

CABINET

24 June 2025

PART 1 – PUBLIC DOCUMENT

TITLE OF REPORT: STRATEGIC PLANNING MATTERS

REPORT OF: NIGEL SMITH, INTERIM DIRECTOR: PLACE

EXECUTIVE MEMBER: CLLR DONNA WRIGHT, EXECUTIVE MEMBER FOR PLANNING & TRANSPORT

COUNCIL PRIORITY: THRIVING COMMUNITIES / ACCESSIBLE SERVICES / RESPONSIBLE GROWTH / SUSTAINABILITY

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1 This report identifies the latest position on key planning and transport issues affecting the Council.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 2.1. That the report on strategic planning matters be noted.

3. REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

- 3.1. To keep Cabinet informed of recent developments on strategic planning matters.

4. ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS CONSIDERED

- 4.1. None

5. CONSULTATION WITH RELEVANT MEMBERS AND EXTERNAL ORGANISATIONS

- 5.1. The Executive Member has been briefed on the relevant matters in this report. Where appropriate these have also been reported to the Council's internal, informal Strategic Planning Project Board. This includes cross-party representation from all political groups. The Project Board is chaired by the Executive Member for Planning & Transport. Local ward members have been invited to participate in relevant meetings of the Board

6. FORWARD PLAN

- 6.1 This report does not contain a recommendation on a key Executive decision and has therefore not been referred to in the Forward Plan.

7. BACKGROUND

- 7.1. Members will be aware of, and familiar with, many of the issues surrounding the strategic planning matters referred to in paragraph 1.1 above. This report is intended to provide Members with the current positions on the following key matters where there has been substantive change since the report in January 2025.

8. RELEVANT CONSIDERATIONS

Government Changes

- 8.1. On 7 February 2025, the government updated the [National Planning Policy Framework \(NPPF\)](#) by amending paragraph 155 to make its intention clear. Paragraph 155 sets out criteria relating to the circumstances in which the development of homes, commercial and other development in the Green Belt should not be regarded as inappropriate. The amendment requires all the criteria [utilisation of grey belt land whilst not fundamentally undermining the purposes of the remaining Green Belt; a demonstrable unmet need for the type of development proposed; being in a sustainable location; and ensuring the Golden Rules relating to provision of affordable housing, infrastructure or improving accessible green spaces] to apply rather than one of the criteria only.
- 8.2. On 11 March 2025, the Planning and Infrastructure Bill was taken to the House of Commons and is currently going through its committee stages. The Bill contains the following provisions:
- speeding up the consenting process for national infrastructure projects;
 - introducing a new Nature Recovery Fund to help drive positive outcomes in nature recovery whilst unlocking development;
 - changing the way planning committees operate to speed up decision making¹;
 - reforms to enable planning authorities to increase planning fees;
 - introducing a new system spatial planning to ensure full coverage of Strategic Development Strategies across the country;
 - legislating to strengthen Development Corporations to make it easier to deliver large-scale new communities; and
 - changing the way compensation is paid to landowners through the Compulsory Purchase Process

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/reform-of-planning-committees-technical-consultation/reform-of-planning-committees-technical-consultation>

- 8.3. Other changes on the horizon include the consultation of National Development Management Policies (NDMPs). The purpose of these is to provide consistency across the country and should not be repeated in local plans, therefore freeing up planning authorities to concentrate on more locally specific policies. It is not clear what policies will be included and /or how detailed they will be. These were expected to be consulted on in the spring, however it is more likely this will be towards the end of July. The Council will provide a response to this consultation once published. As NDMPs will become part of authorities' Development Plan, the Local Plan will need to take account of these changes as it is prepared.

Proposed Expansion of Luton Airport

- 8.4. The Council received a copy of the Notice of the decision by the Secretary of State for Transport on [3 April 2025](#) to approve Luton Rising's Development Consent Order (DCO) application for the expansion of London Luton Airport to increase passenger numbers from the currently consented 19mpa to 32mpa by 2040s following completion of a lengthy Examination on 10 February 2024. This decision was despite National Planning Inspectors recommending refusal against the proposed development due to its significant environmental harms. The decision was subject to a 6-week High Court challenge period called a Judicial Review.
- 8.5. The Luton And District Association for the Control of Aircraft Noise (LADACAN) initiated legal proceedings to challenge the Transport SoS decision considering it to be unlawful, and after seeking legal advice, the association launched a Judicial Review to have the SoS's decision quashed. In the interim while this legal process is ongoing, officers are in the process of reviewing the current decision and its implications for the Council.

