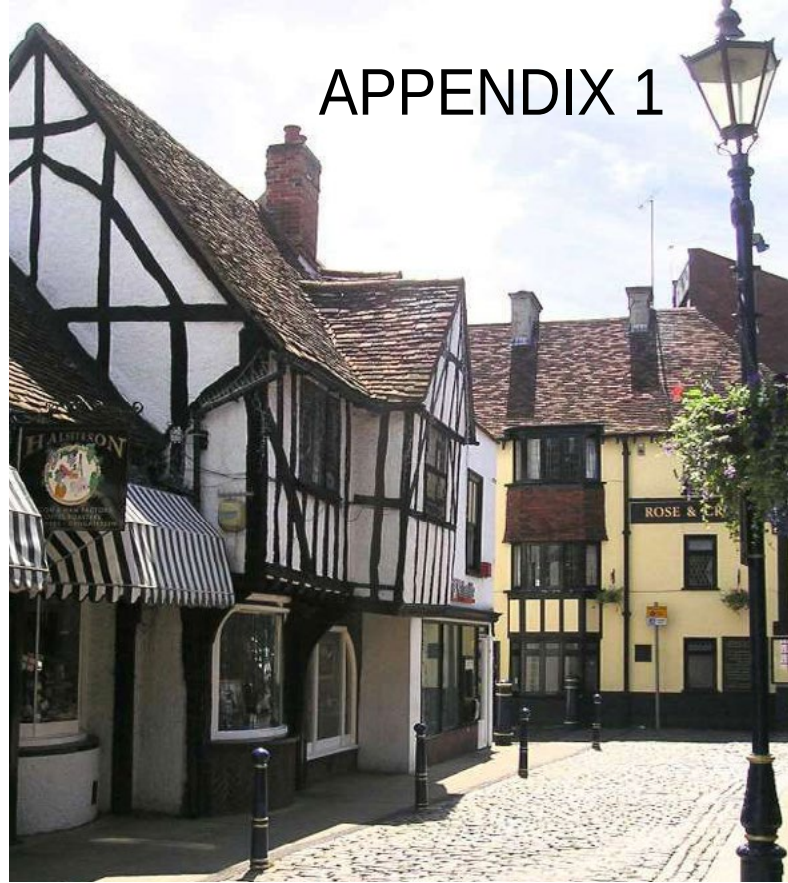




Town Centres Strategy 2026-2030



**North
Herts**
Council

Executive summary

This Strategy sets out North Hertfordshire District Council's vision, evidence base and priorities for four town centres (Hitchin, Letchworth Garden City, Royston, and Baldock) to guide development, investment, and Council action ahead of the review of the North Herts Local Plan 2011-2031 (adopted 2022). It supersedes the Council's previous town centre strategies (2004-2008).

The Strategy has been prepared following the general principles of a Supplementary Planning Document and, while not formal planning policy, should be treated as an important material consideration in determining planning applications affecting town centres. It draws on updated 2023/24 evidence reflecting the impacts of Covid-19, e-commerce and cost-of-living pressures, together with an independent resident survey (1,001 respondents), a stakeholder workshop and consultation with Business Improvement Districts (BIDs), landowners, and town councils. The Strategy will be followed by town-specific Delivery Plans covering a period of at least five years.

Structure of the Strategy

- Part 1** – Town Centre Context: summarises the evidence base across four themes - land use and retail; built environment; transport, access and movement; and community.
- Part 2** – Town Centre Guidance: Guidance Notes bridging the adopted and emerging Local Plan to inform interpretation of current town centre policy.
- Part 3** – Individual Town Centre Strategies: a vision, SWOT analysis and set of key priorities for each of the four towns.
- Part 4** – Further Council Actions: cross-cutting actions across the four themes, together with a summary of funding and delivery options.

Evidence of retail and leisure need

Updated capacity projections indicate no pressing requirement to allocate additional sites for major retail or leisure development over the next decade beyond those already identified in the current Local Plan. Combined retail and food & beverage floorspace need is projected to grow cumulatively to around 5,170 sq.m (gross) by 2036, the majority of which could be met by reoccupying vacant units rather than new development.

Letchworth Garden City has the greatest concentration of vacant floorspace and, reflecting overlapping catchments and population growth from planned development, has the most potential to accommodate capacity redistributed from Hitchin and Baldock. Existing and Local Plan mixed-use allocations (including HT11, HT12, LG19, LG21 and RY12) are considered sufficient to meet any long-term residual need.

Town centre visions and priorities

Hitchin

North Herts' largest town and principal shopping and commercial centre, valued for its historic market-town character and river setting. The vision for the town centre is to maintain this character while creating an attractive, mixed-use, accessible and lively centre, optimising underused assets such as the River Hiz and St Mary's Church.

Key priorities:

- Delivering the Churchgate Regeneration Zone as a mixed-use, significant development.
- Joint public realm, connectivity and wayfinding improvements.
- Development of a Cultural Economy Strategy.
- Strengthening Hitchin's role as a sustainable transport hub.

Letchworth Garden City

The second largest town and the country's first Garden City, with distinctive heritage stewarded by the Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation. The vision for the centre is to serve as a civic and social core for North Herts, that upholds Garden City principles while supporting future growth, investment, and resident and business opportunities.

Key priorities:

- Town centre development opportunities and repurposing of vacant units.
- Enhancement of The Wynd and the markets' offer.
- Growing the evening economy.
- Improved connectivity and links, including improvements to the station forecourt.

Royston

A market town with a rich heritage including Royston Cave, Royston Museum and Priory Memorial Gardens. The vision is a thriving centre with a clearly identifiable, vibrant heart built on heritage, culture, and sustainable travel.

Key priorities:

- Promoting Royston's key heritage assets and exploring the potential for a Destination Management Organisation.
- Supporting independent and speciality operators as the centre evolves.
- Improving the public realm.
- Expanding the market offer.

Baldock

North Herts' smallest market town, with a historic High Street, strong pedestrian character, and café culture. The vision is to maximise these strengths and capture the benefits of significant planned growth around the town as new residents and workers visit and spend in the centre.

Key priorities:

- Managing the growth and evolution of the centre.
- Improving connectivity.
- Ongoing monitoring of town centre health.
- Capturing the benefits of planned growth for the town centre.

Delivery and funding

Delivery of the Strategy cannot be achieved by the Council alone and will depend on close, ongoing coordination with the BIDs, the Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation, town councils, landowners, and other stakeholders. The Strategy identifies a range of potential public and private funding sources, including government growth and heritage funds, developer contributions, and public-private partnerships, that the Council may draw on to implement the identified priorities.

Next steps

Following adoption, the Strategy will inform planning decisions and future Local Plan policy and will be put into practice through town-specific Delivery Plans setting out detailed objectives, actions and monitoring arrangements for each centre.

Contents

Foreword	3
Introduction	4
Part 1: Town centre context	6
1A: Introduction and context	6
1B: The Council's role	8
1C: The purpose of the town centres strategy	9
1D: Town centres evidence	9
Part 2: Town Centre guidance	26
2A: Town Centre developments	26
2B: Guidance notes	27
Part 3: Individual Town Centre Strategies	35
3A: Hitchin	36
3B: Letchworth Garden City	40
3C: Royston	45
3D: Baldock	49
Part 4: Further Council actions	54
Glossary	60
Appendices	
Appendix 1: Resource list and hyperlinks	64
Appendix 2: Town Centre policy direction	66
Appendix 3: Individual town centre evidence notes	70
Appendix 3A: Hitchin town centre evidence notes	70
Appendix 3B: Letchworth Garden City town centre evidence notes	76
Appendix 3C: Royston town centre evidence notes	82
Appendix 3D: Baldock town centre evidence notes	87

Foreword

Introduction

This Town Centres Strategy will support development in and surrounding North Hertfordshire's four town centres of Hitchin, Letchworth Garden City, Royston and Baldock, setting out the Council's vision for the town centres across the following themes:

Land use and retail

The Council will ensure that any significant development within the town centres contributes and strengthens the economic, environmental and social benefits of the town centre as well as reinforcing its local distinctiveness as a special place to invest, live and visit. Built environment

Built environment

The Council requires high quality design from landowners and developers to develop and maintain buildings, the built form, the public realm and open spaces in town centres that will reinforce the local distinctiveness of the town centres, mitigate climate change, support ecological networks and have regard to adopted and emerging design guides, design codes and other guidance as agreed with the Council

Transport, access and movement

The Council will seek to provide inclusive and convenient sustainable transport and active travel options for all users to move with autonomy to support the economic vitality of the town centres as competitive hubs for resources, amenities and experiences, opportunities for social interaction and promoting physical health and well-being.

Community

The Council will utilise the planning system to facilitate social interactions, and the creation of healthy, inclusive communities. The town centres can support community well-being with access to facilities, secure environments and opportunities to thrive.

The Strategy is delivery and development focused, providing a comprehensive overview and summary of the Council's evidence base for development in and affecting town centres at **Part 1**. This part will assist landowners, architects, planners, and stakeholders bringing forward development proposals in understanding the relevant context for North Herts' town centres. It should be noted that the Strategy sits at a high level and will be supported by Delivery Plans for each of the four towns. While the Strategy is a 'point-in-time' document, the Delivery Plans will be kept updated to reflect the latest evidence.

North Herts Local Plan 2011-2031 was adopted in November 2022, and the Council is currently progressing the Local Plan Update. In order to bridge the gap between current and emerging Local Plan and provide further details and guidance to support compliance with relevant town centre policies in the existing Local Plan, **Part 2** sets out a series of Guidance Notes. These Guidance Notes will provide supplementary information to inform planning applications for development proposals affecting town centres.

Each of North Herts' town centres has specific strengths and challenges, each with a unique offer, and **Part 3** provides a summary of key priorities for each centre. These priorities are informed by the stakeholder consultation and the evidence gathered.

The Strategy then sets out key actions and funding options for the Council at **Part 4**, including a summary of risks and opportunities, and suggested approaches for delivery, in addition to recommendations of suggested Further Actions to be taken forward by the Council. On-going engagement and support of key identified partners and stakeholders will be important in terms of delivering the identified priorities for each of the town centres and the recommended further actions.

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**¹.

Overview

This planning-based Town Centres Strategy draws together clear threads from the existing evidence and stakeholder consultation. It interprets relevant Local Plan policies through **guidance** and summarises challenges and opportunities through **SWOT analysis**, presenting the findings as a series of **key priorities**.

¹ The appendices to this Strategy provide a baseline for each town centre, which will be reviewed and updated as part of the delivery plans and the emerging Local Plan using the most current datasets available. The Strategy is a live document and will be updated as new evidence emerges.

How to read this document

The Town Centres Strategy will serve various roles for stakeholders living, visiting, working and investing in North Herts' town centres. As a guide to using this document, example use cases for each stakeholder are summarised below:

- **Council members and officers:** Predominantly focused on Parts 3 and 4, summarising priorities for town centres and next steps and potential funding and delivery scenarios. Part 4, while predominantly applicable to Council Members and Officers, will be of interest for town centre stakeholders to understand how the Council may bring the priorities forward.
- **Town centre stakeholders [business improvement districts (BIDs), residents, businesses etc.]:** Part 3 will be of most interest, informing stakeholders of the Council's key priorities for the centres identified through the planning-based strategy. Part 1 will also provide details of the Council's previous work, evidence base and decisions.
- **Landowners and developers:** Part 3 will provide a steer on the Council's planning-based priorities for the centres, whilst Part 2 will assist with understanding of existing Local Plan policies and Part 1 provides a summary of the Council's broader plans and ambitions.
- **Consultants and development professionals:** Will utilise Part 1 to provide references to key evidence, Part 2 to inform interpretation of Local Plan policies and Part 3 to understand key priorities for delivery within the respective centre. Part 1: Town Centre Context

Image: Market Square, Hitchin



Part 1: Town centre context

1A: Introduction and context

Introduction

In 2022, the Council adopted its Local Plan, a plan which allocates development sites and provides policy to guide developers and development decision-makers over the period 2011-2031. The town centre policies for the district are set out in the Local Plan. These policies establish the amount of retail required to meet the projected population growth and also allocates parcels of land for retail/mixed use development. The policies were developed through evidence gathering from experts and stakeholders and were subject to both public consultation and formal examination by the government's appointed Planning Inspector.

The evidence for the retail and town centre policies in the Local Plan was published in 2016 and provides data to 2031. In 2023, the Council commissioned new evidence for the town centres to take account of the impact of Covid-19, online shopping, the cost-of-living increases, and new population projections to provide fresh retail needs projections to 2031 and 2036.

This Strategy takes account of this updated evidence and its implications for policy and strategy in the context of the North Herts' town centres that informed the planning policy approach set out in the Council's 2022 Local Plan. Following consultation and adoption by the Council's Cabinet, this Town Centres Strategy will inform future policies, strategies and decisions.

This Town Centres Strategy covers all four town centres and will supersede the Council's previous town centre strategies (2004-2008) upon adoption. It will be followed by a suite of Delivery Plans for each town centre with a focus on delivering the key town centre priorities and further actions identified within this Strategy.



Image: Letchworth 1910



Image: Baldock 1965



Image: Royston 1935



Image: Hitchin

North Herts' towns

North Herts is a rural district with four historic towns, a bounty of charming villages and protected townscapes and landscapes. The district has strong transport links by rail and road (A1 and A505), and economic interactions with major settlements that surround it: Cambridge to the north-east, Stevenage to the east, London to the south and Luton to the west. These complement the retail, leisure, business and entertainment offer for the residents and businesses in North Herts. In turn, the district attracts visitors and investors from these and other nearby settlements.

Hitchin

Is the largest North Herts town, with a 2021 Census population of 35,220, and dates back to at least the 7th century. The town centre has a medieval layout and developed out from its marketplace, alongside the River Hiz. The town's trade developed with agricultural goods sales including lavender, corn and malt. Hitchin expanded from the 19th century when it was connected to the Great Northern rail line from London on the Cambridge branch line, and later in the 20th century with the M1 via the A505 to the west, and the A1 (M) to the east via the A602 road connections.

Letchworth Garden City (Letchworth)

Is the second largest town in North Herts with a 2021 Census population of 33,990. It has developed from an ancient parish, as noted in the Domesday Book of 1086, to the world's first Garden City in 1903. The town was connected to the Great Northern East Coast rail line to London with its Cambridge branch line in 1903, and had its first Garden City homes completed in 1904. The modern town was established by investors, who bought up land to create the world's first Garden City. Much of the town's industrial, office and retail premises are now owned by a charity, the Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation. The A1(M) to the east directly connects the Garden City to the national road network.



Royston

Is the third largest town in North Herts with a 2021 Census population of 17,448. It is located at a crossroads of the Roman Ermine Street and the prehistoric Icknield Way. It was once a settlement straddling both Hertfordshire and Cambridgeshire. Its market charter was granted by Richard I in 1189 and the market currently takes place every Wednesday and Saturday. A Corn Exchange opened in 1829 and is now home to retail premises. The town is linked to London and Cambridge by the East Coast Cambridge rail branch line and to the national road network via the A10 and A505.

Baldock

Is North Herts' smallest market town with a 2021 Census population of 10,615. As a prehistoric town, Baldock town centre has mainly 14th- to 16th-century buildings. Its wide High Street was formed by the demolition of up to three rows of buildings and now serves as a through road with parking and outdoor seating areas. The Great North Road and the Icknield Way traverse Baldock and the town has traditionally been a resting point along these routes. Baldock is also on Cambridge branch railway line.

The Strategy recognises the strong functional relationship between each town centre and the surrounding villages and rural areas that rely on them for services and facilities. The role of buses in linking these is critical for people who cannot drive or do not have access to a car.

1B: The Council's role

The Council has a strategic role in town centre management and renewal. This is acknowledged in its Council Plan covering the period 2024-2028 which includes four priorities:

Thriving communities: Reducing health inequalities by working closely with partners like Everyone Active, to deliver physical activity programmes for older adults and less active residents. Continuing our commitment to providing grants to local organisations and investing in projects to strengthen the fabric of the district's towns and villages and a continued focus on our community safety priorities to foster safer and more inclusive communities.

Accessible services: The Council will continue modernising its services by enhancing online accessibility, simplifying customer experiences, and investing in facilities like leisure centres and parks.

Responsible growth: As the Local Plan continues to be implemented, North Herts will see much-needed housing and responsible development that considers the district's infrastructure and sustainability needs. Strategies to rejuvenate town centres and support local businesses are also central to the plan.

Sustainability: The Council strives for sustainable service delivery both in terms of budget setting and protecting our environment. Responding to the climate and ecological emergencies, the council is committing to reducing carbon emissions and improving biodiversity.

The priority of Responsible Growth directly supports the creation of a new Town Centres Strategy for North Herts, including individual town-specific delivery plans:

We also want to support economic growth across our district. We will prepare Town Centre Strategies and an Economic Development and Tourism Strategy to outline our approach to enhancing our town centres, business engagement and support, tourism, and emerging economic growth opportunities. We will work closely with businesses and other partners to deliver on our key objectives.

Whilst Responsible Growth is the key priority for this Strategy, the other three priorities of the Council Plan will also contribute to the success of the town centres through its service delivery in working together with partners and the community. The Strategy cannot be delivered by the Council alone and will be dependent on close collaboration with key partners – including business groups such as the Business Improvement Districts (BIDs), landlords and leaseholders of town centre premises, community and other organisations – who may best work together to protect and enhance the economic, environmental and social benefits of the district's town centres.

These benefits would include increases in visitors to the town centres, with associated uplifts in spending, alongside more sustainable linked trips within and across the towns and efforts to support the diverse and resilient mix of uses in the centres that will continue to serve residents, visitors and businesses within the centres.

The Council has collaborated with stakeholders including residents and visitors, local organisations, adjacent local authorities, and economic partnerships in producing this Town Centres Strategy. This has included an independent public survey of 1,001 residents by mobile and landline telephone in January to February 2024, a workshop with stakeholders² with an interest in the district's town centres in June 2024 and discussions with relevant BIDs, landowners and Royston Town Council. This Strategy has also been formally consulted upon, including with developers, key stakeholders, local businesses and members of the public.

The Strategy will be supported by Delivery Plans for each of the four towns. 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 this Strategy. 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. The Council will lead their preparation, working collaboratively with key partners and stakeholders.

² Stakeholders invited to the workshop include: Hertfordshire Futures, Herts County Council, Hertfordshire Building Preservation Trust, Baldock Town Partnership, Baldock Bygrave and Clothall Planning Group, Baldock Events Forum, Hitchin Forum – Transport and Planning Group, The Hitchin Society, Hitchin Market Traders Association, Hitchin Historical Society, Hitchin Youth Trust, Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation, Royston Town Council, Royston Community Association, On Our Doorstep, North Hertfordshire College, North Herts Minority Ethnic Forum, Martin Group, Visit Hitchin (Business Improvement District), Love Letchworth (Business Improvement District), Royston First (Business Improvement District), settle, Martin Group, Decarbonise Letchworth (Transition Town Letchworth), Garden Square, Town House Publishing, John Shilcock, North Hertfordshire District Council Teams (Community Partnerships, Enterprise, Development Management, Strategic Planning) and Neighbouring authorities (St. Albans, Luton, East Hertfordshire District Council, Welwyn Hatfield, South Cambridgeshire, Central Bedfordshire, Uttlesford, Stevenage).

1C: The purpose of the town centres strategy

This Town Centres Strategy is to be read in conjunction with North Herts Local Plan 2011-2031 (adopted 2022), providing town centre businesses, residents, developers and other stakeholders with guidance on the interpretation of relevant town centre policies, and the priorities for the respective centres.

The Town Centres Strategy will provide clear guidance to support and maintain each town's unique successful qualities and place identities, and to improve the vitality and viability of each town centre to ensure that change and development occur in a positive way while the Local Plan is under review. The guidance and recommendations will also inform the Council's future Local Plan policies.

Given the substantive and ongoing changes in the retail environment, this Strategy has not been prepared as formal planning policy. However, it has followed the general processes and principles for Supplementary Planning Documents and should be appropriately interpreted as interim guidance until such time as formal policy is advanced and adopted through the Local Plan review.

The Strategy should be given weight as an important material consideration in the assessment and determination of planning applications in and surrounding North Hertfordshire's four town centres of Hitchin, Letchworth, Royston and Baldock. The Strategy supersedes the Council's previous suite of Town Centre Strategies (2004-2008).

Part 1 sets out the Council's evidence base for development in and affecting town centres.

Part 2 provides the Guidance Notes providing supplementary information to support compliance with relevant town centre policies.

Part 3 focuses on the strategies and priorities for North Herts' town centres.

Part 4 summarises the next steps, options and key considerations for delivery and funding.

The following sections have been divided into four themes for ease of reference:

Land use and retail

Built environment

Transport, access and movement

Community

1D: Town centres evidence

Further information on **Part 1: Town Centre Context** is found in **Appendix 1: Resource List and Hyperlinks**

Introduction

This section focuses on the evidence base which will underpin the North Hertfordshire Town Centres Strategy. Each part is structured by a strategic theme and starts by outlining the relevant Local Plan and National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) policies to provide the policy context for each theme. It then outlines which documents from North Hertfordshire's evidence base relate to each theme and explains how each document relates to town centres. Finally, it summarises the recommendations and guidelines that each piece of evidence provides for town centres in the District.

This chapter explains how each document/set of documents can inform the North Hertfordshire Town Centres Strategy and ultimately, how they help meet the Council's Local Plan goals and vision. These local policy and evidence documents are underpinned by relevant national policy and guidance.

Theme 1: Land use and retail

Relevant subthemes:

Retail Needs, Allocations, Designations, and Impact Assessments; Vitality and Viability in the Town Centres.

NPPF sections of relevance:

Chapter 8: Ensuring the vitality of town centres

Local plan policies of relevance:

- **Policy ETC3:** New Retail, Leisure and Other Main Town Centre Development
- **Policy ETC4:** Primary Shopping Frontages
- **Policy ETC5:** Secondary Shopping Frontages
- **Policy SP4:** Town Centres, Local Centres and Community Shops.

Appendices are to be read alongside the Strategy, setting out key supporting details. These include:

Appendix 1 lists the supporting Evidence Base documents, including hyperlinks.

Appendix 2 extracts the policy recommendations from the Town Centre & Retail Study 2024.

Appendix 3 provides detailed evidence notes for each town centre.

Relevant evidence

BID brochures

BID brochure – Hitchin (Visit Hitchin BID, 2024): The brochure explains how the Hitchin BID is working to support businesses and the town centre, for the 2024-29 business plan.

The recommendations developed for the town centre include the following:

- New initiatives to encourage the “experience economy”.
- Increase promotions in quieter areas of the Town Centre to encourage visitors to stay longer.
- Increase business support on a local and national level.
- Improvement to town centre parking and accessibility.
- Force the pace of the Council's Town Centre Strategy.

The objectives of the BID fall under four headings: vibrant, clean & safe, promoted, and business support. Under ‘vibrant’, initiatives include winter and summer displays, events, trails and activities. ‘Clean & safe’ focuses on the teams of Day and Night Rangers, measures to reduce crime, and deep cleaning of main streets in the town centres. Initiatives to promote Hitchin include developing the experience economy in the town, producing publications to promote the town centre, and promoting the town online through the VisitHitchin brand. Business support actions include business representation, support for regeneration projects, training sessions and the ‘H-Town Pounds’ scheme.

BID brochure – Letchworth Garden City (Love Letchworth BID, 2024): The brochure outlines the priorities and objectives for the BID which have been proposed for the next five years (Starting 2024). They include: (1) a 21st century Garden City which is connected to its business community, residents, and visitors; (2) a vibrant ‘Go To’ place which is attractive for everyone in Letchworth; and (3) a place that has strong sense of identity and is recognised locally, nationally, and internationally. Letchworth BID propose to undertake the following activities:

- Organise an annual calendar of events, campaigns and street entertainment.
- Introduce ‘shop local’ promotional opportunities and loyalty schemes.
- Maximise marketing and promotional opportunities of the town centre.
- Enhance landscaping, greenery and planting across the town centre.

- Maintain and extend the operation of CCTV cameras across the town centre to help address anti-social behaviour and crime.
- Coordinate an enhanced business waste collection service, including recycling.
- Be the voice of businesses in the wider town centre meetings, such as the Town Centre Recovery Group and Sustainable Travel Group.
- Explore opportunities for businesses to reduce overheads by working and seeking services collectively as a BID.

BID brochure – Royston (Royston First BID, 2024): the brochure outlines the ambitions and initiatives for Royston BID over the next five years including town investment events, smart radios, new industrial estate signage to assist with deliveries, youth employment initiatives to tackle anti-social behaviour and support youth, a ShopSafe app to protect employees and customers, fire extinguisher and first aid training for businesses and employees, quarterly networking events and digital signage to provide free advertising space for businesses.



Image: Market Square, Hitchin

How do BID brochures inform the North Herts Town Centres Strategy?

The BID Brochures outline proposals and ambitions which are unique to improving the business prospects within each town centre, which have informed the general principles and measures within this Strategy. The BID Brochures contribute towards meeting the Local Plan's vision of North Herts as "attractive and vibrant" with a "robust and prosperous economy", and generally boost the "viability and vitality" of the town centres.

Recovery reports for Baldock, Hitchin, Letchworth GC and Royston (People & Places, 2022): These are part of a district-wide initiative by the Council to work with key stakeholders in Baldock, Hitchin, Letchworth GC, and Royston. Published in 2022.

In the short term, the reports outline a Covid-19 recovery plan for its town centres. In the medium to longer-term, they set out a development strategy framework to assist town centres in developing successfully over the next decade.

They provide the following recommendations:

- Finalise the development plan and 'forward framework': Key stakeholder organisations to review and comment on the draft development plan and its forward framework to enable People & Places (a partnership independent of the Council with a principal goal of revitalising town centres) to finalise it.
- Publish a stakeholder summary: A short, illustrated version of the development plan findings can be published by People & Places for wider distribution, possibly supported by an accompanying video presentation.
- Initial business engagement and survey: The publication of the summary should be used to begin engagement with businesses through visits, meetings and a survey to gauge their perceptions, priorities and reaction to proposals.
- Meetings of theme-based sub-groups: to discuss the development of proposals for partnership working/governance.
- Partnership development and governance: Existing stakeholders as well as business representatives need to determine the partnership development and governance arrangements for revitalising Baldock's town centre. This includes focusing on the representation and roles for a core group responsible and equipped to manage the coordination of activity, including identifying resources, communication and engagement with wider stakeholders.
- Determine initial delivery priorities: The evolving partnership needs to determine initial delivery priorities that underpin the long-term strategy and capacity, as well as demonstrate 'quick wins' to stakeholders and the wider community. The Shared Prosperity Fund (SPF) provides an initial and flexible injection of funds to help achieve this.

Image: Hitchin



How do the recovery reports inform the North Herts Town Centres Strategy?

The recommendations of the recovery reports provide governance advice for preparing strategies to improve town centres, including how stakeholders – including the Council and other local bodies and businesses – can best collaborate to implement the proposals, as well as the recovery strategy more generally.

Town centre strategies (2004-2008)

Town centre strategy – Hitchin (NHDC, 2005):

Published in 2005, the Hitchin strategy sets out a vision and key aims that acknowledge the historic character of Hitchin and propose the enhancement of its town centre to serve the local community and attract visitors.

The strategy aims to guide physical development and maximise the future viability and vitality of Hitchin town centre, whilst emphasising its historic character, its local distinctiveness and the needs of its local community. The strategy allocated five key development sites at Paynes Park; Crown House; Post Office; Ransoms; plus Churchgate and its environs. Notably, Crown House, the old Post Office Site, Ransoms and part of the rear of Paynes Park have been developed since the initial publication of the strategy, providing mixed-use developments comprising mostly residential with retail at ground floor level.

Town centre strategy – Letchworth GC (NHDC, 2006): Published in 2006, the Strategy sets out the vision, objectives and planning strategy for the town centre including the allocation of opportunity sites. The Strategy outlines the proposed approach towards conservation management and urban design in the centre, as well as proposals for improving public realm and transport.

It proposes to expand the town centre's retail provision with increased floorspace and more stores, accommodating for greater provision of smaller specialist stores and a greater choice in food shopping, as well as ensuring that its character and design features as the first Garden City are protected and enhanced. Additionally, it explains that tourism, business and investment in the town centre will be promoted.

It proposes measures to improve the public realm and pedestrian environment, to attract visitors and encourage them to spend time there and recognises that more visitors will require improved

parking management, better security, improved public transport, and improved facilities for walking and cycling.

The Strategy also seeks to ensure that open spaces and gardens that contribute to the landscape character of the Garden City are protected and enhanced for their amenity and environmental value including biodiversity.

Town centre strategy – Royston (NHDC, 2008):

Published in 2008, the Royston strategy sets out the Council's vision and aims for the town centre in the next 15 years. Seven opportunity sites were identified as potential locations for development.

The Royston Town Centre Strategy highlighted that through traffic is directed onto local distributor roads outside of the main town centre shopping areas. While allowing access to the town centre businesses, through traffic can interrupt and detract from the appearance, amenity of the town centre and ease of pedestrian movements.

