

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

<b>LETCWORTH COMMUNITY FORUM</b> <b>17 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 Letchworth Garden City at section 3B 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 Letchworth Garden City at section 3B. **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 3B Letchworth Garden City (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 3B Letchworth Garden City (North Hertfordshire Town Centres Strategy draft for public consultation 19.11.2025)**

# 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.

## 3B: Letchworth Garden City

Further information on Letchworth Garden City town centre is found in Appendix 3B: Letchworth Garden City Town Centre Evidence Notes.

### Identity

Letchworth Garden City (Letchworth) is a unique town centre as a result of its origins as an intensively planned town – the world’s first Garden City – founded in the early twentieth century. By following masterplan principles to balance high quality residential homes with nature pursuits, local employment and accessible transport, the areas of open space, commercial land uses and housing are integrated and convenient to one another. Detailed buildings contribute to the town centre’s unique flair, as the concept of the Garden City incited innovation and competitive design.

The Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation owns a large proportion of the town centre land and assets, and are involved in the visioning, development and investments of the town’s future. Such a large volume of ownership to a single organisation is unique compared to the other town centres and stimulates different commercial decisions and town-centre-wide interventions. This single ownership also provides a key point of difference, providing opportunities for broader strategic alignment.

Letchworth is the only town centre with a railway station directly within its boundary and allows visitors to immediately arrive to the centre. The town centre, although hosting wide, accessible and pleasant footpaths, is spread without a distinct core. There is a variety of uses throughout the town centre, shops, residential flats, restaurants, cafes, with a range of budget priced comparison retail. Letchworth is positioned as an important town centre demonstrating Garden City principles, opportunities for recreation and leisure, and a balanced offer.

More recently, Letchworth is part of Hertfordshire County Council’s Sustainable Travel Town programme, which aims to bring forward a series of measures to reshape the local highways network and achieve a significant switch to walking, cycling and public transport.

### Vision

Letchworth will maintain and develop the town centre for civic and social life, connected by accessible public transport networks through leadership, sense of place, and enterprise. Letchworth will: support the future of arts and heritage; will be a great place to live, visit and shop in; will increase residents life chances; and will be a protagonist in raising investment for the local economy; uphold and promote Garden City principles, and therefore its unique identity, as the first of its kind.

## **SWOT Analysis**

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

#### **Strengths**

1. Letchworth is a compact well-defined centre with a natural circuit for shoppers. The centre has a relatively pleasant shopping environment.
2. The large Morrisons food store is an important anchor store catering for main and top-up food shopping.
3. Letchworth has retained a reasonable range of comparison goods shops, although this has declined and there is a lower representation of comparison retailers than Hitchin.
4. The Arcade, The Wynd and other secondary areas provide a good range of interesting specialist retailers.
5. The centre is easily accessible by a range of modes of transport, with a railway station located within the town centre. Car access is also convenient with several centrally located car parks.
6. Movement around the centre on foot is supported by wide pavements and pedestrianised areas, and Letchworth is one of the County Council's Sustainable Travel Towns.
7. The centre is attractively landscaped giving the centre a sense of spaciousness. Environmental improvements have enhanced the overall attractiveness of the centre.
8. Much of the town centre is consolidated under the sole ownership of the Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation, which provides a simpler single point of contact and greater opportunities for longer-term strategies.

#### **Weaknesses**

9. The proportion of vacant units is significantly above the national average, with vacancies spread across the centre, which suggest the supply of units is currently greater than operator demand.
10. The centre has a lower number of national multiples when compared with Hitchin and other larger centres in the sub-region such as Cambridge and Welwyn.
11. Like many centres of a similar size, Letchworth has lost most of its banks and building societies.
12. Leakage of higher value comparison spend to other centres within and beyond District

#### **Opportunities**

13. Letchworth has a reasonably large and affluent population, which presents an opportunity to claw-back leakage from this catchment by improving its current offer.
14. The vacant premises across the centre could provide an opportunity to consolidate retail, redevelop and accommodate new facilities.



15. The new Emil Dale Academy school recently opened, providing another source of footfall within the centre and an opportunity to cater to the new student population.
16. The Broadway Cinema helps to boost the evening economy, but this facility could be improved and the number of visitors optimised.
17. There remains a number of opportunity sites within the town centre, including the potential regeneration of Garden Square Shopping Centre, which could accommodate new retail/leisure uses that could help to retain more expenditure and customers in the area.
18. There are a number of open and green spaces in close proximity to the town centre that would provide a draw to the centre (if supported by necessary routes and linkages) in keeping with the town's Garden City principles.

### **Threats**

19. 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 Letchworth.
20. Prominent town centre units are vacant with a lack of interest from suitable (main town centre uses) occupiers, held back by various heritage, conservation and planning constraints, with a risk of long term or repeat vacancies.
21. The District Council's offices are located adjacent to the centre, providing a steady stream of workers in the centre each day. In the long-term, potential Local Government Reorganisation could impact the need for this office space.

