 March.
- The Local Government Association Peer Review actions were included in Appendix C of the report.
- No referrals had been made to Cabinet from the last Overview and Scrutiny meeting on 4 February, however, the referrals from this meeting would be made to the next Cabinet meeting on 18 March.
- The Scrutiny Officer and Committee, Scrutiny and Member Manager would be attending a Centre for Governance and Scrutiny Conference on Thursday 20 March. Following this, feedback would be provided to Members on its contents.

Councillor Ralph Muncer thanked the Chair, Members, and officers for their engagement with the formation of the S106 Task and Finish Group so far.

The Chair asked Members for their opinions on two items on the Forward Plan to be discussed at the next Committee meeting. These were the Sustainability Strategy and the Town Centre Strategy.

Councillor Elizabeth Dennis supported the discussion of the Town Centre Strategy at the next meeting, although she recognised the work that would need to be carried out by officers before it could be presented and emphasised that they should not be pressured to present it at the next meeting if it was not ready in time.

Councillor Louise Peace highlighted that a consultation on sustainability was ongoing, and that they should wait to discuss the Sustainability Strategy until after the results from this had been published.

In response to Councillor Louise Peace, the Chair advised that the progress of the consultation would be kept under review.

In response to a question from Councillor Ralph Muncer on seeking the views of the Cabinet Panel on Environment regarding the Sustainability Strategy, the Committee, Member and Scrutiny Manager advised that this could be organised with them, and that all Members were able to attend meetings of the Cabinet Panel on the Environment.

The Chair also mentioned the Council Tax Reduction Scheme as an item for discussion at the Committee meeting in June, however, if more urgent items needed to be discussed, the discussion of this could be delayed to a future Committee meeting.

The Chair noted that the Town Centre Strategy would come to the next Committee meeting, along with potential updates on Museum Storage Options and the Corporate Peer Challenge Action Plan. The Chair also wished for these items to be discussed at the workshop in May.



Councillor Matt Barnes proposed and Councillor Ralph Muncer seconded and, following a vote, it was:

***RESOLVED:***

- (1) That the Committee prioritises topics for inclusion in the Work Programme attached as Appendix A and, where appropriate, determines the high-level form and timing of scrutiny input.
- (2) That the Committee, having considered the most recent iteration of the Forward Plan, as attached at Appendix B, suggests a list of items to be considered at its meetings in the coming civic year.
- (3) That the Corporate Peer Challenge Action Plan as attached at Appendix C be considered.

***REASONS FOR DECISIONS:***

- (1) To allow the Committee to set a work programme which provides focused Member oversight, encourages open debate and seeks to achieve service improvement through effective policy development and meaningful policy and service change.
- (2) The need to observe Constitutional requirements and monitor the Forward Plan for appropriate items to scrutinise remains a key aspect of work programming.

The meeting closed at 10.47pm

Chair