Town centre strategy – Baldock (NHDC, 2004):

Published in 2004, the Baldock strategy promotes opportunities for enhancement of the town centre's street scene.

The Strategy for Baldock also outlines a number of improvements to the town centre following the opening of the Baldock Bypass, including retaining the High Street as a wide, open space when undertaking any future enhancements, and respecting the historic layout and character of the town centre through enhancements to the streets and new developments.

The Strategy also seeks to continue to encourage retail and specialist shops into the town centre, improve and promote the Baldock Market and the use of the market area for other events, develop a strong Chamber of Trade, and promoting Baldock's heritage, cultural and leisure facilities.



How do the existing town centre strategies for the North Herts towns inform the new North Herts Town Centres Strategy?

Although superseded following the adoption of this Strategy, the previous North Herts Town Centre Strategies provide useful context, as their structure and recommendations can be transferable across the documents and across different towns. Further, the set of documents directly address issues of conservation, heritage character, public transport, economic vitality, and viability, all of which are issues which help meet the goals of the town centre vision

North Hertfordshire town centres & retail study (Lichfields, 2024): The study includes an assessment of future retail and leisure-related development needs within the District's main town centres of Baldock, Hitchin, Letchworth, and Royston.

Since the previous studies, amendments to national planning policies in the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) and the Use Classes Order (UCO) have allowed for greater flexibility of uses within town centres, without requiring planning permission, through the integration of Use Class E. Key trends, such as the implications of Brexit, the Covid-19 pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis, continue to affect the high street and demand for town centre uses, which means town centres have had to change and diversify over the past years. Shopping behaviour will continue to change, subject to other emerging changes and uncertainties, and town centres will need to respond by providing a combined retail and leisure experience.

There is likely to be a shift from retail space to more food and beverage and leisure, entertainment, and cultural uses, with vacant shop premises converting to these uses. This also provides an opportunity for a flexible approach to new formats and uses where they would support the overall vitality and viability of centres and reoccupy long-term vacant premises. Such uses could be encouraged where they complement the existing mix of uses in the area and would support the evening economy across the District's town centres. Not all vacant units will be suitable for conversion to these uses; therefore, new development may be required to accommodate some new uses.

The combined cumulative total floorspace capacity projections for all retail and food and beverage floorspace is just over 5,000 sq.m gross up to 2036. Based on a reasonable reduction in shop vacancy rates, reoccupied space could in theory accommodate around three quarters of the projected need up to 2036. However, these floorspace projections should not be adopted as rigid targets, nor as maximum or minimum requirements, but be viewed as broad guidance and as a starting point for the review of site-specific allocations and development management policies.

The capacity projections set out at Appendix 3, 4, and 5 of the 2024 Town Centres & Retail Study suggest no pressing requirements to allocate new sites for major retail or commercial leisure developments to accommodate projected growth for the next decade. The priority in the short- to medium-term would be for the reoccupation of vacant shop units, with existing mixed-use development allocations and new facilities in the Strategic Housing Sites being sufficient to cover any long-term residual need.

Recommendations:

- Regarding town centre growth, national policy requires that a range of suitable sites should be allocated to meet the retail development needs of a variety of scales and types, to accommodate for at least ten years and preferably up to 2036. The main concentration of vacant shop floorspace is in Letchworth, which in turn means it has the most potential to accommodate growth alongside existing allocations.
- The potential to redistribute capacity from Baldock and Hitchin to Letchworth should be explored, with opportunities to reoccupy vacated retail spaces across other town centre uses considered viable.
- The leisure expenditure projections indicate there may be potential to accommodate an additional 1,700 sq.m gross of commercial leisure and cultural floorspace by 2036, which could include any combination of two medium-sized health and fitness facilities, new leisure innovations and small-scale tourist attractions and cultural facilities. As main town centre uses, these facilities should be directed to town centre locations. The location and distribution of any new facilities would depend on the nature of the proposal and operator interest. However, it is expected that these facilities would be located within the district's larger towns, unless suitable alternative town centre opportunities present themselves.



Image: Sun Street, Hitchin

- Overall, North Herts has a reasonably strong evening economy, particularly in terms of restaurant uses. The emerging Local Plan review should recognise and foster the potential for uses that enhance the evening and night-time economy in centres, albeit recognising potential negative environmental and amenity effects and considering appropriate management strategies and mitigation measures.
- No change to the existing hierarchy of centres is considered necessary. The network of town, village and neighbourhood centres should be protected and enhanced to ensure sustainable shopping patterns and that there is appropriate accessibility to important facilities for all sections of the community.
- The need for town centre boundaries and primary/secondary shopping frontages should be reconsidered, for example in Baldock, where a separate town centre boundary and a defined secondary shopping frontage is potentially unnecessary.
- The primary shopping area (PSA) designation can fulfil the purposes of both primary and secondary frontages in most town centres. Relatively low retail floorspace capacity projections suggest there is no need to extend the existing town centre boundaries to accommodate future growth, but longer-term projections of an under-supply of floorspace implies a contraction is also unwarranted. However, as town centre boundaries are quite widely drawn in most centres, predominantly residential areas on the peripheries of town centres could be removed. Notably, main town centre uses (as defined by the National Planning Policy Framework) would continue to be protected within town centre boundaries.

Overall, North Herts has a reasonably strong evening economy, particularly in terms of restaurant uses. The emerging Local Plan review should recognise and foster the potential for uses that enhance the evening and night-time economy in centres, albeit recognising potential negative environmental and amenity effects and considering appropriate management strategies and mitigation measures.

No change to the existing hierarchy of centres is considered necessary. The network of town, village and neighbourhood centres should be protected and enhanced to ensure sustainable shopping patterns and that there is appropriate accessibility to important facilities for all sections of the community.

The need for town centre boundaries and primary/secondary shopping frontages should be reconsidered, for example in Baldock, where a separate town centre boundary and a defined secondary shopping frontage is potentially unnecessary.

The primary shopping area (PSA) designation can fulfil the purposes of both primary and secondary frontages in most town centres. Relatively low retail floorspace capacity projections suggest there is no need to extend the existing town centre boundaries to accommodate future growth, but longer-term projections of an under-supply of floorspace implies a contraction is also unwarranted. However, as town centre boundaries are quite widely drawn in most centres, predominantly residential areas on the peripheries of town centres could be removed. Notably, main town centre uses (as defined by the National Planning Policy Framework) would continue to be protected within town centre boundaries.

Image: St Mary's Church, Hitchin



How does the town centres & retail study inform the North Herts Town Centres Strategy?

The Study informs the overall guidance of the North Herts Town Centres Strategy through updated evidence for retail and leisure floorspace capacity, as well as future recommendations for amendments to town centre boundaries and shopping frontages. The Study Appendices include town centre health checks, which inform the individual strengths and weaknesses of each town centre, and recommendations for subsequent priorities for future growth of the town centres, which in turn, can help meet the Local Plan's vision of a "robust and prosperous economy"..

Developer contributions supplementary planning document (NHDC, 2026): This Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) sets out detailed guidance on the type and scale of developer contributions that will be sought to support new development in North Hertfordshire. It contains a section on the economy and town centres. It states that in the town centres, contributions towards future town centre public realm enhancements will be sought from relevant major development schemes, including, but not necessarily limited to:

- schemes for development within existing town centres;
- schemes for out-of-centre development where the contributions may help preserve the vitality and/or viability of the existing centre(s); and
- schemes elsewhere that may result in a substantive increase in footfall in existing town centres.

It also states that improvements to the public realm will not necessarily be confined to the main town centres. Where appropriate, the Council will seek contributions towards public realm improvements in smaller centres and other areas which play an important role in defining place and supporting the day-to-day function of the built environment. Priorities for public realm enhancements may be identified in Neighbourhood Plans or other locally led strategies such as Parish Plans. The Council may also seek contributions towards the ongoing maintenance of any public realm improvements provided.

How does the developer contributions SPD inform the North Herts Town Centres Strategy?

The SPD provides guidance on considerations for developers when submitting applications for town centre development, and recommends where and to what type of town centre these contributions should be targeted. This is relevant to the Strategy and will help achieve the Council's vision of North Hertfordshire being an "attractive and vibrant place" where "vitality and viability" has been safeguarded.

North Hertfordshire economic development strategy: The Council adopted its new Economic Development Strategy for the District in July 2025. The strategy is aligned with the Council's economic aspirations, priorities and economic vision. The Council Plan (2024-2028) sets out the importance of 'Responsible Growth'. This demonstrates a clear commitment has been made 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 Hertfordshire (in relation to jobs, trending growth areas, industries, connectivity etc.). The Strategy identified five action areas from the evidence base to focus on:

- business and enterprise;
- people and skills;
- innovation and economic change;
- sites and premises; and
- investment, position and promotion.

The strategy also celebrates North Hertfordshire's position geographically and maps out areas within the district ("looking in") and outside ("looking out") – both themes identify opportunities available to the Council to achieve substantial economic growth. The strategy focuses on economic portraits of each town in North Hertfordshire, mapping out key opportunities in each of them.

How does the North Hertfordshire economic strategy inform the North Herts Town Centres Strategy?

A successful Economic Development Strategy would encourage the productivity of existing businesses and attract new business in and around North Herts' towns, increasing resident and worker spending and further supporting existing businesses. This increase in prosperity and diversification of economic drivers would increase the draw and attraction of the District's centres to a wider variety of retail and leisure operators.

The Strategy also directly references town centre development opportunities, as well as areas where developments in and around the centres would benefit from greater connectivity and links to and through the centres including the Churchgate Regeneration Zone, Garden Square Shopping Centre in Letchworth GC, Growing Baldock, and Royston Gateway. .

How the land use and retail evidence helps meet the Local Plan's vision:

The evidence outlined above helps work towards the following sections of the Council's Vision, as outlined in the Local Plan:

- By 2031 North Hertfordshire will be an attractive and vibrant place where people will want to live, work and spend their leisure time.
- North Hertfordshire will have a robust and prosperous economy (including sustainable tourism) with a greater mix of skilled jobs, focused in locations that best support the District's growing population. Local and smaller scale businesses will have had the opportunity to grow.
- The vitality and viability of the towns of Hitchin, Letchworth, Royston and Baldock are safeguarded in a way that takes account of their distinctive role. This will have been achieved through carefully planned development which meets the needs of these centres, retaining their market share in terms of their retail offer, whilst recognising the importance of preserving and enhancing their historic character. In local and village centres, shopping facilities that meet local needs will be supported.
- The District's important natural and historic areas and buildings that help to create the distinctive identity of the District in both urban and rural areas will have been protected

and enhanced where possible. The quality and attractiveness of the landscape of North Hertfordshire, which contributes to its distinctive character, will have been conserved and enhanced where possible.

- Additionally, the 2024 Town Centres & Retail Study provides opportunities and recommendations for town centre policies in the emerging Local Plan update relating to emerging capacity for new floorspace, amendments to boundaries, and suggested controls for the mix of uses.



Image: St Mary's Church, Hitchin



Image: Royston Cave

Theme 2: Built environment

Relevant subthemes:

The Built Form, Public Realm and Design, Heritage and Historic Character; Spatial Layout;

NPPF sections of relevance

Chapter 14: Achieving well-designed places

Chapter 20: Conserving and enhancing the historic environment

Local Plan policies of relevance:

Policy D1: Sustainable design

Policy HE1: Designated Heritage Assets

Policy SP13: Historic Environment

Policy SP9: Design and Sustainability

Relevant evidence

Character and conservation statements (NHDC) for Hitchin (2011), Letchworth (2001), Royston (2007), and Baldock (2003)

Hitchin: The Statement explains that the designated conservation area, the Hitchin Conservation Area, encompasses the historic town centre as well as public or private parkland and high-quality residential suburbs. The Statement goes on to propose three new conservation area designations, because of their unique character: (1) Butts Close, contained by Fishponds Road and Bedford Road; (2) The Railway Station and associated railway buildings and Ransom's Recreation Ground, and (3) Hitchin Hill Path and Butchers Lane. Character statements and conservation area maps for each of the three proposed conservation area designations were adopted in 2011. Other recommendations for site specific improvements included improvements to Bancroft Recreation Ground (which received a splash park in 2015 and further play equipment in 2025), enhancements to The Dell Woodside Open Air Theatre, as well as "to continue improvements to the River Hiz, including, where possible, the opening up of the river frontage for public access".

Letchworth: Section 3.0 of the Statement describes the special interest and character and appearance of the town centre. In addition, the Statement identifies areas and buildings within the town centre which are not considered to preserve or enhance the special character of the area as opportunity areas for improvement. The Statement highlights these areas and identifies the reasons why they are not considered to be in character. It then goes on to recommend the improvement of these areas or buildings to ensure that they preserve or enhance the special character of the town centre. It is important to note that this document was published in 2001 and as such, some areas or buildings referred to as not preserving the character of the area have been redeveloped or repurposed for alternative uses including Station Parade (amended façade as part of an extension in 2019) and the Council's old Town Lodge and Document Centre buildings on Gernon Road (demolished to provide an office building and residential accommodation) amongst others.

Royston: The Statement assesses the setting, character and appearance of the conservation area, and identifies the areas where improvement or redevelopment opportunities exist. It also identifies the areas in the historic town centre which are redevelopment opportunities, i.e. regarded as having a negative impact upon the character and appearance of the conservation area and where redevelopment is positively encouraged. The majority of the areas identified for redevelopment are on, or in, close proximity to the high street.

Baldock: The Statement outlines steps taken to ensure that changes within the conservation area preserve or enhance its special character or appearance. It identifies and describes the special characteristics of the market town that will need to be considered when considering proposed changes. The Statement identifies areas within the town centre which have a negative or neutral impact on the local conservation area but does not provide any targeted recommendations.

How do the character and conservation statements inform the North Herts Town Centres Strategy?

The principles and measures outlined in each of the documents – including preserving each of the conservation areas and the special character of the town centre, the identification of each conservation area's special characteristics, and the redevelopment proposals for areas which have a negative impact on character – have informed the Strategy's guidance. This contributes towards meeting the Council's vision of protecting and enhancing the historic areas and buildings

Design Code Supplementary Planning Document (NHDC, 2026): This Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) replaces the 2011 Design SPD and expands on Local Plan Policies SP9 and D1. It applies formally to residential-led schemes of more than two homes, which must comply with, or justify departure from, 40 individual design codes covering settlement structure, open space, streets, parking and built form. Other forms of development, including within the town centres, are also expected to be demonstrably consistent with the Design Code.

How does the design code SPD inform the North Herts Town Centres Strategy?

The SPD provides guidance on the key design characteristics that development proposals will be assessed against, and that planning applications will need to clearly demonstrate for proposals within and surrounding the District's town centres.

Sustainability Supplementary Planning Document (NHDC, 2024): The 2024 Sustainability Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) provides the standards required to meet the objectives and policies of the North Herts Local Plan through the three pillars of sustainability: environmental, social, and economic.

Reflecting the Council's 2019 declaration of a climate emergency and subsequent Climate Change Strategy, recently replaced in August 2025 by its Sustainability Strategy (2025-2030), the SPD includes detailed guidance on sustainability expectations for different forms of development when applying the Local Plan policies. The guidance is presented thematically, covering energy performance and minimising carbon footprints, to healthy placemaking and sustainable travel.

Each theme includes a checklist with a threshold for application alongside expectations for developments

and a ranking system of bronze, silver, and gold that ranges from basic Local Plan policy compliance (the baseline minimum expectation) through to areas where developments excel. It is not expected that all development will achieve gold for all themes and applicants are to identify which themes to aim for gold standard, depending on site context, type and scale of development.

How does the sustainability SPD inform the North Herts Town Centres Strategy?

The SPD provides guidance, thresholds and a checklist on what developers need to consider when submitting an application for a development scheme. These include proposals in the town centres, as well as those surrounding centres, and themes including healthy placemaking, sustainable travel, and historic buildings would directly affect how development proposals interact with the District's town centres whilst supporting the Council's Plan sustainability priority..

How the built environment evidence helps meet the Local Plan's vision:

The evidence helps meet the following part of the Council's vision, as outlined in the Local Plan:

- The vitality and viability of the towns of Hitchin, Letchworth, Royston and Baldock are safeguarded in a way that takes account of their distinctive role. This will have been achieved through carefully planned development which meets the needs of these centres, retaining their market share in terms of their retail offer, whilst recognising the importance of preserving and enhancing their historic character. In local and village centres, shopping facilities that meet local needs will be supported.
- The District's important natural and historic areas and buildings that help to create the distinctive identity of the District in both urban and rural areas will have been protected and enhanced where possible. The quality and attractiveness of the landscape of North Hertfordshire, which contributes to its distinctive character, will have been conserved and enhanced where possible. New green infrastructure will have enhanced the network of green corridors linking settlements to the open countryside, providing greater opportunities for healthy lifestyles.
- The Council's vision describes how new developments will contribute to sustainable communities, defined as safe, attractive and inclusive, to be achieved through compliance with guiding principles set out within the Local Plan alongside the Sustainability SPD.

Theme 3: Transport, access and movement

Relevant subthemes:

Sustainable Travel, Transport Services, Transport infrastructure

NPPF sections of relevance:

Chapter 15: Promoting sustainable transport

Local plan policies of relevance:

Policy SP6: Sustainable transport

Policy T1: Assessment of transport matters

Policy T2: Parking

Vehicle Parking at New Development SPD

Relevant evidence:

Hertfordshire Active Travel Strategy (Hertfordshire County Council, 2013):

Hertfordshire's Active Travel Strategy sets out how the County Council will deliver and promote interventions to increase the number of people walking and cycling in Hertfordshire. Its recommendations seek to ensure the provision of cycle and pedestrian access arrangements, and links to local cycling and walking networks, across the town centres.

Recommendations include:

- Providing secure cycle parking at key destinations, e.g., railway stations, town centres, and schools.
- Ensuring that all railway stations, key employment sites and key services in towns, especially those associated with high levels of commuting or limited car parking, have convenient cycle and pedestrian access arrangements, high-quality, covered and secure cycle parking and links to local cycling and walking networks.
- Production of up-to-date route and network maps of the cycling and walking network for each town and wider networks.

How does the Active Travel Strategy inform the North Herts Town Centres Strategy?

The Active Travel Strategy provides guidance and targeted interventions/recommendations for the promotion of active travel modes in town centres across North Hertfordshire, helping meet the Council's vision of improving opportunities for travelling by walking and cycling to combat climate change.

Hertfordshire Highways Place & Movement Design Guide (Hertfordshire County Council, 2024): Chapter 3 of the Guide describes how environmentally sustainable, healthy and future ready movement networks will be delivered in Hertfordshire (including in the town centres).

The Guide recommends the following:

- Promotion of walking by implementing measures to increase the priority of pedestrians relative to motorised vehicles, especially in town centres, and creating walking-friendly town and neighbourhood centres.
- All occupied parts of a development should be within 400m walking distance of a bus stop or transport.
- In a town centre location, areas with a significant proportion of elderly residents, around educational establishments, and commercial and industrial developments, the maximum walking distance should be reduced to 200m.
- Consideration of cycling connectivity should ensure priority links to town centres and sustainable transport hubs and connections.

How does the Hertfordshire Highways Place & Movement Design Guide inform the North Herts Town Centres Strategy?

The Hertfordshire Highways Place & Movement Design Guide provides guidance and targeted interventions and recommendations for the provision of walking, cycling and public transport within the town centres, and provide guidance on transport provision for new development. It also provides design measures to promote walking in town centres and help meet the Council's vision of improving opportunities for travelling by walking and cycling to combat climate change.

Hertfordshire Local Transport Plan (LTP4) 2018-2031 Guide (Hertfordshire County Council, 2018): Objective 5 of the Plan aims to enhance the quality and vitality of town centres. Policy 7: Active Travel (walking) explains that the County Council will aim to encourage and promote walking by implementing measures to increase the priority of pedestrians relative to cars, especially in town centres, and create walking-friendly town and neighbourhood centres.

Objective 5 identifies that there are a number of towns which are in need of renewal and regeneration, and that transport plays a role in improving the urban environment. The negative impact of high levels of car use and congestion on the urban environment (noise, air quality, aesthetics, historic & natural environment) limits the potential to improve provision for other modes. It identifies a need to enhance the accessibility to town centres to support growth, development and vitality.

The Plan makes reference towards balancing the negative impact of congestion and car use with the role of transport in improving the urban environment, which is relevant for town centres, particularly for larger town centre areas experiencing greater levels of demand from shoppers and other visitors.

How does the LTP4 inform the North Herts Town Centres Strategy?

The LTP4 provides the reasoning and justification for increasing provision of walking and cycling within the town centres, and balancing car use with more sustainable transport modes around the town centres. This helps meet the Council's vision of improving opportunities for travelling by walking and cycling, as well as improving the vitality and viability of town centres.

Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure

Plan (LCWIP) (WSP, 2022): The Plan references relevant local policies and guidance, including the Local Transport Plan, place and Movement Design Guide and the Sustainable Hertfordshire Strategy and highlights the importance of integration of town centres within local walking and cycling routes. The LCWIP goes on to identify a number of routes to be taken forward to improve connectivity to (and within) each of the town centres.



Image: High Street Baldock

How does the LCWIP inform the North Herts Town Centres Strategy?

The LCWIP provides guidance and targeted interventions and recommendations for the provision of walking and cycling within the town centres; which can feed into the Strategy. It also provides design measures to promote walking and cycling in town centres. This helps meet the Council's vision of improving opportunities for travelling by walking and cycling to combat climate change.

North Central Growth Transport Plan (AECOM, 2022): Provides targeted interventions relating to sustainable transport measures for each of the four North Herts town centres. Recommendations include:

- **Package 7 (Hitchin Centre)** which outlines the aim to encourage use of public transport through support for services and creation of a safe and attractive corridor in which to take advantage of the services within Hitchin Town Centre and Rail Station.
- **Package 10 (Hitchin to Letchworth/Baldock)** seeks to enhance cycling infrastructure between Hitchin, Letchworth and Baldock; and make it a safe and attractive option for sustainable trips.
- **Package 11 (Letchworth Centre and Employment Area)** aims to increase active transport provision between Letchworth Centre and Employment Area by providing a signposted and connected active transport network and to improve access to Letchworth rail station.
- **Package 13 (Baldock connectivity, rail station and development)** seeks to make Baldock a safe, convenient and attractive place to make sustainable transport trips through improvements to cycling and walking infrastructure and facilities as well as public transport journeys.
- **Package 15 (Royston)** aims to transform Royston into a town that facilitates safe, attractive and convenient journeys by active and sustainable transport modes.

How does the North Central Growth Transport Plan inform the North Herts Town Centres Strategy?

The North Central Growth Transport Plan provides guidance and targeted interventions and recommendations for the provision of walking, cycling and public transport within the town centres. This helps meet the Council's vision of improving opportunities for travelling by walking, cycling and public transport to combat climate change.

North Herts Local Transport Strategy (Markides Associates, 2017): Outlines transport strategies for each of the town centres and analyses the results of transport modelling impact assessments. It identifies key issues and transport strategy elements, outlining various measures and recommendations for the town centre areas. Recommendations include:

1. Design focus on walking and cycling through all development, to local facilities and to adjacent areas.
2. Development of a sustainable spine along the A505 enhancing people movement between the towns.
3. Bus-based public transport and interchange in the main urban centres.

How does the North Herts Local Transport Strategy inform the North Herts Town Centres Strategy?

The North Herts Local Transport Strategy provides guidance and targeted interventions and recommendations for the provision of walking, cycling and public transport within the town centres. It also assesses the key strengths and weaknesses of the transport system in each town, to develop enhanced recommendations via an evidence-based approach, which has informed the North Herts Town Centres Strategy. This will help meet the Council's vision of improving opportunities for travelling by walking, cycling and public transport to combat climate change.

North Herts Parking Strategy (NHDC, 2019): The Strategy addresses off-street parking capacity in town centres. Policy 2 explains that the Council will periodically review the level of off-street car parking capacity in each of the town centres. The Council will aim to manage the overall level of capacity in line with policy objectives for town centre vitality, while seeking to minimise environmental impacts, recognising the need for encouraging sustainable travel and adapting to new technology and trends in parking. The Council will consider the balance required between short and longer-stay parking needs in its reviews. The Council will manage its off-street car parks in a financially responsible manner. Where appropriate, the Council will work with other off-street parking operators to seek to ensure that the combined car parking capacity in town centres meets policy objectives and is financially sustainable.

How does the North Herts Parking Strategy inform the North Herts Town Centres Strategy?

The North Herts Parking Strategy provides guidance on balancing the need for parking provision in town centres for purposes of vitality (part of the Council's vision) with the environmental impacts of parking.

Sustainable Travel Town Documents

- **Letchworth GC Outline (NHDC, 2021):** Makes reference to parking provision in town centres. North Hertfordshire District Council through its adopted Parking Strategy is supportive of the principle of working towards the removal of free parking in its town centres to encourage modal shift towards more active and sustainable travel through walking, cycling and public transport. The Council will work towards achieving no net gain in parking spaces, both for on-street in the town centre and in off-street facilities where it is within the Council's power to do so.
- **Royston Outline (NHDC, 2021):** Outlines recommendations for the town centre including cycle parking in the town centre, at neighbourhood retail centres, and at other key service locations, including improved cycling facilities at the railway station, additional seating in the town centre and on key routes, widened pavements and new planters, and consideration of potential semi-pedestrianisation in the future. References are also made to a phased approach to reducing free parking within the centre to encourage a modal shift towards more active and sustainable.

How do the Sustainable Travel Town Documents inform the North Herts Town Centres Strategy?

The Sustainable Travel Town Documents provide targeted recommendations for town centres regarding the promotion of walking and cycling, as well as design and parking measures to help encourage modal shift. These town centre specific recommendations have been distilled into general principles for use in the Strategy, working towards achieving the Council's vision of getting more people walking and cycling.

Active North Herts Strategy Report (SLC, 2023): The report references a key theme outlined within the Council Plan relating to the local economy, highlighting the role of the regeneration of town centres and addressing issues faced by rural communities

How does the Active North Herts Strategy inform the North Herts Town Centres Strategy?

The Active North Herts Strategy provides the link between sustainable transport and regenerating the local economy and has informed relevant areas of the Strategy.

Electric Vehicle Strategy (Hertfordshire County Council, 2022): Sets out Hertfordshire County Council's actions to enable the roll out of public EV charging infrastructure to facilitate this transition. It explains that charge points are increasingly installed in supermarkets, retail outlets, leisure facilities, hotels, restaurants, tourist attractions, and privately managed town centre car parks. Recommends installation of charge points and roll out of charging infrastructure.

How does the Electric Vehicle Strategy inform the North Herts Town Centres Strategy?

The Strategy regarding electric vehicles has informed the development of guidance and recommendations regarding electric vehicles for the North Herts Town Centres Strategy to help meet the Council's vision towards "using natural resources more efficiently" and address climate change.

North Herts Infrastructure Delivery Plan (RS Regeneration, 2018): Outlines strategies for improving and delivering infrastructure in the District, including in town centres. It outlines the potential for significant levels of new investment to deliver growth and impact on the transport network, and how to address this. For example, the delivery plan proposes that cycling infrastructure in Hitchin should include advance stop lines, improved signage, and covered parking in the town centre.



Image: Blue Bus, Letchworth

How does the North Herts Infrastructure Delivery Plan inform the North Herts Town Centres Strategy?

The Infrastructure Delivery Plan provides guidance for improving transport infrastructure and potential investment strategies, which can feed into this Town Centres Strategy. Although these are location specific, they have been used to inform the general principles of the Strategy.

Air Quality Strategy, and Air Quality Implementation Plan (Hertfordshire County Council, 2019): Although the documents do not make direct reference to town centres, the principles outlined in the documents are relevant towards developing strategies for improving air quality and introducing modes of clean transport, and this is applicable to town centres.

How do the Air Quality Strategy and Air Quality Implementation Plan inform the North Herts Town Centres Strategy?

The guidance explains that development coming forward should consider that clean air is a Council priority. The clean air principles outlined in both documents have informed the Strategy's guidance.

How the transport, access and movement evidence helps meet the Local Plan's vision:

The evidence base outlined above helps address the following section of the Local Plan vision:

The District will play its part in addressing climate change by improving opportunities for travelling by public transport, walking and cycling, using natural resources more efficiently, reducing the demand for water, securing high quality sustainable design and managing the risk of flooding

Increased footfall in town centres through increased levels of walking and cycling, can in turn result in improved "viability and vitality" of town centres, and improved local economies, which is also part of the Council's vision.

Theme 4: Community

Relevant subthemes:

Community Facilities, Community Safety, Community Health;

Local Plan policies of relevance:

Policy HC1: Community Facilities

Policy D1: Sustainable Design

Policy SP10: Healthy Communities

NPPF Sections of relevance:

Chapter 16: Promoting healthy and safe communities

Relevant evidence

North Herts Sport Provision and Open Space Review & Standards (NHDC, 2016): Assesses the provision of open space, sport and recreation facilities in North Hertfordshire. In relation to town centres, it explains that small sites of less than 0.1 ha can provide valuable local open space, particularly in residential areas and town centres

How does the North Herts Sports Provision and Open Spaces Review inform the North Herts Town Centres Strategy?