Strategic Sites

- 8.6. The Strategic Planning Project Board continues to meet regularly. The status of work on the six, largest Strategic Sites in the Local Plan is summarised below:

Policy SP14: North of Baldock	The strategic masterplan report has been endorsed by the Strategic Sites Project Board and Cabinet. The Report will seek endorsement at Full Council in June, following a member briefing.
SP15: North of Letchworth	The masterplan for this site was adopted as a material consideration for any future planning applications by Full Council in July 2024. The applicant is currently in the process of procuring a development partner.
SP16: North of Stevenage	The masterplan for this site was adopted as a material consideration for any future planning applications by Full Council in November 2024.

	<p>An outline planning application is under consideration (Council application reference 23/02935/OP).</p> <p>A draft design code is being prepared for the site.</p>
SP17: Highover Farm, Hitchin	<p>Outline planning permission for this site was granted in November 2024 on completion of the s106 legal agreement following a resolution to grant permission by the Planning Committee in October 2023.</p> <p>Reserved matters applications have recently been received for infrastructure and the first phases of new homes, along with a proposed Design Code for the site.</p>
SP18: North-east of Great Ashby	<p>The masterplan for this site was adopted as a material consideration for any future planning applications by Full Council in November 2024.</p> <p>An outline application is expected in September 2025.</p>
SP19: East of Luton	<p>The masterplan for this site was adopted as a material consideration for any future planning applications by Full Council in January 2025.</p> <p>Two outline planning applications are under consideration (Council application references 17/00830/1 and 16/02014/1).</p>

- 8.7. Other masterplans for significant sites are being progressed through a variety of PPAs, pre-application discussions and current planning applications lodged with the Council ([Masterplans in current applications | North Herts Council \(north-herts.gov.uk\)](https://www.north-herts.gov.uk/masterplans)).

North Herts Local Plan

- 8.8. It was agreed at Cabinet in January 2024 to undertake a review of the Local Plan. The Plan is prepared in a number of stages.
- Regulation 18 (an options document) - expecting to consult towards the end of 2025
 - Regulation 19 document (the draft Local Plan) – expecting to consult towards the end of 2026
 - Examination in Public – summer 2027
 - Adoption – end of 2027

- 8.9. An indicative programme for this work is set out in the Local Development Scheme which is published on the Council's website [Local Development Scheme | North Herts Council](#).
- 8.10. Work is underway on preparing the evidence base to support the Local Plan including Strategic Market Housing Assessment, Economic Land Study, joint Green Belt Review, Viability Study, Landscape Study, etc. We are imminently consulting on a Call for Sites - expression of interest for people to submit sites that have the potential for development which the team will analyse for potential suitability. This work will inform the site allocations work to support the Local Plan.

Other Local Authorities' Local Plans

- 8.11. We are neighboured by eight other Local Authorities who are all at differing stages of their Local Plans. As part of Duty to Co-operate, we maintain regular contact with regard to the status of their Local Plans and input to consultations as appropriate. Details of the most recent positions of our neighbours is set out below.

St. Albans City and District Council

- 8.12. Examination of the St Albans Local Plan started 29 April 2025. Following representations made by the Council (reported in the January SPM report), it is not anticipated that it is necessary for us to appear at the hearing sessions.
- 8.13. Examination is expected to continue until February 2026 with a view to adopt in March 2026. More details can be found on [St Albans City and District Council's website](#).

Uttlesford District Council

- 8.14. Examination of the Uttlesford Local Plan will start on 10 June 2025. Following representations made by the Council (reported in the January SPM report), it is not anticipated that it is necessary for us to appear at the hearing sessions.
- 8.15. Examination is expected to continue until March 2026 with a view to adopt in April 2026. More details can be found on [Uttlesford District Council's website](#).

