

Item No	Referred from:	OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
6A	Date:	11 NOVEMBER 2025
	Title of item:	NORTH HERTFORDSHIRE DRAFT TOWN CENTRE STRATEGY
To be considered alongside agenda item:		AGENDA ITEM 9

The report considered by Overview and Scrutiny Committee at the meeting held on 11 November 2025 can be viewed here: [Agenda for Overview and Scrutiny Committee on Tuesday, 11th November, 2025, 7.30 pm | North Herts Council](#)

RECOMMENDED TO CABINET:

- (1) That the draft Town Centres Strategy (attached as Appendix A to this report) and its associated Appendices be endorsed and approved for public consultation.
- (2) That delegated authority is granted to the Director – Place in consultation with the Executive Member for Place to make any minor non-material corrections, including but not limited to cosmetic additions or presentational alterations, to the draft Town Centres Strategy as considered necessary for the public consultation.

REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS:

- (1) To allow the draft Town Centres Strategy to be progressed to public consultation so that it may be developed and eventually adopted as a material planning consideration to support developers, landowners and relevant stakeholders when considering developing proposals and to provide policy advice to development management officers when determining planning applications until superseded by any new Local Plan.
- (2) To set key priorities which seek to maintain and enhance the unique character and vitality and viability of the district's four town centres through agreed partnership working.
- (3) To reinforce and deliver the Council's ambitions as set out in the Council Plan (2024 - 2028).

Audio recording – 1 hour 58 minutes 12 seconds

Councillor Donna Wright, as Executive Member for Place presented the report entitled 'Draft Town Centres Strategy' and advised that:

- The adopted Local Plan 2011-2031 required the Council to prepare and maintain up-to-date town centre strategies to support their strategic policy approach and respond to any changes since the Local Plan evidence base was first prepared.
- Since the Local Plan adoption, online shopping had continued to increase, and pressures from the cost of living and COVID-19 pandemic had also impacted town centres.
- The Council wanted town centres in North Herts to be welcoming and vibrant for residents.
- An overarching Town Centres Strategy had been prepared with consultants from Lichfields as seen at Appendix A to the report.

- Moving to an overarching model instead of four distinct town centre strategies had saved officer resources and time which had helped the Council to manage speculative planning applications through the Local Plan review period.
- Cross-cutting planning-based thematic policies to guide development and key investment priorities tailored to the needs of each town centre had been identified within the strategy.
- The strategy would act as a bridge between the Local Plan and its future review and would also provide guidance for developers and planning officers when developing and determining planning applications.
- Key Priorities within the Council Plan would be supported through the strategy.
- Other Council strategies such as the Economic Development and Sustainability strategies as well as the Churchgate Shopping Centre Regeneration project would also be linked with the strategy.
- Proposals in the strategy would differ to those in the Local Plan which meant that it would be adopted as a material planning consideration for relevant planning applications rather than as a supplementary planning document.
- The strategy would also ensure that plans for town centres continued to be carried out through the Local Government Reorganisation process.
- The document had been divided into four sections with the third section focused on the strengths and weaknesses of each town centre and the fourth section on further actions that the Council could consider to effectively deliver the ambitions within the strategy.
- Formal consultation would also be carried out with key stakeholders and partners and feedback from this would shape a clear, action-focused delivery plan in the final version of the strategy which would be regularly reviewed and updated.
- Initial drafts of the strategy had been reviewed by the Strategic Planning Board and the Political Liaison Board had reviewed the final draft in October.
- Subject to Cabinet approval, the strategy would be issued for public consultation in late 2025 with the final version anticipated for presentation in early 2026.

The following Members asked questions:

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

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

- As part of the Town Centre Retail Study review, a residential telephone survey was undertaken which also included businesses.
- Workshops were also carried out with key businesses and Business Improvement District (BID) Managers to inform the strengths and weaknesses of each town centre in addition to the key priorities.
- Key stakeholders and businesses would be consulted again as part of the wider public consultation.
- The number of businesses engaged, and the location of these, in the Retail Study would be provided after the meeting.
- The strategy would guide developers on development in town centres and allow them to use the evidence base outlined in the first section as justification for developments going forward.

- Consultants from Lichfields engaged with Royston First BID and the Chief Officer from Royston Town Council and they would continue to work with them to raise the profile of the consultation in Royston to encourage more feedback.
- The strategy aimed to address active travel while recognising vehicle use, however, it was acknowledged that modal shift to active travel would take time.
- They would work to implement measures such as the Walking and Infrastructure Plan to improve links within town centres and improve links between rural villages and town centres using S106 contributions and working with Hertfordshire County Council.
- Protection of Public Realm was referenced in the strategy through measures such as the promotion of community facilities.

In response to questions, Councillor Donna Wright advised that:

- Placemaker would be used in the consultation phase to enable readers to interact with the sections of the strategy that were of interest to them.
- New information was contained within the strategy rather than it being a summary of the sources cited within, particularly in the third section.
- Community and culture within the Public Realm were referenced in the strategy, however, if stakeholders felt that they needed enhancing, they would be able to express their views on this through the consultation.
- Parking in town centres would be looked into as part of the Parking Strategy review, particularly in Hitchin where they would investigate underutilised car parks as part of the Churchgate project.
- The glossary within the strategy was currently a draft and would be expanded over time.

Councillor Jon Clayden suggested that signposting on page 4 of the Draft Town Centres Strategy should be expanded, particularly for residents who might be interested in reading the document.

Councillor Martin Prescott noted that public transport was limited in the villages surrounding Royston, therefore, sufficient parking in the town centre was vital to attract residents and help town centre businesses, who would otherwise be impacted by larger businesses on the outskirts of the town where car parking was available.

Councillor Elizabeth Dennis noted that lessons could be learned from Baldock Town Centre which encouraged active travel over vehicle use and was successful with this despite having surrounding villages. It was also noted that the community use of Public Realm spaces in Baldock should be protected within the strategy.

The Chair summarised discussions and outlined that two concerns raised by Members were that the community and value aspects of retaining public realms in town centres was important in the strategy and that consideration should be given to travel to town centres, as well as parking in the centres.

Councillor Martin Prescott proposed and Councillor David Chalmers seconded and, following a vote, it was:

RECOMMENDED TO CABINET:

- (1) That the draft Town Centres Strategy (attached as Appendix A to this report) and its associated Appendices be endorsed and approved for public consultation.

- (2) That delegated authority is granted to the Director – Place in consultation with the Executive Member for Place to make any minor non-material corrections, including but not limited to cosmetic additions or presentational alterations, to the draft Town Centres Strategy as considered necessary for the public consultation.

REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS:

- (1) To allow the draft Town Centres Strategy to be progressed to public consultation so that it may be developed and eventually adopted as a material planning consideration to support developers, landowners and relevant stakeholders when considering developing proposals and to provide policy advice to development management officers when determining planning applications until superseded by any new Local Plan.
- (2) To set key priorities which seek to maintain and enhance the unique character and vitality and viability of the district's four town centres through agreed partnership working.
- (3) To reinforce and deliver the Council's ambitions as set out in the Council Plan (2024 - 2028).