This Review provides guidance for the Town Centres Strategy on open space provision in town centres and helps realise the Council's vision to provide community and recreational facilities accessible to the local population. An updated study is being finalised and will supersede the 2016 work.

Council Plan 2024-2028 (NHDC, 2024):

One of the priorities outlined in the plan is Thriving Communities, which involves focusing on community safety priorities such as anti-social behaviour, violence against women and girls, and environmental crime such as fly tipping. Recommendations include continuing to allocate grant funding to local groups who provide vital services and activities, as well as working with partners to deliver projects which reduce health inequalities. The Council Plan references the importance of street-cleaning services and the leisure centres provided by Everyone Active. It also emphasises efforts to reduce carbon emissions across the District. Further commentary on the strategic role of the Council Plan is set out in Section 1B.

How does the Council Plan inform the North Herts Town Centres Strategy?

The Council Plan provides recommendations to improve community safety in the town centres, which has been applied to the North Herts Town Centres Strategy and help realise the Council's vision for thriving communities with accessible services through responsible growth and sustainability.

Sustainability Strategy 2025-2030 (NHDC 2025): The Sustainability Strategy launched in August 2025 and replaces the Climate Change Strategy to align with the Council priority of Sustainability. The Sustainability Strategy takes a broader scope by including many areas of sustainability, including emissions reductions, climate change adaptation and biodiversity, taking into account action needed to tackle climate change, protect nature, and make better use of natural resources. This strategy has five areas of focus: council emissions, district emissions, adaptation, biodiversity, and cross-cutting.

The aims of the Sustainability Strategy are:

- Achieve Net Zero by 2030 for the Council's own operations.
- Achieve a Net Zero North Hertfordshire district by 2040.
- Ensure all operations and services are resilient to the impacts of climate change.
- Become a district that is resilient to unavoidable impacts of climate change.
- Increase biodiversity in North Herts.

How does the Sustainability Strategy inform the North Herts Town Centres Strategy?

This Strategy sets out the key areas of focus for the Council to improve its sustainability, which has informed how the North Herts Town Centres Strategy guides developments within town centres to require consideration of sustainability across biodiversity, emissions and adaptation to climate change.

Hertfordshire Healthy and Safe Places Framework (Hertfordshire Growth Board, 2025): This framework 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 town centres. It provides guidance to Local Planning Authorities on how to implement health-focused policies into Local Plans and Spatial Development Strategies. The Healthy Placemaking Principles within the framework targets the social determinants of health across housing, the environment, the economy, places and neighbourhoods, connectivity, infrastructure and communities.

How does the Healthy and Safe Places Framework inform the North Herts Town Centres Strategy?

The framework sets out key levers that can be adopted in policy and guidance to promote healthy places and neighbourhoods, including through design, walkability and land uses. These principles have informed the guidance set out within the Town Centres Strategy to improve health outcomes within town centres and across the District more widely.

Resilient Together Report (ResilienTogether, 2017): Resilient Together is a local authority-led partnership which works with the local community to reduce flood risk from the Pix Brook (which flows through Letchworth) and improve water quality. As urban areas have grown, the health of some watercourses has weakened. The Pix Brook has been affected by urban growth and is at increased flood risk from rapid storm runoff, as well as from pollution and a reduction in habitat. ResilienTogether aims to address flooding in urban areas, including Letchworth town centre, and to create a 'smart catchment' to reduce flood risk, enhance the water environment and improve community resilience. It proposes installation of monitoring stations along the Pix Brook to understand the impacts of extreme weather on water flows and water quality.

How does the Resilient Together Report inform the North Herts Town Centres Strategy?

The Resilient Together Report provides guidance for the North Herts Town Centres Strategy on how to reduce flood risk in town centres, enhancing community resilience in the process while also protecting and enhancing biodiversity, which is part of the Council's vision.

Green Infrastructure (GI) Principles (Natural England, 2023): Natural England has developed a set of GI Principles that underpin the GI Framework. The Principles are intended to provide a baseline for different organisations to develop stronger green infrastructure policy and delivery. The principles cover the Why, What and How of how to deliver good GI. There are mapped environmental, socio-economic datasets to support the standards. The Principles can be applied to town centres, and include Nature Rich Places, Active and Healthy Places, Thriving and Prospering Places, Water Management and Resilient and Climate Positive Places.

How do the Green Infrastructure Principles inform the North Herts Town Centres Strategy?

The GI principles have informed the Strategy's guidance to enhance and protect green infrastructure in the North Hertfordshire town centres. This will help realise the aim of the Council's vision to enhance and protect its landscape as well as enhance the network of green corridors linking settlements to the open countryside, providing greater opportunities for healthy lifestyles; and the protection and enhancement of biodiversity in the area.

How the community evidence helps meet the Local Plan's vision:

The evidence base outlined above helps meet the following sections of the Local Plan vision:

The District's important natural and historic areas and buildings that help to create the distinctive identity of the District in both urban and rural areas will have been protected and enhanced where possible. The quality and attractiveness of the landscape of North Hertfordshire, which contributes to its distinctive character, will have been conserved and enhanced where possible.

New green infrastructure will have enhanced the network of green corridors linking settlements to the open countryside, providing greater opportunities for healthy lifestyles.

The rich biodiversity and geodiversity of North Hertfordshire will have been protected and enhanced where possible. Where new development could potentially have an adverse impact on biodiversity and geodiversity, measures will have been taken to ensure that the impact was either avoided or mitigated.

North Hertfordshire will have a range of community, leisure, cultural and recreational facilities in locations that are accessible to the local population, creating cohesive communities that enhance the opportunities and recognise the needs of the centres' diverse demographics from the day-to-day workers to the older population, children and young people.

Image: Priory Memorial Gardens, Royston





Image: High Street, Baldock

Part 2: Town Centre guidance

2A: Town Centre developments

How to use this part

This part of the Town Centres Strategy provides a series of Guidance Notes to support developers, consultants, landowners, and decision-makers responding to the requirements of Local Plan policies when progressing development proposals in North Herts' town centres.



Image: Bridge Street, Hitchin



Image: Leitchworth Arcade

The Guidance Notes set out advice to assist with the interpretation of relevant Local Plan policies, providing additional information and guidance to ensure that development proposals take account of the breadth of relevant evidence and the Council's broader strategies affecting, and affected by, development in the town centres. These include:

- clarifying how and where Local Plan policies will be applied in the assessment of planning applications;
- interpretation of Local Plan policies, listing examples of key criteria and principles that would be expected to be addressed when submitting applications for developments within town centres; and
- examples of supporting information, details, design considerations and infrastructure contributions that would demonstrate Local Plan policy compliance.

Early engagement with the Guidance Notes is encouraged when developing proposals within and affecting town centres, including through pre-application discussions with the Council, to address any areas that would require further consideration to meet the requirements of the Local Plan and Town Centres Strategy. Whilst the Guidance Notes reflect Local Plan policy requirements, the broader principles are considered beneficial for all town centre proposals, including those that would not require an application for planning permission (such as changes within the same Use Class, funding bids, licensing, and prior approval applications) to support the Council's aspirations for the town centres.

Part 1 of this document has set out the evidence base documents, supplementary planning documents, and Council strategies relevant to town centres. This section should also be read alongside the North Hertfordshire Local Plan 2011-2031 (adopted 2022).

As with **Part 1**, the Guidance Notes are presented thematically, expanding on select Local Plan policies as referenced in the text. The Guidance Notes include requirements and recommendations for approaching policy criteria to: address the requirements of the Local Plan policies, consider the findings of the relevant evidence, and implement the Council's strategies affecting town centres.

2B: Guidance notes

Introduction

To ensure the Strategy is responsive to wider trends and strategic challenges, the Council has reviewed the trends in the usage of the town centres through stakeholder engagement, public telephone surveys and commissioning town-centre experts Lichfields to provide data, trends and recommendations. The surveys provide insights into the shopping habits and desires of residents and visitors using a representative and demographically weighted sample, in addition to multiple consultations and workshops with representative groups.

These findings, together with other relevant evidence, strategies and frameworks summarised across Part 1 have helped to identify a number of common themes which seek to deliver the strategic objectives of this Strategy through a set of Guidance Notes that provide a greater level of detail on Local Plan policies that can be applied to developments across the four town centres. While the Guidance Notes, do not represent formal planning policy, they do provide interim guidance setting out the Council's priorities for its town centres while the Local Plan is under review.

The Guidance Notes in this part provide a framework for protecting, improving and delivering positive changes in North Herts' four town centres. The policies are thematically aligned as follows:

Table B1: Thematically guiding policies that are applied to each town centre strategy.

Guidance Note	Theme
1 Promoting Vitality and Viability in Town Centres	Land use and retail
2 The Built Form, Public Realm and Design	Built environment
3 Heritage and Historic Character	Built environment
4 Promoting Sustainable Travel	Transport, access and movement
5 Community Facilities	Community

Guidance note 1

Promoting vitality and viability in Town Centres

Where viability, developer contributions or mitigation are addressed, Local Plan Policy SP7 and the Developer Contributions SPD should be referred to as the primary guidance.

- a Local Plan Policy SP9 defines significant developments as those 'generally comprising residential development of 100 dwellings or more'. In relation to commercial development and other main town centre uses, development of 1,000 sq.m gross or more, sites greater than 1 ha, or existing allocations within town centres would be considered significant development.
- b To promote, protect and enhance the four main town centres in accordance with Local Plan Policy SP4 a), proposals involving the loss of retail and leisure floorspace will be resisted, other than where evidence can be provided demonstrating that the floorspace would not otherwise be required to meet an identified need over the plan period.
- c Proposals that require planning permission that would result in the loss of Use Class E Uses at ground floor level in the Primary Shopping Area (currently designated as Primary Shopping Frontages) or main town centre uses (including Use Class E, Sui Generis and Use Class F) within the town centre boundaries should only be permitted subject to criteria relating to:
 - adverse impact on the vitality and viability of the centre as a whole;
 - individual or cumulative impact on neighbouring amenity;
 - provision of an active frontage at ground floor level which relates well to the design of the building and to the street-scene and its setting; and
 - adequate marketing of the unit for Use Class E uses in primary shopping frontages or for main town centre uses (including Use Class E, Sui Generis and Use Class F) in other parts of the town centre

- d In accordance with Local Plan Policy SP4 b), it is appropriate for significant developments proposing new or replacement retail and leisure floorspace to provide for a mix of uses (with suitable planning controls, where necessary) to support the vitality and viability of town centres. These uses could include shops, cafes and restaurants (Use Class E) along with pubs and drinking establishments and takeaways (Sui Generis).
- e The Council will consider that any significant development within the town centre boundary, including Local Plan allocations, meets the criteria of Local Plan Policy SP9 and should be subject to a proportionate Strategic Masterplan exercise which, as a minimum, should demonstrate how the proposals have taken account of the guidance set out within this document.

Local plan policies of relevance:

Policy SP4: Town Centres, Local Centres and Community Shops

Policy SP7: Infrastructure Requirements and Developer Contributions

Policy SP9: Design and Sustainability

Policy ETC3: New retail, leisure and other main town centre development

Policy ETC4: Primary Shopping Frontages

Policy ETC5: Secondary Shopping Frontages

Guidance note 2

The built form, public realm and design

- a In accordance with Local Plan Policy D1, proposed streetscapes including roads, buildings, pavements, hard and soft landscaping, lighting and street furniture in significant developments or public realm interventions should:
 - be of high quality and contribute towards the overall user experience in town centres;
 - be safe and accommodating to people with mobility, sensory and neurological impairments;
 - improve wayfinding and legibility, permeability, and key views of landmark buildings; and
 - take account of the existing hierarchy of streets and pathways if proposing a change to the street hierarchy. This should not be to the detriment of pedestrian and cycling routes.
- b Open spaces should be designed and maintained to a high quality to promote active recreation, opportunities for social interaction and physical linkages across and between the town centres to support visitors' health and well-being to support Local Plan Policy NE6.
- c To meet Local Plan Policy SP12 2), biodiversity and habitats should be protected and improved in the town centres, in open and green spaces, riversides (as in the case of Hitchin), as well as in the built environment which supports ecological networks. Developers and landowners for significant developments should demonstrate how they will promote these policy aims through design, layout, land use, lighting and landscaping, and prioritise climate action with a long-term vision, including contributing to biodiversity net gain where relevant to help create an attractive environment for the users of the town centres that will also help to mitigate climate change.
- d To support Local Plan Policy D1 a) building types, massing, building and ground floor heights, sight lines, setbacks, and gaps for non-residential development should be proportional in the context of the town, street and surrounding buildings.
- e In accordance with Local Plan Policy D1 a), materials proposed for buildings and ornamentation should be of high quality, sustainable and long-lasting, with reference to the form and character of the proposed development (and where relevant, in relation to the historic buildings). Designs should be complementary, rather than directly copying or competing with historic styles, with scope for innovation allowing the town centre to evolve. They should enhance the existing fabric through similar materials and sympathetic designs.
- f In line with Local Plan Policy D1 a), town centre development should take all reasonable opportunities to design-out crime and anti-social behaviour. This includes consideration of street lighting and other safety measures in line with forthcoming government guidance on designing safer streets for women and girls.
- g In support of Local Plan Policy D1 b), pavements should be of high quality, clear of obstructions and integrate within the street hierarchy and right of ways. Street trees, planting and shrubs are also important elements contributing to the public realm and built environment, and these should be retained, enhanced and added to wherever possible.
- h In alignment with Local Plan Policy D1 b), developments within town centres should take all reasonable opportunities to optimise the potential of the site by incorporating Sustainable Drainage Systems (SuDS) and reduce energy consumption and waste, and integrate water efficiency measures.

Guidance note 3

Heritage and historical character

- a In accordance with Local Plan Policies HE1-3, proposed developments should conserve and enhance the special architectural, historic interest, character and appearance of each of the town centres, and integrate new development sensitively to the setting of listed buildings, designated and non-designated heritage assets.
- b Local Plan Policy SP13 sets the Council's strategy for the protection and enhancement of North Hertfordshire's historic environment. Reflecting Strategic Objective ENV3, this should be taken to include the town centres' cultural assets, in addition to buildings of cultural and heritage value. Proposed developments in town centres will be expected to deliver (as appropriate) and fund (or contribute funding towards) the centre's cultural heritage, such as the promotion of Garden City principles in Letchworth Garden City, Royston Town Trail, the River Hiz and historic market in Hitchin, amongst others.
- c As addressed in Guidance Note 2, street trees, planting and shrubs can also be important elements contributing to the public realm and built environment, and form part of a town's historical character, and these should be retained, enhanced and added to wherever possible.

Local plan policies of relevance:

Policy ETC3: New retail, leisure and other main town centre development

Policy ETC4: Primary Shopping Frontages

Policy ETC5: Secondary Shopping Frontages

Policy D1: Sustainable design

Policy NE6: New and improved open space

Policy SP12: Green infrastructure, landscape and biodiversity

Policy SP13: Historic environment

Policy HE1: Designated heritage assets

Policy HE2: Heritage at risk

Policy HE3: Non-designated heritage assets

Strategic Objective ENV3: Protect, maintain and enhance the District's historic and natural environment, its cultural assets and network of open spaces, urban and rural landscapes.



Image: Churchyard Walk, Hitchin

Guidance note 4

Promoting sustainable travel

a Local Plan Policies SP6 and T1 (d) seek to deliver accessibility improvements and promote the use of sustainable transport modes. Proposed developments in or surrounding town centres will be expected to deliver (as appropriate) or fund (wholly or in part):

- i. infrastructure on-site and off-site that provides:
 - safe and direct walking and cycling routes into town centres, and between town centres, key amenities and travel/mobility hubs*
 - travel/mobility hubs* in towns and villages
 - secure cycle parking
 - parking spaces for club cars[†], including at or close to railway stations
- ii. new or enhanced services, linked to appropriate triggers, for:
 - bus services
 - bike and/or e-scooter (if and when legal) rental schemes
 - car clubs[†]
 - ride-sharing services

*Travel/mobility hubs provide a safe and secure environment for switching between transport modes or services, and may also provide complementary amenities, such as parcel lockers. They include railway and bus stations. Some car parking may be provided, but their main purpose is to support sustainable modes of travel for all journey legs.

[†] Car clubs are membership-based 24/7 short-term car rental services.

b The Council's Vehicle Parking at New Developments SPD (2011) Paragraph 4.8 sets out the evidence needed for the Council to consider a level of parking provision below the minimum standards in accordance with Policy T2:

"Clear evidence must be provided that residents and visitor parking demand will not exceed the parking provided OR that alternative short and long stay daytime and evening parking will be readily available to future residents and visitors. The developer should identify examples of this evidence from other developments or locations in similar circumstances to those found in the district."

A future update to the SPD will provide further details of the level of evidence required where it is considered that existing and future demands for parking is likely to be lower than the current minimum standards. This evidence is likely to be based on the site's location and the quality of sustainable transport options already available, in addition to any transport options that will become available as a result of the application proposal or agreed to be delivered with the development.

c In line with government guidance and the Council's Parking Strategy (2019), parking policies should have regard to the needs of those with disabilities, some of whom depend on the use of a car or taxis.

d The Council's Vehicle Parking at New Developments SPD (2011) Paragraph 4.10 provides criteria where car free developments may be considered in town centres where any of the following apply:

- The extension or alteration or re-use of an existing building with no access to parking;
- The reversion of a previously converted property to its original residential use, including flats above shops;
- The provision of residential accommodation on a small town centre site that may not otherwise come forward for development; or
- Where arrangements are made to share an existing car park within the vicinity of the site that can accommodate development.

Local plan policies of relevance:

Policy ETC3: New retail, leisure and other main town centre development

Policy ETC4: Primary Shopping Frontages

Policy ETC5: Secondary Shopping Frontages

Policy SP6: Sustainable transport

Policy T1: Assessment of transport matters

Policy T2: Parking

Guidance note 5

Community facilities

- a Local Plan Policy HC1 seeks the retention and provision of cultural, recreation and community facilities. For new significant developments in town centres that:
 - i. include community facilities, developers and landowners are expected to reflect best practices for community cohesion, health and safety, as well as opportunities for skill development within their development.
 - ii. do not include community facilities within the scheme, the Council will seek commuted payments from developers through planning obligations towards the provision of new off-site facilities or enhancements to existing community facilities within the town centre, where there is a demonstratable need..
- b In accordance with Local Plan Policy HC1, development of new and improved health, children's and youth facilities will be supported within or close to town centres, as part of town centre allocations and/or through contributions secured through planning obligations for development proposals, where there is a demonstratable need.
- c The Council will resist the loss of community facilities and will require the replacement of existing community facilities in development proposals or through enhancement schemes, in line with Local Plan Policy HC1.
- d The Local Plan definition of community facilities under Policy HC1 should be taken to include public access to toilet facilities. Where public toilets are not available in the vicinity of a proposed development including a community facility use, proposed community facilities should provide the general public access to toilets and changing rooms on their premises, otherwise known as a Community Toilet Scheme.
- e In alignment with Policy HC1 and Policy SP1, developments in town centres should seek to apply the 'Healthy Streets Approach', considering factors such as noise, air pollution, accessibility, seating and shelter.

Local plan policies of relevance:

Policy SP1: Sustainable development in North Hertfordshire

Policy ETC3: New retail, leisure and other main town centre development

Policy ETC4: Primary Shopping Frontages

Policy ETC5: Secondary Shopping Frontages

Policy HC1: Community facilities





Image: Howard Park, Leichworth



Image: Churchyard Walk, Hitchin

Part 3: Individual Town Centre Strategies

Introduction

The following strategies for North Hertfordshire's individual towns focus on a concise series of key priorities for the town centres, that will work alongside the Guidance Notes set out in Part 2 to steer development and investment in and surrounding Hitchin, Letchworth, Royston and Baldock.

The priorities identified provide a focus and key actions for the Council, and work within the planning policy context of the Council's adopted Local Plan 2011-2031, ahead of the new Local Plan. Part 4 also sets out further District-wide initiatives for the Council to undertake alongside the key priorities identified. The Council may wish to revisit these sections and update the priorities in due course as actions are undertaken and new opportunities emerge.

The key priorities are informed by the SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) analysis for each town, based on the context and evidence summarised in Part 1 and Appendix 3 alongside consultations, ranging from residents to stakeholder workshops, undertaken during the Town Centre and Retail Study (2024), as well as subsequent meetings with Business Improvement Districts (BIDs), landowners and stakeholders.

Consideration of the suitability of planning obligations will be particularly relevant where proposals impact town centres, either through trade diversion or any increases in the number of visitors or users of existing or proposed town centre services. Part 4 sets out how the Council may also seek to explore alternative funding options including national government funding opportunities, private investment, or direct funding allocations from District Council or County Council budgets to deliver identified priorities.

The strategies' key priorities identify opportunities to support vitality and viability of the town centres. They also seek to reflect the strong functional relationship between each town centre and their surrounding villages, and the importance of regular and reliable connections between them.

The vision statements within the individual town centre strategies will be built upon and deepened through the Delivery Plans for each town centre.

This Strategy has been developed with a planning and delivery focus, setting out next steps and actions to bring forward the key priorities. One area that this can be achieved is through financial contributions from developments that would affect the town centres in the form of planning obligations³. It is noted that Section 106 sets out the tests for requesting planning obligations, in accordance with Regulation 122 of The Community Infrastructure Levy Regulations 2010. It is not for strategies such as this, to specifically set out formulaic requests for such financial contributions, which would be subject to viability and costings via the Council or applicant.

³ Planning obligations assist in mitigating the impact of unacceptable development to make it acceptable in planning terms. Planning obligations may only constitute a reason for granting planning permission if they meet the tests that are necessary to make the development acceptable in planning terms. They must be:

- necessary to make the development acceptable in planning terms;
- directly related to the development; and
- fairly and reasonably related in scale and kind to the development.

3A: Hitchin

Further information on **Hitchin town centre** is found in **Appendix 3A: Hitchin Town Centre Evidence Notes**.

Identity

Hitchin's origins have been traced back to pre-Roman times, aligned with the River Hiz as an important crossing point. Over time, Hitchin developed as a market town, and thus, the layout of the town centre has unfolded with temporary market stalls becoming permanent. In the 19th century, with the arrival of the railway, the previously unchanged street plan rapidly expanded to meet the new demands of the town's growth.

Now, the historic layout of the town centre is linear in structure stretching for over 800 metres north- south along Bancroft and the High Street. Narrow streets are clustered around Market Place adjoining to St. Mary's Church (dating back to the 14th century) and are adjacent to the Churchgate Shopping Centre developed in the 1970s.

There is a mix of typologies and uses in Hitchin town centre; a conservation area, listed buildings and late twentieth century developments, as well as a mix of residential, commercial shopping, recreation, and restaurants or cafe uses. The town centre has evolved over time and will continue to do so, but any changes should respect the overall historic character of Hitchin.

Hitchin is the main shopping and commercial centre in North Hertfordshire, predominantly serving the western half of the District. The centre has the strongest range and choice of comparison and convenience goods retail and services uses, including a wide range of national multiple operators.

Visitors are drawn to Hitchin by the market town's attractive historic character, as well as the variety of restaurants and cafes. The town also serves as a popular filming location, further tying the aesthetics and historic character of the town to its identity. Nonetheless, the River Hiz and the area surrounding St. Mary's Church are underutilised assets, with planned development of the Churchgate Regeneration Zone providing a significantly opportunity to secure the long-term viability of the centre

Vision

Hitchin will maintain and support the quality of its intrinsic historic market town character to develop an attractive, mixed-use, safe, accessible, vibrant and lively town centre for the local community and visitors to shop, work and live in. Hitchin will have strong and sustainable connections to key destinations, such as the railway station, Hitchin Lavender Fields, and nearby towns and villages. Town centre assets will be optimised, such as the River Hiz, St. Mary's Church, museums and its historic market. For the Churchgate Regeneration Zone and any other new development, Hitchin will take advantage of the opportunity to bring people into the town centre, provide quality public spaces, contribute to the cultural heritage and support the retail core.

The Council is committed to restoring Charnwood House, bringing it back into viable use, while safeguarding its historic features. In addition, the vision will embed clear actions for nature recovery, flood risk reduction and water quality improvements, recognising opportunities linked to the emerging Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS), funding and emphasising the enhancement of the River Hiz and public access as key environmental priorities for Hitchin.

The Delivery Plan will build on and strengthen this vision through specific objectives and actions.



Image: Market Square, Hitchin



SWOT analysis Summary of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats

Strengths

1. Hitchin is the main shopping destination in the district, providing a good range and choice of convenience and comparison shops. It has a reasonable selection of national multiple retailers, and it has the strongest range and choice of comparison and convenience retail, and services uses in the district.
2. Large food stores are available which cater for main and bulk food shopping needs.
3. The environmental quality of the centre is good, reflecting its historic character and the centre's attractive mix of period buildings and a varied street scene, including the Market Place.
4. The town centre provides a range of service facilities including banks and building societies.
5. The evening economy is relatively strong with many restaurants, pubs and bars.
6. The vacancy rate is much lower than the national average - suggesting demand for premises is relatively good.
7. Most areas of the centre are maintained in at least moderate condition, with Hermitage Road setting a benchmark for improvement.
8. The centre has a good range of small specialist independent retailers.
9. The centre has a good bus service, with many bus routes serving the centre.
10. Buildings are generally attractive and in a reasonable to good condition.
11. The household survey results suggest Hitchin has higher levels of customer satisfaction than dissatisfaction.
12. Hitchin features a popular market in the town centre, operating on Tuesdays, Fridays and Saturdays, in addition to a flea market on Sundays.

Weaknesses

13. The choice of retailers is not comparable with some larger centres, which encourages expenditure leakage to centres with a better range of facilities, such as Cambridge, Luton and Stevenage.

14. The linear form of the centre does not provide a natural circuit for shoppers, and pedestrian flows within peripheral areas are low, i.e. Bridge Street and the top end of Bancroft.
15. Some non-pedestrianised streets have narrow pavements and can be congested, and difficult for those with mobility difficulties at peak times, such as Sun Street and Bucklersbury.
16. The Conservation Area designation and listed buildings could constrain potential redevelopment opportunities. It could restrict the growth of the centre and deter new operators, due to the lack of availability of spaces needed for larger format stores.
17. The Churchgate Shopping Centre and the market area between St Mary's Church and the Churchgate Centre detract from the overall attractiveness of the town centre.
18. Surface car parking around St Mary's Church is visually dominant and detracts from the advantages of the proximity to the river frontage and historic core.
19. The train station is not within a comfortable walking distance of the town centre.
20. Lack of legibility from the town centre to peripheral car parks (e.g. Woodside and Lairage) and key facilities within and on the edge of the town centre (e.g. swimming pool, schools, museums, Priory Park and the rail station).

Opportunities

21. Hitchin has a reasonably affluent population, but a high proportion of the expenditure generated leaks from the area. Population and expenditure are expected to grow in the future. If Hitchin can maintain its current share of market expenditure there is potential to improve and expand retail, leisure and service uses.
22. There remain several opportunity sites within the town centre, which could accommodate new retail/leisure uses, which would help to retain more expenditure and customers in the area.
23. Improved linkages along the River Hiz could provide better access and natural

circuit for pedestrians between Bridge Street, the Churchgate Centre, the Portmill Lane car parks and Hermitage Road.

24. Improved pedestrian, cycling and bus linkages to the railway station would improve overall levels of customer accessibility to the town centre.
25. Enhancement of the Churchgate Centre and market area would significantly improve the attraction and ambience of the town centre as a retail and leisure destination.
26. The centre is already popular as a restaurant and café destination, providing a key opportunity (particularly within or associated with any development of the Churchgate Regeneration Zone) to develop a complementary cultural strategy.
27. A coordinated approach to transport and parking may provide opportunities for reconfiguration of provision, whilst maintaining or increasing footfall and vitality.
28. To restore Charnwood House to bring it back into viable use while safeguarding its historic features.

Threats

29. The number of vacant shop units has increased significantly in recent years. The continuation of this trend could undermine Hitchin's role as a higher order shopping destination in the retail hierarchy.
30. The continued polarisation of national multiples in larger centres and/or the business failure of more national multiples could lead to the closure of outlets. The continued rationalisation and restructuring of national multiples could lead to the closure of outlets. Multiple operators could seek to focus on (sub-)regional centres such as Stevenage, Cambridge and Luton rather than Hitchin.
31. Transport impacts of growth within and around Hitchin, including Luton Airport, could exacerbate congestion. This could deter town centre visits, given the proximity and capacity of through-routes.

