

Information Report for Noting and Discussion by the Community Forum

HITCHIN COMMUNITY FORUM 9 DECEMBER 2025
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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 19th 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 Hitchin at section 3A 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 Hitchin at section 3A. **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

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 3A Hitchin (North Hertfordshire Town Centres Strategy draft for public consultation 21.10.2025)

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APPENDIX 1

Extract from Part 3: Individual Town Centre Strategies - Section 3A Hitchin (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 obligations¹, 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.

¹ 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.

3A: Hitchin

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

Identity

Hitchin's origins have been traced back to pre-Roman times, aligned with the River Hiz as an important crossing point. Over time, Hitchin developed as a market town, and thus, the layout of the town centre has unfolded with temporary market stalls becoming permanent. In the 19th century, with the arrival of the railway, the previously unchanged street plan rapidly expanded to meet the new demands of the town's growth.

Now, the historic layout of the town centre is linear in structure stretching for over 800 metres north- south along Bancroft and the High Street. Narrow streets are clustered around Market Place adjoining to St. Mary's Church (dating back to the 14th century) and are adjacent to the Churchgate Shopping Centre developed in the 1970s.

There is a mix of typologies and uses in Hitchin town centre; a conservation area, listed buildings and late twentieth century developments, as well as a mix of residential, commercial shopping, recreation, and restaurants or cafe uses. The town centre has evolved over time and will continue to do so, but any changes should respect the overall historic character of Hitchin.

Hitchin is the main shopping and commercial centre in North Hertfordshire, predominantly serving the western half of the District. The centre has the strongest range and choice of comparison and convenience goods retail and services uses, including a wide range of national multiple operators.

Visitors are drawn to Hitchin by the market town's attractive historic character, as well as the variety of restaurants and cafes. The town also serves as a popular filming location, further tying the aesthetics and historic character of the town to its identity. Nonetheless, the River Hiz and the area surrounding St. Mary's Church are underutilised assets, with planned development of the Churchgate Regeneration Zone providing a significantly opportunity to secure the long-term viability of the centre.

Vision

Hitchin will maintain and support the quality of its intrinsic historic market town character to develop an attractive, mixed-use, safe, accessible, vibrant and lively town centre for the local community and visitors to shop, work and live in. Hitchin will have strong and sustainable connections to key destinations, such as the railway station, Hitchin Lavender Fields, and nearby towns and villages. Town centre assets will be optimised, such as the River Hiz, St. Mary's Church, museums and its historic market. For the Churchgate Regeneration Zone and any other new development, Hitchin will take advantage of the opportunity to bring people into the town centre, provide quality public spaces, contribute to the cultural heritage and support the retail core.

SWOT Analysis

Summary of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats

Strengths

1. Hitchin is the main shopping destination in the district, providing a good range and choice of convenience and comparison shops. It has a reasonable selection of national multiple retailers, and it has the strongest range and choice of comparison and convenience retail, and services uses in the district.
2. Large food stores are available which cater for main and bulk food shopping needs.
3. The environmental quality of the centre is good, reflecting its historic character and the centre's attractive mix of period buildings and a varied street scene, including the Market Place.
4. The town centre provides a range of service facilities including banks and building societies.
5. The evening economy is relatively strong with many restaurants, pubs and bars.
6. The vacancy rate is much lower than the national average - suggesting demand for premises is relatively good.
7. Most areas of the centre are well maintained, and adequate street furniture is provided.
8. The centre has a good range of small specialist independent retailers.
9. The centre has a good bus service, with many bus routes serving the centre.
10. Buildings are generally attractive and in a reasonable to good condition.
11. The household survey results suggest Hitchin has higher levels of customer satisfaction than dissatisfaction.
12. Hitchin features a popular market in the town centre, operating on Tuesdays, Fridays and Saturdays.

Weaknesses

13. The choice of retailers is not comparable with some larger centres, which encourages expenditure leakage to centres with a better range of facilities, such as Cambridge, Luton and Stevenage.
14. The linear form of the centre does not provide a natural circuit for shoppers, and pedestrian flows within peripheral areas are low, i.e. Bridge Street and the top end of Bancroft.
15. Some non-pedestrianised streets have narrow pavements and can be congested, and difficult for those with mobility difficulties at peak times, such as Sun Street and Bucklersbury.
16. The historic character of the town centre, particularly in terms of the Conservation Area designation and listed buildings could constrain potential redevelopment

opportunities. It could restrict the growth of the centre and deter new operators, due to the lack of availability of spaces needed for larger format stores.

17. The Churchgate Shopping Centre and the market area between St Mary's Church and the Churchgate Centre detract from the overall attractiveness of the town centre.
18. Surface car parking around St Mary's Church is visually dominant and detracts from the advantages of the proximity to the river frontage and historic core.
19. The train station is not within a reasonable walking distance of the town centre.
20. Lack of legibility from the town centre to peripheral car parks (e.g. Woodside and Lairage) and key facilities within and on the edge of the town centre (e.g. swimming pool, schools, museums, Priory Park and the rail station).

Opportunities

21. Hitchin has a reasonably affluent population, but a high proportion of the expenditure generated leaks from the area. Population and expenditure are expected to grow in the future. If Hitchin can maintain its current share of market expenditure there is potential to improve and expand retail, leisure and service uses.
22. There remain several opportunity sites within the town centre, which could accommodate new retail/leisure uses, which would help to retain more expenditure and customers in the area.
23. Improved linkages along the River Hiz could provide better access and natural circuit for pedestrians between Bridge Street, the Churchgate Centre, the Portmill Lane car parks and Hermitage Road.
24. Improved pedestrian, cycling and bus linkages to the railway station would improve overall levels of customer accessibility to the town centre.
25. Enhancement of the Churchgate Centre and market area would significantly improve the attraction and ambience of the town centre as a retail and leisure destination.
26. The centre is already popular as a restaurant and café destination, providing a key opportunity (particularly within or associated with any development of the Churchgate Regeneration Zone) to develop a complementary cultural strategy.
27. A holistic approach to transport and parking may provide opportunities for reconfiguration of provision, whilst maintaining or increasing footfall and vitality.

