

## **Information Report for Noting and Discussion by the Community Forum**

<b>BALDOCK COMMUNITY FORUM</b> <b>8 DECEMBER 2025</b>
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### **DRAFT TOWN CENTRES STRATEGY FOR PUBLIC CONSULTATION**

#### **SERVICE DIRECTORATE: PLACE**

#### **1.0 PURPOSE OF REPORT**

- 1.1 To inform the Community Forum of the draft Town Centres Strategy agreed by Cabinet at its meeting on 19<sup>th</sup> November 2025 for public consultation in December and January.

#### **2.0 BACKGROUND**

- 2.1 The adopted Local Plan 2011-2031 stipulates that the Council “prepare and maintain up-to-date town centre strategies to support its strategic policy approach and / or adapt to change. These will be used to inform the approach to retail at the time of the early review of the Local Plan.”
- 2.2 As such, we are preparing an overarching Town Centres Strategy to
- provide additional guidance to current Local Plan Policies: ETC3: New retail, leisure, and other main town centre development, ETC4: Primary Shopping Frontages, ETC5: Secondary Shopping Frontages and SP4: Town Centres, Local Centres and Community Shops.
  - Set out the Council’s planning priorities for its town centres which can be given appropriate weight in relevant planning decisions; and
  - Act as a ‘bridging document’ pending the approved review of the Local Plan.

#### **3.0 OVERVIEW OF THE CONSULTATION DRAFT STRATEGY**

- 3.1 In summary, the draft Strategy:
- Incorporates advice on a range of changes in national policy and guidance and takes account of the updated evidence in the Town Centres and Retail Study (2024).
  - Addresses the relevant policy criteria identified in the adopted Local Plan by providing more robust guidance for developers and stakeholders that should be taken into consideration for any type of development or improvements within the town centres to promote their vitality and viability.
  - Is a planning-led document and should be read in conjunction with relevant policies in the adopted Local Plan whilst also taking into consideration other important Council Strategies and projects, such as the emerging Economic Development Strategy, the Churchgate project, the Council Plan and the

Council's Sustainability Strategy. All these documents together contribute towards the Council's overall strategy for its town centres.

- Has been prepared following similar principles to a Supplementary Planning Document including reference to relevant policies and evidence and stakeholder engagement in its preparation and will be subject to Cabinet approval and public consultation.
  - Provides the overall direction of travel with clear policy guidance and priorities for each town centre to guide developers when submitting planning applications and other town centre improvements. It is based on a sound evidence base with clear connections to published policy and supplementary planning documents, including other Council and external organisations documents. These together inform the Strategy and contribute towards meeting the Council's Plan and the Local Plan goals and vision.
- 3.2 The Strategy covers a range of town centre topics including land use capacities and distributions, mixed-use needs, vacancy reoccupation, public realm quality, heritage preservation, sustainable transport, connectivity, active travel, and community facilities and community well-being.
- 3.3 The draft Strategy covers all four town centres of the district: Hitchin, Letchworth Garden City, Royston, and Baldock, with considerations and implications for the surrounding context of each centre. It sets out the Council's vision for the town Centres across four generic themes: land use and retail, built environment, transport access and movement and communities.
- 3.4 The Strategy is delivery and development focussed. **Part 1** sets out the purpose of the Strategy providing a comprehensive overview and summary of the Council's evidence base for development in and affecting town centres. This section will assist landowners, architects, planners, and stakeholders bringing forward development proposals in understanding the relevant context for North Herts' town centres.
- 3.5 In order to bridge the gap between current and emerging Local Plans and to provide further details and guidance to support compliance with relevant town centre policies in the existing Local Plan, **Part 2** sets out a series of Guidance Notes. These Guidance Notes provide supplementary information to inform planning applications for development proposals affecting town centres.
- 3.6 Each of North Herts' town centres have specific strengths and weaknesses, offering their own unique offer and **Part 3** provides a vision statement, summary of key priorities for each centre including development opportunities for larger parcels of land and how these could be taken forward through partnership working. An extract from Part 3 of the Strategy incorporating Baldock at section 3D is attached at **Appendix 1** and should be read alongside other parts of the Strategy.
- 3.7 **Part 4** identifies opportunities to support the vitality and viability of the town centres and proposes further actions together with several funding and delivery options that the Council could consider in delivering the ambitions set out within the draft Strategy. The effective delivery of the Strategy will require the Council to work closely with several partners and stakeholders. It is proposed to gauge the support of key identified partners

and stakeholders through the formal consultation process of the Strategy. This will be important in terms of delivering the identified priorities for each of the town centres and the recommended further actions. This approach will help inform a clearer, action-oriented delivery plan to be included in the final version that can be subject to regular review and update.