Key priorities – Hitchin Town Centre

	Land use and retail Built environment Transport, access and movement		Priority area: Churchgate Regeneration Zone		Responsibility: NHDC as Local Planning Authority (LPA) development management) Future development partners
 Actions / Planning considerations:					
Through the Council's development management role in the planning system, the Council will assess proposals associated with the Churchgate Regeneration Zone (Local Plan Allocation HT11) as a Significant Development in accordance with Local Plan Policy SP9 and the Guidance Notes identified in Part 2. This would require a strategic masterplan demonstrating how the development could:					
• provide a mix of flexible and adaptable commercial units that would enable future reoccupation by a range of town centre uses, as well as a mix of accommodation to increase the town centre's resident population; • strategically target a mix of retail, food and beverage, and leisure operators, including recognition and assessment of the impact of any potential overlap of catchments for leisure uses; • activate and open up the River Hiz for user recreation; • improve pedestrian and active travel permeability through the site and surrounding area such as introducing street patterns to increase accessibility and linkages across the centre; • support the ongoing vitality of the town centre by increasing potential for visitors and footfall including the promotion of active travel to the centre. • deliver a coordinated parking strategy; any proposals should be supported by a parking survey to demonstrate the current use of existing car parks in and around the town centre and plan for appropriate levels of parking, integrating with an emerging transport strategy for Hitchin; • ensure any scheme facilitates and does not prejudice further sites being brought forward in the future; and • provide accessible links to, and enhanced utilities infrastructure for Hitchin Market, including electrical connections and water supply.					

	Built environment Transport, access and movement		Priority area: Public realm, connectivity and way-finding		Responsibility: NHDC HCC Visit Hitchin Business Improvement District Future development partners
 Actions / Planning considerations:					
Develop and deliver a joint public realm, connectivity and wayfinding strategy and delivery plan for Hitchin, taking forward the recommendations of the Local Cycling and Walking Infra-structure Plan. For Hitchin:					
• Create a public realm and wayfinding strategy in collaboration with the BID, Churchgate Regeneration Zone development partners and other stakeholders, including viability and costings, to identify key opportunities for investment from street furniture, lighting and planters, as well as the provision of public realm alongside the River Hiz. • Identify funding sources, future joint bidding opportunities, and requests for planning obligations for relevant developments for financial contributions to wayfinding, pedestrian routes, and public realm investments, particularly between the town centre, new public realm along the River Hiz, and the surrounding open space and gardens. • Improve transport links and signage from the town centre to key destinations such as the Hitchin Lavender Fields, the theatre and event space at The Dell, and other leisure destinations outside the town centre.					



**Land use and retail
Community**



Priority area:
Cultural economy strategy



Responsibility:
NHDC

Visit Hitchin Business Improvement District (BID)



Actions / Planning considerations:

- Through the Council's development management role in the planning system, the Council will recognise the benefits of innovative commercial uses that contribute to the nighttime economy, particularly options for young people, as a positive material consideration when supported through evidence of

viability and long-term vacancies, preventing breaks in active frontages, resolving amenity issues (e.g., noise and smells), impact on the nature and character of the retail frontages.

- Building on the economic opportunities from the Churchgate Regeneration Zone, the Council

and development partners for Churchgate will engage with key stakeholders to identify further commercial and cultural opportunities including investing in The Dell as an open-air theatre and to identify possible future funding sources.



**Transport, access and
movement**



Priority area:
Hitchin as a key sustainable transport hub



Responsibility:
NHDC

HCC

Visit Hitchin Business Improvement District
Future development partners



Actions / Planning considerations:

In collaboration with HCC, the BID and other stakeholders, the Council will develop a transport strategy for Hitchin that aims to reduce car dependency in the district and promote sustainable modes of travel into and within the town, including to:

- better integrate rail and bus services to facilitate travel by public transport within the district and to major destinations beyond, including Stevenage, Luton (including the airport), Biggleswade and Bedford;

- provide a bus station in the town centre to increase the convenience and comfort for people interchanging between services;
- improve the efficiency of bus routing in the town centre by adding a bus turnaround;
- support the expansion of the HertsLynx demand-responsive bus service to include villages to the northwest, west and south of Hitchin;
- deliver schemes in the Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan;

- redirect through-traffic and more effectively regulate traffic flows within the town to:
 - minimise congestion that impacts bus journey times and reliability;
 - enable the reallocation of road space for safer walking and cycling, particularly between the town centre and railway station;
 - reduce the severance and other inhibitory effects of the A505 on people walking and cycling into and within the town;
- improve air quality for residents and visitors.

3B: Letchworth Garden City

Further information on **Letchworth Garden City town centre** is found in **Appendix 3B: Letchworth Garden City Town Centre Evidence Notes**

Identity

Letchworth Garden City is a unique town centre as a result of its origins as an intensively planned town – the world’s first Garden City – founded in the early twentieth century. By following masterplan principles to balance high quality residential homes with nature pursuits, local employment and accessible transport, the areas of open space, commercial land uses and housing are integrated and convenient to one another. Detailed buildings contribute to the town centre’s unique flair, as the concept of the Garden City incited innovation and competitive design.

The Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation owns a large proportion of the town centre land and assets, and is involved in the visioning, development and investments of the town’s future. Such a large volume of ownership to a single organisation is unique compared to the other town centres and stimulates different commercial decisions and town-centre-wide interventions. This single ownership also provides a key point of difference, providing opportunities for broader strategic alignment.

Letchworth is the only town with the convenience of a railway station within its centre. The town centre, although hosting wide, accessible and pleasant footpaths, lacks a distinct core. There is a variety of uses throughout the town centre, shops, residential flats, restaurants, cafes, with a range of budget priced comparison retail. Letchworth is positioned as an important town centre demonstrating Garden City principles, opportunities for recreation and leisure, and a balanced offer.

More recently, Letchworth is part of Hertfordshire County Council’s Sustainable Travel Town programme, which aims to bring forward a series of measures to reshape the local highways network and achieve a significant switch to walking, cycling and public transport.

Vision

Letchworth will maintain and develop the town centre for civic and social life, connected by accessible public transport networks through leadership, sense of place, and enterprise. Letchworth will: support the future of arts and heritage; will be a great place to live, visit and shop in; will increase residents life chances; and will be a protagonist in raising investment for the local economy; uphold and promote Garden City principles, and therefore its unique identity, as the first of its kind; and present a strengthened, more ambitious vision that reflects its future potential, aligns with the evidence base, builds on its distinctiveness, and recognises Letchworth’s capacity for growth.



SWOT analysis

Summary of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats

Strengths

1. Letchworth is a compact well-defined centre with a natural circuit for shoppers. The centre has a relatively pleasant shopping environment.
2. The large Morrisons food store is an important anchor store catering for main and top-up food shopping.
3. Letchworth has retained a reasonable range of comparison goods shops, although this has declined and there is a lower representation of comparison retailers than Hitchin.
4. The Arcade, The Wynd and other secondary areas provide a good range of interesting specialist retailers.
5. The centre is easily accessible by a range of modes of transport, with a railway station located within the town centre. Car access is also convenient with several centrally located car parks.
6. Movement around the centre on foot is supported by wide pavements and pedestrianised areas, and Letchworth is one of the County Council's Sustainable Travel Towns.
7. The centre is attractively landscaped giving the centre a sense of spaciousness. Environmental improvements have enhanced the overall attractiveness of the centre.
8. Much of the town centre is consolidated under the sole ownership of the Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation, which provides a simpler single point of contact and greater opportunities for longer-term strategies.
9. The Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation provides a significant draw for visitors and supports the town's distinctive offer.

Weaknesses

10. The proportion of vacant units is significantly above the national average, with vacancies spread across the centre, which suggest the supply of units is currently greater than operator demand.
11. The centre has a lower number of national multiples when compared with Hitchin and other larger centres in the sub-region such as Cambridge and Welwyn.
12. Like many centres of a similar size, Letchworth has lost most of its banks and building societies.
13. Leakage of higher value comparison spend to other centres within and beyond District.

Opportunities

14. Letchworth has a reasonably large and affluent population, which presents an opportunity to claw-back leakage from this catchment by improving its current offer.
15. The vacant premises across the centre could provide an opportunity to consolidate retail, redevelop and accommodate new facilities.
16. The new Emil Dale Academy school recently opened, providing another source of footfall within the centre and an opportunity to cater to the new student population.
17. The Broadway Cinema helps to boost the evening economy, but this facility could be improved and the number of visitors optimised.
18. There remains a number of opportunity sites within the town centre, including the potential regeneration of Garden Square Shopping Centre, which could accommodate new retail/leisure uses that could help to retain more expenditure and customers in the area.
19. There are a number of open and green spaces in close proximity to the town centre that would provide a draw to the centre (if supported by necessary routes and linkages) in keeping with the town's Garden City principles.

20. There is strong potential for high quality cycleways identified within the LCWIP to enhance active travel links between the town centre, the station and Letchworth Business Park.
21. Activate Broadway Gardens through regular events and markets.
22. Review the town centre one-way system to better support cycling.
23. Consider temporary or part-time closure of Leys Avenue to vehicular through-traffic to create a safer environment for community events.
24. Build on the popularity of The Wynd play area and explore similar interventions elsewhere in Letchworth.

Threats

25. The continued rationalisation and restructuring of national multiples could lead to the closure of outlets. Multiple operators could seek to focus on (sub-) regional centres such as Stevenage, Cambridge and Luton rather than Letchworth.
26. Prominent town centre units remain, vacant with limited interest from suitable occupiers, creating a risk of long term or repeat vacancies driven by wider commercial and market factors.
27. The District Council's offices are located adjacent to the centre, providing a steady stream of workers in the centre each day. Planned Local Government Reorganisation could impact the need for this office space by a local authority.
28. Increased footfall and evening activity may require proportionate security and safety measures to support local businesses.

Key priorities – Letchworth Garden City Town Centre



Land use and retail
Built environment



Priority area:

Town centre development opportunities and allocations (Garden Square Shopping Centre and Arena Parade)



Responsibility:

NNHDC (as Local Planning Authority (LPA) development management)
Future development partners



Actions / Planning considerations:

Through the Council's development management role in the planning system, the Council will assess proposals associated with the development of Garden Square and Arena Parade (Local Plan Allocation LG21) as a Significant Development in accordance with Local Plan Policy SP9 and the Guidance Notes identified in Part 2. This would require the preparation of a strategic masterplan demonstrating how the developments could:

- provide a mix of flexible and adaptable units that would enable future reoccupation by a range of town centre uses, broadening the diversity of the retail and

dining offer, as well a mix of accommodation to increase the town centre's resident population;

- strategically target a mix of retail, food and beverage, and leisure operators, including recognition and assessment of the impact of any potential overlap of catchments for leisure uses;
- demonstrate consideration of the inclusion of community facilities, including the potential for a primary care/health hub;
- improve pedestrian and active travel permeability through the site and surrounding area, such as introducing street patterns to

increase legibility and linkages across the centre, and provide additional street furniture including benches;

- support the ongoing vitality of the town centre by increasing potential for visitors and footfall, including the promotion of active travel to the centre; and
- ensure any scheme facilitates and does not prejudice further sites being brought forward in the future.



Land use and retail



Priority area:

Repurposing of vacant units



Responsibility:

NHDC (as Local Planning Authority (LPA) development management)
Landowners
Future development partners
Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation



Actions / Planning considerations:

Through the Council's development management role in the planning system, the Council will seek to address higher levels of vacancy by giving positive weight to the repurposing of vacant units by uses that contribute to the vitality and

viability of the centre as a material benefit to be weighed against limited loss of floorspace or limited harm to heritage assets in the determination of planning applications.



Land use and retail
Community



Priority area:
The Wynd



Responsibility:
NHDC (as Local Planning Authority (LPA)
development management



Actions / Planning considerations:

Through the Council's development management role in the planning system, the Council will give positive weight to new uses and formats (including non-main town centre uses) in the Wynd where it can

be demonstrated that they would contribute to the character of the street (to be weighed against any loss of main town centre uses and floorspace).



Land use and retail



Priority area:
Markets



Responsibility:
NHDC (as Local Planning Authority (LPA)
development management
Future development partners
Letchworth Garden City Heritage
Foundation
Love Letchworth Business Improvement
District (BID)



Actions / Planning considerations:

Through the Council's development management role in the planning system, support the reinstatement of regular open air and/or covered markets in Letchworth town centre.



Land use and retail
Community



Priority area:
Evening economy



Responsibility:
NHDC (as Local Planning Authority (LPA)
development management)
Love Letchworth Business Improvement
District (BID)
Letchworth Garden City Heritage
Foundation



Actions / Planning considerations:

- Through the Council's development management role in the planning system, the Council will give positive weight to innovative commercial uses that contribute to the nighttime economy, particularly options for young people, when supported by evidence of viability, long-term vacancies, preventing breaks in active frontages, resolving historic amenity issues (e.g. noise, unpleasant odours, or anti-social

behaviour), and the impact on the nature and character of the retail frontages.

- Through the Council's development management role in the planning system, the Council will give positive weight to planning applications for amendments to operating hours to support an evening economy, where supported by evidence that it will not lead to unacceptable adverse amenity issues.

- Collaborate with the Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation, alongside the BID, to build on the Letchworth Culture Strategy 'Create the Future' to incorporate the evening economy. This will include identifying funding sources and future joint bidding opportunities to support potential pilot schemes and the roll-out of extended operating hours as part of a wider evening economy strategy.



**Transport, access
and movement**



Priority area:

Connectivity and links to
Broadway Gardens and
Howard Park



Responsibility:

NHDC

HCC

Love Letchworth Business Improvement
District (BID)

Letchworth Garden City Heritage
Foundation



Actions / Planning considerations:

Develop and deliver a joint public
realm, connectivity and wayfinding
strategy:

- Taking account of the findings and recommendations of the Places & People 'Town Centre Access Review' and 'Placemaking Plan' to develop viability and costings to deliver key priorities identified, including orientation and signage improvements at Letchworth Station and Broadway Gardens.

- Progress the recommendations of the LCWIP for improved pedestrian and cycle routes in the town, including creation of a segregated carriageway facility for cyclists around Broadway Gardens, on Bridge Road, Station Place and Station Road.
- Improve the quality and legibility of routes between the town centre and the surrounding open space and gardens.

- Identify funding sources, including future joint bidding opportunities and planning obligations.



**Transport, access
and movement**



Priority area:

Station forecourt and
northern entrance



Responsibility:

HCC

NHDC

Network Rail



Actions / Planning considerations:

- In collaboration with HCC, engage with Network Rail to progress the redevelopment of the Station forecourt as a key gateway into Letchworth, to improve integration between bus and rail, and to make access to the station by cycle safer.

- Explore potential to create a northern pedestrian entrance to Letchworth railway station to improve access.

3C: Royston

Further information on **Royston town centre** is found in **Appendix 3C: Royston Town Centre Evidence Notes**

Identity

Royston has a rich heritage dating back to the 12th century, with surrounding green open spaces and town centre streets with a variety of cafes and restaurants offering a diverse mix of food and drink. Royston is distinctive through its historic qualities of the town centre, such as its medieval street layout, market places and sites of archaeological and historic interests.



An outstanding feature of Royston town centre is its compact size and streets, namely, King Street and High Street, lined with historic shop fronts. Leaning into the rich heritage, the Royston Town Trail has 31 marked stops throughout the centre detailing medieval and cultural buildings of interest.

Royston is smaller than Hitchin and Letchworth and primarily serves the day-to-day shopping, food, beverage, and service needs of local residents. Its town centre is located in the northeast of North Herts, southwest of Cambridge; it is approximately 10 miles away from the Hitchin-Letchworth-Baldock grouping, and thus, plays an important service role for many of the surrounding villages in both Hertfordshire and Cambridgeshire. There is a large employment estate to the north of the town, Royston Gateway Retail Park and Industrial Estate.

In recent years, the expansion of out-of-town retail at Royston Gateway has developed into a significant draw to the area, bringing visitors from a catchment extending north into Cambridgeshire. However, Royston Gateway is not currently well linked to the town centre, which provides a longer-term opportunity to develop a cohesive wider offer.

In 2022, Royston became a Sustainable Travel Town, and as such, prioritises measures to improve public transport, walking and cycling. Royston Railway Station approximately half a mile north of the town centre and is accessed on foot via narrow pedestrian paths along Kneesworth Street which carries high levels of traffic.

Vision

Royston will have a thriving town centre with a strong sense of identity marked by a clearly identifiable and vibrant 'heart' by tapping into its distinct character marked by rich heritage, medieval layout and a diverse mix of food and drink offerings. The centre features cultural attractions including Royston Cave, Royston Museum, Priory Memorial Gardens, and Royston Town Trail that offer a key opportunity for further economic and cultural growth. The town centre will encourage sustainable travel and serve its local community as a welcoming place that is a pleasure to live in, work in and visit.

The Delivery Plan will build on and strengthen this vision through specific objectives and actions.

SWOT analysis

Summary of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats

Strengths

1. The centre serves the day-to-day service needs of residents.
2. The centre is accessible by a choice of modes of transport other than the car, with bus stops and a railway station located close to the centre, supporting a high proportion of trips by walking.
3. Access by car is served by convenient car parks located within and around to the main shopping area.
4. There is a small but interesting range of independent specialist retailers.
5. There is a good selection of pubs and restaurants that strengthen the evening economy.
6. The centre has a relatively low proportion of vacant units compared to both the District and UK averages, showing a healthy level of market demand.
7. Royston Town Council offices are located immediately adjacent to the town centre, providing access to key administrative functions as well as a draw to the centre.
8. The centre features a number of distinct cultural attractions within and in close proximity to the town centre, including Royston Cave, Royston Museum, Priory Memorial Gardens, and Royston Town Trail.
9. Royston features a popular market in the town centre, operating on Wednesdays and Saturdays.

Weaknesses

10. The closure of the Morrisons town centre food store has reduced the food and grocery offer and an important anchor store for the centre has been lost.
11. Premises in Royston are generally small which may be less attractive to potential new occupiers looking for more modern premises. The centre has a limited number of larger retail units to accommodate national multiple retailers.

12. The Angel Pavement shopping mall features a number of vacancies but is dated and the design is relatively constrained reducing the attractiveness of the units for new occupiers.
13. Many of the pavements in the peripheral parts of the centre are narrow which causes congestion and vehicular and pedestrian conflict.
14. The opportunity to expand and improve the market is constrained by the existing location and infrastructure, including limited pedestrian access.
15. Although the train station is within a reasonable walking distance from the heart of the town centre, the trip is along pavements that are narrow in places and lack active frontage.
16. A number of large retailers, including Tesco, Aldi, M&S and Costa have located to peripheral locations on the bypass and northern fringe of the town, drawing spending away from the town centre.
17. The main employment area is located to the north of the town, closer to the Royston Gateway Retail Park, limiting the attractiveness of the town centre and the amount of lunchtime / after work spending.
18. The A505 is a major obstacle to active travel between Royston and Melbourn, Kneesworth, Bassingbourn and Litlington.

Opportunities

19. Royston Town Centre benefits from a local customer base, especially as local residents need to travel relatively long distances to reach alternative facilities. Population and expenditure generated by this customer base is expected to grow in the future, which should provide opportunities to improve the range and choice of shops and services in the town.
20. The Corn Exchange is an attractive destination within the centre with key heritage traits, featuring a variety of small specialist independent shops and the potential to offer a range of town centre services building on the popularity of the existing offer.

21. Royston is linked by public transport to Cambridge and intermediate villages (Melbourn, Meldreth, Shepreth and Foxton) and has the potential to benefit from increased spending from planned housing growth in Cambridge and South Cambridgeshire.
22. Royston Town Centre is dominated by independent traders, which could benefit from planning policy support for growth and opportunities for diversification through potential amalgamation, subdivision and investment in existing units.
23. Both the Royston Gateway Retail Park and Industrial Estate attract different users that could be drawn into Royston town centre for complementary activities.
24. Improved active travel links across the A505 and into Royston town centre would enable more economic activity without a commensurate level in car traffic.

Threats

25. The recent loss of the Morrisons from the town centre further reduces the number of national multiple retailers and the convenience goods shopping draw of the centre (as a distinct destination from Royston Gateway).
26. The potential for further edge-of-town/ out of centre retail development at Royston Gateway (given the limited town centre opportunities) would draw further trade from the town centre.

Key priorities – Royston Town Centre



Land use and retail
Built environment



Priority area:
Royston's key assets



Responsibility:
NHDC

Royston Town Council

Royston First Business Improvement
District (BID)



Actions / Planning considerations:

- Work with the Town Council and BID to establish a joint marketing strategy for the Royston Cave, Royston Museum, Priory Memorial Gardens, and Royston Town Trail to encourage visitors to the town centre.
- Building on the Council's Economic Strategy, collaborate with the BID, Royston Town Council and other stakeholders to support the establishment of a Royston focused Destination Management Organisation (DMO) to promote leisure activities and attractions in and around Royston.



Land use and retail



Priority area:
Growth and evolution of independent and speciality operators, protecting their contribution to Royston's character



Responsibility:

NHDC (as Local Planning Authority (LPA)
development management)

Landowners

Future development partners



Actions / Planning considerations:

Through the Council's development management role in the planning system, the Council will recognise the benefits of the viability of existing operators that contribute to the vitality and viability of the centre and give positive weight to applications for the amalgamation, subdivision and investment in existing units to be weighed against limited loss of floorspace or less than substantial harm to heritage assets in the determination of planning applications



**Transport, access
and movement**



Priority area:

Public realm, connectivity
and wayfinding



Responsibility:

NHDC

HCC

Royston Town Council

Royston BID



Actions / Planning considerations:

Develop and deliver a joint public realm, connectivity and wayfinding strategy:

- Provide wayfinding signage to improve legibility of routes to railway station, bus station, leisure centre, Royston Cave, Royston Museum, Royston Gateway Retail Park, employment areas, the Priory Memorial Gardens, Therfield Heath, and other destinations;
- Improve the pedestrian experience in and around the town centre, including connections between the High Street and Kneesworth Street, and between Market Hill, The Warren car park and premises within the gyratory; and
- Progress LCWIP recommendations for improved pedestrian and cycle routes in the town and from surrounding villages.
- Explore with HCC how to make bus services more attractive and reliable, and improve the experience for people waiting for buses at the railway and bus stations.



**Land use and retail
Community**



Priority area:

Royston Market



Responsibility:

NHDC

Royston Town Council



Actions / Planning considerations:

- Encourage Royston Town Council to undertake a study to identify the demand and opportunities to expand and enhance the existing market offering, including the potential for additional pitches and a greater range of operating hours and days.
- Collaborate with the BID and the Town Council to identify and apply funding sources to support expansion and promotion of the market.

3D: Baldock

Further information on **Baldock town centre** is found in **Appendix 3D: Hitchin Town Centre Evidence Notes**.

Identity

Baldock is the smallest town centre in North Herts and is located to the east of Letchworth. The town centre provides a mix of independent specialist retailers, food and beverage outlets and service businesses alongside a historic open market that operates every Wednesday.



Baldock town centre has a strong local identity with a thriving cafe and pub culture, which takes full advantage of the wide High Street and its refined old buildings. Baldock's strength lies with its specialist, independent retailers and service business sector which make a valuable contribution to the local economy and community. Combined, the built environment and town identity provides a pleasant social centre for residents and visitors to interact.

The town centre has retained its traditional market town character with the historic core containing fine architecture from the medieval and Georgian periods. St. Mary's Church, a Grade I Listed Building, lies in the northern part of the town centre and is surrounded by historic and more recent residential areas. The town centre is designated a Conservation Area and contains a mix of uses with town houses, inns and commercial buildings.

Since the completion of the A505 bypass, opportunities exist to promote a more vibrant and sustainable town centre, a social centre for residents as identified in the North Herts Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan (LCWIP). Moreover, the Tesco Extra – located on the periphery of the town centre – attracts customers from neighbouring villages and towns, as well as locals but would benefit from better links to the town centre.

Looking forward, significant residential development surrounding Baldock town centre will likely increase town centre footfall and demand; the Growing Baldock scheme is planned to provide an additional 3,000 homes.

Vision

Baldock will maintain and maximise its town centre's strengths, namely, its historical market context, network of pedestrian paths, leafy green features, and local identity for cafe culture – by enhancing its attractive, safe, accessible, and lively town centre that incentivises investment for the local community and visitors to work, live and relax. Significant growth surrounding Baldock will provide a vibrant new resident and working population to visit and spend in the centre.

SWOT analysis

Summary of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats

Strengths

1. Baldock is an attractive historic market town with period buildings and a pleasant environment. The centre has a wide and attractive tree lined High Street and a high-quality public realm.
2. The town centre is relatively compact, easy to navigate and generally accessible. The pavements are relatively wide and well maintained.
3. The shop vacancy rate is below the District and UK averages, and this has not increased significantly since 2015.
4. The centre has a strong presence of small independent outlets and primarily serves the day-to-day shopping and service needs of local residents.
5. There is adequate on-street parking provided within the centre and off-street parking at the Tesco Extra store and the Twitchell car park.
6. Baldock has a well-established evening economy with a wide selection of restaurants, pubs and bars for a centre of its size. The town centre has a higher-than-average proportion of food and beverage outlets.
7. Following the completion of the A505 Baldock bypass, the centre has benefited from investment and public realm improvements with recent updates including the replacement of street furniture along High Street and Whitehorse Street.
8. The town hosts a variety of regular community events that 'activate' the High Street ranging from Ecofest to Baldock Beer Festival, as well as the weekly outdoor market on Wednesdays.

Weaknesses

9. The large Tesco Extra on the edge of the town centre is a significant draw, but there is little evidence of a commensurate level of linked trips into the town centre. This is potentially exacerbated by the poor wayfinding and a lack of clear pedestrian links between Tesco Extra and the centre. As such, Baldock currently draws trade from a relatively small catchment area, similar to Royston, in contrast to Hitchin and Letchworth.

10. The public realm in the core Market Square is directly adjacent to parking bays, which may detract from the quality and experience of the public realm.
11. High volumes of traffic along Hitchin Street, Whitehorse Street, and High Street undermine the ambience of the shopping environment and inhibit pedestrian movements. Additionally, the pedestrian crossings of High Street, which is a busy road, are far apart (240m and 300m). Pedestrians are often observed walking on the road, especially near Simpson Drive.
12. The centre has no banks or building societies.
13. Shopping areas are fragmented with several breaks in the retail frontage by offices and dwellings located on the High Street.
14. Many of the shops are converted dwellings and some are also listed buildings, which can limit interest from potential occupiers that require a specific spatial format.
15. There are a limited range of retail shops, including national multiples. There are few comparison goods retailers within Baldock, well below the District and UK averages.
16. There is no co-ordinating body between local businesses and the District Council, and limited demand for a group (such as a BID) that would facilitate stakeholder engagement and local representation.
21. If more of the customers drawn to the Tesco Extra, some of whom are from outside the district, could be attracted to other shops and services in the town centre, that would boost the vitality and viability of the town centre. This depends in part on improving pedestrian routes and signage through the memorial gardens from Tesco to the High Street.
22. The transport strategy for Growing Baldock redirects through traffic away from the centre to A505/A1(M)/Letchworth Gate. This provides an opportunity to address east-to-west traffic on Hitchin Road/Whitehorse Road that detract from the centre, as well as to provide an additional pedestrian crossing on High Street (as recommended by the LCWIP).
23. Baldock town centre is dominated by independent traders, which could benefit from planning policy support for growth and opportunities for diversification through potential amalgamation, subdivision and investment in existing units.

Threats

24. Since 2015, the number of comparison goods shops has decreased significantly. The continuation of this trend could undermine the centre's attraction as a shopping, food and beverage destination.
25. Whilst Growing Baldock will increase the resident population within the town's catchment, the edge of centre Tesco Extra store provides an extensive range of food and non-food goods, which may directly attract the new spending, reducing the potential spending available to new and existing facilities in the town centre.
26. The increase in spending and activity generated by the Growing Baldock development may be lost by the limited opportunities/vacant units for existing businesses to expand or relocate within the town centre.
27. Failure to appropriately manage, monitor and influence the Growing Baldock development may result in an adverse impact on the town centre in terms of loss of vitality or footfall, increased traffic etc. if the emerging residents and workers are drawn to alternative destinations.

Opportunities

17. Shop rental rates are lower in Baldock than the other town centres in North Herts and more affordable for small independent traders.
18. The Local Plan (2011 – 2031) allocates 3,360 homes in Baldock. This could significantly increase the resident population supporting new and existing shops and services within the town centre.
19. The BA10 employment land allocation (19.6ha) could increase spending in the town. This will depend in part on improving cycling and walking connectivity between the industrial/employment land and the town centre.
20. The Growing Baldock development will provide a greater critical mass of businesses and commercial activity within the town, attracting a wider variety of retail and leisure operators.

