

***PART 1 – PUBLIC DOCUMENT**

TITLE OF REPORT: NORTH HERTFORDSHIRE TOWN CENTRES STRATEGY ADOPTION

REPORT OF: DIRECTOR – PLACE

EXECUTIVE MEMBER: CLLR DONNA WRIGHT, EXECUTIVE MEMBER FOR PLACE

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

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1 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”.
- 1.2 The Town Centres Strategy has been prepared to
- provide additional guidance to 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.
- 1.3 Until a new Local Plan is adopted, the Town Centres Strategy provides interim policy guidance to protect each town’s character and identity. It guides developers, stakeholders and planning officers, supports town-centre vitality and viability, and aligns with other council strategies, including the Council Plan and the Economic Development and Sustainability strategies.
- 1.4 The draft Town Centres Strategy has been updated following public consultation. The report outlines the results of that public consultation, the proposed modifications to the Strategy and seeks approval to adopt the Town Centres Strategy to be used as guidance in determining planning applications.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 2.1. To adopt the Town Centres Strategy attached as Appendix 1

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| 2.2 | That delegated authority is granted to the Director, Place in consultation with the Executive Member for Place to make any minor non-material corrections, including but not limited to cosmetic additions or presentational alterations, to the adopted Town Centres Strategy as considered necessary for publication and publicity. |
| 2.3 | That Officers proceed with the preparation of Delivery Plans for each of the town centres following adoption of the Town Centres Strategy. |

3. REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

- 3.1. To allow the Town Centres Strategy to be adopted as a material planning consideration to support developers, landowners and relevant stakeholders when considering developing proposals and to provide policy advice to development management officers when determining planning applications until superseded by any new Local Plan.
- 3.2. To set key priorities which seek to maintain and enhance the unique character and vitality and viability of the district's four town centres through agreed partnership working and the preparation of Delivery Plan for each town.
- 3.3. To reinforce and deliver the Council's ambitions as set out in the Council Plan (2024 - 2028).

4. ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS CONSIDERED

- 4.1. None. Consultation has taken place on the draft Town Centres Strategy, modifications have been made in response to the representations made, minor non-material corrections have been made for clarity, including relevant updates in response to changes in planning legislation and to the Evidence base in Part 1 to reflect recently adopted Council documents.

5. CONSULTATION WITH RELEVANT MEMBERS AND EXTERNAL ORGANISATIONS

- 5.1. The Executive Member for Place has been briefed on the progress of the Town Centres Strategy. Regular updates on the progress of the Strategy have been provided to Cabinet through various Strategic Planning Matters Reports.
- 5.2. Extensive consultation was undertaken on the scope and preparation of the draft Town Centres Strategy with members of the Strategic Planning Matters Project Board, internally with relevant officers across Council departments and externally with relevant stakeholders, such as the town's Business Improvement Districts and business representatives, as well as the Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation.
- 5.3. Public Consultation on the draft Town Centres Strategy was undertaken between 3 December 2025 and 30 January 2026, where:
 - Residents, businesses, community groups and partner organisations on our Local Plan database were invited to participate in the consultation;

- Business Improvement District (BID) managers in Hitchin, Letchworth and Royston were asked to promote the Strategy consultation to their members to encourage wider business engagement;
 - A leaflet drop was made to local businesses in Baldock town centre to raise awareness and encourage feedback on the draft Strategy;
 - Recognising the importance of our town centres in supporting local villages, and to encourage wider local and community engagement, Parish Council and the Royston Town Council were asked to promote the draft strategy through their own communication channels;
 - Posters were displayed in the libraries and at our leisure centres encouraging people to engage in the consultation;
 - The draft Strategy was actively promoted on the Council's website and through the Council's various social media channels; and.
 - Members were also informed by email and through Member Information Service (MIS) and requested to promote the consultation through their own communication channels.
- 5.4 Both Officers and the Exec Member for Place attended and presented the draft Strategy for discussion at the, Baldock, Hitchin, Royston, and Letchworth December Community Forum meetings to raise awareness and encourage feedback from members and local communities.
- 5.5 A summary of the comments made in response to the draft Town Centres Strategy has been prepared and is attached as Appendix 2.

