



# Corporate Peer Challenge

## Progress Review Statement

[www.north-herts.gov.uk](http://www.north-herts.gov.uk)

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# 1.0 Welcome back to North Herts

We're pleased to welcome the Local Government Association Corporate Peer Challenge team back to North Herts, one year on from your last visit in November 2024.

This past year has been one of significant progress and purposeful change. Building on the recommendations from your visit, we've worked hard to embed learning, strengthen our leadership capacity, and deliver meaningful improvements for our communities – all while navigating the challenges of financial constraint and preparing for Local Government Reorganisation.

From launching our Women and Girls Safety Charter to starting our ambitious £16.4 million project to decarbonise and modernise our leisure centres and changing our Waste and Recycling service, we've focused on delivering tangible outcomes that make a difference to our residents. We've also taken steps to improve how we engage with our communities – through in-person forums, design workshops, and our first-ever budget consultation – ensuring local voices shape local decisions.

This Corporate Peer Challenge Progress Review statement provides a snapshot of our achievements since your last visit aligned with our key Council Priorities: **Thriving Communities, Accessible Services, Responsible Growth, and Sustainability**; and our action plan updates on the ten recommendations you gave us last year have been emailed over.

We hope this review statement demonstrates our commitment to continuous improvement, transparency, and delivering for the people of North Herts. Thank you again for your support and challenge – we look forward to updating you on our progress.



Cllr. Daniel Allen,  
Leader of the Council



Anthony Roche,  
North Herts Council  
Chief Executive

## 2.0 One year on



### Thriving communities

#### Women and Girls Safety Charter launched

In response to growing concerns around safety in public spaces, we launched the Women and Girls Safety Charter in January 2025 – a district-wide initiative encouraging venues and organisations to take a stand against harassment and violence.

Developed in partnership with local stakeholders, the Charter sets out clear commitments around staff training, reporting procedures and safe spaces. Over 20 pubs from across the district have already signed up and we plan to promote the charter to other premises in the future.

The Charter has been promoted through our digital communications channels and featured in Outlook magazine, helping to raise awareness and drive engagement. It's a key part of our work to make North Herts safer and more inclusive for everyone.



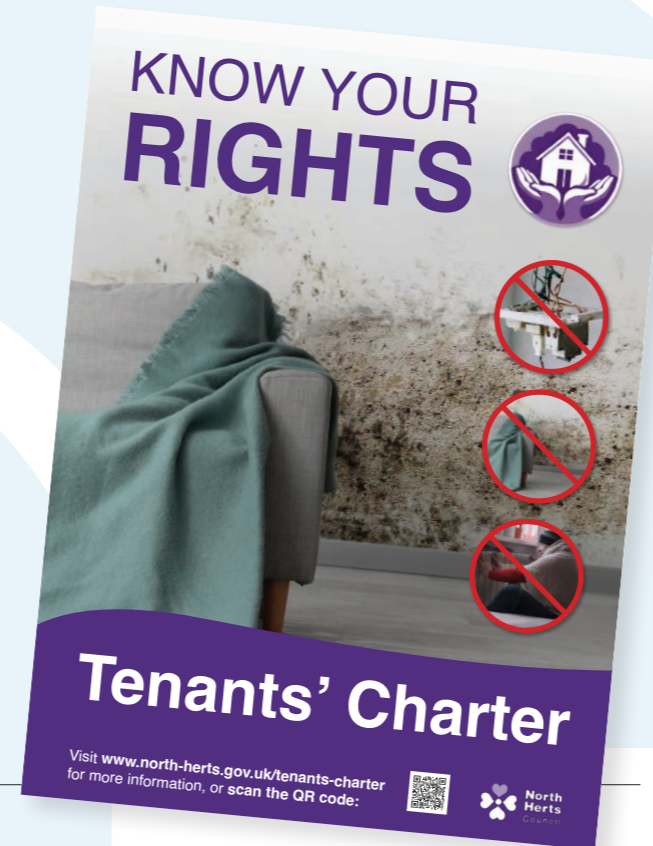
#### Tenants' Charter launched

We published a Tenants' Charter in February to provide guidance and support to both tenants and landlords in North Herts. This is a first for North Herts and sets out the rights and responsibilities for tenants, landlords and the council, to ensure rented homes in the district are safe, warm, and well maintained.