Key priorities – Baldock Town Centre

A Land use and retail Built environment	Priority area: Growth and evolution of independent and speciality operators, protecting their contribution to Baldock's character	Responsibility: NHDC (as Local Planning Authority (LPA) development management) Existing and future operators Landowners Developers
Actions / Planning considerations: Through the Council's development management role in the planning system, the Council will: - recognise the benefits of the viability of existing operators that contribute to the vitality and viability of the centre through amalgamation and subdivision of units, and investment in existing town centre facilities as a material benefit to be weighed against limited loss of floorspace or less than substantial harm to heritage assets in the determination of planning applications. - give positive weight to new uses and formats (including non-main town centre uses) where it can be demonstrated that they would contribute to the character of the street (to be weighed against any loss of main town centre uses and floorspace).		
B Built environment Transport, access and movement	Priority area: Connectivity and wayfinding as the wider centre grows	Responsibility: NNHDC HCC Future development partners
Actions / Planning considerations: Develop and deliver a joint public realm, connectivity and wayfinding strategy: - Growing Baldock residential-led development should support new residents access to the town centre via cycling and pedestrian routes, car, and public transport in accordance with the approved masterplan. This will include the redesign of Station Road / Icknield Way junction and additional cycle routes, and overall improvements to Whitehorse Street, amongst others; - new employment floorspace at Local Plan Allocation BA10, including development of new accesses from Royston Road and new/upgraded active travel routes (with associated wayfinding signage) to draw workers into the town centre; - improvements to pedestrian links between Tesco Extra and Baldock Town Centre to incentivise and support linked trips; - progress LCWIP recommendations for improved pedestrian and cycle routes in the town; and - install more interpretation boards, blue plaques and destination/route signage around the town centre.		



Land use and retail
Community



Priority area:

Monitoring of town centre
service provision and
infrastructure



Responsibility: NHDC

Future development partners



Actions / Planning considerations:

The Council will request funding from development such as Growing Baldock to support the Council's monitoring of the mix of uses and services within and surrounding Baldock Town Centre including main town centre uses, supporting infrastructure, community administrative and medical facilities to:

- identify and address any deficiencies through the loss of existing services and/or capacity

as a direct result of the planned increases in residential population, visitors and employees; and

- build an evidence base to support intervention through additional allocations, funding bids, or marketing initiatives.

Explore opportunities to provide public conveniences within the town centre.



Land use and retail



Priority area:

Capture benefits of
planned growth



Responsibility:

NNHDC (as Local Planning Authority (LPA)
development management)

Future development partners



Actions / Planning considerations:

- Through the Council's development management role in the planning system, the Council will require developments in and surrounding the town centre, such as Growing Baldock to enter into planning obligations for financial contributions to deliver

the actions and town centre priorities (as well as those within the approved masterplan, LCWIP amongst others) to mitigate the impact of otherwise unacceptable developments to make them acceptable in planning terms.



Image: Church Street, Baldock

Part 4: Further Council actions

Further council actions

The Towns Centres Strategy has identified a series of cross-cutting planning-based thematic policies to guide development, Council intervention and investment proposals. The Strategy adopts a place-based approach to identifying key investment priorities, tailored to the needs of each individual town centre to support vitality and viability throughout the district.

The Council should look to support, protect and enhance long-term viability and vitality of town centres. The effective delivery of the Strategy will require the Council to work closely with several partners and stakeholders.

Set out below are recommendations for Council-led priorities for action across each of the town centres.

The ongoing support of key identified partners and stakeholders will be important in terms of delivering the identified priorities for each of the town centres and the recommended further actions. This will inform action-oriented Delivery Plans for each of the centres that can be subject to regular review and updates.

Image: Howard Park, Leichworth

Land use and retail

1. The Council will incorporate the findings and recommendations for new policies from the North Hertfordshire Town Centres & Retail Study (2024, or any subsequent updates) when preparing the emerging Local Plan. The recommendations are reproduced at Appendix 2 of this document.
2. The Council will continue to foster engagement and partnerships with relevant town centre stakeholder groups including Royston Town Council, Visit Hitchin BID, Love Letchworth BID, Royston First BID, and the Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation (amongst others). The Council will support the potential to diversify commercial uses in vacant units, and further boost footfall and dwell time, including through promotion and marketing efforts.
3. The Council will explore opportunities to facilitate community programming and spaces for recreation across open and green spaces in and surrounding town centres.
4. The Council will implement the Economic Strategy for North Hertfordshire to build a strong, resilient and sustainable local economy that will provide a critical mass of workers, residents, and commercial activity within the town centres.

Built environment

5. In accordance with Local Plan Policy SP9 and Guidance Note 1, the Council will require 'significant developments', including those within town centres, to be subject to a proportionate Strategic Masterplan exercise.
6. In accordance with Local Plan Policy D1, the Council will:
 - a encourage high density development in town centres that incorporate a mix of commercial uses on the ground floor, with residential or commercial above.
 - b progress and encourage enhancements to the public realm or new developments that ensure that the character and high quality of the historic fabric is maintained and thematically linked to the town centre enhancements.
 - c preserve the historic layout and retain the width of the streets across town centres, with any exceptions to be suitably justified. The towns' pedestrian permeability,

achieved through a network of footpaths, should be protected and enhanced.

- d ensure that new developments are complementary, rather than directly copying or competing with historic styles, with scope for innovation allowing the town centre to evolve. They should enhance the existing fabric through similar materials and sympathetic designs, scale, height, massing and proportions.

Transport, access and movement

7. The Council will work with partners to develop and deliver a joint public realm, connectivity and wayfinding strategy and delivery plan for the four towns, building on Hertfordshire County Council's Active Travel Fund work in Stevenage Town Centre.
8. Review and update the Council's Parking Strategy to complement planned improvements in sustainable travel options. This could be by setting parking tariffs to encourage greater use of car parks outside the town centre boundary and reduce the amount of traffic circulating in town centres, or adjusting/implementing new Controlled Parking Zones and/or parking time limits to ensure town centre parking spaces are used efficiently.
9. The Council, in partnership with Hertfordshire County Council, will seek developer contributions and apply for, or support other bodies' applications for, grant funding to support sustainable transport infrastructure and services, including to:
 - a Appoint a transport project officer to deliver the recommendations of the Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan (LCWIP), including measures and schemes that complement the Plan's priorities.
 - b Reduce through-traffic in all towns to reduce congestion (in particular on bus routes), increase safety and space for people walking and cycling, and improve air quality for residents and visitors.
 - c Reduce traffic speeds where these pose a danger or deterrent to people walking or cycling.
 - d Modify junctions where traffic speeds or volumes pose a danger or deterrent to people walking or cycling, in particular those with mobility, sensory or neurological impairments.

- e Increase the frequency and operating hours of bus services within and into all towns.
 - f Invite and support operators of bike/e-scooter rental schemes and car clubs into all towns.
 - g Promote public and shared transport services, including carpooling/ridesharing, to employers, education providers, leisure and sports centres, tourist attractions and information providers, etc.
 - h Create, reconfigure, add waiting facilities or otherwise enhance travel/mobility hubs, including existing railway and bus stations, to better integrate sustainable modes of travel – walking, wheeling (wheelchair, rollator, child buggy, etc), cycling, e-scootering (when and where legal), public and shared transport – and make interchanging more convenient, safe and comfortable.
 - i Support technology initiatives to integrate transport services into a single platform for planning, booking and payment options.
 - j Review the location and quantity of disabled parking bays to ensure that they adequately match demand.
 - k Prioritise buses using smart traffic management (e.g. traffic signals that respond to approaching buses or hold traffic where queues cause least disruption to bus services), bus lanes (provided these do not compromise provision unacceptably for active travel), and bus gates (where access is restricted to buses, other authorised vehicles and cycles).
10. The Council will use its role as a member of the Intalink Partnership to seek greater transparency and responsiveness around unreliable bus services, and to support improved bus services between town centres and surrounding villages.

Community

- 11. The Council through its annual Authority Monitoring Report will record the provision of the community facilities and services within the Primary Shopping Area and town centre boundary to assess any gaps in meeting the needs of the local community.
- 12. The Council will facilitate collaboration between stakeholders and facility providers as appropriate to help meet the needs of the local community.
- 13. The Council's adopted Design Code SPD includes advice on permeability and layout that foster a safe environment and deter anti-social behaviour to help guide developers and landowners.
- 14. The Council will expect licensing regulations of commercial retailers, within the Council's control, to deter 'dead frontages' through recommending appropriate hours of operation based on the surrounding mix of uses, proximity to areas of sensitivity (such as schools), delivery needs in comparison to the public realm and noise and waste pollution from the retailer.
- 15. The Council, through partnership working, will:
 - a Promote each of North Herts' town centres to demonstrate their unique character and strengths.
 - b Communicate and market the town centre offers, events and engagements to keep residents and visitors informed and to increase the frequency of their usage of the town centres.
 - c Support stakeholder groups in town centres to strengthen local networks, connections and skills.

Funding

In order to ensure that the Council can deliver the ambitions set out within this Strategy, there are several funding and delivery factors that will be integral to the implementation of the identified priorities. This section sets out the potential funding and delivery options that could be used by the Council. The list of funding opportunities identified is not exhaustive, and may be subject to change, particularly within the context of local government reorganisation and devolution arrangements.

There are likely to be opportunities for the Council to obtain funding from the Government, building on their previous success with historic funding rounds such as the Growth Area Fund (GAF). This may be complemented by opportunities for grant funding from third sector or other organisations. Developer contributions from strategic and large developments will be a significant source of funding for all four towns. It may be appropriate in some cases to explore public–private partnerships. A summary of potential private and public sector funding opportunities is provided in more detail in Table 1 below.

Table 1 High-level funding opportunities

	Funding Opportunities	Commentary
National	Local Growth Fund	Announced by Government in the Spending Review, awaiting further details. The objectives of these funds align with the priority areas identified in the Strategy.
	Local Mission Fund	
	Heritage Lottery Fund	Funding to support place-specific heritage and cultural interventions, particularly in Letchworth and Baldock.
	Arts Council England	
	National Wealth Fund	Blend of public and private financing to aid local authorities with capital to fund projects across priority sectors including transport, creative industries and digital technology.
Regional	Sub-national / Regional Transport Bodies	Utilising opportunities from regional authorities and dedicated project officer to secure funding for interventions.
	Hertfordshire County Council	Discretionary funding from the County Council.
Local	S106 Contributions	Contributions for non-highway town centre improvements and alignment with HCC contributions for transport interventions from the town centre outward. This may consist of 'Strand 1' contributions from individual schemes within or adjoining town centres or broader 'Strand 2' contributions from developments in the wider area to mitigate cumulative impacts. Collection and spend should be closely coordinated to ensure effective delivery of town centre initiatives.
	Local discretionary funding	From existing capital funding, e.g., Growth Area Funds (GAF) or discretionary funding from council tax or business rate charges. Place-specific funding can also be utilised for targeted investment, such as the Letchworth Garden City Heritage Fund.
	Business Improvement District (BID) Funding	Using funds raised through the mandatory levy charged to businesses within the BID.
	Public Works Loan (PWL)	PWL, now administered by HM Treasury, can be utilised by the Council to fund capital projects.
	Private Loans/Grants	Use of private equity to wholly or match fund capital projects including the Private Finance Initiative where the project will yield sufficient revenue.
	Local Climate Bonds	Use Local Climate Bonds to finance suitable environmental and social impact projects.

Key considerations

While there are a number of potential funding mechanisms the Council could use to deliver the Strategy, there is both opportunity and risk associated with these mechanisms; these are highlighted below:

Opportunities

- Although the timing and criteria of Government funding programmes remain uncertain, the Council can proactively prepare projects to be funding ready. This includes packaging initiatives such as town centre improvements into targeted groups (e.g., walking and cycling infrastructure, wayfinding, and public realm enhancements) to align with specific funding streams.
- The Council should strengthen its capacity and capability to develop high-quality funding applications. Projects should be progressed to a mature stage, supported by a robust evidence base, to enhance the credibility of bids and increase the likelihood of securing funding.
- The Council benefits from a strong network of stakeholders, which is a key asset for the District. The Council should draw on these relationships to coordinate efforts and facilitate joint funding and delivery of projects. Effective collaboration will help ensure that the distinct priorities of each town centre are addressed.
- Additionally, the Council should make greater use of national-level resources. For instance, the National Wealth Fund offers support to local authorities by financing capital projects and providing advisory services to help overcome financial barriers.

Risks

- There is limited transparency in future funding programmes committed by central government. These programmes may therefore not align with project timescales and therefore the Council must develop a clear funding and financing strategy which sets out a series of realistic funding models that deliver the priorities within this strategy.
- Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) will act as both a risk and opportunity. The risk lies in ensuring that the importance of North Herts' town centres is recognised and carried forward to new devolved authorities. LGR also presents an opportunity for additional funding streams through devolved funds, which are more accessible than central government funding programmes.





Image: Baldock High Street

Next steps

Public engagement has helped assess the level of support from key partners and stakeholders for the actions set out in the Strategy.

The Council, working across relevant service areas, will lead the preparation of Delivery Plans for each of the four town centres in collaboration with partners and stakeholders. These would be high-level plans covering at least five years and align with the vision for each centre, setting out core objectives, key priorities and actions to guide positive development and strengthen the identity, vitality and viability of each town. Work will begin following adoption of the Strategy, subject to the availability of resources and funding opportunities across partner organisations.

Glossary

Convenience goods

Consumer goods purchased on a regular basis e.g. food/groceries and cleaning materials.

Comparison goods

Durable goods such as clothing, household goods, furniture, DIY and electrical goods.

Design code

A set of illustrated design requirements, prepared with community input, that translate design principles into detailed parameters (e.g., building form, streets, landscaping) to guide and assess development in a defined area.

Experian

A data consultancy widely used for retail and leisure planning information.

Development brief

A document, typically prepared by a local planning authority (sometimes jointly with a landowner or developer) setting out detailed planning and design requirements for a specific site to guide the preparation and assessment of a planning application. A development brief covers matters such as land use, layout, density, access and infrastructure, and may be adopted as a Supplementary Planning Document (SPD).

Food and beverage

Use Classes A3 food and drink outlets, selling food and drinks consumed away from the home or hot food takeaway food, but not food and grocery items including convenience goods.

Goad Plans

Town centre plans prepared by Experian, which are based on occupier surveys of over 1,300 town centres across the UK.

Healthy Streets

A Department for Transport-endorsed approach to street design and management that prioritises walking, cycling and public transport, with the aim of improving air quality, public health and the quality of the public realm.

Market share/penetration rate

The proportion of total consumer expenditure within a given area taken by a particular town centre, destination or shopping/leisure facility. It quantifies its performance against other destinations.

Multi-channel shopping

Products made available to consumers on more than one sales channel, such as ecommerce websites, brick-and-mortar stores, marketplaces, comparison shopping engines, social media platforms, and other online channels.

National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF)

The NPPF sets out the Government's planning policies - economic, environmental and social planning policies - for England and how these should be applied. It provides a framework within which locally prepared plans can provide for sufficient housing and other development in a sustainable manner.

Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan (LCWIP)

A strategic, evidence-based framework prepared by a Local Highway Authority (LHA) to identify and prioritise walking and cycling infrastructure improvements over a 10-year period, in line with Department for Transport guidance.

Local Plan

The statutory development plan document(s) prepared by a Local Planning Authority (LPA), setting out policies and land allocations that guide decisions on planning applications in its area.

Permitted Development Rights (PDR)

Rights granted under the Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) (England) Order 2015 (as amended) that allow specified categories of development to proceed without a full planning application.

Site allocations

Specific parcels of land identified in a Local Plan for a particular use or mix of uses – such as housing, employment or retail – together with the quantum of development expected and any site-specific policy requirements.

Spatial Development Strategy (SDS)

A strategic planning document prepared by a combined authority or equivalent body (following devolution) that sets the long-term framework for housing, employment and infrastructure across a wider area than a single local authority.

Supplementary Planning Document (SPD)

A document that provides additional guidance on how a Local Plan's policies should be applied. It is capable of being a material consideration in decision-making but does not form part of the statutory development plan.

Sustainable Drainage Systems (SuDS)

Drainage systems designed to manage surface water run-off close to where it falls, mimicking natural drainage patterns (e.g., permeable paving, swales, attenuation ponds) to reduce flood risk and improve water quality.

Use Classes Order (UCO)

A categorisation system within the planning process set out by the Government to label types of property and land based on function.

Use Class A1

Commercial units/premises previously classed as retail or shop uses, but now part of the new Use Class E.

Use Class A2

Commercial units/premises previously classed as financial or professional services, e.g. banks and building societies, but now part of the new Use Class E.

Use Class A3

Commercial units/premises previously classed as restaurants and cafés, but now part of the new Use Class E.

Use Class A4

Commercial units/premises previously classed as public houses and bars, but now classed as Sui Generis.

Use Class A5

Commercial units/premises previously classed as hot food takeaway outlets, but now classed as Sui Generis.

Use Class D2

Commercial units/premises previously classed as leisure, sport and recreation uses, but now classed as Use Class E, Use Class F1 or Sui Generis.

Class MA

A new class of permitted development rights allowing certain changes from business and commercial to residential.

Abbreviations and acronyms

BID Business Improvement District

CWZ Core Walking Zone

DMO Destination Management Organisation

EV Electric Vehicle

GAF Growth Area Fund

GC Garden City

GI Green Infrastructure

HCC Hertfordshire County Council

HGV Heavy Goods Vehicle

LGCHF Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation

LCWIP Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan

LGR Local Government Reorganisation

LNRS Local Nature Recovery Strategy

LPA Local Planning Authority

LTP Local Transport Plan

LHA Local Highway Authority

LTA Local Transport Authority

NHDC North Herts Council

NPPF National Planning Policy Framework

PSA Primary Shopping Area

SPF Shared Prosperity Fund

SWOT Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats

SPD Supplementary Planning Document

SuDS Sustainable Drainage Systems



Image: Hitchin Lavender fields ©dixit-dhinakaran

Appendices

Appendix 1: Reference list and hyperlinks	XX
Appendix 2: Town centre policy direction	XX
Appendix 3: Individual town centre evidence notes	XX
Appendix C1: Hitchin town centre evidence notes	XX
Appendix C2: Letchworth Garden City town centre evidence notes	XX
Appendix C3: Royston town centre evidence notes	XX
Appendix C4: Baldock town centre evidence notes	XX

Appendix 1: Resource list and hyperlinks

Please click on the links with the › symbol before them.

Part 1: Town centre evidence

Theme 1: Land use and retail

- › [BID Brochure – Hitchin \(Visit Hitchin BID, 2024\)](#)
- › [BID Brochure - Letchworth GC \(Love Letchworth BID, 2024\)](#)
- › [BID Brochure – Royston \(Royston First BID, 2024\)](#)
- › [Baldock Town Centre Recovery & Development Plan \(People & Places, 2022\)](#)
- › [Hitchin Town Centre Recovery & Development Plan \(People & Places, 2022\)](#)
- › [Letchworth Garden City Town Centre Recovery & Development Plan \(People & Places, 2022\)](#)
- › [Royston Town Centre Recovery & Development Plan \(People & Places, 2022\)](#)
- › [Town Centre Strategy – Hitchin \(NHDC, 2005\)](#)
- › [Town Centre Strategy – Letchworth GC \(NHDC, 2006\)](#)
- › [Town Centre Strategy – Royston \(NHDC, 2008\)](#)
- › [Town Centre Strategy – Baldock \(NHDC, 2004\)](#)
- › [North Hertfordshire Town Centres & Retail Study \(Lichfields, 2024\)](#)
- › [Development Contributions SPD \(NHDC, 2023\)](#)
- › [North Hertfordshire Economic Strategy \(NHDC, 2025\)](#)

Theme 2: Built environment

- › [Character and Conservation Statements \(NHDC\) Hitchin \(2011\)](#)
- › [Character and Conservation Statements \(NHDC\) Letchworth \(2001\)](#)
- › [Character and Conservation Statements \(NHDC\) Royston \(2007\)](#)
- › [Character and Conservation Statements \(NHDC\) Baldock \(2003\)](#)
- › [North Herts Design Code SPD \(NHDC, 2026\)](#)
- › [Sustainability Supplementary Planning Document \(NHDC, 2024\)](#)

Theme 3: Transport, access and movement

- › [An Active Travel Strategy for Hertfordshire \(Hertfordshire County Council, 2024\)](#)
- › [Hertfordshire Highways Place & Movement Design Guide \(Hertfordshire County Council, 2024\)](#)
- › [Hertfordshire Local Transport Plan \(LTP4\) 2018-2031 Guide \(Hertfordshire County Council, 2018\)](#)
- › [Local Cycling Walking Infrastructure Plan \(LCWIP\) \(WSP, 2022\)](#)
- › [North Central Growth Transport Plan \(AECOM, 2022\)](#)
- › [North Herts Local Transport Strategy \(Markides Associates, 2017\)](#)
- › [North Herts Parking Strategy 2019 – 2031 \(NHDC, 2019\)](#)
- › [Sustainable Travel Town Letchworth GC Outline \(NHDC, 2021\)](#)
- › [Sustainable Travel Town Royston Outline \(NHDC, 2021\)](#)
- › [Active North Herts Strategy Report \(SLC, 2023\)](#)
- › [Electric Vehicle Strategy \(Hertfordshire County Council, 2022\)](#)
- › [North Herts Infrastructure Delivery Plan \(RS Regeneration, 2018\)](#)
- › [Air Quality Strategy, and Air Quality Implementation Plan \(Hertfordshire County Council, 2019\)](#)

Theme 4: Community

- › [North Herts Sport Provision and Open Space Review & Standards \(NHDC, 2016\)](#)
- › [Council Plan 2024-2028 \(NHDC, 2024\)](#)
- › [Sustainability Strategy 2025-2030 \(NHC 2025\)](#)
- › [Resilient Together Report \(ResilienTogether, 2017\)](#)
- › [Green Infrastructure Principles \(Natural England, 2023\)](#)
- › [Hertfordshire Healthy and Safe Places Framework \(Hertfordshire Growth Board, 2025\)](#)

Appendix 2: Town Centre policy direction

Existing local plan town centre policy

Policy SP4: Town centres, local centres and community shops

The Council will make provision for an appropriate range of retail and service facilities across the District and are committed to protecting the vitality and viability of all centres. We will:

- a) Promote, protect and enhance the provision of shops, financial and professional services, café or restaurants, pubs or drinking establishments or takeaways in the following centres in our retail hierarchy:
 - i. the town centres of Hitchin, Letchworth Garden City, Baldock and Royston;
 - ii. 13 existing local centres consisting of:
 - village centres at Ashwell, Codicote and Knebworth;
 - seven centres in Hitchin;
 - two centres in Letchworth Garden City; and
 - the centre at Great Ashby; and
 - iii. 2 new local centres north of Baldock and East of Luton within the strategic housing sites identified in this Plan;
- b) Support proposals for main town centre uses in these locations where they are appropriate to the size, scale, function, catchment area, historic and architectural character of the centre;
- c) Identify Primary Shopping Frontages within town centres where shops will be expected to concentrate;

d) To ensure the District's towns maintain their role and market share, make provision for up to 38,100 gross sq.m of additional floorspace over the plan period, comprising shops, café or restaurants, pubs or drinking establishments or takeaways including the re-occupation of vacant floorspace, consisting of:

- i. 22,500 gross sq.m comparison goods (e.g. clothes, shoes, furniture, carpets);
- ii. 8,600 gross sq.m convenience (e.g. food, drink, toiletries); and
- iii. 7,000 gross sq.m food and beverage outlets (e.g. restaurants, takeaways and bars).

38,100 gross sq.m is a district wide retail capacity but it is principally derived from the retail capacity projections for the four town centres, as indicated below:

Years	2016-2021	2021-2026	2026-2031	Totals
Baldock	300	1,600	1,400	3,300
Hitchin	3,800	3,600	3,700	11,100
Letchworth	2,400	3,300	3,500	9,200
Royston	3,200	2,000	1,900	7,100
Strategic Housing	1,500	2,700	2,600	6,800
Other	200	200	200	600
Total	11,400	13,400	13,300	38,100

The three town centres of Baldock, Hitchin and Letchworth Garden City have significant overlapping markets, with spend leakage from Letchworth Garden City to Hitchin and a lack of physical space at Baldock to accommodate its projected retail capacity. To address the leakage and physical capacity across these three centres the indicative distribution and phasing of provision is as follows:

Years	2016-2021*	2021-2026	2026-2031	Totals
Baldock	0	0	0	0
Hitchin	0	3,700	3,300	7,000
Letchworth	5,350	5,500	5,000	15,850
Royston	4,350	2,200	1,800	8,350
Strategic Housing Sites	0	3,400	2,900	6,800
Other	0	300	300	600
Total	9,700	15,100	13,300	38,100

*2016 to 2021 projections includes take-up of vacant units and the implementation of commitments.

- e) Prepare and maintain up-to-date town centre strategies to support this approach and / or adapt to change. These will be used to inform the approach to retail at the time of the early review; and;
- f) Support the retention and provision of shops outside of identified centres where they serve a local day-to-day need.

Town centre policy recommendations

(extract from North Herts Town Centres and Retail Study 2024 prepared under the national policy context at the time of publication)

Meeting North Hertfordshire's needs

When planning for growth in their town centres, Local Planning authorities should allocate a range of suitable sites to meet the scale and type of retail development needed. It is important that the needs for retail and other main town centre uses are met in full and not compromised by limited site availability. The combined floorspace projections for retail and food/beverage floorspace in 2026, 2031 and 2036 are summarised and rounded in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1 Combined retail and food/beverage floorspace requirements (sq.m gross) - cumulative

	Convenience retail (sq.m gross)	Comparison retail (sq.m gross)	Food / beverage (sq.m gross)	Total (sq.m gross)
By 2026	-240	10	870	640
By 2031	-360	180	2,850	2,670
By 2036	-140	390	4,920	5,170

Table 2 Combined floorspace requirements by location (sq.m gross) - cumulative

	By 2026	By 2031	By 2036
Hitchin	290	1,180	2,150
Letchworth GC	160	690	1,350
Baldock	150	550	1,020
Royston	-50	-70	100
Other North Herts	90	320	550
Total	640	2,670	5,170

The early Local Plan review should seek to accommodate for existing and new residents' retail and leisure needs over the plan period. Due to over-lapping shopping catchment areas, there should be potential to redistribute capacity to Letchworth Garden City from Hitchin and Baldock, reflecting planned population growth patterns. Letchworth Garden City also has the main concentration of vacant floorspace and therefore the most potential to accommodate growth within the designated centre.

The combined total floorspace capacity projection up to 2036 is 5,170 sq.m gross. Based on a reasonable reduction in shop vacancy rates, reoccupied space could in theory accommodate about three quarters of the projected capacity need up to 2036.

The leisure expenditure projections indicate there may be potential to accommodate an additional 1,700 sq.m gross of commercial leisure and cultural floorspace by 2036, which could include:

- two medium sized health and fitness facilities (about 140 new fitness stations);
- new leisure innovations e.g. trampolines, indoor climbing, escape rooms, virtual sport activities; and
- small scale tourist attractions/cultural facilities.

The development strategy should be flexible to respond to emerging opportunities for new leisure, entertainment and tourist related facilities.

The updated capacity projections suggest there is no pressing requirement to allocate new sites for major retail or leisure development to accommodate projected growth for the next ten years. The priority in the short to medium term will be the reoccupation of vacant shop units. Existing Local Plan allocated sites for mixed use development i.e. HT11, HT12, LG19, LG21 and RY12 and new facilities in strategic housing sites are more than sufficient to accommodate any long-term residual need.

Future planning policy

Hierarchy of centres

Continuing to identify the hierarchy of centres and the centres boundaries in the early Local Plan review is important in terms of:

- ensuring the vitality and viability of town, village and neighbourhood centres is maintained and enhanced as important hubs for the community, through the application of the impact test;
- directing retail and main town centre uses to appropriate accessible and sustainable locations, through the application of the sequential approach to site selection; and
- identifying a viable role and strategy for each centre, based on the health check analysis in this report.

No changes to the existing hierarchy are considered necessary. The network of town, village and neighbourhood centres should be protected and enhanced to ensure appropriate accessibility to important facilities for all sections of the community and to ensure sustainable shopping patterns.

Impact and sequential tests

Local Plan Policy ETC3 and the supporting text clearly set out the sequential and impact tests and are in the most part consistent with the latest NPPF and not affected by the changes to the use classes order. However, the policy wording implies an impact assessment is required for all main town centre uses. Policy ETC3 criterion b) could be amended to “retail and leisure” rather than “town centre” development for consistency with the NPPF.

In relation to the sequential test the supporting text at Local Plan paragraph 5.13 could be expanded to reflect paragraph 92 of the NPPF, which indicates when considering edge-of-centre and out-of-centre sites preference should be given to accessible sites that are well connected to the town centre.

The NPPF minimum threshold of 2,500 sq.m gross continues to be an inappropriate threshold for North Hertfordshire because this scale of development would exceed the five-year retail and food beverage projections for all centres in the District. The early Local Plan review should continue to adopt lower impact thresholds for retail and leisure uses in Baldock and Royston i.e. 500 sq.m gross. The threshold in Letchworth Garden City could also be reduced from 1,000 sq.m gross to 500 sq.m gross, because the

floorspace capacity projections are much lower. A lower impact threshold of 1,000 sq.m gross rather than 2,500 sq.m gross could be considered in Hitchin.