6. FORWARD PLAN

- 6.1 This report contains a recommendation on a key Executive decision that was first notified to the public in the Forward Plan on the 17 July 2026.

7. BACKGROUND

- 7.1. This Town Centres Strategy has been prepared taking into consideration relevant national and local policy and guidance and provides a comprehensive overview and summary of the Council's evidence base for development in and affecting town centres. The starting point for the Town Centres Strategy is the Council's Local Plan and, in particular and sequentially:
- a. The recognition that, at the point of the Local Plan's adoption in November 2022, elements of its retail strategy had been overtaken by events – notably Covid-19 - which fundamentally changed or accelerated change in the retail environment and predictions of future requirements
 - b. The conclusion of the Government Inspector examining the Plan that *"this is no criticism of the Council or its work – these factors could not have been accounted for at the time"*
 - c. That the only basis for remedying this in plan-making terms was through an early review of the plan that, among other matters, *will have particular regard to the identification of the needs for retail, leisure, office and other main town centre uses*
 - d. A recognition that even this early review would take some time and that up-to-date town strategies would be prepared in the interim to bridge the gap and inform

the review. [The Local Plan Review is subject to a separate report to this meeting].

- 7.2 The Town Centres Strategy incorporates advice on a range of changes in national policy and guidance and takes account of the updated evidence in the [2024 Retail and Town Centre Study](#) which has identified there is a need to review the retail policies as part of the New Local Plan given changes in consumer behaviour patterns and the changing role and function of town centres in meeting these demands. It recommends that the retail and town centre policies in the New Local Plan will need to be more flexible in their approach whilst ensuring that any development and improvements within the town centres contributes and strengthens the retail, economic, environmental and social benefits of the town centres as well as reinforcing each town centre's local distinctiveness as a special place to invest, live and visit.
- 7.3 As such, the Strategy 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.
- 7.4 The Town Centres Strategy is a planning-led document and should be read in conjunction with relevant policies in the adopted Local Plan (see listed below) whilst also taking into consideration other important Council Strategies and projects, such as the Economic Development Strategy, the Churchgate Regeneration Zone 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.
- 7.5 The adopted Local Plan, contains policies with implications for town centres, these include:
- Policy SP4: Town Centres, Local Centres and Community Shops,
 - Policy ETC3: New retail, leisure and other main town centre development,
 - Policy ETC4: Primary Shopping Frontages and
 - Policy ETC5: Secondary Shopping Frontages.

And is to be read alongside other policies and supporting guidance documents in the Local Plan which will have an impact on development proposals – including:

- Policy D1: Sustainable design
- Policy HE1: Designated heritage assets
- Policy SP13: Historic Environment
- Policy SP9: Design and Sustainability
- Policy SP6: Sustainable transport
- Policy HC1: Community Facilities
- Policy D1: Sustainable Design
- Policy SP10: Healthy Communities
- Developer Contributions SPD
- Parking SPD
- Design Code SDP
- Sustainability SPD

- 7.6 The Strategy has been prepared following similar principles to a Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) including reference to relevant policies and evidence and stakeholder engagement in its preparation and has been the subject of formal public consultation, following a resolution by Cabinet in November 2025. This took place between 3 December 2025 and 30 January 2026.