We felt it was important to not only create one comprehensive source of information, where tenants and landlords can find answers to any questions they have, but to also work together to create a community where everyone enjoys a comfortable and secure living environment.

Advice for tenants includes checking that the letting or managing agent is registered, that the agreement provided is a proper tenancy agreement, and how to stop mould becoming a problem. Advice for landlords includes checking that tenants have the right to rent your property, ensuring the property is free from hazards, and that gas and electrical inspections are carried out by qualified professionals.

1000 people have visited our Tenants' Charter webpages for advice and support, and we are currently in the process of taking flyers and posters to letting and managing agents, community centres, GP surgeries, and libraries to spread the word further about our Tenants' Charter.



### Thriving communities

#### White Ribbon accreditation achieved

In December 2024, we were proud to achieve White Ribbon Accreditation – a national recognition of our commitment to ending male violence against women. The accreditation followed months of work across the council, including staff training, awareness campaigns, and policy reviews.

We marked the achievement with a public pledge event and have continued to promote the campaign through our channels, including Outlook magazine. White Ribbon aligns with our wider efforts around community safety and equality, and we're now working with partners to embed its principles across the district, starting with a Men's Panel on White Ribbon Day's 2025 theme of "We speak up" in November.

The accreditation is not just a badge – it's a statement of intent, and we're determined to keep the momentum going.

#### In-person resident liaison

Following on from the Churchgate regeneration in-person hubs in September 2024, we have started a programme of increased in-person resident engagement events, starting with a resident's design forum in June.

A diverse group of 22 North Herts residents were invited to explore and develop a vision for new development in the district and set the direction of travel for the emerging District Design Code. Residents were encouraged to reflect on their own experiences of living in North Herts and to identify what makes neighbourhoods successful, inclusive and distinctive.

In September, residents were invited to join our Community Forums in-person to hear more about Local Government Reorganisation from our Leader and have their opportunity to ask questions. In total 73 residents joined us across our five Community Forums in Great Ashby, Baldock, Hitchin, Letchworth and Royston. Their feedback has helped shape our response to Government. A second resident's design forum is planned for November.



## Thriving communities

### Community Governance Review

We undertook our second community governance review (CGR) consultation from the 14 March to the 9 May 2025, asking for feedback on proposed changes to parish arrangements such as changes to ward boundaries, that parish election dates be aligned to the district election cycle and the number of parish councillors, based on the feedback received in our first CGR consultation in 2024.

Householders in areas where a substantial change was proposed were sent targeted flyers detailing the specific changes. The consultation was shared directly with all district and North Hertfordshire County councillors, parish councils, MPs, PCC and to anyone who expressed an interest to hear more following the first consultation. It was also communicated on the homepage of our website, dedicated consultation webpage and through our E: Newsletter and social media channels. The consultation was also promoted via general flyers circulated for display in various community establishments, at Councillor Surgeries and announcements made at the various meetings such as at the Community Forums. Anyone who was unable to respond via the online consultation was assisted in any way that they needed, such as the

provision of paper forms, accepting comments via email to ensure everyone could have their say.

We had a significant response of 2,253 completed surveys which were weighed against statutory criteria and used to form the recommendations which can be found at: [www.north-herts.gov.uk/community-governance-review](http://www.north-herts.gov.uk/community-governance-review) and will be implemented ahead of our 2026 local elections.



### £4.5M Government funding secured for supported housing scheme

Following a successful funding bid to the Ministry of Housing and Local Government under its Single Homelessness Accommodation Programme (SHAP), we were awarded £4.5m to deliver an accommodation-based service for homeless 18–24-year-olds, with support needs. The partners to the bid were One YMCA and Hertfordshire County Council, and the service – which is also run by One YMCA – launched in April 2025 and is based at their site in Hitchin.