All retail and leisure developments above these floorspace thresholds (combined) proposed outside or on the edge of designated town, village and neighbourhood centres should be required to prepare a proportionate impact assessment, including retail and leisure uses included within mixed use allocations. The level of detail required in the impact assessment will vary case-by-case and it is for the applicant to provide robust justification that their impact assessment is robust, appropriate and proportionate.

As in the adopted Local Plan Policies ETC6 and ETC7 the early Local Plan review should continue to support small scale shops and services within village and neighbourhood centres and outside designated centres, where a particular market and locational requirement has been robustly justified. Both Policy ETC6 and ETC7 should seek to protect valuable local shops and services.

Town and local centre boundaries

The early Local Plan review Plan should continue to define clear boundaries for town, village and neighbourhood centres on the Proposals Map and should remain the focus for retail, leisure and other main town centre uses. The continued need for town centre boundaries, primary and secondary shopping frontages needs to be considered. For example, a separate town centre boundary and secondary shopping frontages is probably unnecessary in Baldock.

The relatively low retail floorspace capacity projections up to 2036, suggest there is no need to extend centre boundaries to accommodate future growth, but the longer term projected under-supply of floorspace implies a significant contraction of centre boundaries is also unnecessary. However, town centre boundaries are relatively widely drawn in most centres and some predominantly residential areas on the periphery of town centres could be removed. The Council should review the centre boundaries and amend as necessary.

Controlling the mix of uses

The policy approach set out in Policies ETC4 and ETC5 could be challenged following recent changes to the Use Classes Order and Permitted Development Rights. The updated floorspace projections do not indicate an overall reduction in Class E main town centre uses is required in North Hertfordshire's town centres. The continued adoption of Article 4 Directions in the four town centres will help to prevent the loss of town centre uses.

The continuation of the policy approaches set out in Policies ETC4 and ETC5 will be undermined and hampered by the UCO/PDR changes. The continued adoption of Article 4 Directions in the four town centres will help to prevent the loss of town centre uses

The early Local Plan review could designate a primary shopping area (PSA) in Hitchin, Letchworth Garden City and Royston town centres to manage the mix of uses and protect the vitality and viability of these centres. This PSA should cover the area currently designated as primary shopping frontages. The PSA will be the area where retail uses will be concentrated for the sequential approach and the area from where edge-of-centre sites will be measured. Leisure and other non-retail town centre uses can be focused in the wider town centre area i.e. the area between the PSA and the town centre boundary.

The continued designation of secondary frontages, in addition to a PSA, is probably unnecessary. The designated town centre boundary in Baldock could be adopted to control the mix of uses, rather than a PSA or frontage designations.

Class E uses should be maintained and enhanced in the PSA and development should maintain an active frontage. This approach would replace Policy ETC3. Within other parts of these three town centres and in Baldock a wider range of main town centre uses including Class E, Sui Generis and Class F could be promoted and protected. This approach would replace Policy ETC4:

- individual or cumulative impact on neighbouring amenity;
- adverse impact on the vitality and viability of the centre as a whole;
- provision of an active frontage at ground floor level which relates well to the design of the building and to the street-scene and its setting; and
- adequate marketing of the unit for Class E uses in primary frontages or Class E, Sui Generis and Class F uses in other parts of the centre.

In the future and in specific cases, it may be appropriate to consider Article 4 directions to prevent permitted changes of use that could undermine the character or vitality and viability of parts of town centres.

Future monitoring

The recommendations and projections within this study will assist the Council in reviewing development plan policies over the coming years and to assist future development management decisions. The study provides an overview of the potential need for further retail and leisure development in the medium and long-term up to 2036. Longer-term projections are subject to uncertainty and forecasts will need to be amended to reflect emerging changes, as and when new information becomes available. These uncertainties include the longer-term implications of the Covid-19 and cost of living crisis that will need to be monitored. Longer-term projections up to 2036 should be treated with caution and provide broad guidance only. Projections should be monitored and the floorspace projections rolled forward. The following key assumptions should be updated as necessary:

- population projections;
- local expenditure estimates (information from Experian or other recognised providers);
- growth rate assumptions for expenditure per capita (information from Experian or other recognised data providers);
- the impact of potential increases in home and internet shopping (Experian regularly provides projections for internet shopping and these projections will need to be updated at the same time as expenditure and population figures);
- existing retail floorspace and average turnover to floorspace densities; and
- implemented development within and around the study area.

These key inputs into the retail/leisure capacity assessment can be amended to provide revised capacity projections.

Appendix 3: Individual town centre evidence notes

3A: Hitchin town centre evidence notes

- Land use and retail
- Built environment
- Transport, access and movement
- Community

3B: Letchworth Garden City town centre evidence notes

- Land use and retail
- Built environment
- Transport, access and movement
- Community

3C: Royston town centre evidence notes

- Land use and retail
- Built environment
- Transport, access and movement
- Community

3D: Baldock town centre evidence notes

- Land use and retail
- Built environment
- Transport, access and movement
- Community

This appendix is a helpful tool to be read alongside Part 3: Individual town centre strategies, as well as and Part 2B: Guidance notes, within North Herts’ town centres strategy.

The following sub-sections to Appendix 3 represent evidence related to each town centre, Hitchin, Letchworth Garden City, Royston and Baldock respectively, and across the thematic pillars of the town centres strategy:

Retail and Land Use,
Built Environment,
Transport, access and movement and
Community.

Links to the relevant supporting documents are listed in Appendix 1.

Appendix 3A: Hitchin town centre evidence notes

Land use and retail

The land uses and town centre health indicators for Hitchin are outlined below relating to the following categories:

- mix of uses,
- vacancy rate and economic vitality,
- boundaries and frontages,
- development allocations,
- leisure,
- Local Needs Index and
- Article 4 Directions.

Mix of uses

There are 346 retail and service units within Hitchin town centre’s designated shopping frontages; the mix of uses is set out in Table 1 below, which is compared with the District and UK averages. Approximately a third of these units are comparison retail, which is just over the District and National average. Falling below the District and National averages, Hitchin has only 10 hot food takeaways.

Table 1: Mix of retail and service uses – Hitchin town centre (Town Centres and Retail Study, 2024).

TYPE	# of Units	% of Units	% of Units (District avg.)	% of Units (UK avg.)
Convenience retail	23	6.6	5.6	9.5
Comparison retail	107	30.9	27.8	27.7
Financial/Professional	32	9.2	8.3	8.5
Restaurant/Café	42	12.1	12.8	10.0
Public house/Bar	13	3.8	3.0	4.9
Hot food takeaway	10	2.9	4.1	6.2
Other non-retail service	85	24.6	26.3	19.3
Vacant unit	34	9.8	12.3	13.9
TOTAL	346	100.0	100.0	100.0

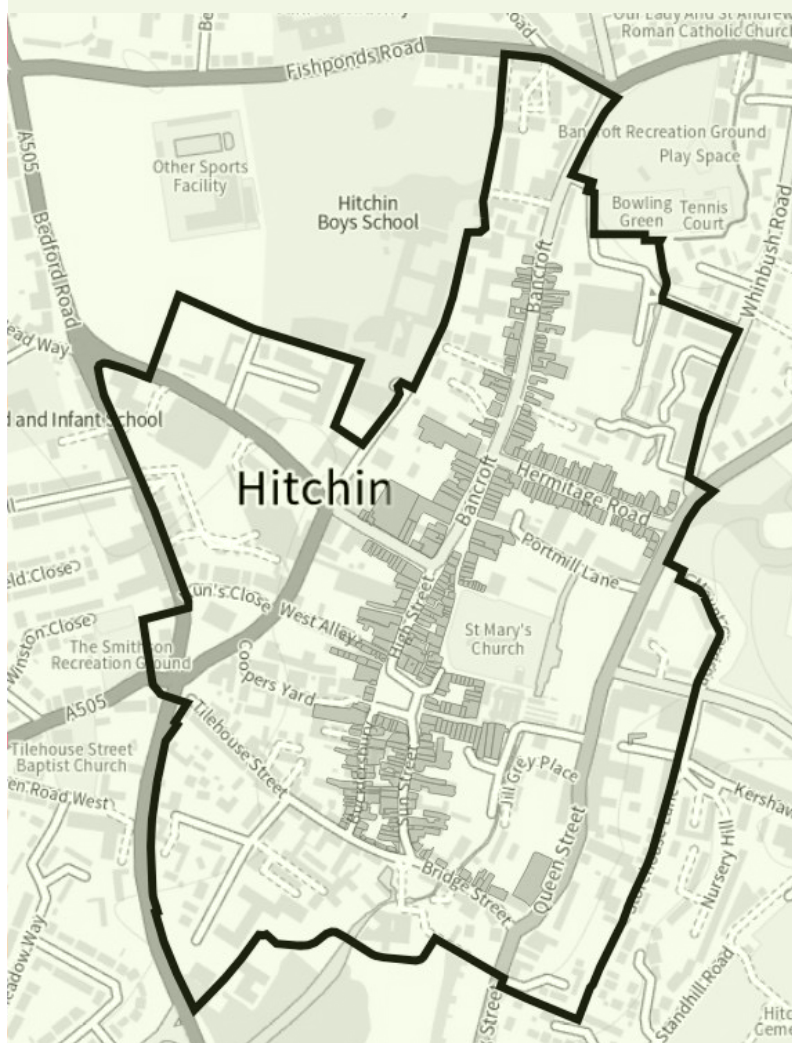
Vacancy rate and economic vitality

At 9.8% shop vacancy, Hitchin is below the District and National averages; there were 34 vacant units within the centre at the time of the 2023 land use survey. From 2015 to 2023 the number of vacant units in the town centre increased from 20 units to 34 units. Although Hitchin town centre has experienced the impact of Covid-19 and the cost-of-living crisis, the vacancy rate remains relatively low compared with other centres. Vacant units vary in size from under 50 square metres to over 1,000 square metres and are relatively evenly spread throughout the centre with no obvious concentrations.

Boundary and frontages

The existing town centre boundary for Hitchin can be found in Figure 1; notably, town centre boundaries evolve over time as required by the Local Plan updates process. In Hitchin town centre boundary, there are areas that do not actively host commercial or mixed-use development, but rather non-main town centre uses, such as residential use.

Figure 1: Hitchin town centre, depicting the current town centre boundary in blue and retail land use in orange (town centre area: 451,274 sq.m).



Development allocations

Based on the Local Plan (2011 – 2031), there are two town centre allocations as mixed-use enhancement opportunity sites in Hitchin.

HT11 Churchgate & its surrounding area: This allocation proposes that the current centre is redeveloped to provide 4,000 square metres of additional shop, café, restaurant, pub, drinking establishment or takeaway and other town centre uses at ground floor level, with other main town uses and residential uses in upper or basement areas. The policy requires a concept framework/masterplan to be prepared and provides further guidance on key considerations to be covered.

To help bring this development forward, the Council has acquired the leasehold for the Churchgate Shopping Centre and is marketing the centre and its locational environment as a redevelopment opportunity and is rebranding this allocation as the Churchgate Regeneration Zone (CRZ). The mixed-use policy allocation, HT11 for Churchgate and its surrounding area in the Local Plan (2011 -2031), has supportive text for the redevelopment of this mixed- use site.

Separate to the Town Centres Strategy, the Council's Enterprise Team has conducted public consultation on this proposed redevelopment site seeking public views. Further information on the CRZ can be found on the Council's website: [Join the Churchgate Conversation](#).

HT12 Paynes Park: This allocation proposes that the current centre is redeveloped to provide 3,000 square metres of additional shop, café, restaurant, pub, drinking establishment or takeaway and other town centre uses at ground floor level, with other main town uses and residential uses in upper or basement areas. The policy requires a concept framework/masterplan, and the policy identifies the key considerations to be covered.

Since the time that Paynes Park was allocated for redevelopment, part of this allocation, known as the former Woolworths building and its car park to the rear, is subject to a Planning Application for the reprovion of retail units and the addition of 44 one-and two- bedroom apartments.

Leisure

Informed by the Town Centres and Retail Study, leisure in Hitchin is oriented around food and beverage pastimes, such as frequenting restaurants and pubs, as well as using hair salons, health facilities and non-food shopping. Within the shopping category and compared to the rest of the district’s town centres, visitors report non-food shopping in Hitchin at 10% more, a logical outcome considering this town centre’s robust offer of national and smaller boutique comparison shops. Hitchin also hosts other various leisure experiences in the town centre, such as the North Hertfordshire Museum and British Schools Museum, with recreational lavender fields nearby.

Table 2: Participation in leisure activities by Hitchin town centre users (Town Centres and Retail Study, 2024).

Activity	Hitchin %	Average % across all town centres
Go for walk	0.5	0.9
Cafe/pub/restaurant	57.1	46.8
Leisure activity	8.1	9.9
Restaurant/Café	42	12.1

Visit time: According to the NEMS household survey (2024), 71% of respondents dwell for more than 1 hour in Hitchin town centre. Hitchin has the highest percentage of visitors that dwell for longer than 1 hour. Compared to the other town centres within North Herts, the user visit duration to the town centre is unique to Hitchin; this is about 20 – 35% more than the other town centres. It is logical that this town’s profile has a longer duration of visits correlated with more ‘out of town’ users, there is a draw to come into Hitchin and make the journey worthwhile.

Figure 2: Dwell time for Hitchin town centre users (HUQ, 2023 – 2024).

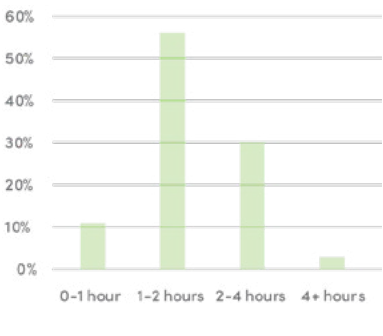


Figure 3: Origin of Hitchin town centre users (People & Places, 2022).



Local Needs Index: A standardised Local Needs Index of Hitchin town centre was undertaken in 2024. This exercise judges against 16 types of shops, services or community uses; Hitchin scored 15 out of 16, only lacking a community hall. Although, the community may access this amenity, a community hall, through the presence of St. Mary’s Parish, Hitchin Town Hall and/or the North Herts’ Museum, all of which hold rooms for community uses (such as workshops or events) and are located within the town centre.

Table 3: Local Needs Index Summary of North Herts’ town centres (Town Centres and Retail Study, 2024)

Centre	Hierarchy Classification	Local Needs Index Score (out of 16)
Hitchin	Town Centre	15
Letchworth Garden City	Town Centre	16
Royston	Town Centre	14
Baldock	Town Centre	12

Planning protections - Article 4 Directions and Listed Buildings: Alongside balancing controls in planning, such as the existing Listing Building designation to protect building heritage and historic integrity, the immediate Article 4 Directions was made to protect the commercial uses in town centres. The Article 4 Directions mandates special controls for planning teams to assess approval for commercial land uses to turn to residential, as this could create a weakening in commercial opportunities and can also create dead frontages within town centres. The Article 4 Direction applies to the current Primary and Secondary frontage designation in the 2022 Local Plan, and importantly, follows to 2022 Local Plan approach to prioritise main uses in town centres first.

Figure 4: Planning protections in Hitchin town centre; Article 4 Directions (purple) protect main town centre uses in town centres first and Listed Buildings (yellow) protect building heritage and historic integrity.



Built environment

The built environmental conditions for Hitchin are outlined below relating to the following categories:

- design and the public realm,
- historic character and
- open and green spaces.

Design and the public realm: The historic layout of Hitchin features narrow streets clustered around Market Place adjoining with St Mary's church. Historically, the buildings are a mix of town houses built on narrow burgage plots and for commercial activities. The town centre has evolved over time and will continue to do so, but any changes should respect the overall historic character of Hitchin.

The scale and typology of new buildings should be dictated by the scale and typology of historic buildings. Architecture of new developments should be complementary, rather than directly copying or competing with historic styles. New designs should use materials that complement historic styles. There should be scope for innovation allowing the town centre to evolve.

Building heights are generally three storeys, although there is a mix of two and three storey buildings which creates interest and variety. As the roofscape in Hitchin town centre varies in pitch and style, flat roofs are considered inappropriate for new development. Higher densities are appropriate within the town centre, as are a mix of uses including residential, retail and commercial.

Vistas and viewpoints are restricted within the town centre due to the curved character of the streets; this creates a sense of anticipation and interest for the user, with important views of St Mary's Church.

As continuous frontages create strong building lines and thus clear enclosures of places, continuous frontages should be retained in any new development, including larger buildings which should reflect plot sizes in their detailing. Moreover, where appropriate, narrow building plots should be maintained. To activate the facades and naturally build in surveillance of the public realm, building frontages should face the street. Blank walls should be modified to create interest in the plinth.

Historic Character: Hitchin is one of the oldest continually inhabited towns in the county, and arguably, the historic centre of North Herts. The Hitchin Conservation Area spans beyond the current town centre boundary and contains the entire town centre. There are just under 100 listed buildings in Hitchin town centre which are protected through various listed building designations. A few modern buildings exist throughout the town centre, which arguably detract from the overall historical environmental character. The current pattern of roads and footpaths has significantly influenced the development of the town's layout and further, preserves a network of rights of way over the former medieval open fields.

The relationship of buildings to the spaces in the Hitchin Conservation Area is varied according to historical development and uses within each part of the conservation area.

In the south and west, namely Bucklesbury Street and Sun Street, where the streets are narrow, the buildings are all two or three storeys high and mostly listed and sit on the back edge of the pavement providing a complex and closely contained streetscape of great quality.

Churchgate sits between The Market Place Square and the more modern Hitchin Market. It is also adjacent to St. Mary's Church. This site, including the Market Place Square, is currently under consideration for redevelopment (Churchgate Regeneration Zone) and must respect the surrounding context and town character, such as building heights, density, materiality, design, and views.

St. Mary's Church and churchyard are tucked away behind the Market Place and High Street by narrow pedestrianised lanes (Churchyard and Munts Alley). The grounds sit alongside the River Hiz with scenic banks for users to recreate, and also alongside St. Mary's Car Park. Views to the east of St. Mary's Church (along Queen's Street) detract from the high quality and historic character of the grounds and the town centre.

Hermitage Road includes uniform rows of mixed-use buildings dating back to the early 20th century, with a priority towards commercial activities on the ground floor, and office or residential above. This road includes a clear vantage point up to Windmill Hill.

Compared to the other town centres in the district, Hitchin has more listed buildings in number than Baldock, Letchworth Garden City and Royston town centres combined, but in terms of ratio (non-listed compared to listed buildings) within the town centre, Hitchin has less than Baldock and Royston.

Open and green spaces: The town centre contains important public spaces which should be protected and enhanced. The hard character of Market Place contrasts with the soft landscaping to the east of St Mary's church along the banks of the River Hiz. The River Hiz is an important element in the character of Hitchin town centre and its potential for a riverside walk should be fulfilled. Additionally, Priory Park, Windmill Hill and Bancroft Recreation Ground are all close to the town centre and are important open green spaces. It is important to improve connectivity between these spaces and the town centre.

Transport, access and movement

Transport, access and movement conditions for Hitchin are outlined below relating to the following categories:

- access and movement,
- mode of travel
- footfall and
- parking.

Access and movement: Hitchin town centre has a strong urban structure resulting in an informal grid of routes. Some of these routes are for both vehicles and pedestrians, although there are a number which are just for pedestrians making Hitchin town centre permeable for people accessing the town centre on foot. However, due to the historic nature of the centre, some pavements and streets are narrow restricting pedestrian movement when congested (i.e. Sun Street and Bucklersbury). From 1993 onwards, the town centre has been partially pedestrianised, and the impact of this intervention can perhaps be traced in user survey results from Hitchin's 2022 Recovery and Development Plan by People & Places: approximately three quarters of respondents felt positively about the *"pedestrian access around the town centre"*, with an addition 24% feeling neutral.

Motor traffic volumes through Hitchin, particularly on the A505 and B656, and large volumes of HGV traffic, in particular on the A505 and Grove Road (leading to the industrial estate), create significant barriers to walking and cycling. The locations that are least supportive for pedestrian uses in and close to the town centre include Cambridge Road railway underbridge, multiple roundabouts on the A505, and major junctions on the B656 (Walsworth Road and Queen Street). Hills around the town centre are also a barrier to cycling, as cycling routes that minimise climbs and avoid steep climbs are preferred.

Of relevance to Hitchin town centre, connections that have been identified in the Local Cycling Walking and Infrastructure Plan (LCWIP) to be improved include:

- Hitchin to Baldock via Letchworth Garden City via cycling routes and bus networks,
- Hitchin town centre to the railway station via pedestrian routes, and
- Hitchin town centre to Stevenage via bus networks.

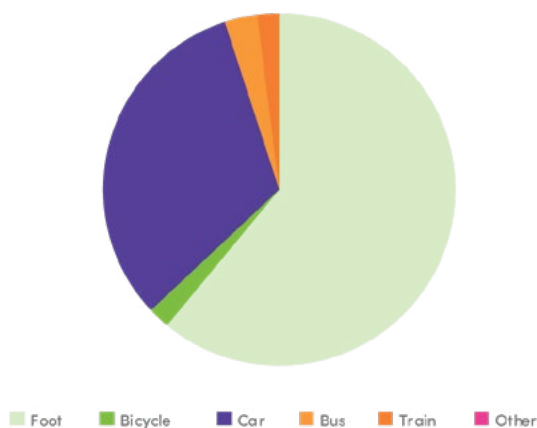
For example, a segregated cycle infrastructure on the route connecting Hitchin to Letchworth Garden City to Baldock has been proposed, with lower speed limits for motorised vehicles on respective roads and an improvement in bus provision. Additionally, the LCWIP determined Core Walking Zones (CWZ) to understand trips that can be optimised to increase walkability. Hitchin is considered a CWZ with routes between its town centre and railway station as Key Walking Routes. There are bus stops on Bancroft, Hermitage Road and Queen Street, and bus services link the centre to Bedford, Luton, Shefford, and Welwyn.

Mode of travel: The Hitchin Railway Station is 1.4km from Market Place, a 20-minute walk for most people. As expected, the Household Survey for the Town Centre and Retail Study suggests that few Hitchin town centre users arrive by train. Although there are various bus stops throughout the town centre, there is no bus station. As the bus stops are dispersed around Hermitage Road, Queen Street and Bancroft, interchanging between routes is difficult.

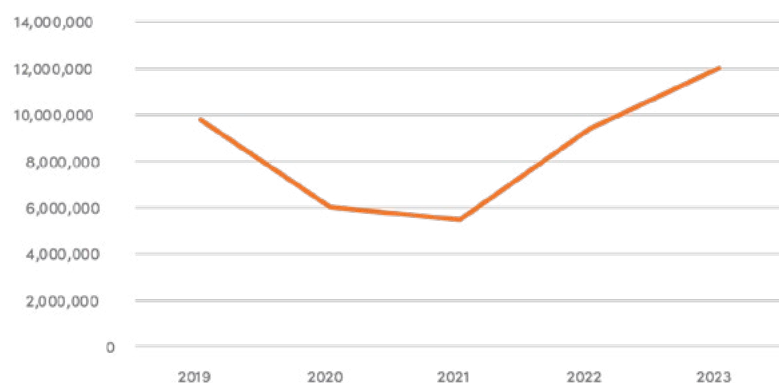
Based on NEMS Household survey, the majority of visitors use the car to reach Hitchin, although this town centre has more walking behaviour compared to the other three town centres. According to the People & Places Recovery Report (2022), 61% Hitchin users reported a preference to travel by foot into the town centre compared to by car (32%). These results indicate that these two studies engaged with different sample populations resulting in different route choice preferences. It can be interpreted that locals are more likely to reach the town centre by foot (who the People & Places Recovery Report engaged with more), while visitors from the wider Study Area reach the town centre by car (who the NEMS Household Study engaged with more).

Following Hertfordshire County Council's public consultation on pedestrianisation and travel preferences in Hitchin town centre, both High Street and Market Square are now closed to vehicles during the day, except on Sundays.

Figure 5: User travel preference in Hitchin town centre (People & Places, 2022).



Footfall: The district's HUQ footfall data indicates that Hitchin town centre has experienced the negative effects of Covid-19 pandemic with a reduced annual footfall from just below 10 million in 2019 to approximately 6 million in 2020 and further to about 5 million in 2021. Likely Recovering from physical isolation measures and businesses temporary closures, the town centre's annual footfall recovered steadily surpassing its pre-covid frequency, to roughly 12 million in 2023.

Figure 6: Annual footfall in Hitchin Town Centre from 2019 through 2023 (HUQ).

Parking: While users report, via the Household Questionnaire and People & Places surveys, a relatively high volume of positive opinions regarding pedestrian access inside the town centre (as well as positive reactions to walking and cycling routes into the town), they also report negative to neutral opinions regarding both on and off-street parking provisions. There is a mix of Council owned and privately owned car parks that are accessible to the main shopping area, but provision is relatively fragmented with some having small capacity and/or located up-hill from the centre. These provide a varied amount of parking in terms of on and off-street, short and long-stay, location, charging periods and price.

Figure 7: On-street parking views by Hitchin town centre users. Users lack positive views. (People & Places, 2022)**Figure 8:** Off-street parking views by Hitchin town centre users. Users are generally split between positive, neutral and negative views. (People & Places, 2022).

Community

Hitchin has a good provision of community facilities, such as the North Hertfordshire Museum and Hitchin Town Hall (both located adjacent to High Street/ Bancroft Road), and various community venues, such as The Block Community Hub, Signing Rooms and St. Mary's Church. The community spaces accommodate a variety of community functions with spaces to hire for external events. Additionally, and linked to promoting the town centre's offer, Visit Hitchin founded in 2009, the town's Business Improvement District (BID), helps to facilitate community culture through programming the Market Square events.

Via the North Herts' Communities Partnership Team, Hitchin users are welcomed to monthly Community Forum meetings to present applications for small grassroot grants and hear about important updates, and also Town Drop-ins to express general concerns or questions.

The Hitchin Market is open four days a week and connects a community of market traders invested in raising and maintaining the profile of the town centre to boost the local economy. Moreover, Visit Hitchin hosts over 600 local businesses contributing via a business rates levy to inspire "visitors to the town to stay longer, spend more money and return more frequently." As is set out to be achieved through events, seasonal displays, nighttime security, graffiti removal, online promotion, and business support.

Design-wise, Hitchin's Primary Shopping Area generally follows good design to deter anti-social behaviour using natural surveillance, interactive shop facades, clear lines of sight, and pedestrian paths, although the historic and cosy character of the wider town does foster narrow side streets and routes that do not clearly indicate an end point or how to exit the area. To benefit the community health in Hitchin, and overlapping with both the built environment and accessibility, wayfinding signs would be helpful to indicate clear routes to key amenities throughout the town centre. This will help to facilitate a more pleasant experience with less stress for users and bolster the existing walking culture.

Churchgate lacks pedestrian permeability and good design to invite users to enter, spend time and shop there; there is also a high vacancy rate for tenants in this development, resulting in dead frontages. Directly attached behind the Churchgate shopping centre, the outdoor market has many physical and metal manmade elements that block lines of sight and provide opportunities to hide behind. Arguably, although the path around St. Mary's Churchyard (Churchyard Walk) has vulnerabilities, such as mid-height walls and darker paths at night, in regard to designing out crime, the cosy and historic nature of this path contributes to the town's unique setting.

Appendix 3B: Letchworth Garden City town centre evidence notes

Land use and retail

The land uses and town centre health indicators for Letchworth Garden City are outlined below relating to the following categories:

- mix of uses,
- vacancy rate and economic vitality,
- boundaries and frontages,
- development allocations,
- leisure,
- visit time,
- Local Needs Index and
- Article 4 Directions.

Mix of uses: There are 244 retail and service units within Letchworth town centre's designated shopping frontages; the mix of uses is set out in Table 4 below, which is compared with the District and UK averages. Generally, Letchworth GC has a broad offer with a variety of type of commercial uses, although participants in the Household Survey have indicated a desire for improved quality in the comparison shops. Of the comparison shops, Letchworth GC has higher than average frequency of charity shops, as well as those that provide books, crafts and hobby materials, but lower than average for shops that sell clothing and footwear. Notably, there is a significant percentage of vacancies at 19.7%, higher than the 13.9% UK average. Of the 244 units, approximately 26% of this is comparison retail, 12% restaurant and 24% other non-retail service (such as hairdressers). Perhaps mirroring the town centre's history of sobriety, Letchworth has 4 pubs making up just 1.6% of retail units; this falls below both the district and the UK averages.

Table 4: Mix of retail and service uses – Letchworth GC town centre (Town Centre and Retail Study, 2024).