3.8 The **appendices** to the draft Strategy comprise:

- Appendix 1: providing a full reference list and hyperlinks to the comprehensive evidence base at Part 1.
- Appendix 2: outlines the Town Centre Policy Direction recommending alterations to the adopted Local Plan given the significant changes in retail floorspace demand, changes in use classes and other policy recommendations identified in the 2024 Retail and Town Centre Study. This has informed the guidance principles outlines in Part 2 of the draft Strategy, but its recommendations will be formally considered and taken forward through the Local Plan review.
- Appendix 3: includes further background evidence notes for each of the town centres to be read alongside Part 3.

3.9 The full draft Strategy can be viewed on the Council's Website at [Town centres strategy | North Herts Council](#)

3.10 Appendix 1 of this Information note is an extract from Part 3 of the Strategy incorporating Baldock at section 3D. **It is to be noted that all parts of the Strategy should be read alongside the respective town centre section outlined in Part 3.**

## 4.0 CONSULTATION

4.1 The consultation period will run from **3 December 2025 to 30 January 2026**. This will be through an online consultation platform available on the Council's website.

4.2 We encourage, members, local businesses, organisations and residents to submit their comments via the Council's consultation platform 'Placemaker' or visit our [website](#) for more information. Request for any further information regarding the draft Strategy or the consultation period should be made through the following email address: [towncentres@north-herts.go.uk](mailto:towncentres@north-herts.go.uk)

4.3 The draft Strategy will be a topic for discussion at all Town Community Forums through December affording wider public consultation in addition to consulting with key stakeholders, local businesses and members of the public registered on the Council's Local Plan data base.

4.4 A leaflet outlining the details of where to view the consultation documentation, together with a QR code link to the Council's website will be available as a handout at the Community Forum.

- 4.5 The consultation will be widely publicised on the Council's website and through various social media channels. Members will also have been informed through Members Information Service (MIS)

## **5.0 NEXT STEPS**

- 5.1 Following the public consultation, any comments received will inform the final version of the Strategy which would then be re-presented to Cabinet for approval and adoption at an appropriate time in early 2026. The final version of the Strategy will be desktop published with graphics, photos and designed as a readable and well-presented document.
- 5.2 If / once adopted, the Town Centres Strategy would be a material planning consideration for relevant planning applications and would supersede the Council's previous town centre strategies for Baldock, Hitchin, Letchworth Garden City and Royston prepared between 2004 and 2008.

## **6.0 APEPNDICES**

- 6.1 Appendix 1 - Extract from Part 3: Individual Town Centre Strategies - Section 3D Baldock (North Hertfordshire Town Centres Strategy draft for public consultation 21.10.2025)

## **CONTACT OFFICERS**

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## **APPENDIX 1**

- **Extract from Part 3: Individual Town Centre Strategies - Section 3D Baldock (North Hertfordshire Town Centres Strategy draft for public consultation 21.10.2025)**

# Part 3: Individual Town Centre Strategies

## *Introduction*

The following strategies for North Hertfordshire's individual towns focus on a concise series of key priorities for the town centres, that will work alongside the Guidance Notes set out in Part 2 to steer development and investment in and surrounding Hitchin, Letchworth, Royston and Baldock.

The priorities identified provide a focus and key actions for the Council, and work within the planning policy context of the Council's adopted Local Plan 2011-2031, ahead of the new Local Plan. Part 4 also sets out further District-wide initiatives for the Council to undertake alongside the key priorities identified. The Council may wish to revisit these sections and update the priorities in due course as actions are undertaken and new opportunities emerge.

The key priorities are informed by the SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) analysis for each town, based on the context and evidence summarised in Part 1 and Appendix 3 alongside consultations, ranging from residents to stakeholder workshops, undertaken during the Town Centre and Retail Study (2024), as well as subsequent meetings with Business Improvement Districts (BIDs), landowners and stakeholders.

Consideration of the suitability of planning obligations will be particularly relevant where proposals impact town centres, either through trade diversion or any increases in the number of visitors or users of existing or proposed town centre services. Part 4 sets out how the Council may also seek to explore alternative funding options including national government funding opportunities, private investment, or direct funding allocations from District Council or County Council budgets to deliver identified priorities.

The strategies' key priorities identify opportunities to support vitality and viability of the town centres.

This strategy has been developed with a planning and delivery focus, setting out next steps and actions to bring forward the key priorities. One area that this can be achieved is through financial contributions from developments that would affect the town centres in the form of planning obligations. It is noted that Section 106 sets out the tests for requesting planning obligations<sup>1</sup>, in accordance with Regulation 122 of The Community Infrastructure Levy Regulations 2010. It is not for strategies such as this, to specifically set out formulaic requests for such financial contributions, which would be subject to viability and costings via the Council or applicant.

