

CABINET

20 January 2026

PART 1 – PUBLIC DOCUMENT

TITLE OF REPORT: STRATEGIC PLANNING MATTERS

REPORT OF: RACHAEL ROONEY, INTERIM STRATEGIC PLANNING MANAGER: PLACE

EXECUTIVE MEMBER: CLLR DONNA WRIGHT, EXECUTIVE MEMBER FOR PLACE

COUNCIL PRIORITY: THRIVING COMMUNITIES / ACCESSIBLE SERVICES / RESPONSIBLE GROWTH / SUSTAINABILITY

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1.1 This report identifies the latest position on key planning and transport issues affecting the Council.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

2.1. That the report on strategic planning matters and appendices be noted.

3. REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

3.1. To keep Cabinet informed of recent developments on strategic planning matters.

4. ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS CONSIDERED

4.1. None

5. CONSULTATION WITH RELEVANT MEMBERS AND EXTERNAL ORGANISATIONS

5.1. The Executive Member has been briefed on the relevant matters in this report. Where appropriate these have also been reported to the Council's internal, informal Strategic Planning Project Board. This includes cross-party representation from all political groups. The Project Board is chaired by the Executive Member for Place.

6. FORWARD PLAN

6.1. This report does not contain a recommendation on a key Executive decision and has therefore not been referred to in the Forward Plan.

7. BACKGROUND

- 7.1. Members will be aware of, and familiar with, many of the issues surrounding strategic planning matters. This report is intended to provide Members with the current positions on the following key matters where there has been substantive change since the report in September 2025.

8. RELEVANT CONSIDERATIONS

Government Changes

- 8.1. On 18 November 2025, the government launched a major consultation on [reforming the statutory consultee system](#). The reforms aim to:
- reduce planning delays;
 - streamline the application process; and
 - refocus expert bodies on high-impact projects.
- 8.2. Key proposals include the removal of statutory status from Sport England, The Gardens Trust, and the Theatres Trust; and a refined scope and thresholds for 7 key national consultees (Environment Agency, Natural England, Historic England, National Highways, Health and Safety Executive, Mining Remediation Authority, and Active Travel England) to narrow their involvement. It also proposes a new performance framework as well as new funding proposals – the introduction of a planning fee surcharge and expanding the ability of bodies involved in Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects to recovery of costs from developers.
- 8.3. On 27 November 2025, the Government released new guidance on how councils should prepare Local Plans. This included a [Ministerial Statement](#), supporting information on the [Create or update a local plan](#) page on the MHCLG website, and a [regulations explainer](#). Together, these documents outline the new stages and requirements of the plan-making system. It is anticipated that secondary legislation to enact the new system will be laid before Parliament in early January 2026; with the system coming into effect six weeks later, likely at the beginning of March 2026.
- 8.4. Key changes include local plans being required to be prepared within a 30 month timeframe, with a get ready period of at least 4 months; new Gateways stages with target support from PINs (Planning Inspectorate) assessors to ensure authorities are meeting requirements at each stage before progressing to the next stage; more emphasis on digitalisation of local plans, the importance of a vision for an area and the use of templates to help standardised processes to ensure consistency across the country. The implications for the review of the Local Plan are set out in a separate report.
- 8.5. Prior to the publication of this guidance, officers had co-ordinated a joint letter to the Secretary of State from five local authorities in Hertfordshire and Bedfordshire. The letter outlined the effects continued delays were having upon plan-making and decision-making. This letter and the Secretary of State's response are attached at Appendices A and B.