TYPE	# of Units	% of Units	% of Units (District avg.)	% of Units
(UK avg.)	23	6.6	5.6	9.5
Convenience retail	12	4.9	5.6	9.5
Comparison retail	64	26.2	27.8	27.7
Financial/ Professional	17	7.0	8.3	8.5
Restaurant/Café	30	12.3	12.8	10.0
Public house/Bar	4	1.6	3.0	4.9
Hot food takeaway	10	4.1	4.1	6.2
Other non-retail service	59	24.2	26.3	19.3
Vacant unit	48	19.7	12.3	13.9
TOTAL	244	100.0	100.0	100.0

Vacancy rate and economic vitality: There were 48 vacant units within the centre at the time of the Council's 2023 land use survey, equating to a vacancy rate of 19.7%, which is well above both the District and UK averages. Such a high vacancy rate could support distributing a portion of the growth capacity projections, especially for retailers that would service Hitchin and Baldock residents, into Letchworth town centre.

Boundary and frontages: The existing town centre boundary for Letchworth can be found in Figure 9; notably a significant area that is included within the boundary does not actively host commercial or mixed-use development.

Figure9: Letchworth GC town centre, depicting the current town centre boundary in blue and retail land use in orange (town centre area: 274,506 sq.m).



Development allocations: Based on the Local Plan (2011 – 2031), there are three town centre allocations as mixed-use enhancement opportunity sites in Letchworth Garden City.

LG19 The Wynd: This allocation proposes that the current centre is redeveloped to provide 4,500 sq.m of additional shop, café, restaurant, pub, drinking establishment or takeaway and other town centre uses at ground floor level, with other main town uses and residential uses in upper or basement areas.

Since the time that The Wynd was allocated for redevelopment, the landowners and tenants have invested in the area. This investment, including a popular play area, has improved the footfall to the area, vibrancy and quality of the public realm.

LG20 Gernon Road: This allocation proposes that the current centre is redeveloped to provide 1,000 square metres of additional shop, café, restaurant, pub, drinking establishment or takeaway and other town centre uses at ground floor level, with other main town uses and residential uses in upper or basement areas.

Since the time that Gernon Road was allocated for redevelopment, the site, excluding the county library, has been redeveloped. The development of homes and an office for Croudace Homes has been completed.

LG21 Arena Parade: This allocation proposes that the current centre is redeveloped to provide 5,000 square metres of additional shop, café, restaurant, pub, drinking establishment or takeaway and other town centre uses at ground floor level, with other main town uses and residential uses in upper or basement areas.

Since the time that Arena Parade was allocated for redevelopment, the site has undergone some improvement works. However, the buildings are outdated with the need for improvements and repairs.

Garden Square Shopping Centre: Since the adoption of the Local Plan (2011 -2031), this proposed development opportunity has arisen and will be subject to a Planning Performance Agreement, including the preparation of a master plan for the site. Guidance is provided in Part 2 and Part 3 of the Town Centres Strategy.

Leisure: Letchworth GC visitors take part in non-food shopping, window shopping and leisure activities more than the combined district average. Compared to other town centres, visitors to Letchworth GC less frequently visit pubs and restaurants. Interestingly, leisure activities are 18.4%, while the district average is 9.9%. Considering Letchworth GC's origin as a place for craft, art and innovation, future retail and leisure offer could seek to maintain and support such experiences and artistic activities.

Table 5: Participation in leisure activities by Letchworth GC town centre users (Town Centre and Retail Study, 2024).

Activity	Letchworth %	Average % across all town centres	% of Units (District avg.)	% of Units
Go for walk	0.4	0.9	5.6	9.5
Cafe/pub/restaurant	43.5	46.8	5.6	9.5
Leisure activity	18.4	9.9	27.8	27.7

Visit time: According to the NEMS household telephone survey (2024), 49% of respondents (from the wider region and locals) dwell for more than 1 hour in Letchworth GC town centre. Letchworth GC is the second highest town centre for users to dwell for longer than an hour, following behind Hitchin which holds the longest user dwell time.

Similarly, the People & Places Recovery Report (2022) also found that Letchworth GC was the second highest town centre for dwell time for longer than an hour (74%); this was based on users surveyed from Letchworth. While the percentages for Letchworth GC vary between surveys, the order remains the same in relation to the other town centres – this indicates Letchworth GC has maintained its relative status over the years and between users groups, those who live locally or more distant.

Figure 10: Dwell time for Letchworth GC town centre users during one year period 2023 – 2024 (HUQ).

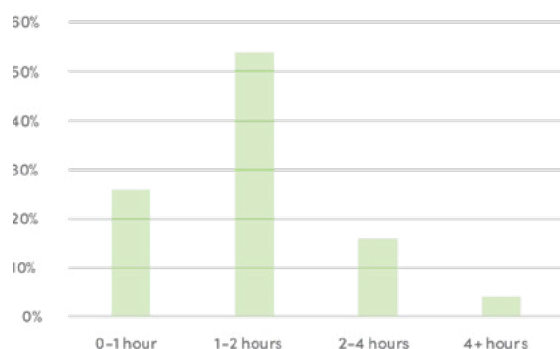
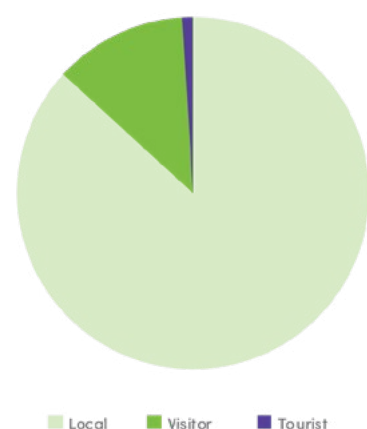


Figure 11: Origin of Letchworth GC town centre users (People & Places, 2022).



Local Needs Index: A standardised Local Needs Index of Letchworth GC town centre was undertaken in 2024. This exercise judges against 16 types of shops, services or community uses; Letchworth GC scored 16 out of 16, meeting all types of listed services. Letchworth GC is in an advantageous position to build on a strong and complete mix of essential services to further incentivise visitors to shop, stay and recreate in the town centre.

Table 6: Local Needs Index Summary of North Herts' town centres (Town Centre and Retail Study, 2024).

Centre	Hierarchy Classification	Local Needs Index Score (out of 16)	% of Units (District avg.)	% of Units
Hitchin	Town Centre	15	5.6	9.5
Letchworth Garden City	Town Centre	16	5.6	9.5
Royston	Town Centre	14	27.8	27.7
Baldock	Town Centre	12		

Planning protections – Article 4 Directions and Listed Buildings:

Alongside balancing controls in planning, such as the existing Listing Building designation to protect building heritage and historic integrity, the immediate Article 4 Directions was made to protect the commercial uses in town centres. The Article 4 Directions mandates special controls for planning teams to assess approval for commercial land uses to turn to residential, as this could create a weakening in commercial opportunities and can also create dead frontages within town centres. The Article 4 Direction applies to the current Primary and Secondary frontage designation in the 2022 Local Plan, and importantly, follows to 2022 Local Plan approach to prioritise main uses in town centres first.

Figure 12: Planning protections in Letchworth GC town centre; Article 4 Directions (purple) protect main town centre uses in town centres first and Listed Buildings (yellow) protect building heritage and historic integrity.



Built environment

The built environment conditions for Letchworth GC are outlined below relating to the following categories:

- design and the public realm,
- historic character and
- open and green spaces

Design and public realm: As outlined in the planning of the world's first Garden City, the town follows a masterplan on the principle of balance using a central town square with radiating axes and grid pattern layouts. This balance integrates high quality residential homes with natural pursuits, local employment and accessible transport, areas of open space, commercial shopping and housing. Letchworth GC was the creation of a town dominated by open space, varied types of trees to symbolise distinct areas of the town, and groups of houses oriented to obtain the maximum benefits of daylight. Such master planning garnered widespread interest and led to the development of pioneer planning legislation and the founding of the Royal Town Planning Institute in 1914.

In the 1990s, the environmental quality of Letchworth GC town centre improved following significant interventions in the public realm focused on consistency of design and was likely supported by the town's unique land ownership context; one main owner (Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation) in combination with the Council's holdings. The centre has a pleasant shopping environment, particularly from pedestrian-oriented improvements along Eastcheap and Leys Avenue, yet the hierarchy of streets lacks clear order and users report that there is no one distinct core area of the town centre. Partial or full pedestrianisation exists in the main shopping area and contributes towards the town's sense of spaciousness; such is the case in The Wynd, Arcade, and Garden Square Centre.

The centre has wide, clean pavements and several areas of open space and planting. Street furniture is provided along the length of Leys Avenue including benches, bins, and street lighting. Commercial units are generally well maintained and are of good quality. Leys Square provides landscaped seating areas, water features and sculptures, which enhances the appearance of the town centre. The centre has attractive arcades, e.g. the covered Arcade, which connects Leys Avenue with Station Road.

The Wynd area has lower density and provides an enclosed pedestrianised area for cafe seating, a children's playground, and community garden. The Garden Square Shopping Centre is partially covered and located off Eastcheap with several units occupied by national retailers. However, although this shopping centre is pedestrianised, it is relatively unattractive compared to the rest of the centre and has a number of vacant units.

According to the People & Places Recovery & Development Plan (2022), and specifically the User Survey Section, Letchworth GC users are less negative towards the status of the public realm and more critical of what services the town centre has to offer. Similarly, the health checks within the Retail and Town Centres Study (2024) indicate that the public realm, or the environmental quality of Letchworth GC's town centre, is regarded positively by users, and thus a strength.

Historic character: Although Letchworth GC is a relatively recent town centre compared to Baldock, Hitchin and Royston, it does hold important historical value as the world's first Garden City. As such, Letchworth GC town centre sits entirely within the wider Conservation Area and hosts a series of heritage and listed buildings, which are protected through listed building designations. In particular, the Museum, The Grammar School and The Town Hall border the important site of Broadway Gardens and feature a distinct Georgian design. Additionally, the Broadway Cinema is a unique repurposed art deco building from the 1930s. Other buildings throughout the town centre represent more modern styles and architecture, dating from the 1960s and 1970s. The more recently built development of Garden Square Shopping Centre stands out compared to other buildings in the town centre; according to the People & Places Recovery and Development Plan, "the frontage within the Garden Square Shopping Centre... was identified of poorer quality and less sympathetic to the character of Letchworth, and this detracts from the town centre appearance."

Overall, Letchworth has large buildings, often formal Georgian in style with rough cast brickwork and rich red tile roofs; they are two or three storeys with continuous façades and provide a high density interspersed throughout the town centre. Following the Garden City principle of balance, the scale and mass of the town's buildings are pleasantly counterbalanced by the relative width of the streets.

Any future development proposals in the town centre of Letchworth GC should be complementary, taking into consideration the design, layout, scale, material and colours of the surrounding character. There should be scope for innovation allowing the town centre to evolve.

Open and green spaces: Letchworth GC town centre has a pleasant public realm with consistent design, wide pedestrian paths, and open and green spaces that include both formal and informal types. Along Leys Avenue, there is water splash zone gently enclosed with street furniture: benches, garden planters, and bins. Additionally, outdoor seating areas nearby spill into this zone. On Eastcheap, there are many benches positioned along the wide pedestrian pavements. At the station, there is a small green park and memorial statue, although this resource is underperforming with reports of antisocial behaviour and a general low-quality environment due to overgrowth and litter, the Love Letchworth BID has undertaken improvements to this area. In the Wynd, there is a small route spanning roughly 70 meters transecting Openshaw Way's curved road that is pedestrianised with garden planters, cherry blossom trees, and outdoor seating from the small cafes. Directly

beside this area is a children's playground and a community garden. In the northwest part of the town centre, along Broadway Avenue, the pedestrian routes are through a wide central footpath with benches, bushes, and small trees.

Formally, there is one green space within Letchworth GC's town centre boundary, Broadway Gardens. Howard Park is directly adjacent to the town centre boundary, and further, there are two formal green spaces nearby, Norton Common and The Grange Recreation Park. Norton Common and The Grange sit relatively close to one another and considering upcoming residential development of 900 homes bordering this area (LG1), there is a unique opportunity to connect the town centre to residences via these green links. Both the formal and informal open spaces should seek to be better connected to improve the town centre hierarchy of streets and user experience.

Transport, access and movement

Transport, access and movement conditions for Letchworth GC are outlined below relating to the following categories:

- access and movement,
- mode of travel,
- footfall and
- parking.

Access and movement: Letchworth GC, according to Town Centre and Retail Study (2024) health checks, the town centre maintains a good quality public realm, including pedestrian paths, accessibility and quality of surfaces. Walkways and pavements within the town centre boundary are well kept and wide enough for users to walk without impediment. In recent years, Eastcheap and Leys Avenue have been resurfaced, as defined in the previous Letchworth GC Town Centre Strategy (2007), and now allocates less space for roads and parking; through this design pedestrians are given more priority to traverse the centre. While design on the material level is perceived positively by both experts and users, as understood from the Town Centres and Retail Study (2024) and the User Survey within the Letchworth Recovery and Development Plan (2022), wayfinding through the town centre and a hierarchy of streets towards a central core is not clear. As the Garden Square Shopping Centre has been identified as detracting from the historic quality of the town centre, future development here could be a catalyst to create a stronger hierarchy and network of streets to clearly symbolise the central core of the town.

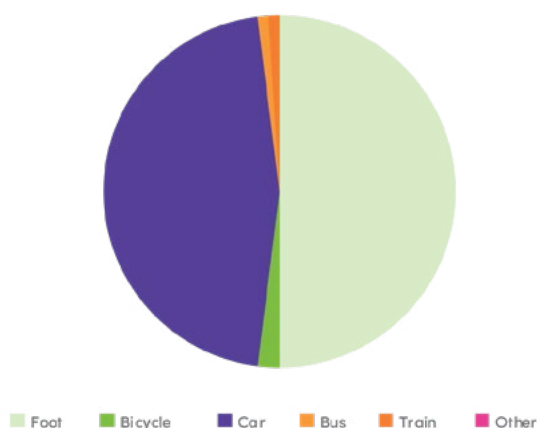
Letchworth GC is a Sustainable Travel Town appointed by Hertfordshire County Council. In collaboration with local town organisations, North Herts seeks to support sustainable travel within the town boundary. This stipulates that “pedestrians, cyclists and public transport users will have a greater priority than they do at present, leading to a higher level of natural enforcement and behavioural change.” North Herts Council is working with Love Letchworth BID, Herts County Council, and The Letchworth Heritage Foundation in this programme.

In 2022, Letchworth GC users were surveyed regarding various town centre perceptions and habits by People & Places. In relation to the built environment, the survey concluded that users wanted more convenient and cheaper parking options. Further, users shared that they travel to the town centre by foot (50%) and by car (47%), with the remaining 3% between cycling, bus or taxi. The Household Survey within the Town Centres and Retail Study (2024) pooled responses from a wide catchment area and found that the majority of respondents who visited Letchworth GC used the car.

Mode of travel: Unique to Letchworth GC, the railway station is accessible and within the core town centre. The station provides direct access to London, Stevenage, Hitchin and Welwyn Garden City to the south, and Baldock, Royston and Cambridge to the north. Bus stops are located near the railway station on Station Road and Broadway and are accessible to the main shopping area. Bus routes link the centre with surrounding town, villages and neighbourhood centres.

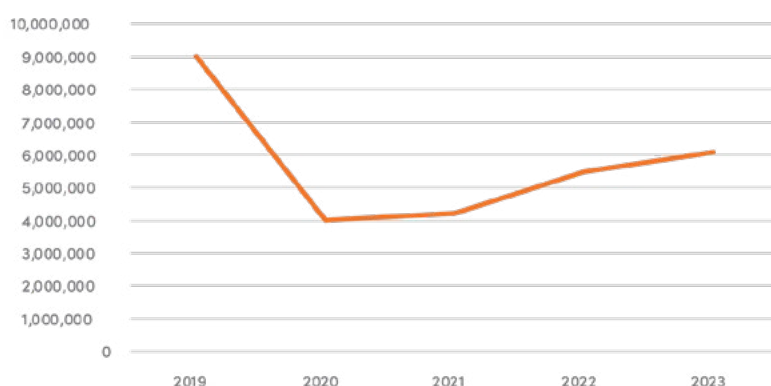
The Household Survey found that the majority of respondents who visited Letchworth GC in the last year used the car as the main mode of transport. Comparatively, the People & Places Recovery & Development Report (2022) found that 50% of users report their preference to travel to the town centre by foot at 50% and by car at 47%. Based on origin of users and duration of visit, it can be concluded that locals and nearby residents (87%) visit the town centre frequently for shorter durations (under 2 hours) and are more likely to travel by foot (50%) compared to visitors traveling in from out of town (12%). who are more likely to stay for longer and use the car.

Figure 13: User travel preference in Letchworth GC town centre (People & Places, 2022).



Footfall: The district’s HUQ footfall data indicates that Letchworth GC town centre has experienced the negative effects of Covid-19 pandemic with a reduced annual footfall from just about 9 million in 2019 to approximately 5 million in 2020 with a plateau in 2021 followed by a gradual uptick to approximately 6 million in 2023. Although the town centre has improved since Covid-19, it has not returned to pre-pandemic vibrancy levels using footfall as an indicator.

Figure 14: Annual footfall in Letchworth Garden City Town Centre from 2019 through 2023 (HUQ).



Parking: As the world’s first Garden City, Letchworth town centre was built with a masterplan, consisting of radiating axes and grid patterns that are interspersed with a variety of parking, public transport, and active travel options. Specific to parking, there is adequate provision with a mix of both private and council-owned lots, as well as on-street and off-street options. In general, the off-street car parks are conveniently located within the town centre and major shopping destinations; for example, the Garden Square multi-storey car park, Morrisons open car park, and The Wynd car park.

Town centre users are roughly 70% content (positive to neutral feelings) towards the on-street parking offer and roughly 80% content (positive to neutral feelings) towards the off-street parking offer. According to the Town Centres and Retail Study (2024), particularly the Household Survey, Letchworth GC parking availability was regarded more positively compared to parking availability in the other town centres. Unsurprisingly, as parking surveys frequently show negative responses on cost, the respondents were relatively more negative than positive for Letchworth GC town centre both for the parking costs and compared to other town centres.

Figure 15: On-street parking views by Letchworth GC users. Over 70% of users respond with positive or neutral views (People & Places, 2022)



Figure 16: Off-street parking views by Letchworth GC users. Users are largely positive to neutral (People & Places, 2022)



Community

Letchworth GC has a good provision of community facilities, including Letchworth GC Library, Letchworth GC Youth Centre, and Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation, including an information centre and town history museum. These various community spaces accommodate a variety of community functions with spaces to hire for external events. Additionally, the District's council offices are within the town centre and provide support and services. Via the North Herts' Communities Partnership Team, Letchworth GC users are welcomed to monthly Community Forum meetings to present applications for small grassroots grants and hear about important updates as well as the Town Drop-ins to express general concerns or questions.

A key stakeholder of the town centre that also contributes to the promotion and marketing is Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation (LGCHF); they seek to "manage assets and investment to generate income ... to care for the Garden City estate and support [the] local community, providing access to green spaces and a range of culture, heritage, learning and leisure facilities.

A second key stakeholder of the town centre that also contributes to the promotion and marketing is Love Letchworth BID as this organisation helps to facilitate a community culture through programming public events and building business capacity with locals. Love Letchworth BID works on four streams of projects to boost the town centre's vitality: facilitating regular and seasonal events, bringing accessible transport and parking, marketing promotion with digital media, and improving the range and quality of social, leisure, service, and retail offer in the town centre.

Both LGCHF and Love Letchworth BID work with town centre businesses, including the Garden Square Shopping Centre, to improve user experience and look ahead to the future. At present, the Garden Square Shopping Centre is underperforming, especially regarding above ground floor units, be that commercial or residential leases. There is potential to improve the occupancy and vibrancy of the Garden Square Shopping Centre alongside a paired promotion and marketing campaign.

Considering access to resources and services, Letchworth meets all 16 aspects within the Local Needs Index. Letchworth GC has plentiful resources and services within the town centres, thereby supporting a robust community culture, events and programmes, along with incentivising higher footfall and longer dwell times for visitors.

Letchworth GC's environment includes interactive shop facades, clear lines of sight, pedestrian paths, and opportunities for rest to create high-quality places that support community use and congregating. Leys Avenue, Broadway, Eastcheap and The Wynd promote Garden City principles through balanced design and human-scale architecture. Such design, combined with higher footfall, thus natural surveillance, deters anti-social behaviour. The open and green spaces of Broadway Gardens and Howard Park both supports community well-being to provide uses with recreational opportunities and natural features. These spaces are opportunities to foster deeper well-being for town centre users through physical health, exposure to green features and community event programming.

Arguably, the Letchworth GC railway forecourt poses as a challenge to public safety due to its overgrown plants, lack of lighting and underused pedestrian route through the parklet; station users are often observed walking around the parklet to the wider sidewalk routes.

Appendix 3C: Royston town centre evidence notes

Land use and retail

The land uses and town centre health indicators for Royston are outlined below relating to the following categories:

- mix of uses,
- vacancy rate and economic vitality,
- boundaries and frontages,
- development allocations,
- leisure,
- visit time,
- Local Needs Index and
- planning protections.

Mix of uses: Royston town centre's designated shopping frontages have 145 retail and service units, and the mix of uses is set out in Table 7, which is compared with the District and UK averages. On average, there are more restaurants, professional services and other non-retail services (such as barbers). There is a lower-than-average presence of convenience stores and pubs. Royston retail profile supports a higher dwell time for visitors that do come to the town centre for sit down meal and/or meeting for a professional service.

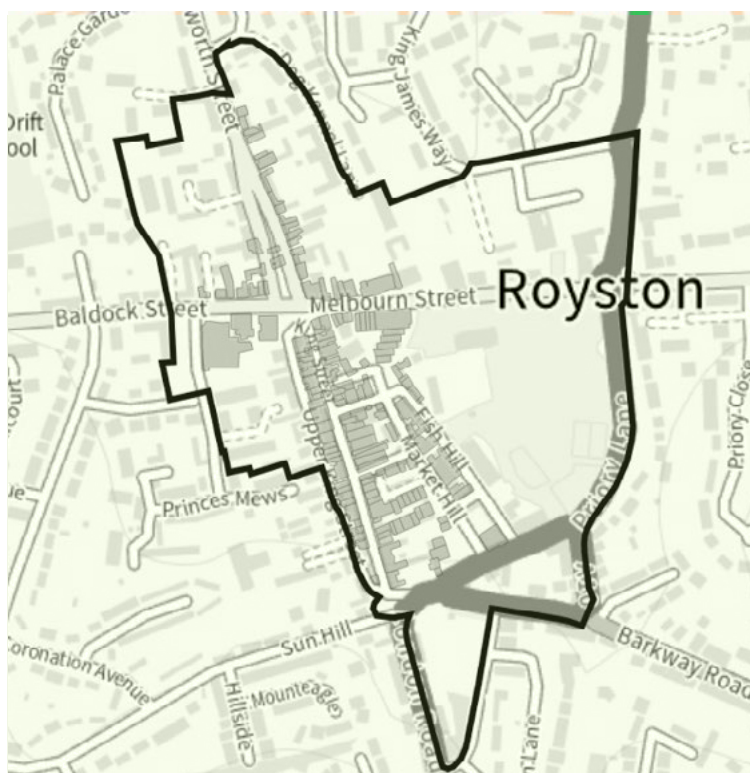
Table 7: Mix of retail and service uses – Royston town centre (Town Centre and Retail Study, 2024).

TYPE	# of Units	% of Units	% of Units (District avg.)	% of Units
(UK avg.)	23	6.6	5.6	9.5
Convenience retail	5	3.4	5.6	9.5
Comparison retail	42	29.0	27.8	27.7
Financial/ Professional	15	10.3	8.3	8.5
Restaurant/Café	19	13.1	12.8	10.0
Public house/Bar	3	2.1	3.0	4.9
Hot food takeaway	8	5.5	4.1	6.2
Other non-retail service	43	29.7	26.3	19.3
Vacant unit	10	6.9	12.3	13.9
TOTAL	145	100.0	100.0	100.0

Vacancy rate and economic vitality: There were 10 vacant units within the centre at the time of the Council's 2023 land use survey, equating to a vacancy rate of 6.9%, which is below the District and UK averages. This low vacancy rate suggests the supply of shop premises is in line with demand.

Boundary and frontages: The existing town centre boundary for Royston can be found in Figure 17, notably a significant area does not actively host commercial or mixed-use development (town centre area: 174,466 sq.m) within the current boundary.

Figure 17: Royston town centre depicting the current town centre boundary in blue and commercial retail land use in orange (town centre area: 174,466 sq.m).



Development allocations: Based on the Local Plan (2011 – 2031), there is one mixed use town centre allocation in Royston.

RY12 Town Hall: This allocation proposes that the current site is redeveloped to provide 4,000 sq.m of additional main town centre use floorspace, and provision of residential accommodation on upper floors. The policy identifies the key considerations to be covered, including the potential retention of the Town Hall.

Since the time that the Town Hall site was allocated for redevelopment, the site has had limited development activity.

Leisure: As shown in Table CX, leisure in Royston is primarily oriented around food and beverage pastimes, such as frequenting restaurants, as to be expected based on the breakdown of type of service unit within the centre. By ratio, Royston has more restaurants by ratio than the UK average and the combined average of North Herts' town centres, yet based on the household survey, a lower percentage of users frequent Royston's cafes and pubs as a leisure pastime (34.1%) compared to the North Herts' town centre average (46.8%).

Table 8: Participation in leisure activities by Royston town centre users (Town Centre and Retail Study, 2024).

Activity	Royston %	Average % across all town centres	% of Units (District avg.)	% of Units
Go for walk	1.3	0.9	5.6	9.5
Cafe/pub/restaurant	34.1	46.8	5.6	9.5
Leisure activity	8.3	9.9	27.8	27.7

Visit time: According to the NEMS household survey (2024), 35% of respondents dwell for more than 1 hour in Royston town centre. Compared to the other town centres, Royston has the lowest frequency for dwell time for more than one hour. Similarly, in the People & Places User Survey, Royston came in last with the lowest percentage for town users to dwell for longer than an hour (58%). Although the percentages vary between NEMS (2024) and the People & Place's survey (2022), the order remains the same. This indicates that Royston has maintained its status in relation to the other town centres but perhaps has dropped further in attraction to visitors within this order. Alternatively, as the sample populations vary, the NEMS survey is a broader sample from a wider catchment, whereas the People & Places survey engaged with more local users, the visitors are more drastically less enticed to visit Royston compared to the locals and in the context of the other towns in the district.

Figure 18: Dwell time for Royston town centre users in one year period from 2023 – 2024 (HUQ).

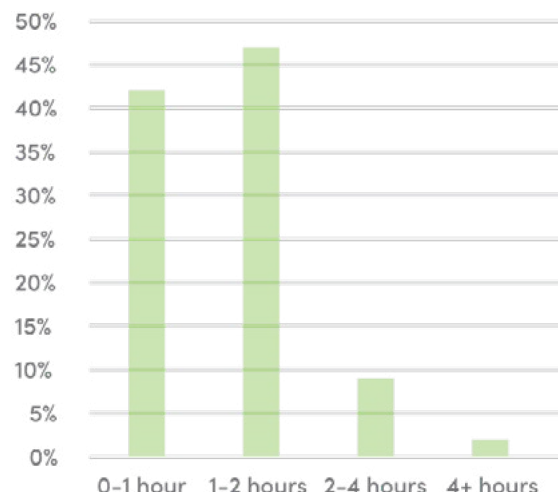
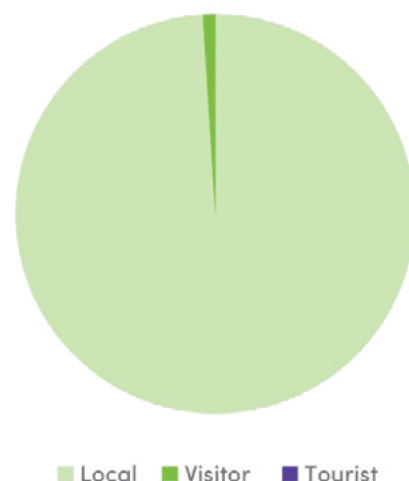


Figure 19: Origin of Royston town centre users.



The great majority are local users (People & Places, 2022).

Local Needs Index: A standardised Local Needs Index of Royston town centre was undertaken in 2024. This exercise judges against 16 types of shops, services or community uses; Royston scored 14 out of 16, technically lacking an off-license and community hall. Whilst Royston does not have a standalone community hall, it does have community halls within several churches on the town centre periphery. Additionally, Royston Town Council premises are within the town centre and have rooms for hire; perhaps this also suffices for community convening. The Tesco Express at the top of Market Hill in the town centre likely provides a similar service to an off-license shop.

Table 9: Local Needs Index Summary of North Herts' town centres (Town Centre and Retail Study, 2024).