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<sup>1</sup> Planning obligations assist in mitigating the impact of unacceptable development to make it acceptable in planning terms. Planning obligations may only constitute a reason for granting planning permission if they meet the tests that are necessary to make the development acceptable in planning terms. They must be:

- necessary to make the development acceptable in planning terms;
- directly related to the development; and
- fairly and reasonably related in scale and kind to the development.

## 3D: Baldock

Further information on Baldock town centre is found in Appendix 3D: Baldock Town Centre Evidence Notes.

### Identity

Baldock is the smallest town centre in North Herts and is located to the east of Letchworth. The town centre provides a mix of independent specialist retailers, food and beverage outlets and service businesses alongside a historic open market that operates every Wednesday.

Baldock town centre has a strong local identity with a thriving cafe and pub culture, which takes full advantage of the wide High Street and its refined old buildings. Baldock's strength lies with its specialist, independent retailers and service business sector which make a valuable contribution to the local economy and community. Combined, the built environment and town identity provides a pleasant social centre for residents and visitors to interact.

The town centre has retained its traditional market town character with the historic core containing fine architecture from the medieval and Georgian periods. St. Mary's Church, a Grade I Listed Building, lies in the northern part of the town centre and is surrounded by historic and more recent residential areas. The town centre is designated a Conservation Area and contains a mix of uses with town houses, inns and commercial buildings.

Since the completion of the A505 bypass, opportunities exist to promote a more vibrant and sustainable town centre, a social centre for residents as identified in the North Hertfordshire Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan (LCWIP). Moreover, the Tesco Extra – located on the periphery of the town centre – attracts customers from neighbouring villages and towns, as well as locals but would benefit from better links to the town centre.

Looking forward, significant residential development surrounding Baldock town centre will likely increase town centre footfall and demand; the Growing Baldock scheme is planned to provide an additional 3,000 homes.

### Vision

Baldock will maintain and maximise its town centre's strengths, namely, its historical market context, network of pedestrian paths, leafy green features, and local identity for cafe culture – by enhancing its attractive, safe, accessible, and lively town centre that incentivises investment for the local community and visitors to work, live and relax. Significant growth surrounding Baldock will provide a vibrant new resident and working population to visit and spend in the centre.

## **SWOT Analysis**

### *Summary of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats*

#### **Strengths**

1. Baldock is an attractive historic market town with period buildings and a pleasant environment. The centre has a wide and attractive tree lined High Street and a high-quality public realm.
2. The town centre is relatively compact, easy to navigate and generally accessible. The pavements are relatively wide and well maintained.
3. The shop vacancy rate is below the District and UK averages, and this has not increased significantly since 2015.
4. The centre has a strong presence of small independent outlets and primarily serves the day-to-day shopping and service needs of local residents.
5. There is adequate on-street parking provided within the centre and off-street parking at the Tesco Extra store and the Twitchell car park.
6. Baldock has a well-established evening economy with a wide selection of restaurants, pubs and bars for a centre of its size. The town centre has a higher-than-average proportion of food and beverage outlets.
7. Following the completion of the A505 Baldock bypass, the centre has benefited from investment and public realm improvements with recent updates including the replacement of street furniture along High Street and Whitehorse Street.
8. The town hosts a variety of regular community events that 'activate' the High Street ranging from Ecofest to Baldock Beer Festival, as well as the weekly outdoor market on Wednesdays.

#### **Weaknesses**

9. The large Tesco Extra on the edge of the town centre is a significant draw, but there is little evidence of a commensurate level of linked trips into the town centre. This is potentially exacerbated by the poor wayfinding and a lack of clear pedestrian links between Tesco Extra and the centre. As such, Baldock currently draws trade from a relatively small catchment area, similar to Royston, in contrast to Hitchin and Letchworth.
10. The public realm in the core Market Square is directly adjacent to parking bays, which may detract from the quality and experience of the public realm.
11. High volumes of traffic along Hitchin Street, Whitehorse Street, and High Street undermine the ambience of the shopping environment and inhibit pedestrian movements. Additionally, the pedestrian crossings of High Street, which is a busy road, are far apart (240m and 300m). Pedestrians are often observed walking on the road, especially near Simpson Drive.
12. The centre has no banks or building societies.



13. Shopping areas are fragmented with several breaks in the retail frontage by offices and dwellings located on the High Street.
14. Many of the shops are converted dwellings and some are also listed buildings, which can limit interest from potential occupiers that require a specific spatial format.
15. There are a limited range of retail shops, including national multiples. There are few comparison goods retailers within Baldock, well below the District and UK averages.
16. There is no co-ordinating body between local businesses and the District Council, and limited demand for a group (such as a BID) that would facilitate stakeholder engagement and local representation.