The building has 24 self-contained rooms for the SHAP, and the aim of the service is to eventually resettle young people into their own independent accommodation. In addition to support from the Council and One YMCA, residents can also be referred to specialist partner agencies such as health services, social care, CGL (Change, Grow Live) and MIND.

## Accessible services

### Waste and recycling service change

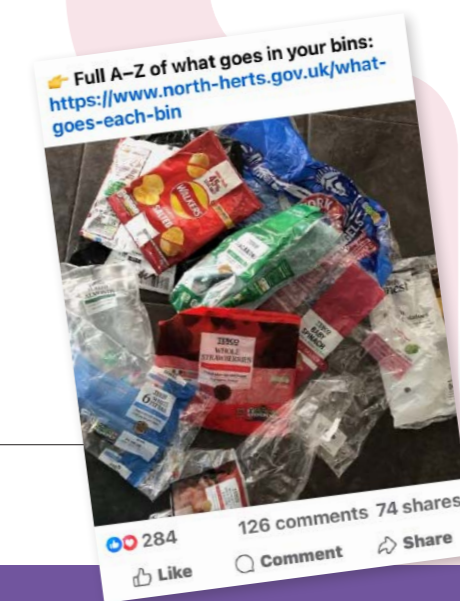
Following a public consultation in 2022 and a highly competitive and robust procurement process, our shared waste, recycling, and street cleansing service (with East Herts Council) was awarded to Veolia in May. This was followed by changes to our waste and recycling service in August, designed to make recycling easier and more efficient for residents, support our wider environmental goals of reducing carbon emissions and align with the Government’s ‘Simpler Recycling’ environmental requirements.

The key changes were:

- An increase to the range of materials that residents can recycle at home, including increased capacity for cardboard and paper, and the addition of plastic bags and wrapping recycling.
- Collection frequency changes -, with non-recyclable waste, mixed recycling and cardboard & paper bins moving to a new alternating three-week collection cycle.
- New collection days for some residents - to improve route efficiency.

Food waste continues to be collected weekly and garden waste continues to be collected fortnightly for subscribers. We have also launched a new council app that notifies residents in advance of each collection, letting them know exactly which bins to put out when. As of the 20 November, the app had been downloaded 7,224 times and been very positively received.

The contractor and service change were of course not without challenges, but we have already seen a 34% decrease in general waste tonnage in August (Vs July) and have received an overwhelming positive response to the fact that residents can now recycling plastic bags and wrapping at home, including residents of neighbouring councils asking them to do the same!





# Accessible services

## Progress on the Digital strategy

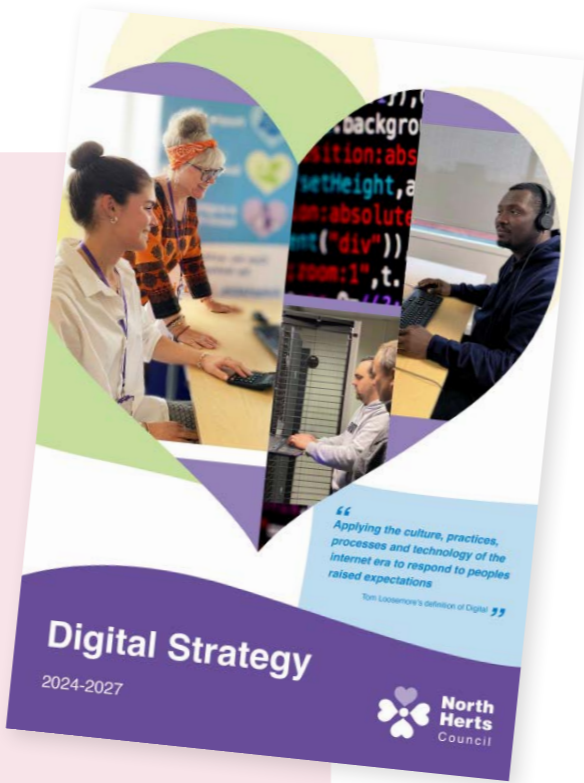
Over the past year, we have made substantial progress in delivering our Digital Strategy. Key achievements include using our digital platform 'Connect' to deliver a host of fully integrated online Waste services that includes a garden waste platform, reporting a missed bin, and booking a bulky waste collection. The team have also been busy developing an online bookings application, a Grants application and more. Views of our Customer Service webpages have increased by 46.58% YOY and views of our 'Report a problem' webpage have increased by 27.71%.