Centre	Hierarchy Classification	Local Needs Index Score (out of 16)	% of Units (District avg.)	% of Units
Hitchin	Town Centre	15	5.6	9.5
Letchworth Garden City	Town Centre	16	5.6	9.5
Royston	Town Centre	14	27.8	27.7
Baldock	Town Centre	12		

Planning protections – Article 4 Directions and Listed Buildings:

Alongside balancing controls in planning, such as the existing Listing Building designation to protect building heritage and historic integrity, the immediate Article 4 Directions was made to protect the commercial uses in town centres. The Article 4 Directions mandates special controls for planning teams to assess approval for commercial land uses to turn to residential, as this could create a weakening in commercial opportunities and can also create dead frontages within town centres. The Article 4 Direction applies to the current Primary and Secondary frontage designation in the 2022 Local Plan, and importantly, follows to 2022 Local Plan approach to prioritise main uses in town centres first.

Figure 20. Planning protections in Royston town centre; Article 4 Directions (purple) protect main town centre uses in town centres first and Listed Buildings (yellow) protect building heritage and historic integrity.



Built environment

The built environmental conditions for Royston are outlined below relating to the following categories:

- design and the public realm,
- historic character and
- open and green spaces

Design and public realm: Royston town centre is located in the northeast of North Herts, southwest of Cambridge. It is smaller than Hitchin and Letchworth Garden City and primarily serves the day-to-day shopping, food, beverage, and service needs of local residents, although the out-of-centre Tesco Extra, Aldi, and M&S stores serve wider catchment areas. The structure of the centre is linear, stretching over 500 metres north-south with narrow streets and a slight hill incline north-south. The quality of the public realm in terms of maintenance, street furniture, and safety is good. Throughout the town centre, there are several signs and plaques to depict the heritage and history of Royston, especially related to the Royston Cave and King James I hunting expeditions.

Historic character: As a town dating back to late 12th century, Royston holds significant heritage significance. Both the current and proposed town centre boundaries are entirely within the wider Conservation Area, as shown in Figure X.

As noted in the Conservation Area Townscape Analysis and Conservation Area Statement, the town layout is medieval in its pattern with buildings set adjacently to the road on long narrow plots, with the narrowest end onto the street. This arrangement is typical of the medieval period and plots of this shape are known as 'burgage' plots. The main buildings (houses or shops) were positioned closest to the thoroughfare with workshops and outbuildings in the plots behind.

Importantly, the medieval market was situated at the main crossroads of the historic roads known as The Cross, in a wide part of Ermine Street to the north and south of the crossroads. Over time, the stalls occupying these areas became permanent resulting in an island of buildings within Kneesworth Street and the High Street forming Upper and Lower King Streets. The High Street is a relatively narrow, with a slight slope, but straight street, reflecting its origins as the direct route through the town to and from London.

The town centre streets are narrow with narrow pedestrian paths; the streets lack trees and are paved with similar materials: York stone and brown/grey bricks. This results in a cold feeling public realm and certain sections of the town, primarily the narrow alleys linking High Street to Upper King Street, are shaded. Buildings are often two storey and date back to the 18th and 19th centuries.

There are numerous listed buildings within Royston town centre, frequently located on Fish Hill, Baldock Road, Kneesworth Street, and King Street. Important buildings or sites include: The Priory, King James' Palace and Royston Cave.

In accordance with Historic Environment Policy HE1 - Designated heritage assets from the Local Plan 2011 - 2031, historical assets such as designated Scheduled Monuments, Listed Buildings, Conservation Areas and Registered Parks and Gardens must continue to be protected and maintained. Further, any future development must respect an overall emphasis on the preservation and enhancement of the existing fabric in order to maintain continuity throughout the town; and where new building takes place, the design, layout, scale, material and colours should blend with the established character.

Open and green spaces: The layout of Royston town centre has evolved from a medieval market town and has major crossroads with narrow streets, pedestrian paths and plots. The narrow and compact nature of the town centre affords limited open or green spaces. At the base of High Street, an area called The Cross, there is a small recreation area including info boards, benches, a statue, and tree landscaping with views towards north and south. Additionally, Fish Hill has an enclosed square with benches and trees oriented toward the historic Courthouse that has been repurposed as a restaurant.

There is one formal green open space within Royston town centre boundary, the Priory Memorial Gardens; it is located south of Melbourn Street on the eastern side of the town. This green resource is adjacent to the Town Hall and Royston Police Station, and it wraps around the Saint John the Baptist Church. Future interventions should ensure strong access and connections to the Priory Memorial Gardens to offer town centre visitors recess in green space.

Transport, access and movement

Transport, access and movement conditions for Royston are outlined below relating to the following categories:

- access and movement,
- parking,
- mode of travel and
- footfall.

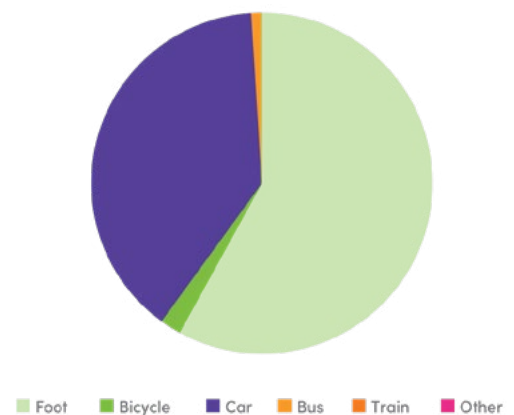
Access and movement: Royston, like Letchworth Garden City, is part of the Sustainable Travel Town programme, which is bringing together Herts County Council, North Herts District Council, Royston Town Council and Royston First Business Improvement District (BID) in a collaboration to develop and deliver plans to support sustainable travel in and around the town. One of the programme's objectives is that *"pedestrians, cyclists and public transport users will have a greater priority than they do at present, leading to a higher level of natural enforcement and behavioural change."*

The town centre is linear in structure whilst High Street, Market Hill and linking streets provide a natural circuit for pedestrians. Pavements are generally well maintained but narrow, particularly on Kneesworth Street and parts of the High Street. Cycle parking is available. The volume of through-traffic along Baldock Street/Melbourn Street acts as a barrier to pedestrian movement between the High Street and Kneesworth Street. Further west and east there are zebra crossings.

Mode of travel: Royston Railway Station is about 600 metres (approximately 9 minutes to walk) north of the Baldock Street and Melbourn Street junction.

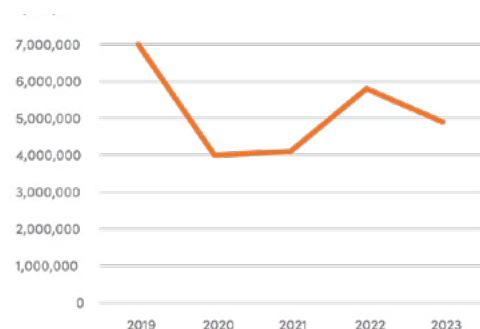
Based on NEMS Household survey, the majority of visitors use a car to reach Royston. Additionally, based on the People & Places Report User Survey, 58% of Royston users surveyed travel to the centre by foot, and 39% travel by car; this sample population was made up of 99% locals and 1% visitors (living outside the postcode, but within a 30-minute drive). This indicates that locals are more likely to walk to the centre, whereas respondents from the wider Study Area will arrive by car.

Figure 20: User travel preference into Royston town centre (People & Places, 2022).



Footfall: Royston town centre's annual HUQ footfall data indicates that this town is no different from the other 3 town centres of the district in that it has negatively experienced the effects of Covid-19 pandemic. In 2019, the annual footfall went from roughly 7 million to 4 million in 2020 and stays relatively constant to 2021. A brief bounce back from the pandemic shows the footfall increasing in 2022 to just shy of 6 million, to then drop back down in 2023 to below 5 million. Interestingly, Royston's trend to bounce back in 2022 and reduce again in 2023 is similar to Baldock's annual footfall data.

Figure 21: Annual footfall in Royston Town Centre from 2019 through 2023 (HUQ).

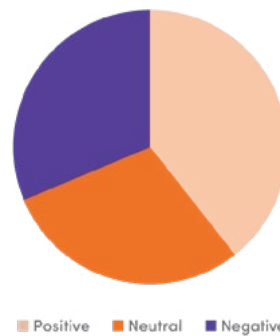


Parking: Royston town centre car parks are accessible to the main shopping area, but provision is relatively fragmented with four of the six car parks providing less than 35 spaces. According to Lichfields' 2024 study, respondents who visit Royston responded relatively more negatively to parking offer, availability and cost, than any other town centre. Similarly, in the People & Places 2022 Recovery and Development Plan, Royston users share negative perceptions on parking especially on-street offer (approximately 85% have neutral to negative views for on-street parking and 65% have neutral to negative views for off-street parking). Due to the physical layout of the town, there is limited ability to provide car parking directly on town centre streets. Interestingly, these same users report positive opinions on both road links and pedestrian access throughout the town centre.

Figure 22: On-street parking views by Letchworth GC users. 60% of users respond with positive or neutral views (People & Places, 2022)



Figure 23: Off-street parking views by Royston users. Users are generally evenly split between positive, neutral and negative views (People & Places, 2022)



Community

For a town centre of its size, Royston has a good provision of community facilities with a library, police station, town hall, and health centre within the core. As previously referenced, users have access to community halls surrounding the town centre via local churches, and further rooms for hire within Royston Town Council. These are essential to the functioning of the town and provide much-needed spaces for communal gatherings and events. Via North Herts' Community Partnerships Team, Royston users are welcomed to monthly Community Forum meetings to present applications for small grassroots grants and hear about important updates, and also Town Drop-ins to express general concerns or questions.

Royston holds a unique historic market town character defined by its medieval street layout, compact size, and heritage, featured on the Royston Town Trail, interspersed between local shops, cafes and restaurants.

Royston is unique compared to the other three towns, as it is the only town in the district with a local town council, Royston Town Council. Royston First, the town's Business Improvement District founded in 2009, often collaborates with the town council to improve the status of Royston town centre. In this aim, Royston First applies the business levy back into local area through 5 key areas: town investment (such as the Youth Employment Initiative), events (local business awards), welcome and security (ShopSafe app), business support (first aid training), and marketing (digital signage).

Royston was awarded the badge of Sustainable Travel Town to pilot active travel mechanisms for overall public health and climate action. These different groups, Royston Town Council, Royston First and Royston Sustainable Travel Town consortium work to promote the profile of Royston town centre. While Royston is within North Herts, it borders Cambridgeshire County Council, and experiences competition in market expenditure to Cambridge.

The health centre, Granta Market Hill Surgery operated by the NHS, is located along Market Hill and is an important resource for community health. This amenity also draws in visitors to the town centre to either trip chain alongside their appointment, or for carers, family members etc. (who have travelled in with the Granta Market Hill patient) can visit the town centre during the appointment.

Whilst Royston town centre has a handful of long-term challenges related to its historic morphology, main vehicle road bisecting the town centre, and topography sloped hill, the main High Street offers users a pleasant experience with good design, such as prioritising pedestrians, interactive facades, and opportunities to rest with natural surveillance. The open space at The Cross and at the intersection of Jepps Lane and Fish Hill are good opportunities to facilitate community programming and spaces for recreation.

Baldock Street / Melbourn Street bisect the town centre and positions users in competition with a major vehicle road to cross safely. This road also arguably acts as a perceptual barrier to disconnect Kneesworth Street and Lower King Street from the rest of the town centre. Further, along these streets, the pedestrian paths are extremely narrow with major traffic going by and in some locations very dark.

Appendix 3D: Baldock town centre evidence notes

Land use and retail

The land uses and town centre health indicators for Baldock are outlined below relating to the following categories:

- mix of uses,
- vacancy rate and economic vitality,
- boundaries and frontages,
- development allocations,
- leisure,
- visit time,
- Local Needs Index and
- planning protections.

Mix of uses: There are 73 retail and service units within Baldock town centre's designated shopping frontages; the mix of uses is set out in Table 10 below, which is compared with the District and UK averages.

Table 10: Mix of retail and service uses – Baldock town centre (Town Centre and Retail Study, 2024).

TYPE	# of Units	% of Units	% of Units (District avg.)	% of Units
(UK avg.)	23	6.6	5.6	9.5
Convenience retail	5	6.8	5.6	9.5
Comparison retail	13	17.8	27.8	27.7
Financial/ Professional	3	4.1	8.3	8.5
Restaurant/Café	12	16.4	12.8	10.0
Public house/Bar	4	5.5	3.0	4.9
Hot food takeaway	5	6.8	4.1	6.2
Other non-retail service	25	32.9	26.3	19.3
Vacant unit	7	9.6	12.3	13.9
TOTAL	73	100.0	100.0	100.0

Vacancy rate and economic vitality: Of the 73 total retail and service units within the town centre, there were 7 vacant units at the time of the Council's 2023 land use and monitoring survey. This equates to a vacancy rate of 9.6%, which is below the District and UK averages (12.3% and 13.9% respectively). The number of vacant units recorded in 2015 was similar with 6 vacant units. The relatively low vacancy rate suggests the supply of shop premises is broadly in line with operator demand and provides opportunity for churning retail spaces for current and potential occupiers.

Boundary and frontages: The existing town centre boundary for Baldock can be found in Figure 24; notably, there are pockets or areas that exist within the boundary that do not actively host commercial or mixed-use development (town centre area: 109,968 sq.m).

Figure 24: Baldock town centre, depicting the current town centre boundary in blue and retail land use in orange (town centre area: 109,968 sq.m).



Development allocations: The 2022 Local Plan does not allocate any town centre mixed use allocations for Baldock, nor does it have any active allocations, this is due to the highly historic nature of the town centre and proximity to neighbouring Letchworth Garden City.

Importantly, on the northeastern periphery, the Growing Baldock scheme for residential use is under pre-development to create a Strategic Masterplan. This housing area, set to provide 3,000 homes, will require 1,500 square metres amount of retail use that satisfies the immediate needs of residents and will not be a competition to the local economy of the town centre.

Additionally, adjacent to the town centre lies allocated employment land to meet the needs of Functional Economic Market Area, east of Baldock BA10 (19.6ha). This was set out in the 2022 Local Plan and is currently under review. Advantageously, employment land near town centres can have positive impact on the footfall into the centre and the local economy.

Leisure: As shown in Table CX, leisure in Baldock is primarily oriented around food and beverage pastimes, such as frequenting cafes, pubs or restaurants. By ratio, Baldock has more restaurant/cafe and public house/bar units than the other town centres in North Herts' and across the UK. While there is the potential for a distribution of 1,400 square metres of leisure space to develop within the town centres of North Herts, such as a cinema, gyms or escape room, it is less likely to be placed in Baldock town centre considering its limited size, number of listed buildings and low number of vacant units.

Table 11: Participation in leisure activities by Baldock town centre users (Town Centre and Retail Study, 2024).

Activity	Baldock %	Average % across all town centres	% of Units	% of Units
Go for walk	1.3	0.9	5.6	9.5
Cafe/pub/restaurant	52.6	46.8	5.6	9.5
Leisure activity	4.9	9.9	27.8	27.7

Visit time: According to the NEMS Household Survey (2024), 41% of respondents dwell for more than 1 hour in Baldock town centre. Compared to the other town centres, Baldock dwell time is in the middle, with more users dwelling for an hour or longer than Royston, but less than Letchworth GC and Hitchin. Further, in this survey, respondents shared that visited Baldock in the last year for food shopping (46%) and cafes/pubs (53%): the respondents could select multiple options.

Similarly, in the Recovery & Development Plan (2022), 68% of Baldock users shared that they visited the centre for longer than 1 hour. In comparison to the other town centres, Baldock again sits in the middle, with higher percentage than Royston and lower than Letchworth GC and Hitchin for dwell time of 1 hour or more. Within this survey, research concludes that users often spent their time on comparison shopping (47%), such as food shopping, and for leisure activities (37%).

Figure 25: Dwell time for Baldock town centre users within a 1 year period spanning 2023 - 2024. It is relatively uncommon for users to dwell longer than 2 hours. (HUQ).

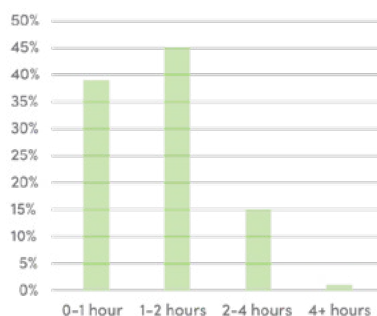
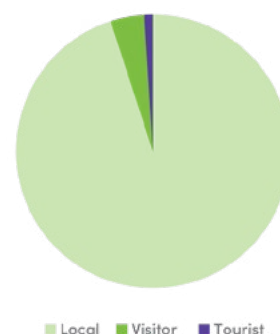


Figure 26: Origin of Baldock town centre users. The large majority are locals (People & Places, 2022).



Local needs index: A standardised Local Needs Index for town centres was undertaken in 2024. This exercise judges against 16 types of shops, services or community uses; Baldock scored 12 out of 16, only lacking a bank, newsagent, florist and off-license. The Tesco Extra, located on the edge of the town boundary, provides some of these missing services within the defined town centre boundary.

Table 12: Local Needs Index Summary of North Herts' town centres (Town Centre and Retail Study, 2024).

Centre	Hierarchy Classification	Local Needs Index Score (out of 16)
Hitchin	Town Centre	15
Letchworth Garden City	Town Centre	16
Royston	Town Centre	14
Baldock	Town Centre	12

Planning protections - Article 4 Directions and Listed Buildings: Alongside balancing controls in planning, such as the existing Listing Building designation to protect building heritage and historic integrity, the immediate Article 4 Directions was made to protect the commercial uses in town centres. The Article 4 Directions mandates special controls for planning teams to assess approval for commercial land uses to turn to residential, as this could create a weakening in commercial opportunities and can also create dead frontages within town centres. The Article 4 Direction applies to the current Primary and Secondary frontage designation in the 2022 Local Plan, and importantly, follows to 2022 Local Plan approach to prioritise main uses in town centres first.

Figure 27: Planning protections in Baldock town centre; Article 4 Directions (purple) protect main town centre uses in town centres first and Listed Buildings (yellow) protect building heritage and historic integrity.



Built environment

The built environmental conditions for Baldock are outlined below relating to the following categories:

- design and the public realm,
- historic character and
- open and green spaces.

Design and public realm: Baldock town centre is characterised by wide main streets enclosed by continuous frontages and narrow side streets. The streets widen towards the junction of High Street, Whitehorse Street and Hitchin Street. This widening of the streets creates spaces for the public realm and community uses. This strategy recommends that the historic layout should be preserved, and the width of the streets should be retained. The town's pedestrian permeability, achieved through a network of footpaths, should be protected and enhanced.

New buildings should enhance the existing fabric through similar materials and sympathetic designs, scale, height, massing and proportions. The buildings are two, three or four storeys with some consistency in height. There are a large number of townhouses which are built on burgage plots, creating continuous frontages which should dictate the scale and typology of new development in the town centre. High density may be acceptable with a mix of commercial on the ground floor with residential above.

Coach arches are common within the town centre and these often open out into small courtyards. These could accommodate mews type development (a row of stables with living quarters above them, set back from the street and accessed through an archway), small commercial units and conversions. Rear walled gardens are important to retain.

The public realm is a sensitive area for new architecture and enhancements because of the quality of the historic buildings.

Any enhancements to the public realm or new buildings should ensure that the character and high quality of the historic fabric is maintained and be thematically linked to the town centre enhancements.

Historic Character: As an historic market town, Baldock has a significant number of listed buildings throughout its town centre. Further, the Conservation Area spans beyond the current town centre boundary and thus includes the entire town centre within it. The overall character of this Conservation Area is largely that of 18th Century buildings. There are large Georgian Town Houses, such as Clare House, The Manor House and Holford House as well as many other older buildings also having been re-fronted in brick in the style of this time.

In accordance with [Historic Environment Policy HE1 - Designated heritage assets](#) from the 2022 Local Plan, historical assets such as designated Scheduled Monuments, Listed Buildings, Conservation Areas and Registered Parks and Gardens must continue to be protected and maintained.

Open and green spaces: The historic layout of Baldock town centre creates wide open streets with two and three storey buildings that frame the area and support local events and a cafe culture. For example, the town's core square, it includes a memorial garden and recreational seating at the meeting of Bell Row and High Street. High Street spans about half a mile and provides a clear view, east and west with green leafy trees between the pedestrian paths and buildings. This scale and design of open space creates a positive public realm and further inspires walking.

Both the width of the streets and surrounding buildings, as well as the pedestrian permeability, and the network of footpaths, should be retained and protected. Street furniture exists throughout the centre, although they are currently in need of repair due to weathering, they offer users frequent opportunities to sit and relax in the open space. While pedestrian footpaths exist throughout the centre, there are limited zebra crossings on High Street; there is one to the north-west on High Street near Hitchin Street, and one to the south-east on High Street near Manfield Road.

St. Mary's Parish Church offers a protected small green space with views of the historic building dating to the 12th century. It is conveniently adjacent to the open seating area on Sun Street, and nearby High Street's activity.

Tesco Extra, and the Tesco Memorial Gardens, while not within the existing town centre boundary, are located directly adjacent to the town on the southwestern side of High Street. This area is a green buffer between the large car park and the pleasant town centre open realm, this strategy recommends improving the overall quality and connectivity to High Street.

Considering North Herts's register for formal open and green spaces, there are three near Baldock town centre: Avenue Park, Ivel Springs and more distantly, Weston Hills. While none of these exist within the current town centre boundary, it is beneficial to maintain and promote their quality for town centre users' recreation, as well as trip chaining for visitors to also use the town centre.

Transport, access and movement

Transport, access and movement conditions for Baldock are outlined below relating to the following categories:

- access and movement,
- mode of travel,
- footfall and
- parking.

Access and movement: Following Baldock's Town Centre Enhancement Scheme in 2006, significant changes to the street scene and infrastructure have enabled better pedestrian permeability and flows of movement. This was achieved through widening the pedestrian paths, which has enabled wider walking access and space for traders to use the open realm for outdoor seating. The completion of the Baldock (A505) Bypass has aided this through the diversion of traffic around the town centre.

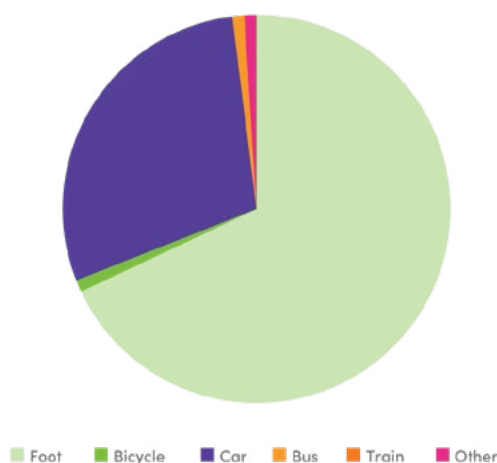
The [Baldock, Bygrave and Clothall Neighbourhood Plan](#) was published in 2021 and supports walking and cycling infrastructure, with a specific aim to improve infrastructure. This report also states the importance to reduce congestion and air pollution, thereby supporting walking and cycling journeys within Baldock.

Of relevance to Baldock town centre, connections that have been identified (by the Local Cycling Walking and Infrastructure Plan) to be improved include Hitchin to Baldock via Letchworth Garden City and Baldock connectivity to rail stations and development sites, with a desire to improve the A505 transport corridor. For example, a segregated cycle infrastructure on this route has been proposed, with lower speed limits for motorised vehicles on respective roads. To improve pedestrian flow between Letchworth Garden City and Baldock, the A1(M) Pedestrian Bridge would require minimal changes, surfacing, lighting, bollards and vegetation management, to return high impact. Additionally, the [Local Cycling Walking and Infrastructure Plan](#) determined Core Walking Zones to understand trips that can be optimised for increased walkability. Baldock is considered a Core Walking Zone with routes between its town centre and railway station as Key Walking Routes.

Mode of travel: The Baldock Railway Station is located about 550 metres (under 10 minutes' average walk) to the northeast of the town centres' market square. Despite this, the household survey within the 2024 Town Centre and Retail Study suggests that few Baldock shop customers arrive by train.

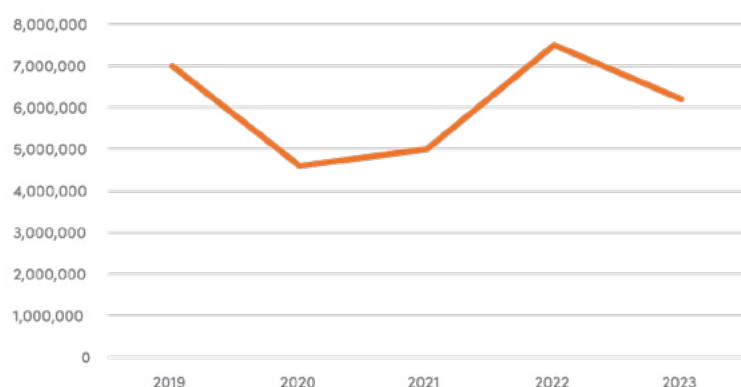
Based on NEMS Household survey, the majority of visitors to Baldock arrive by car. Additionally, based on the People & Places Report User Survey, 68% of Baldock residents surveyed travel to the centre by foot, and 33% travel by car; this sample population was made up of 95% locals and 5% visitors (living outside the postcode, but within a 30-minute drive). This indicates that locals are more likely to walk to the centre, whereas respondents from the wider Study Area will arrive by car.

Figure 28: User travel preference in Baldock town centre (People & Places, 2022).



Footfall: The district's HUQ footfall data indicates that Baldock town centre has experienced the negative effects of Covid-19 pandemic with a reduced annual footfall from roughly 7 million in 2019 to 4.7 million in 2020. Recovering from physical isolation measures, the town centre's annual footfall rose slightly in 2021, and more significantly in 2022 to above the 2019 frequency (7.4 million). Interestingly, in 2023, Baldock town centre's footfall decreases again to just above 6 million visitors annually.

Figure 29: Annual footfall in Baldock Town Centre from 2019 through 2023 (HUQ).



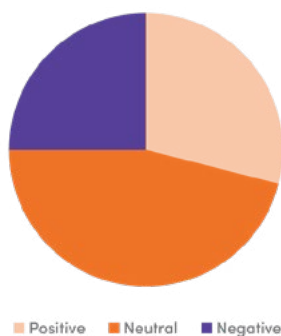
Parking: For local traffic, following Town Enhancement Scheme, work has been done to “organise parking to enable new open public spaces, provide short-term parking on the high street, and improve parking appearance.” Now, on-street car parking is available along the west and east sides of High Street, along Whitehorse Street, Hitchin Street and Sun Street, and is free for up to two hours. Off-street public car parking is located near Baldock Community Centre. The Tesco Extra store also provides car parking spaces for customers. With improved wayfinding, if an appropriate partnership was formed between the district and Tesco Extra, this could be an opportunity to motivate Tesco patrons to walk and enjoy town centre businesses and public realm as well.

The quantity of on- and off-street parking within walking distance of the town centre is sufficient to meet current demand, and there are good pedestrian routes traversing the town. In the [People & Places Baldock Town Centre Recovery and Development Plan \(2022\)](#), users surveyed reported positive (79%) and neutral (18%) views, totalling to 97% combined, towards pedestrian access, with only 3% reporting negative attitudes on this aspect. Regarding on-street parking, users were relatively satisfied (positive and neutral) with the provision, with only 23% reporting negative attitudes. For off-street parking, there were fewer positive reports (29%), but a similar percentage of negative attitudes (25%).

Figure 30: On-street parking views by Baldock town centre users. Over 75% of users respond with positive or neutral views (People & Places, 2022).



Figure 31: Off-street parking views by Baldock town centre users. Users are generally split, with many neutral views (People & Places, 2022).



Community

Baldock town centre has a good provision of community facilities, with a library, community centre and arts and heritage centre within the core. The community centre accommodates a variety of community functions with spaces to hire for external events. The library programmes a range of activities with combined walking and reading discussion groups and meetings with Police Community Support Officer. Additionally, and linked to promoting the town centre's offer, the Baldock Events Forum helps facilitate a community culture through managing the weekly outdoor market. Via the North Herts' Communities Partnership Team, Baldock users are welcomed to monthly Community Forum meetings to present applications for small grassroot grants and hear about important updates, as well as Town Drop-ins to express general concerns or questions.

To entice visitors into the town centre, Baldock should promote its strong offer for cafes, restaurants and pubs with charming historic market town character and pedestrian access.

Design-wise, Baldock Primary Shopping Area follows good design to deter anti-social behaviour using natural surveillance, interactive shop facades, clear lines of sight, and wide pedestrian paths. The public realm and small-town characteristic of Baldock facilitates visitors to walk the high street and interact with familiar neighbours, shop workers or the community in general, especially near the open public space at Bell Row and High Street.

Considering community safety and roads, High Street is the major artery of Baldock town centre, followed by Whitehorse Street; these streets intersect at a roundabout with a pedestrian crossing. There is one other pedestrian crossing on High Street within the town centre and it is a quarter mile south near Mansfield Road, approximately 4 minutes walking one direction. From officer site visits, users of the town centre are often observed crossing the road at unmarked spots and in-between moving cars to access the main town shops sitting directly across from each other. This behaviour is a hazard and highlights the disfunction of the pedestrian infrastructure.