8. RELEVANT CONSIDERATIONS

- 8.1. As outlined in the report to Cabinet in November 2025, the 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 and their relationship to surrounding villages. 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.
- 8.2. The Strategy is delivery and development focussed, providing a comprehensive overview and summary of the Council's evidence base for development in and affecting town centres at **Part 1: Town Centres Context**. This section will assist landowners, architects, planners, and stakeholders bringing forward development proposals in understanding the relevant context for North Herts' town centres.
- 8.3. 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: Town Centre Guidance**, sets out a series of Guidance Notes. These Guidance Notes provide supplementary information to inform planning applications for development proposals affecting town centres.
- 8.4. Each of North Herts' town centres have specific strengths and weaknesses, offering their own unique offer and **Part 3: Individual Town Centre Strategies**, 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.
- 8.5 **Part 4: Further Council Actions and Funding Opportunities**, 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 Strategy.
- 8.6 The **Appendices** are to be read alongside the Strategy. These provide hyperlinks to access full documents listed in the Evidence Base at Part 1, policy recommendations from the Town Centre & Retail Study 2024 supporting Parts 2 and 3, and more detailed evidence notes on each town centre supporting Part 3.
- 8.7 Officers, working together with consultants (Lichfields), have updated the Strategy following public consultation. 84 individual responses were received. Three-quarters of respondents were residents of North Hertfordshire. Other respondents included those from the public sector (including Hertfordshire County Council), parish councils, local businesses, Town Centre BIDs and community groups.
- 8.8 A summary of the representations and responses is attached as Appendix 2. All responses have been read and modifications made to the Strategy as considered

relevant. Other comments raised have been documented and may not result in a proposed modification as they may already be addressed within the Strategy or in other Council or Hertfordshire County Council documents and strategies

8.9 In response to the representations, a number of further modifications have been made to the Strategy in relation to:

- (i) The status of the Strategy in relation to planning policy and the Council's role in delivering the Strategy.
 - The status of the strategy has been clarified advising that it has not been prepared as formal policy given the substantive and ongoing changes in the retail environment. However, it follows the general processes and principles for Supplementary Planning Documents and should therefore be treated as interim guidance until formal policy is developed and adopted through the Local Plan review.
 - References have been added to Part 1 and throughout the document to explain the Council's role in delivering the Strategy. This includes working with key stakeholders to prepare Delivery Plans for each town centre. Part 4, covering further actions and funding, has also been updated to set out the next steps following adoption, with preparation of the Delivery Plans identified as the next phase of work.
- (ii) The Strategy recognises the strong functional links between each town centre and the surrounding villages and rural areas that depend on them for services and facilities. It also acknowledges the important role of buses in connecting people who cannot drive or do not have access to a car. These points have been reflected throughout the Strategy, including in the individual town centre sections in Part 3 and the Council's further actions in Part 4.
- (ii) Part 2 guidance notes have been updated to:
 - clarify funding requirements and reference the Developer Contributions SPD in Guidance Note 1, which covers promoting town centre vitality;
 - strengthen Guidance Note 2 on built form, public realm and design by addressing safety, including street lighting and forthcoming national guidance on designing safer streets for women and girls;
 - recognise open spaces and trees as important features of the town's historic character, public realm and built environment in Guidance Note 3 on heritage and historic character;
 - prioritise sustainable travel over private car use and clarify the need for travel and mobility hubs, including provision for disabled people, in Guidance Note 4 on promoting sustainable travel; and
 - address access to public conveniences and reference the Department for Transport's Healthy Streets approach, with the aim of improving air quality, public health and the quality of the public realm, in Guidance Note 5 on community facilities.