An intelligent chatbot service has been launched on the website to improve customer engagement and an AI telephony system is now in place on the Customer Service telephone line to handle the most common enquiries. Staff are also being upskilled in AI & Data through the apprenticeship programme. Work is ongoing to redesign processes, rationalise applications, and enhance efficiency across the Council.

## Advancing Digital Inclusion

Prioritisation has been given to digital inclusion through the expansion of the 'Staying Connected' programme following a successful grant application, which will be delivered in partnership with North Herts CVS. This initiative aims to improve digital skills and access for residents most affected by digital exclusion, including older adults, those living in poverty, and people with disabilities. Plans include recruiting Digital Champions and upskilling Council staff, distributing secure devices to households in need, and running cybercrime awareness workshops with Hertfordshire Constabulary. The programme is expected to support over 300 residents by March 2026.

Looking ahead, our digital inclusion plans will be embedded within the mid-term review of the Digital Strategy, rather than developed as a standalone strategy. The Council will continue to signpost, connecting residents with external organisations such as Hertfordshire Steps to Skills and Barclays Digital Eagles. The Customer Service team will maintain their role in assisting residents with online tasks, ensuring that digital transformation remains inclusive and accessible to all.



# Accessible services

## People Advancements

Over the past year, we've made significant strides in strengthening our leadership team by ensuring appropriate resources and therefore enabling more time for strategic decision making. This includes an additional Director role, reorganisation of teams and reassignment of executive portfolios to match the directorates and more evenly distribute responsibilities.

We've also invested in staff engagement and development, including hosting three successful in-person staff conference events that fostered connection, celebrated achievements (see staff conference film shared on email), and supported our values. Feedback from the events showed that they were valued by staff and we have committed to making this an annual event. In addition, we are beginning a review of our Regular Performance Review process, and have started work on a refreshed People Strategy, which will consider our values and guide our approach to recruitment, retention, and development as we head towards Local Government Reorganisation.

## Museum Collection Facility

We are proud to own North Herts Museum, the leading accredited museum in the district which houses a collection of great regional, academic, and scientific importance. Items in our collection include the world's oldest football collection, records of our rare chalk stream habitats and Roman bones.

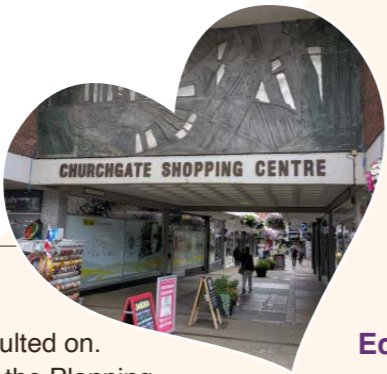
In March 2025, Cabinet agreed to acquire a new building in Letchworth to safeguard and preserve the estimated 1 million plus items in our museum collection by keeping them at a stable temperature and in a suitable environment all year round, something our current facility is unable to provide. As well as protecting the area's history, art and heritage collection for years to come, the new building will also be able to accommodate visitors, including school children.

This project will also ensure that our North Herts Museum service retains accreditation which enables us to apply for grants and host national and international exhibitions such as The Snowman, Paddington, and Rembrandt. The redevelopment of the new premises is estimated to take two years to complete at a cost of around £3M.