Threats

28. The number of vacant shop units has increased significantly in recent years. The continuation of this trend could undermine Hitchin's role as a higher order shopping destination in the retail hierarchy.
29. The continued polarisation of national multiples in larger centres and/or the business failure of more national multiples could lead to the closure of outlets. The continued rationalisation and restructuring of national multiples could lead to the closure of outlets. Multiple operators could seek to focus on (sub-)regional centres such as Stevenage, Cambridge and Luton rather than Hitchin.

30. Transport impacts of growth within and around Hitchin, including Luton Airport, could exacerbate congestion. This could deter town centre visits, given the proximity and capacity of through routes.

Key Priorities – Hitchin Town Centre

Theme	Priority area	Actions / Planning considerations	Responsibility
<p>A</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Land use and retail • Built environment • Transport, access and movement 	Churchgate Regeneration Zone	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Through the Council's <i>development management role</i> in the planning system, the Council will assess proposals associated with the Churchgate Regeneration Zone (Local Plan Allocation HT11) as a Significant Development in accordance with Local Plan Policy SP9 and the Guidance Notes identified in Part 2. This would require a strategic masterplan demonstrating how the development could: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – provide a mix of flexible and adaptable commercial units that would enable future reoccupation by a range of town centre uses, as well a mix of accommodation to increase the town centre's resident population; – strategically target a mix of retail, food and beverage, and leisure operators, including recognition and assessment of the impact of any potential overlap of catchments for leisure uses; – activate and open up the River Hiz for user recreation; – improve pedestrian and active travel permeability through the site and surrounding area such as introducing street patterns to increase accessibility and linkages across the centre; – support the ongoing vitality of the town centre by increasing potential for visitors and footfall including the promotion of active travel to the centre. – deliver a holistic parking strategy; any proposals should be 	<p>NHDC as Local Planning Authority (LPA) development management)</p> <p>Future development partners</p>

		<p>supported by a parking survey to demonstrate the current use of existing car parks in and around the town centre and plan for appropriate levels of parking, integrating with an emerging transport strategy for Hitchin;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - ensure any scheme facilitates and does not prejudice further sites being brought forward in the future; and - provide accessible links to, and enhanced utilities infrastructure for Hitchin Market, including electrical connections and water supply. 	
<p>B</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Built environment • Transport, access and movement 	<p>Public realm, connectivity and wayfinding</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop and deliver a joint public realm, connectivity and wayfinding strategy and delivery plan for Hitchin, taking forward the recommendations of the Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan. For Hitchin: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Create a public realm and wayfinding strategy in collaboration with the BID, Churchgate Regeneration Zone development partners and other stakeholders, including viability and costings, to identify key opportunities for investment from street furniture, lighting and planters, as well as the provision of public realm alongside the River Hiz. - Identify funding sources, future joint bidding opportunities, and requests for planning obligations for relevant developments for financial contributions to wayfinding, pedestrian routes, and public realm investments, particularly between the town centre, new public realm along 	<p>NHDC HCC Visit Hitchin Business Improvement District (BID) Future development partners</p>

		<p>the River Hiz, and the surrounding open space and gardens.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Improve transport links and signage from the town centre to key destinations such as the Hitchin Lavender Fields, the theatre and event space at The Dell, and other leisure destinations outside the town centre. 	
<p>C</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Land use and retail • Community 	Cultural economy strategy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Through the Council's <i>development management role</i> in the planning system, the Council will recognise the benefits of innovative commercial uses that contribute to the nighttime economy, particularly options for young people, as a positive material consideration when supported through evidence of viability, long-term vacancies, preventing breaks in active frontages, resolving amenity issues (e.g.: noise and smells), impact on the nature and character of the retail frontages • Building on the economic opportunities from the Churchgate Regeneration Zone, the Council and development partners for Churchgate will engage with key stakeholders to identify further commercial and cultural opportunities including investing in The Dell as an open-air theatre and to identify possible future funding sources. 	<p>NHDC</p> <p>Visit Hitchin Business Improvement District (BID)</p>
<p>D</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transport, access and movement 	Hitchin as a key sustainable transport hub	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In collaboration with HCC, the BID and other stakeholders, the Council will develop a transport strategy for Hitchin that aims to reduce car dependency in the district and promote sustainable modes of travel into and within the town, including to: 	<p>NHDC</p> <p>HCC</p> <p>Visit Hitchin Business Improvement District (BID)</p>

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - better integrate rail and bus services to facilitate travel by public transport within the district and to major destinations beyond, including Stevenage, Luton (including the airport), Biggleswade and Bedford; - consider opportunities for providing a bus station in the town centre to increase the convenience and comfort for people interchanging between services; - improve the efficiency of bus routing in the town centre by adding a bus turnaround; - deliver schemes in the Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan; - consider redirecting through-traffic and more effectively regulate traffic flows within the town to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ minimise congestion that impacts bus journey times and reliability; ▪ enable the reallocation of road space for safer walking and cycling, particularly between the town centre and railway station; ▪ reduce the severance and other inhibitory effects of the A505 on people walking and cycling into and in the town; - improve air quality for residents and visitors. 	<p>Future development partners</p>
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