

North Herts Council
SOUTHERN RURAL COMMUNITY FORUM

Meeting held at Knebworth Village Hall
On Thursday 11 June 2026 at 7.30pm

NOTES

Present: Cllr Dominic Griffiths (DG) (Chair), Cllr Paul Ward (PW) (Vice-Chair), Cllr David Barnard (DB), Cllr Joe Graziano (JG), Caroline McDonnell (CM), Ralph Muncer (RM), Cllr Vijaiya Poopalasingham (VP) and Cllr Laura Williams (LW).

In attendance: Laura Hartley (Community Partnerships Officer) (LH), Rachael Rooney (RR) (Interim Strategic Planning Manager) and Debbie Coates (DC) (Strategic Planning Team Leader)

Also present: At the commencement of the meeting there were around 8 members of the public (MOP), including registered speakers.

Meeting Started at **19:30**

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Cllrs Lisa Nash, Steven Patmore, Louise Peace and Claire Strong.

2. CHAIR'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

DG welcomed everyone in attendance.

Highlighted that the Forum is an informal, inclusive meeting to share ideas.

Members were reminded to make declarations of interest before an item they may wish to abstain from voting if they have an interest, but they are merely making recommendations and not decisions.

3. ANNUAL SOUTHERN RURAL COMMUNITY FORUM MINUTES

Members voted whether they wish to approve the minutes of the 2024 Annual Southern Rural Community Forum.

RM proposed
DB seconded

Following a vote, Members unanimously voted in favour of approving the minutes of the meeting from 2024.

Members voted whether they wish to approve the minutes of the 2025 Annual Southern Rural Community Forum.

Cllrs Griffiths, Ward and McDonnell did not vote as they were absent for the 2025 Annual Southern Rural Community Forum meeting.

RM proposed
JG seconded

Following a vote, five Members voted in favour of approving the minutes of the meeting from 2025.

Members voted whether they wish to approve the minutes of the 2026 Annual Southern Rural Community Forum.

Cllr Graziano did not vote as they were absent for the 2026 Annual Southern Rural Community Forum meeting.

RM proposed
DB seconded

Following a vote, seven Members voted in favour of approving the minutes of the meeting from 2026.

4. PRESENTATION - NEW LOCAL PLAN SCOPING CONSULTATION

Rachael Rooney (RR) Interim Strategic Planning Manager and Debbie Coates (DC) Strategic Planning Team Leader presented

RR gave an outline of what the scoping consultation sets out to do and background as to why it's important.

The PowerPoint presentation has been published alongside these notes.
For full details please see the Scoping Document - [Community consultation strategy](#)
The scoping consultation is open until 28th June and welcome any feedback.

Topics covered in the Q&A

- With the move to unitary authorities, how does North Herts Council (NHC) see the strategic direction changing? RR – as councils merge, it is expected that existing and new Local Plans will continue to cover their current geographical areas, with the new authority initially operating with multiple Local Plans. Over time a single joint Local Plan will be developed. RR also highlighted the introduction of a Spatial Development Strategy, a regional framework for economic growth and infrastructure.
- In the previous plan, the A1(M) upgrade was included but has been delayed. How will this be reflected in the new plan? RR - the Government sets a housing target, currently 1,036 homes per year, which must be met. As part of preparing the new Local Plan, existing site allocations that have not yet received planning permission or secured Section 106 agreements will be reviewed. These will be assessed alongside new site submissions, with consideration given to the infrastructure required to bring them forward.

- When will Parishes who submitted the Mimram Valley Project see the outcome on whether this will be included in the new Local Plan? RR - during the “content and evidence-based consultation” scheduled for October, NHC will set out its approach to the new Local Plan and seek feedback. At this stage, there should be an initial indication of how the Mimram Valley Project will be considered.
- Discussion around how grey belt land is determined and how decisions are made about development on it. RR - NHC will soon publish a report identifying land classified as grey belt, based on Government criteria. Green belt policy is assessed against five purposes; land may be considered grey belt where it does not strongly perform against purposes a (unrestricted growth), b (merging of towns) and d (setting of historic towns). Even if a site is considered grey belt that does not automatically mean it can be developed, it would still need to demonstrate it is a sustainable location as well as meet other requirements.
- Confirmed that when allocating sites through the local planning process, NHC must demonstrate that any required mitigation measures are clear. It must also be shown that there is commitment from infrastructure providers.
- Parish Councils have been asked to provide feedback on existing infrastructure to help inform how settlements are categorised and prioritised.
- As part of the Local Plan there will be a green belt study There will also be a map published of all the sites that have been submitted, alongside the consultation on the spatial strategy to support that growth. Sites brought forward will be assessed and categorised to determine their sustainability and suitability for allocation in the new Local Plan. Government policy has changed so that if housing needs cannot be met, one option is to amend green belt boundaries to accommodate development.
- It was raised that Herts County Council's (HCC) LGB4 policy focuses on promoting active travel, primarily in urban areas rather than rural communities. With HCC now moving toward LGB5, will NHC work with HCC to address expectations for rural areas?
DC advised this would be best raised with the Strategic Transport Team.

5. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION IN RELATION TO GRANT APPLICATIONS

The Community Partnerships officer informed those present that there is £17,310 available in the Southern Rural grant budget. The total amount of funding requested for the meeting was £3,108. If all grants are recommended and subsequently approved, there will be £14,202 remaining in the budget for the remainder of the financial year 2026/27.

Received presentations in support of grant applications by the following:

DG outlined the **Pirton School** application for £858 towards the purchase of scooter and bike racks for the school.

Members discussed:

- The positives of reducing carbon footprint and promoting active travel.
- The need for alternative routes to offer safer active travel in villages.

Pirton School vote

DB proposed.

JG seconded.

Members unanimously voted in favour of recommending £858 to Pirton School

Representative from **Preston Village Hall** presented an application for £1,500 towards the purchase of a projector and screen for the village hall.

Members enquired and received satisfactory answers about:

- The village hall is run by the Parish Council.
- Population of Preston – approx. 400
- Number of requests they've received to hire the hall with a screen – approx. twice a month
- The hire of the screen and projector will be included in the hall hire.

Preston Village Hall vote

JG proposed.

CM seconded.

Members unanimously voted in favour of recommending £1,500 to Preston Village Hall

Representative from **Resolve** presented an application for £750 towards the costs of a Key Worker who runs the Group Therapy and Key Work Sessions.

Members enquired and received satisfactory answers about:

- What Resolve provides, including peer support, group therapy and offering a 54-week programme, with the support of qualified staff, some of which have lived experience.
- GS role in Resolve - has been brought in to diversify funding streams.
- Clients come from across the county to meet in Letchworth and Welwyn.

Resolve vote

JG proposed to raise the request from £750 and recommend £1,500.

LW seconded.

Members unanimously voted in favour of recommending £1,500 to Resolve

6. COMMUNITY UPDATE

The Community and Partnerships Officer highlighted:

- NHCVS Volunteer Summit taking place on 9th July at the Icknield Centre, Letchworth. Find out more & register at: ['Be The Good' Summit: Reimagining Volunteering Together](#)

7. WARD MATTERS & OUTSIDE ORGANISATIONS

- MOP asked how LGR will impact the villages, in particular Knebworth.
 - RM – the likelihood is North Herts will be grouping with Stevenage and worried that more focus would be on the towns than rural villages. Currently Councillors have limited influence on issues.
 - LW (Exec Member for LGR at NHC) - Great Ashby have similar issues to Knebworth and found a lot of case work is bounced between HCC and NHC. With a unitary authority this should minimise and streamline these issues. Also, when grouping together with Stevenage, the council can think more strategically across a wider area without the boundaries.

- MOP – raised the lack of LGR materials in libraries. RM to raise with relevant officers at HCC.
- PW – Knebworth Environmental Group have been awarded Plastic Free Community status by Surfers Against Sewage. To get involved visit: plasticfree.org.uk/community/knebworth/
- DG & CM – Gravely Village Day takes place on 31 August.
- JG – highlighted a good news story of a MOP tackling active fly tipping.
- DB – holding a charity BBQ on 27th June for 'Make a Wish Foundation' and Lilley Fate is returning after 40 years on 18th July.

8. TOPICS FOR FUTURE FORUMS

- September 2026 – Green Space consultation
- November 2026 – invite officers from HCC to present on highways and sustainable travel.

Other future topics:

- S106 contributions and how that process works and the money being paid out.
- Inviting the ICB to present.

MEETING CLOSED 21:20