# Responsible growth



## Local Plan review



Our Local Plan review has begun, focused on setting the stage for a refreshed vision for our district. We've commenced gathering studies and data about things like housing need, flood risk, the Green Belt and more, to make sure any updates to our Local Plan are based on robust data.

We're identifying land that could meet the district's future needs as part of our review – from housing and jobs to green spaces. We are in the process of assessing a range of sites and are gathering more detail on those with potential, such as transport and landscape information.

We have procured a new digital platform: Place Maker to ensure North Herts residents can sign up to have their say and receive regular updates on the progress of our Local Plan review, be the first to know about upcoming Planning Policy consultations and comment directly on planning policy documents.

Planning applications for East of Luton and Baldock (the single largest planning application we have received) have been received and validated and

are currently being consulted on. During November 2025, the Planning Officers' Society completed a focused review of the planning service. This is to help us continue delivering our current Local Plan while also responding to changes in national planning policy.

## Churchgate regeneration approach approved

At Full Council in July 2025 approval was given for us to move forward with developing a regeneration encompassing Portmill East/West, Biggin Lane car parks, the Market and the shopping centre. This approval has enabled us to work on the financial viability of the scheme on a much more detailed level, which has included: car parking surveys/analysis to determine if Hitchin can 'afford' to lose spacing/income, a market feasibility study that focuses on the ideal size/mix/location of the site, a public realm study that demonstrates how the river could be opened up etc and a community space feasibility study that reviews the need for this type of space in Hitchin. These work streams will provide us with that extra level of detail required to move forward in our programme and report back to the appropriate committee, in preparation for taking forward the process for bringing on board external development expertise in Spring 2026.

## Economic development strategy

Our new Economic Development Strategy for the district was adopted in July 2025. The strategy is aligned with the Council's economic aspirations, priorities and economic vision. Our Council Plan (2024-2028) sets out the importance of 'Responsible Growth' with a clear commitment to support economic growth across the district, and to work closely with businesses and other partners to deliver on our key objectives. The strategy is supported by a comprehensive evidence base, that includes stakeholder engagement with a variety of local businesses and an in-depth analysis of economic data in North Herts (in relation to jobs, trending growth areas, industries, connectivity etc). The evidence base enabled the team to identify five action areas to focus on: 1) business and enterprise; 2) people and skills; 3) innovation and economic change; 4) site and premises and 5) investment, position and promotion. The strategy also celebrates our position geographically and maps out areas within the district (looking in) and outside (looking out) with both themes identifying opportunities available to the Council to achieve substantial economic growth. The strategy focuses on economic portraits of each town in North Herts, mapping out key opportunities in each of them.



# Responsible growth



## Town Centres strategy in progress

Our Town Centres strategy is in progress and will support development both in and surrounding our four town centres: Hitchin, Letchworth Garden City, Royston and Baldock.

The 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), setting out our vision and planning priorities for our town centres across the following themes: 1) land use and retail; 2) built environment; 3) transport, access and movement and 4) community. It will provide additional guidance to Local Plan Policies pending the approved review of the Local Plan which is due to progress during 2026 once new Government regulations and guidance are released.

The draft Town Centres strategy was presented at the 19 November Cabinet meeting: Agenda for Cabinet on Wednesday, 19th November, 2025, 7.30 pm | North Herts Council with public consultation planned for December 25 and January 26, including in-person engagement at our December Area Forums. Following consultation and adoption our Town Centres strategy will play