Stevenage Borough Council

- 8.16. Stevenage Borough Council are undertaking a partial review of their Local Plan. The Regulation 19 consultation, or pre-submission consultation has now ended, and SBC are preparing to submit their Plan to the Secretary of State this summer.
- 8.17. We have made representations on the Plan and await direction as to the next steps in terms of the examination of the Plan. More details can be found on [Stevenage Borough Council's website](#).

Luton Borough Council

- 8.18. Luton Borough Council are undertaking a review of their Local Plan. The Council are currently undertaking a second round of Call for Sites. These sites will help to identify areas for the provision of growth in the Borough.
- 8.19. More details can be found on [Luton Borough Council's website](#).

Central Bedfordshire Council

- 8.20. A Call for Sites exercise was carried out November 2024 to January 2025. This has been published and can be viewed here [Call for Sites | Central Bedfordshire Council](#).

East Hertfordshire District Council

- 8.21. A Call for Sites exercise was carried out July to September 2024. Results of this exercise are currently being assessed and will be published in due course.
- 8.22. More details can be found on [East Herts Council's website](#).

Welwyn Hatfield District Council

- 8.23. A Call for Sites exercise was carried out recently and closed March 2025. Results of this exercise are currently being assessed and will be published in due course.
- 8.24. More details can be found on [Welwyn Hatfield District Council's website](#).

South Cambridgeshire District Council

- 8.25. The Council are undertaking a Local Plan with Cambridge City Council under the Greater Cambridge Local Plan. A Call for Sites was previously undertaken and they plan to consult on a draft Plan in autumn/winter 2025.
- 8.26. More details can be found on [Greater Cambridge Shared Planning's website](#).

Neighbourhood Plans

- 8.27. A referendum for the Barkway and Nuthampstead Neighbourhood Plan was held on 1 May 2025. The result of the referendum was 325 votes in favour of the neighbourhood plan with 49 votes against. The neighbourhood plan was “made” by [delegated decision](#) on 15 May 2025.
- 8.28. The examination for the Codicote Neighbourhood Plan has concluded and is subject to a separate report on this agenda.

Other matters

North, East & Central Herts Authorities Strategic Planning

- 8.29. Since 2019 the Council together with East Herts District Council, Stevenage Borough Council, Welwyn Hatfield District Council, Broxbourne Borough Council and Hertfordshire County Council along with the help of consultants, have been working together on the strategic planning of the area. This included establishing a Vision and a Growth Study for North East Central (NEC) Herts. The intention of the Growth Study is to create a key piece of initial evidence to support the preparation of a joint strategic plan for the area and inform the next round of Local Plans from the 2030s to 2050.

- 8.30. The production of the Stage 2 Growth Study is now underway with a final report expected towards the end of the summer with member briefings prior to final publication. Outcomes of this will be reported in the next Strategic Matters Report.

Chilterns National Landscape proposed extension

- 8.31. As reported in MIS recently, Natural England have announced that the long-anticipated review of the Chilterns National Landscape boundary has been cancelled due to funding cuts from Defra.
- 8.32. It was anticipated that the boundary review of the Chilterns National Landscape would result in more of North Herts Council being included in the National Designation, which would have recognised the beauty and value of the landscape within the Council's area.
- 8.33. A full statement from Chilterns Conservation Board² on the Chilterns National Landscape cancellation can be found here [Deep Disappointment at Cancellation of the Chilterns Boundary Review | Chilterns National Landscape](#).

North Herts Council's Draft Town Centres Strategy

- 8.34. Officers presented an overview of the Town Centres Strategy to the Strategic Planning Board on 20th May 2025. The Board received a presentation from officers and their consultants, Lichfields & Partners Ltd ("Lichfields"), on the status of the project, timeline and next steps, including a 'You said – We did' section from the last Project Board meeting. Lichfields were previously commissioned for the work of the Town Centres and Retail Study Evidence, base and more recently to assist officers with the Town Centres Strategy redrafting.
- 8.35. The Board members acknowledged receipt of the presentations and the comprehensive work undertaken by the Consultants, Lichfields, and officers. Since the last Project Board meeting (30 Oct 2024), the project has progressed with:
- Reviewing proposed town centre boundaries, to be less restrictive: i.e. to only remove areas from existing boundaries if these are residential or non-main town centre uses.
 - Reviewing the population figures and update tables as needed (specifically considering strategic housing allocations).
 - Completion of the Town Centre and Retail Study (Final in Dec 2024) and taking forward the recommendations in the Town Centre Strategy.
 - Researching individual town centre documents and strategies.
 - Restructuring the document to reduce the length and to simplify the context.