## **Key Priorities – Letchworth Garden City Town Centre**

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Priority area</b>	<b>Actions / Planning considerations</b>	<b>Responsibility</b>
<p>A</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Land use and retail</li> <li>• Built environment</li> </ul>	<p>Town centre development opportunities and allocations (Garden Square Shopping Centre and Arena Parade)</p>	<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 assess proposals associated with the development of Garden Square and Arena Parade (Local Plan Allocation LG21) as a Significant Development in accordance with Local Plan Policy SP9 and the Guidance Notes identified in Part 2. This would require the preparation of a strategic masterplan demonstrating how the developments could: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– provide a mix of flexible and adaptable 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;</li> <li>– 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;</li> <li>– demonstrate consideration of the inclusion of community facilities, including the potential for a primary care/health hub;</li> <li>– improve pedestrian and active travel permeability through the site and surrounding area, such as introducing street patterns to increase legibility and linkages across the centre;</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<p>NHDC (as Local Planning Authority (LPA) development management)</p> <p>Future development partners</p>

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– support the ongoing vitality of the town centre by increasing potential for visitors and footfall, including the promotion of active travel to the centre; and</li> <li>– ensure any scheme facilitates and does not prejudice further sites being brought forward in the future.</li> </ul>	
<p>B</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Land use and retail</li> </ul>	Repurposing of vacant units	<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 seek to address higher levels of vacancy by giving positive weight to the repurposing of vacant units by uses that contribute to the vitality and viability of the centre as a material benefit to be weighed against limited loss of floorspace or limited harm to heritage assets in the determination of planning applications.</li> </ul>	<p>NHDC (as Local Planning Authority (LPA) development management)</p> <p>Landowners</p> <p>Future development partners</p> <p>Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation</p>
<p>C</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Land use and retail</li> <li>• Community</li> </ul>	The Wynd	<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 give positive weight to new uses and formats (including non-main town centre uses) in the Wynd 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>	<p>NHDC (as Local Planning Authority (LPA) development management)</p>
<p>D</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Land use and retail</li> </ul>	Evening economy	<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 give positive weight to</li> </ul>	<p>NHDC (as Local Planning Authority (LPA))</p>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Community</li> </ul>		<p>innovative commercial uses that contribute to the nighttime economy, particularly options for young people, when supported by evidence of viability, long-term vacancies, preventing breaks in active frontages, resolving historic amenity issues (e.g. noise, unpleasant odours, or anti-social behaviour), and the impact on the nature and character of the retail frontages.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Through the Council's <b>development management role</b> in the planning system, the Council will give positive weight to planning applications for amendments to operating hours to support an evening economy where supported by evidence that it will not lead to unacceptable adverse amenity issues.</li> <li>• Collaborate with the Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation, alongside the BID, to build on the Letchworth Culture Strategy 'Create the Future' to incorporate the evening economy. This will include identifying funding sources and future joint bidding opportunities to support potential pilot schemes and the roll-out of extended operating hours as part of a wider evening economy strategy.</li> </ul>	<p>development management)</p> <p>Love Letchworth Business Improvement District (BID)</p> <p>Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation</p>
<p>E</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Transport, access and movement</li> </ul>	<p>Connectivity and links to Broadway Gardens and Howard Park</p>	<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 Letchworth: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Taking account of the findings and recommendations of the Places &amp; People 'Town Centre Access Review' and</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<p>NHDC</p> <p>HCC</p> <p>Love Letchworth Business Improvement District (BID)</p> <p>Letchworth Garden City</p>

		<p>‘Placemaking Plan’ to develop viability and costings to deliver key priorities identified, including orientation and signage improvements at Letchworth Station and Broadway Gardens.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Progress the recommendations of the LCWIP for the development of a segregated carriageway facility for cyclists around Broadway Gardens, on Bridge Road, Station Place and Station Road.</li> <li>– Identify funding sources, future joint bidding opportunities, and requests for planning obligations for relevant developments for financial contributions to wayfinding, pedestrian and cycling routes and public realm investments between the town centre and the surrounding open space and gardens.</li> </ul>	Heritage Foundation
<p>F</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Transport, access and movement</li> </ul>	Station forecourt	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In collaboration with HCC, engage with Network Rail to progress the redevelopment of the Station forecourt as a key gateway into Letchworth, building on existing design and funding for the redevelopment of existing areas of parking and vegetation to improve access and visual links into the centre.</li> </ul>	<p>HCC</p> <p>NHDC</p> <p>Network Rail</p> <p>Letchworth</p> <p>Garden City</p> <p>Heritsge Foundation</p>