- 8.6. On 16 December 2025, the Government consulted on a revised [National Planning Policy Framework \(NPPF\)](#). Consultation closes on 20 March 2026 with a final version expected summer 2026. The new NPPF contains a proposed suite of National Development Management Policies (NDMPs). Authorities have been advised that they must have regard to the draft NDMPs when preparing new Local Plans.
- 8.7. Key changes include:
- Distinct sections for plan-making and decision-taking
 - Requirements around new spatial development strategies – content, how they will be examined, how they fit into the wider system
 - Sets expectations on the 30 month timetable for Local Plans and stronger emphasis on cross -boundary cooperation
 - New National Development Management Policies – these are not statutory but hold a stronger national weight, especially where local development plans conflict with them (unless those plans are examined under the new system. Although the intention is still that local plans should not duplicate, substantively restate or modify them in local plans.
 - Reaffirmation of the standard method for housing targets and a more explicit expectation of meeting strategic housing requirements
 - Refinements of a standardised set of inputs for viability assessments
 - Expanded presumption in favour of sustainable development:
 - The presumption would apply to all development proposals within settlements, unless the "harms would substantially outweigh the benefits"
 - Outside settlements, the presumption would apply to a list of development types. These would include the familiar (failure to demonstrate a five-year housing land supply or scores of less than 75% on the latest Housing Delivery Test) and the new (housing and mixed-use sites within reasonable walking distance of railway stations, which are additionally subject to minimum density expectations)
 - Mandatory requirements for swift bricks and protection for chalk streams
 - Measures to support SME developers – a new medium category for 10-49 homes on sites of up to 2.5 hectares – as well as potential exemptions to the Building Safety Levy for SME developers.
 - Changes to the approach to heritage assets - harm is now split into 3 categories (harm, substantial harm, total loss)
 - Biodiversity Net Gain – sites under 0.2ha will be exempt from BNG. This is a lower threshold than the 0.5 ha originally consulted upon. The Government have also indicated they will consult shortly on an "additional targeted exemption for residential brownfield development (on site sizes ranging up to 2.5ha).

- 8.8. Officers will consider a formal response to the consultation with the Executive Member for Place. Any response will be reported to a future meeting of Cabinet.
- 8.9. Further Government announcements on a national scheme of delegation, which would prescribe which matters could be considered by planning committees, and fee-setting are expected in early 2026.

Proposed Expansion of Luton Airport

- 8.10. As previously reported, the Council received a copy of the Notice of the decision by the Secretary of State for Transport on 3 April 2025 to approve Luton Rising's Development Consent Order (DCO) application for the expansion of London Luton Airport to increase passenger numbers from the currently consented 19mpa to 32mpa by 2040s following completion of a lengthy Examination on 10 February 2024. This decision was despite National Planning Inspectors recommending refusal against the proposed development due to its significant environmental harms. The decision was subject to a 6-week High Court Judicial Review Challenge.
- 8.11. The Luton And District Association for the Control of Aircraft Noise (LADACAN) initiated legal proceedings to challenge the Transport SoS (Secretary of State) decision quashed. A hearing took place November 2025 with the High Court ruling in favour of the SoS's (Secretary of State) decision to permit the Luton Rising's DCO application for the expansion of London Luton Airport.
- 8.12. At the time of writing this update, LADACAN are considering a further legal appeal. Any update will be verbally reported at the Cabinet meeting. The full judgement is available to view at:

<https://www.bailii.org/ew/cases/EWHC/Admin/2025/3206.html>

- 8.13. Officers will continue to monitor the legal proceedings and work together with the Hertfordshire Host authorities and will take further advice on these and our role / powers once the legal proceedings are resolved.

Strategic Sites

- 8.14. The Strategic Planning Project Board continues to meet regularly. The status of work on the six, largest Strategic Sites in the Local Plan is summarised below:

Policy SP14: North of Baldock	<p>The masterplan for this site was adopted as a material consideration for any future planning applications by Full Council in June 2025.</p> <p>An outline application was submitted in October 2025 (application reference 25/02571/OP).</p>
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SP15: North of Letchworth	<p>The masterplan for this site was adopted as a material consideration for any future planning applications by Full Council in July 2024.</p> <p>The applicant is currently in the process of procuring a development partner.</p>
SP16: North of Stevenage	<p>The masterplan for this site was adopted as a material consideration for any future planning applications by Full Council in November 2024.</p> <p>Members resolved to approve the outline planning application (23/01935/OP) in March 2025 subject to completion of the s106 agreement. This legal agreement is being prepared</p> <p>A draft design code is being prepared for the site.</p>
SP17: Highover Farm, Hitchin	<p>Outline planning permission for this site was granted in November 2024 on completion of the s106 legal agreement following a resolution to grant permission by the Planning Committee in October 2023.</p> <p>Reserved matters for infrastructure have been approved following committee resolution in October 2025 alongside a number of conditions including a Design Code for the site.</p> <p>The application for the first phases of new homes was received in November 2025 (25/02794/RM).</p> <p>Development expected to commence in early 2026.</p>
SP18: North-east of Great Ashby	<p>The masterplan for this site was adopted as a material consideration for any future planning applications by Full Council in November 2024.</p> <p>An outline application is submitted awaiting validation (25/03080/HYA).</p>
SP19: East of Luton	<p>The masterplan for this site was adopted as a material consideration for any future planning applications by Full Council in January 2025.</p> <p>Amendments to the two, separate outline planning applications were submitted November 2025 and are under consideration (Council application references 17/00830/1 and 16/02014/1). There are separate applications for the main access points into the sites (22/02904/FP, 22/02905/FP)</p>

- 8.15. Other masterplans for significant sites are being progressed through a variety of PPAs, pre-application discussions and current planning applications lodged with the Council ([Masterplans in current applications | North Herts Council \(north-herts.gov.uk\)](https://north-herts.gov.uk/masterplans-in-current-applications)).

North Herts Local Plan

- 8.16. An update on the Local Plan review, and the impact of the Government reforms outlined above, is subject to a separate report to this meeting. Ongoing updates will be provided through future Strategic Planning Matters reports.

Other Local Authorities' Local Plans

- 8.17. We are neighboured by eight other Local Authorities who are all at differing stages of their Local Plans. We maintain regular contact with regard to the status of their Local Plans and input to consultations as appropriate. Details of the most recent positions of our neighbours is set out below.
- 8.18. The Government reforms outlined above and in the Local Plan report will abolish the current, statutory Duty to Co-operate. This is / was a formal legal test applied to the preparation of local plans. However, there will still be a strong expectation that authorities will continue to collaborate on strategic issues and Inspectors will still consider this as plans are examined.

St. Albans City and District Council

- 8.19. Examination of the St Albans Local Plan – Stage 1 sessions were held in April / May 2025 with Stage 2 hearing held Oct / Nov 25. North Herts did not appear at the hearing sessions. More details can be found on [St Albans City and District Council's website](https://www.stalbans.gov.uk/council-and-government/local-plan).

Uttlesford District Council

- 8.20. Examination of the Uttlesford Local Plan took place in June 2025. The Inspector published a post-hearing note in July 25 which requested the Council undertake some amendments. Consultation on these amendments closed on 27 October 2025. The Council is currently awaiting the inspector's report. It is expected that the Local Plan will be adopted in Spring 2026. North Herts did not appear at the hearing sessions. More details can be found on [Uttlesford District Council's website](https://www.uttlesford.gov.uk/council-and-government/local-plan).

Stevenage Borough Council

- 8.21. Stevenage Borough Council are undertaking a partial review of their Local Plan. The Council's examination on the Local Plan was in December 2026.
- 8.22. We have made representations on the Plan and attended the first day of the examination of the Plan. More details can be found on [Stevenage Borough Council's website](https://www.stevenage.gov.uk/council-and-government/local-plan).

Luton Borough Council

- 8.23. Luton Borough Council are undertaking a review of their Local Plan. The Regulation 18 issues and options consultation closed in February 2025. A further Regulation 18 consultation was planned for March – April 2026. However, the Council are now reconsidering the Local Plan programme in respect of alignment with the new plan-making system timetable. More details can be found on [Luton Borough Council's website](#).

Central Bedfordshire Council

- 8.24. Central Bedfordshire Local Plan was adopted in July 2021. A full review of the Local Plan started in November 2023. A Call for Sites exercise was carried out November 2024 to January 2025. Central Bedfordshire's Local Development Scheme expected that a Regulation 18 consultation would commence in February 2026. However, no proposals have been presented to the Council's Executive and it is expected that the Council will reconsider the Local Plan programme (both Luton and Central Bedfordshire were signatories to the joint letter to MHCLG). More details can be found on [Central Bedfordshire Council's website](#).