² an independent body established by Parliamentary Order in July 2004, its members are all drawn from local communities including representatives from local authorities and DEFRA

- Reviewing the evidence base and policy and prioritising individual town centre aspirations.
 - Engaging with Officers across various services, with the view to engage with the Bids and other key stakeholders such as the Royston Town Council and the Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation over the next month.
- 8.29 The Board members recognised the need for a more policy weighted strategy supported by a robust evidence base in order to respond and guide future development proposals, with sub-sections detailing specific town centre aspirations to be more visionary setting out the Council's proposed direction of travel and priorities for each of the town centres that could be taken forward as part of the Local Plan review.
- 8.30 The Board, recognising that some additional work needed to be undertaken following the discussion around the priorities for the town centres, and to allow time for officers and their consultants to complete the draft, the Board requested to have sight of the draft once complete for their review prior to it being submitted to Cabinet at a future date, (anticipated for September Cabinet meeting).

9. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 9.1. Under (Section 5, paragraph 5.7.18) of the Council's Constitution (the Terms of Reference for Cabinet), the Constitution states that Cabinet may exercise the Council's functions as Local Planning Authority and receive reports on strategic planning matters, applications for, approval/designation, consultation/referendums revocations (or recommend revocation) of neighbourhood plans and orders, (except to the extent that those functions are by law the responsibility of the Council or delegated to the Service Director: Regulatory).
- 9.2. The preparation of statutory plans and supporting documents is guided by a range of acts and associated regulations including the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 (as amended) and the Localism Act 2011.
- 9.3. Under the Council's Constitution (14.6.10 (b) iv B) all functions relating to National Infrastructure Planning including co-ordination of the Council's response to any consultation, examination or other any other matter concerned with major infrastructure projects, is delegated to the Service Director Place.

10. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 10.1. The general costs of activities identified in this report - including the additional, temporary posts identified in Section 15 below - are met through existing revenue budgets or benefit from external funding or other arrangements to recover costs.
- 10.2. £20k has been set aside in the budget for any additional work associated with the London Luton Airport DCO application following the conclusion of the Examination from the SoS following the Judicial Review and any ongoing work arising from a positive decision, such as implementing monitoring levels and the enforcement of the approved scheme.

11. RISK IMPLICATIONS

- 11.1. Good Risk Management supports and enhances the decision-making process, increasing the likelihood of the Council meeting its objectives and enabling it to respond quickly and effectively to change. When taking decisions, risks and opportunities must be considered.
- 11.2. Delays to the publishing of secondary legislation relating to Local Plans poses risks to the progression of the Local Plan update. However, we will keep this under review.

12. EQUALITIES IMPLICATIONS

- 12.1. In line with the Public Sector Equality Duty, public bodies must, in the exercise of their functions, give due regard to the need to eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation, to advance equality of opportunity and foster good relations between those who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.
- 12.2. There are not considered to be any direct equality issues arising from this report. Future individual schemes or considerations may well be subject to appropriate review to ensure they comply with latest equality legislative need. Any risks and opportunities identified will also be subject to assessment for impact on those that share a protected characteristic.

13. SOCIAL VALUE IMPLICATIONS

- 13.1. The Social Value Act and “go local” requirements do not apply to this report.

14. ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS

- 14.1. Several of the schemes noted at section 8 will have considerable impact on the environment as they come to fruition. Many of these will be subject to their own statutory requirements for environmental assessment such as Sustainability Appraisal or Environmental Impact Assessment. The need for further assessment, for example where there is no statutory requirement, is considered on a case-by-case basis.

15. HUMAN RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

- 15.1. There is one permanent vacancy in the Strategic Planning Team. This was unsuccessfully advertised in 2024 and will be readvertised shortly along with an additional fixed-term post (18 months) to support work on the Local Plan. A further temporary post is being created within the design service to assist with projects including the District Design Guide. Interim and backfill / temporary arrangements have been put in place following the recent retirement of the Director: Place.

16. CONTACT OFFICERS

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