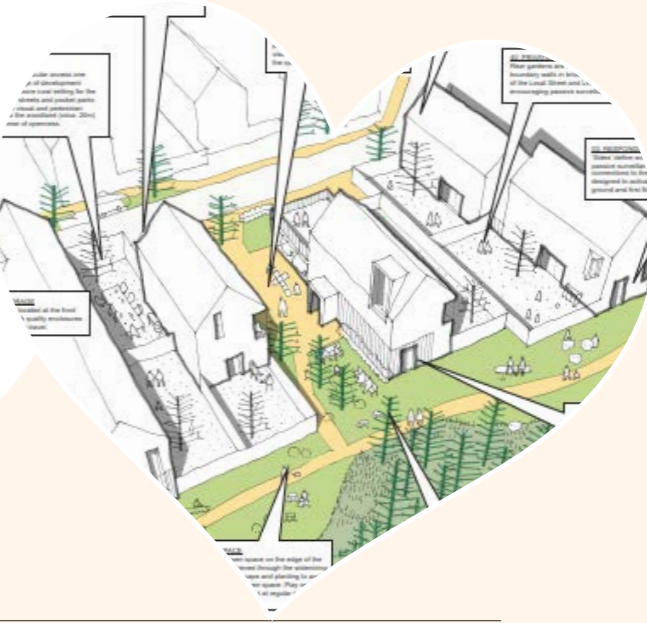
a key part in the assessment and determination of planning applications in and surrounding our four town centres.

## District Design Code in progress

Work has begun on our District Design Code, a multi-phased design policy document that aims to improve design quality of new development in North Herts, provide consistency to pre-application feedback and upskill planners.

One of only a handful of councils producing their own code in-house, the seven key place-making objectives within our code have been created using feedback from members, officers and the residents design forum mentioned earlier in this document and supported and reviewed by North Herts Council, County and industry expert working groups.

The first phase of our District Design Code will focus on new developments on settlement edges, covering topics such as open space, streets, built form and tenure neutrality, with public consultation planned for Spring 2026.





## Sustainability

### Decarbonising our Leisure Centres

Our ambitious £16.4 million project to decarbonise and modernise our leisure centres, making them more energy-efficient, environmentally friendly, and enjoyable for residents began in June.

The scheme, which is part-funded by £7.74 million from the government's Public Sector Decarbonisation Scheme is bringing significant upgrades to Royston Leisure Centre, Hitchin Swimming and Fitness Centre, and North Herts Leisure Centre (Letchworth). The improvements will cut carbon emissions and enhance the experience for our leisure centre users.

As part of the project, all three centres are benefitting from decarbonisation measures including replacing gas boilers with air source heat pumps, installing solar panels, upgrade of insulation, glazing and air handling systems and introducing energy-efficient technologies across all buildings. Royston Leisure Centre is also benefitting from a large gym extension with state-of-the-art equipment and refurbished changing rooms. North Herts Leisure Centre is getting a brand-new pool flume and swimming pool changing rooms and Hitchin Swimming & Fitness



Centre will enjoy refurbished changing rooms and a new health suite.

This major investment marks an important step towards a greener, more sustainable future for North Herts and will be accompanied by energy efficiency improvements to other council-owned buildings in 2026-27 as we have also been further awarded over £1.17 million in government funding from Salix Finance. These future upgrades are expected to save around 100 tonnes of carbon emissions every year.

### Our continuing commitment to sustainability

In August 2025, we launched our Sustainability Strategy, setting out our aims for how we'll work with communities to tackle climate change and protect our local environment. Developed with input from residents, councillors and officers, the strategy focuses on practical actions across energy, transport, biodiversity, waste and adapting to the changing climate.



To support grassroots efforts across North Herts, we also introduced the Sustainable Communities Grant – a pot of nearly £80,000 to help local community groups and businesses deliver sustainability projects. From renewable energy projects to increasing biodiversity and community engagement on sustainability education, the grant is supporting a range of initiatives that make a real difference.

Alongside this, we published our Sustainability Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) in September 2024, which provides detailed guidance to developers on how to embed sustainability into new developments. The SPD covers areas including energy efficiency, water conservation, and green infrastructure, ensuring our planning decisions support our climate goals.

Together, these actions, alongside our ambitious project to decarbonise our leisure centres, show how we are demonstrating leadership through actions to reduce our own environmental footprint and reflect our commitment to empowering communities and embedding sustainability in everything we do.



## Sustainability

### Budget consultation held

Over June and July, we asked residents to help us shape our future budget decision-making by sharing their thoughts on the services they value and their future priorities via our first-ever budget consultation.