- (iv) In Part 3, the vision statements, SWOT analyses and key priorities for each town centre have been updated, where relevant, to address the following shared themes:
- promoting public transport and better connections to railway stations and surrounding villages; integrating sustainable travel options, including walking and cycling; respecting heritage assets, conservation areas and local character; supporting cultural and leisure activities, the evening economy and local markets; and improving the public realm and public facilities.
 - The Strategy also identifies an opportunity to develop and strengthen each town centre's vision through its respective Delivery Plan.
- (v) Part 4 updates references to funding opportunities and notes that these may change, particularly in response to local government reorganisation and devolution arrangements. It also concludes with a new paragraph outlining the next steps for delivering the Strategy after adoption.
- 8.10 Other minor non-material corrections have been made throughout the Strategy for clarity, including relevant updates in response to changes in planning legislation and to the Evidence base in Part 1 to reflect recently adopted Council documents such as the Developer Contributions SPD and the Design Code SPD both recently adopted in June 2026 as well as referencing the 2025 Hertfordshire Growth Board Healthy and Safe Places Framework which sets out a county-wide approach to integrating health, community and recreational infrastructure, supporting well-being, reducing health inequalities and promoting active, sustainable lifestyles within settlements including town centres.
- 8.11 The Strategy has been updated taking into account representations received through the consultation process and is attached at Appendix 1
- 8.12 Subject to approval by Cabinet the Town Centres Strategy will be adopted and will be a material 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.
- 8.13 During preparation and consultation, there has been some comments of the scope of the Town Centres strategy and the suggestion of a more holistic approach encompassing areas such as business support and economic development. Officers' view is that this is, in part, due to an understandable friction between what stakeholders might have reasonably anticipated, based on a 'Plain English' understanding of the Council preparing a strategy for its town centres versus the more focused, planning-based origins set out above.
- 8.14 Officers equally accept that, in the past, there has been a fragmented approach to liaison with key town centre stakeholders. This has often involved seeking views through the lens of a particular Council document or project or has been limited by available capacity. There is a recognised need to reset these relationships and discussions are being held with town centre managers on this basis.
- 8.15 The intention is to move forward with a more holistic approach, holding broader conversations regarding our town centres and appropriately reflecting the issues and

priorities that emerge through these through the most appropriate plans, strategies and projects

- 8.16 The effective delivery of the Strategy – and this renewed working relationship - will require the Council to work closely with several partners and stakeholders. This will include the preparation of Delivery Plans for each centre. These will be high-level plans covering at least five years and focus on delivering the key town centre priorities and further actions identified in Parts 3 and 4 of the Strategy.
- 8.17 These would be aligned with the vision for each centre, set out core objectives, key priorities and actions to guide positive development and strengthen the identity, vitality and viability of each town. It is proposed working across service areas that the Council will lead their preparation, working collaboratively with key partners and stakeholders.
- 8.18 In addition to economic development capacity, funding for a Town Centre Project Officer post within the Place Directorate was previously agreed. This has been vacant for a number of months and is currently undergoing recruitment, see section 15 below on Human Resource implications.

9. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 9.1. Under the Terms of Reference for Cabinet, paragraph 5.7.18 of the Constitution states that the Cabinet should exercise the Council's functions as Local Planning Authority except to the extent that those functions are by law the responsibility of the Council or delegated to the Director: Place. This includes the preparation and adoption of planning strategies and guidance notes which do not form part of the Council Policy Framework.
- 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 Supporting documents and strategies to the Local Plan have previously been prepared as Supplementary Planning Documents (SPDs). These had a defined meaning and place within the statutory planning system and were subject to various regulatory requirements.
- 9.4 The Town Centres Strategy has closely followed the *process* for the preparation of an SPD. However, because its content diverges from the policies of the Local Plan – due to the changed circumstances outlined in the report – it was not possible to formally adopt it as an SPD. Due to Government changes to the planning system, it would now not be possible to adopt it as an SPD in any event. It is intended that, subject to future approval, the Town Centres Strategy would be adopted as a material planning consideration for relevant planning applications.
- 9.5 The weight to be attributed to any policy or policy document or material consideration is a matter for the decision-maker on a case-by-case basis. However, by following the steps outlined above it is considered that a future, adopted strategy could be considered broadly commensurate to a formal SPD and applied as such.

10. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 10.1. No new financial implications arising from this report. The general costs of preparing the Town Centres Strategy including consultancy and supplementary staffing costs have been met through existing revenue budgets (see also Human Resources Implications below). £90k was carried forward into 2026/27, an estimated £20k will be spent on updating and finalising the strategy. The remaining budget will be used to progress work on the preparation of the Delivery Plans.
- 10.2. The Town Centre Project Officer post as, referenced in para 15.3, will be funded for 2 years, the total cost of this will be £123k. There is £64k earmarked for this post with the planning reserve, and a further £40k of funding will be secured through a grant from MHCLG. The remaining funding will be from a combination of the existing Town Centre budget and Planning earmarked reserves.

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. The Town Centres Strategy is listed as a Corporate Risk relating to a key project in the Council Delivery Plan. As part of current Council Delivery Plan monitoring arrangements, the risk entry is reviewed and updated on a quarterly basis and reported to Cabinet. Not having a Town Centres Strategy in place that provides a strategic direction and overall policy guidance could lead to speculative development that undermines the function of town centres thereby impacting their vitality and viability. A lack of sufficient resource could also lead to delays in developing individual delivery plans and achieving strategic aims. Pending adoption of the Town Centres Strategy, the combination of related risks is assessed as a medium risk.

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 identified through the preparation of the Delivery Plans supporting the Town centres Strategy 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. There are no known direct Environmental impacts or requirements that apply to this report and its recommendations; this is a procedural decision.
- 14.2 The adopted Local Plan policies which implement the guidance and priorities within the Town Centres Strategy have been subject to statutory environmental assessment as part of the Local Plan examination. Officers will consider the environmental implications of any developments or improvements within or nearby the town centres when assessing planning applications, when reviewing retail and town centre policies in the updated Local Plan and through the preparation of the Delivery Plans.

15. HUMAN RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

- 15.1 There are no new human resource implications arising from the contents of this report, other than officer requirements to publish the Strategy, which is part of their duties.
- 15.2 A Town Centre Project Officer post was established through a revenue budget growth bid a number of years ago with the intention it would lead on delivery of the Town Centres Strategy. This post was never successfully filled on a permanent basis despite multiple rounds of advertisement and recruitment. Resource for the project has been provided through a combination of agency contractors, consultant support, fixed-term appointments to the establishment post and backfilling by other officers.
- 15.3 The Town Centre Project Officer post is currently vacant and is undergoing recruitment. There is sufficient funding within the town centres budget (see paragraphs 10.1 and 10.2 above) and / or arising from salary underspend from this current vacancy, plus seeking further grant award through the MHCLG – Funded Salary Support for Associated Programme Recruitment through Public Practice, to support the work going forward on the Delivery Plans following final adoption of the Town Centres Strategy by Cabinet. The Place Directorate has successfully recruited staff through Public Practice, an organisation committed to leveraging multidisciplinary built environment skills to address shortages of public sector planners.
- 15.4 Any further officer support required to deliver on the projects and priorities in the Town Centres Strategy will need to be discussed with other senior managers across other directorates regarding work priorities and available resources as appropriate.

16. APPENDICES

- 16.1 Appendix 1: North Hertfordshire Town Centres Strategy (Sept 2026) and Supporting Appendices
- 16.2 Appendix 2: Summary of Consultation: North Hertfordshire Town Centres Strategy

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18. BACKGROUND PAPERS

- 18.1 [Cabinet Report 19 November 2025 – Draft Town Centres Strategy](#) and associated [Appendix A – Draft North Herts Town Centre Strategy for Public consultation.](#)
- 18.2 [Town Centres and Retail Study \(December 2024\) prepared by Lichfields](#)
- 18.3 [Adopted Local Plan \(2011 – 2031\)](#)
- 18.4 Various [Strategic Planning Matters Reports](#) updating Cabinet at the following meetings:
 - [16 January 2024](#)
 - [19 March 2024](#)
 - [09 July 2024](#)
 - [14 January 2025](#)
 - [24 June 2025.](#)
 - [23 September 2025](#)
 - [20 January 2026](#)
 - [14 April 2026](#)
 - [16 June 2026](#)
- 18.5 Various [MIS Notes](#) published in February 2024, June 2024, and January 2026 available upon request.