East Hertfordshire District Council

- 8.25. East Hertfordshire District Council anticipate beginning the plan making process in once the new regulations and legislation are in force. They will revise the timetable accordingly and expect adoption in 2028.
- 8.26. A Call for Sites exercise was carried out July to September 2024. Results of this exercise are currently being assessed and will be published in due course.
- 8.27. More details can be found on [East Herts Council's website](#).

Welwyn Hatfield District Council

- 8.28. A Call for Sites exercise was carried out recently and closed March 2025. A second Call for Sites has been launched, focusing on brownfield and urban land, which closed on 19 September 2025. Results of this exercise are currently being assessed and will be published in due course. The Council is still expecting to submit the draft Plan to the Secretary of State before the deadline of December 2026 to be considered under the current system rather than the new plan-making system.
- 8.29. More details can be found on [Welwyn Hatfield District Council's website](#).

South Cambridgeshire District Council / Greater Cambridgeshire Shared Planning

- 8.30. The Council are undertaking a Local Plan with Cambridge City Council under the Greater Cambridge Local Plan. They are currently consulting on the draft Local Plan which closed on 30 January 2026. A number of sites close to the administrative / county border were

promoted by landowners. However, there are no significant allocations proposed in areas adjoining North Herts. A response to the consultation will be prepared by officers. A call for sites is published alongside their draft Plan.

- 8.31. More details can be found on [Greater Cambridge Shared Planning's website](#).

Neighbourhood Plans

- 8.32. There are currently no Neighbourhoods Plans in preparation. Under planning reforms, local communities will be able to prepare 'Neighbourhood Priorities Statements' (NPS). These are a lighter-touch alternate to Neighbourhood Plans. The (potential) role of NPS will be explored with parish and town councils as part of the preparatory stages of the new Local Plan.

Other matters

North, East & Central Herts Authorities Strategic Planning

- 8.33. Since 2019 the Council together with East Herts District Council, Stevenage Borough Council, Welwyn Hatfield District Council, Broxbourne Borough Council and Hertfordshire County Council along with the help of consultants, have been working together on the strategic planning of the area. This included establishing a Vision and a Growth Study for North East Central (NEC) Herts. The intention of the Growth Study is to create a key piece of initial evidence to support the preparation of a joint strategic plan for the area and inform the next round of Local Plans from the 2030s to 2050.
- 8.34. The Stage 2 Growth Study is currently being finalised with a final report prepared. Discussions are underway with Heads of Planning as to when the best time for briefing members and publishing the report, noting the changes to strategic planning and local plans regulations.
- 8.35. Under the planning reforms outlined above, Hertfordshire County Council (and any future mayoral authority that replaces it) will become responsible for preparing a Spatial Development Strategy (SDS) for their area. This will be a form of strategic plan to guide growth, housing, infrastructure and economic development. It is likely that some or all of the NEC work will be absorbed into a future SDS. A report is due to be considered by Hertfordshire Chief Executives outlining potential next steps and options.

North Herts Council's Draft Town Centres Strategy

- 8.36. Cabinet approved the draft Town Centres Strategy for public consultation at its meeting on 19 November 2025. The consultation was launched on 3 December 2025 and will run until 30 January 2026. Full details about the consultation and how to submit comments on-line are on the Council Website at the Town Centres Strategy subpage.
- 8.37. Residents, businesses, community groups and partner organisations on our Local Plan database have been invited to participate in the consultation. Officers asked the BID

(Business Improvement District) managers to promote the Strategy consultation to their members to encourage wider business engagement and the Parish Councils to encourage wider local and community engagement recognising the importance of the town centres in supporting local villages. All Local Councillors have been informed and requested that members promote the consultation through your own communication channels.

9. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 9.1. Under (Section 5, paragraph 5.7.18) of the Council's Constitution (the Terms of Reference for Cabinet), the Constitution states that Cabinet may exercise the Council's functions as Local Planning Authority and receive reports on strategic planning matters, applications for, approval/designation, consultation/referendums revocations (or recommend revocation) of neighbourhood plans and orders, (except to the extent that those functions are by law the responsibility of the Council or delegated to the Service Director: Place).
- 9.2. The preparation of statutory plans and supporting documents is guided by a range of acts and associated regulations including the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 (as amended) and the Localism Act 2011.
- 9.3. Under the Council's Constitution (14.6.10 (b) iv B) all functions relating to National Infrastructure Planning including co-ordination of the Council's response to any consultation, examination or other any other matter concerned with major infrastructure projects, is delegated to the Service Director Place.

10. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 10.1. The general costs of activities identified in this report - including the additional, temporary posts identified in Section 15 below - are met through existing revenue budgets, reserves or benefit from external funding or other arrangements to recover costs.
- 10.2. £20k has been set aside in the budget for any additional work associated with the London Luton Airport DCO application following the conclusion of the Examination from the SoS,(Secretary of State) and following the outcome of the Judicial Review and any ongoing work arising from a positive decision, such as implementing monitoring levels and the enforcement of the approved scheme.
- 10.3. In December 2025, the Government announced the continuation of financial support for neighbourhood planning for the 2025/26 financial year. A claim for £20k has been submitted in respect of the Codicote Neighbourhood Plan and associated referendum held earlier this year.

11. RISK IMPLICATIONS

- 11.1. Good Risk Management supports and enhances the decision-making process, increasing the likelihood of the Council meeting its objectives and enabling it to respond quickly and effectively to change. When taking decisions, risks and opportunities must be considered.

- 11.2. Delays to the publishing of secondary legislation relating to Local Plans has meant the Local Plan timetable has needed to be revised to ensure compliance with the new regulations. This is reported on in a separate paper to this Cabinet.
- 11.3. As neighbouring authorities advance their own Local Plans, it is essential to maintain alignment on strategic matters, particularly with those authorities that may be integrated with us through Local Government Reorganisation (LGR). Officers continue to hold regular meetings with neighbouring authorities to support constructive and collaborative working relationships. This includes ongoing work through the NEC group, as well as preparatory work for the future Strategic Development Strategy (SDS) and its relationship with the Local Plan.
- 11.4. A substantial number of Government consultations affecting the planning system—both plan-making and decision-taking—have recently been issued, with more expected. Officers will continue to monitor these developments closely and assess their implications for ongoing and future work at North Herts.

12. EQUALITIES IMPLICATIONS

- 12.1. In line with the Public Sector Equality Duty, public bodies must, in the exercise of their functions, give due regard to the need to eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation, to advance equality of opportunity and foster good relations between those who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.
- 12.2. There are not considered to be any direct equality issues arising from this report. Future individual schemes or considerations may well be subject to appropriate review to ensure they comply with latest equality legislative need. Any risks and opportunities identified will also be subject to assessment for impact on those that share a protected characteristic.

13. SOCIAL VALUE IMPLICATIONS

- 13.1. The Social Value Act and “go local” requirements do not apply to this report.

14. ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS

- 14.1. Several of the schemes noted at section 8 will have considerable impact on the environment as they come to fruition. Many of these will be subject to their own statutory requirements for environmental assessment such as Sustainability Appraisal or Environmental Impact Assessment. The need for further assessment, for example where there is no statutory requirement, is considered on a case-by-case basis.

15. HUMAN RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

- 15.1. No new implications arising directly from this report. Staffing and capacity within the planning service is monitored and managed on an on-going basis. Several new posts –

approved through revenue budget bids – have now been recruited to, to provide new or additional capacity for transport, tree & landscape and administrative matters.

- 15.2. There are presently two vacancies in the Development Management service, one has been advertised and an appointment made. Additional capacity through fixed-term posts is currently being explored.
- 15.3. Two fixed-term posts within the Strategic Planning Service have been filled. Recruitment to a permanent post was not successful and is currently under advertisement. The strategic planning manager post is currently filled on an interim basis and is expected to be advertised in the spring 2026 following consideration of the 2026/27 budget by Full Council.

16. CONTACT OFFICERS

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Appendices

Appendix A – Joint Signatory letter to MHCLG

Appendix B – response letter from MHCLG