

## Information Report for Noting by Community Forum

<b>SOUTHERN RURAL COMMUNITY FORUM</b> <b>27 NOVEMBER 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.
- 2.3 The Draft Strategy can be viewed on the Council’s Website - See link to Cabinet Meeting Agenda No.9  
[Agenda for Cabinet on Wednesday, 19th November, 2025, 7.30 pm | North Herts Council](#)

#### 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.
- 3.5 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.

3.6 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.

## 4.0 CONSULTATION

4.1 It is proposed to have an extended consultation period over December and January given the Christmas period. This will be through an online consultation platform available on the Council's website. The consultation will be more widely publicised on the Council's website and through various social media channels once the dates have been confirmed and the platform has gone live. Members will also be informed through Members Information Service (MIS)

4.2 The draft Strategy will be a topic for discussion at the Town Forums through December should any local councillors or members of the public from southern rural wish to attend: The dates of these Forums are as follows:

- Baldock Community Forum – 8<sup>th</sup> December 7.30pm at Baldock Library
- Hitchin Community Forum – 9<sup>th</sup> December, 7pm at Hitchin Town Hall
- Royston Community Forum – 10<sup>th</sup> December 7.30pm at Hardwicke Hall, Town Hall
- Letchworth Community Forum – 17<sup>th</sup> December 7.30pm at Letchworth Library

4.3 This programme will afford wider public engagement through the above Community Forums in December during the consultation period, in addition to consulting with key stakeholders, local businesses and members of the public registered on the Council's Local Plan data base.

## 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.

## **CONTACT OFFICERS**

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