### **Opportunities**

17. Shop rental rates are lower in Baldock than the other town centres in North Herts and more affordable for small independent traders.
18. The Local Plan (2011 – 2031) allocates 3,360 homes in Baldock. This could significantly increase the resident population supporting new and existing shops and services within the town centre.
19. The BA10 employment land allocation (19.6ha) could increase spending in the town. This will depend in part on improving cycling and walking connectivity between the industrial/employment land and the town centre.
20. The Growing Baldock development will provide a greater critical mass of businesses and commercial activity within the town, attracting a wider variety of retail and leisure operators.
21. If more of the customers drawn to the Tesco Extra, some of whom are from outside the district, could be attracted to other shops and services in the town centre, that would boost the vitality and viability of the town centre. This depends in part on improving pedestrian routes and signage through the memorial gardens from Tesco to the High Street.
22. The transport strategy for Growing Baldock redirects through traffic away from the centre to A505/A1(M)/Letchworth Gate. This provides an opportunity to address east-to-west traffic on Hitchin Road/Whitehorse Road that detract from the centre, as well as to provide an additional pedestrian crossing on High Street (as recommended by the LCWIP).
23. Baldock town centre is dominated by independent traders, which could benefit from planning policy support for growth and opportunities for diversification through potential amalgamation, subdivision and investment in existing units.

### **Threats**

24. Since 2015, the number of comparison goods shops has decreased significantly. The continuation of this trend could undermine the centre's attraction as a shopping, food and beverage destination.
25. Whilst Growing Baldock will increase the resident population within the town's catchment, the edge of centre Tesco Extra store provides an extensive range of food and

non-food goods, which may directly attract the new spending, reducing the potential spending available to new and existing facilities in the town centre.

26. The increase in spending and activity generated by the Growing Baldock development may be lost by the limited opportunities/vacant units for existing businesses to expand or relocate within the town centre.
27. Failure to appropriately manage, monitor and influence the Growing Baldock development may result in an adverse impact on the town centre in terms of loss of vitality or footfall, increased traffic etc. if the emerging residents and workers are drawn to alternative destinations.

## **Key Priorities – Baldock Town Centre**

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Priority areas</b>	<b>Actions / Planning considerations</b>	<b>Responsibility</b>
<b>A</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Land use and retail</li> <li>• Built environment</li> </ul>	Growth and evolution of independent and speciality operators, protecting their contribution to Baldock's character	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Through the Council's <b><i>development management role</i></b> in the planning system, the Council will:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– recognise the benefits of the viability of existing operators that contribute to the vitality and viability of the centre through amalgamation and subdivision of units, and investment in existing town centre facilities as a material benefit to be weighed against limited loss of floorspace or less than substantial harm to heritage assets in the determination of planning applications.</li> <li>– give positive weight to new uses and formats (including non-main town centre uses) where it can be demonstrated that they would contribute to the character of the street (to be weighed against any loss of main town centre uses and floorspace).</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	NHDC (as Local Planning Authority (LPA) development management)  Existing and future operators  Landowners  Developers
<b>B</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Built environment</li> <li>• Transport, access and movement</li> </ul>	Connectivity and wayfinding as the wider centre grows	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop and deliver a joint public realm, connectivity and wayfinding strategy taking forward the recommendations of the Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan (LCWIP). For Baldock:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Growing Baldock residential-led development should support new residents access to the town centre via cycling</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	NHDC  HCC  Future development partners

		<p>and pedestrian routes, car, and public transport in accordance with the approved masterplan. This will include the redesign of Station Road / Icknield Way junction and additional cycle routes, and overall improvements to Whitehorse Street, amongst others;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– links to new employment floorspace at Local Plan Allocation Policy BA10 including development of a new access from Royston Road alongside additional signage and access routes to draw workers into the town centre; and</li> <li>– improvements to pedestrian links between Tesco Extra and Baldock Town Centre to incentivise and support linked trips.</li> </ul>	
<p>C</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Land use and retail</li> <li>• Community</li> </ul>	<p>Monitoring of town centre service provision and infrastructure</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Council will request funding from development such as Growing Baldock to support the Council’s monitoring of the mix of uses and services within and surrounding Baldock Town Centre including main town centre uses, community administrative and medical facilities in order to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– identify and address any deficiencies through the loss of existing services and/or capacity as a direct result of the planned increases in residential population, visitors and employees; and</li> <li>– build-up an evidence base to support intervention through additional allocations,</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<p>NHDC</p> <p>Future development partners</p>

		funding bids, or marketing initiatives.	
D <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Land use and retail</li> </ul>	Capture benefits of planned growth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Through the Council's <b><i>development management role</i></b> in the planning system, the Council will require developments in and surrounding the town centre, such as Growing Baldock to enter into planning obligations for financial contributions to deliver the actions and town centre priorities (as well as those within the approved masterplan, LCWIP amongst others) to mitigate the impact of otherwise unacceptable developments to make them acceptable in planning terms.</li> </ul>	NHDC (as Local Planning Authority (LPA) development management)  Future development partners