The aim of the consultation was to gauge residents' views and use the findings to aid our decision-making rather than make any concrete decisions on future services. The consultation focused on those services which are paid for through our general funding rather than those that are fully covered by fees and charges.

559 residents responded who told us their top five services in terms of importance to them were:

- 1) Waste collection & recycling;
  - 2) Parks & greenspaces;
  - 3) Street cleaning;
  - 4) Community safety & environmental crime; and
  - 5) Environment health.
- In terms of their thoughts on balancing our future budgets, they told us that they would rather we find ways new ways to fund our existing services rather than reduce the frequency or quality of the services we provide. These findings will be used to help us set our 2026-27 budget, which will be agreed at our February 2026 Council meeting.



### Royston Bee Corridor

Following a request from a Royston resident who wanted to introduce 'wild areas' within Royston, we expanded our award-winning Letchworth bee corridor initiative to Royston in March 2025 – creating a new pollinator-friendly route that connects green spaces across the town.

The project, involving the council but led by John O'Conner, our grounds maintenance contractor, includes wildflower planting, bee hotels and educational signage, designed to support biodiversity and raise awareness of the importance of pollinators. Local schools and community groups have been involved in planting days, which has helped create a sense of ownership and pride.

The project builds on our wider commitment to enhancing natural habitats and making our towns greener and more resilient. It's also a great example of how small-scale environmental interventions can have a big impact – both ecologically and socially.



# 3.0 Local Government Reorganisation

Following the formal invitation from central government in February to develop proposals for a single tier of local government in Hertfordshire, we have been working collaboratively with our 10 Hertfordshire council colleagues and the Police and Crime Commissioner to draft a single submission, with three options contained within it.

We have embraced the challenge and taken a leading role in the Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) programme team, being on the Programme Management Board, leading the Technology & Systems workstream and co-leading the Service Design workstream, whilst being represented on all the other workstreams. Throughout our approach has been to embrace and explore the opportunities reorganisation could bring in terms of how services are delivered in Hertfordshire in the future.

Key district partner organisations, including Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation, our Business Improvement Districts and Veolia were involved in our first stage stakeholder engagement to ensure their voices were heard at an early stage. This was followed by a full month of both in-person and online stakeholder engagement in September with wider stakeholders, staff and

councillors. Staff have been kept informed since February through regular staff briefings, updates on The Hub and Global update emails. LGR was also the focus of one of the main sessions at our in-person Staff Conferences. Councillors have been kept informed through regular Political Liaison Board, party leader and executive member briefings, updates on The Hub and Global update emails. A councillor briefing and separate Overview and Scrutiny Committee presentation took place during the September engagement.

After listening to resident feedback both in-person and through September's survey and following discussion and debate with North Herts Council Councillors at the Extraordinary Council meeting on the 13 November, the four unitary model was confirmed as our preferred model for the future of Local Government Reorganisation in Hertfordshire at a meeting of the North Herts Council Cabinet on Wednesday 19 November. This included a caveat that we would like the proposed placement of Arbury Ward to be reconsidered by central government.

Embracing the challenge that has come with developing the LGR submission has come with a significant impact on staff workload, particularly our

most senior officers. Aside from the additional workload that participating in each LGR workstream has naturally created, LGR commitments have also resulted in a review and reprioritisation of the digital transformation programme plans discussed during your last visit and the difficult decision not to actively pursue our increased Place Narrative promotional plans.

It is recognised that the future work to support the transition to the new authorities, whilst also ensuring our community sees no difference in business as usual and we deliver any legacy projects the Council wishes to prioritise, will place significant strain on staff workloads. It may be necessary to employ additional staff between now and 2028 to deliver all this work, including the need to backfill for any officers who are delivering the transition programme.

It is also recognised that the uncertainty caused by reorganisation will have an impact personally on staff, at different times. Training and support are already in place to assist with this, and a programme will be delivered until April 2028. The Chief Executive has committed to keeping staff updated on the timelines for when the issues of greatest interest to staff will be addressed.

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