

North Hertfordshire Town Centres Strategy – Draft for Public Consultation

Response by Hitchin Forum – January 2026

Introduction

Hitchin Forum is a community organisation founded in 1992 as a non-political umbrella to bring together people and organisations who want to maintain and enhance Hitchin's special character. It enables the views of people who live and work in Hitchin to be presented in a co-ordinated manner to relevant bodies. Currently we have in excess of 100 members, including community groups and businesses in Hitchin.

Responding to this Consultation

Your Planning Portal has blocked our use for reasons we cannot fathom, hence this response. This does not bode well for general public use of this system and needs addressing.

Overall Assessment of the Draft Town Centres Strategy

In terms of public engagement in the planning process, this is a very difficult document for public comment. It is made unnecessarily complicated by interspersing comment and discussion about the four towns in some parts, while separating more detailed description for the individual towns in other sections. Its clarity and quality are greatly reduced by attempting to deal with four very different and distinctive towns in one document.

Part 3 is headed "Individual Town Centre Strategies" but there is no strategy to be found. Descriptions of a town's "Identity", a "Vision" for the town, a "SWOT Analysis", "Key Priorities" and "Priority Areas" do not make a "Strategy".

It appears to us that the Council has tried to save time and resources to speed up the process by getting consultants to prepare an overarching strategy. It shows. This document is inferior in every way to the 2004 Hitchin Town Centre Strategy. The Council might not need to begin all over again but must create a policy document for each town that does justice to the particular and unique character of each town and builds a policy direction appropriate to each town for the next decade.

Q1: Do you have any comments on 1A: Introduction and context?

See above.

Q2: Do you have any comments on 1B: The Council's Role?

Here it is stated: "The Priority of Responsible Growth directly supports the creation of a new **Town Centres Strategy** for North Hertfordshire:". In fact, its "supporting text" contradicts this: "*We also want to support economic growth across our district. We will prepare **Town Centre Strategies** . . .*" This is not a matter of semantics; the two are very different entities.

Q3: Do you have any comments on 1C: Purpose of the Town Centres Strategy?

Para 2 states: "The Town Centres Strategy will provide clear planning policy 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."

There are no planning policies evident in this document. The "Guidance Notes" in Part 2B are only *"to support developers, consultants, landowners and decision makers . . ."*

Q4: Do you have any comments on the Land Use and Retail Evidence?

The second Recommendation provided from the Lichfields 2024 Study is quoted on p.13: *"The potential to redistribute capacity from Baldock and Hitchin to Letchworth should be explored . . ."* This does not reflect commercial reality and should be dismissed out of hand.

Q5: Do you have any comments on the Built Environment Evidence?

No comments.

Q6: Do you have any comments on the Transport, Access and Movement Evidence?

We can find no mention of engaging with groups representing those with disabilities. This is particularly an issue regarding the public realm deficiencies in Hitchin that impact wheelchair users and others. This was highlighted in a walk Hitchin Forum arranged into and round the town centre in 2023 with a wheelchair user, the Town Centre Manager and a County Council Transport officer. We expect greater recognition of this as an issue throughout this section.

Hitchin is the commercial and social centre for a hinterland of villages who have no choice overall except to use private cars to get into Hitchin. The Council should be researching the viability of a network of comprehensive public or public/private transport (electric minibuses?) to provide regular and reliable services between Hitchin town centre and these villages. This would reduce pressure on car parking as well as enabling environmental improvements.

Q7: Do you have any comments on the Community Evidence?

No comments.

Q8 - 12: Do you have any comments on Guidance Notes 1 - 5: Promoting Vitality and Viability in Town Centres; The Built Form, Public Realm and Design; Heritage and Historical Character; Promoting Sustainable Travel; Community Facilities?

These appear to be mostly an elaboration of current Local Plan policies which are generalist. These Guidance Notes would be more helpful if they pointed to how they should be interpreted for each town.

Q13: Hitchin – The North Herts Town Centre Strategy sets out an identity and vision for Hitchin Town Centre. Do you think these reflect what makes Hitchin special and what its future should be? Please explain why.

This section is impoverished compared to the 2004 Hitchin Town Centre Strategy. It fails to reference what should be its foundation document: the Conservation Area Character Statement for Hitchin. Most of the “**Identity**” section could describe any market town in Britain. It is a “bird’s eye view” rather than identifying what is unique and special about Hitchin. No doubt this “blandness” is due to attempting (unsuccessfully) to produce one strategy for four very different towns.

The “**Vision**” section refers to town centre assets in the most general of terms and fails to mention what is probably Hitchin town centre’s greatest visitor attraction: The British Schools Museum is internationally significant and last year hosted in excess of 18,000 visitors. Instead there is bland mention of “museums”. Shame!

Q14: Do you have any comments on the SWOT Analysis for Hitchin (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats)?

Much of what is stated in this Analysis we would support. However, we take issue as follows:

“7. Strength: Most areas of the centre are well-maintained and adequate street furniture is provided.”

Apart from Hermitage Road where pavements were recently re-laid, most areas are neglected with uneven paving, crude repairs in tarmac, areas that flood or puddle in rain, signposts that are rusting, leaning or redundant and street furniture needing painting. The ironwork in the Church Cloisters is a disgrace, as are the railings along the river by Portmill Lane. Moss’s Corner is well-used for sitting etc, despite being ugly and out of character with the rest of the town centre. We could go on.

“9. Strength: The centre has a good bus service, with many bus routes serving the centre.”

See comment to Q.6 above.

“13. Weakness: 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.”

It is commercial nonsense to talk about comparisons with larger centres. Hitchin is a middle-sized market town and is not competing with such centres. It cannot, it does not and it should not. It has its own unique charms, not least due to the fact that it does not, and some would say thankfully, cannot accommodate the large chains.

“16. Weakness: The historic character of the town centre, particularly in terms of 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.”

Some would see this as a strength in Hitchin rather than a weakness. There continues to be a healthy turnover of shops; units are rarely empty for long periods. Larger format stores tend to be chain stores which often add blandness rather than diversity or interest.

This is a prime example of why it is mistaken to try to produce a district-wide Town Centres Strategy which cannot, by its very broad-brush stroke nature, address the specific and very different individuality of each town.

“27. Opportunity: A holistic approach to transport and parking may provide opportunities for reconfiguration of provision, whilst maintaining or increasing footfall and vitality.”

See comment to Q.6 above.

“28. Threat: The number of vacant shop units has increased significantly in recent years.”

The Hitchin Town Centre Manager should be consulted re the accuracy or otherwise of this statement.

“29. Threat: The continued polarisation of national multiples in larger centres and/or 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.”

These statements are confusing, contradictory and should be deleted. See comments on 13 & 16 above. It is not the national multiples that draw visitors to Hitchin or define Hitchin's distinctiveness or attractiveness.

“30. Threat: 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.”

This is probably the greatest threat Hitchin faces today.

Q.15. Do you have any comments on the Key Priorities for Hitchin Town Centre?

This section is unnecessarily impoverished by lack of locational detail. We would reiterate that each town needs its own Town Centre Strategy so location-specific policies can be produced.

Theme D: Transport, access and movement: “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. Note that our recommendation above about regular and dependable (mini)bus transport between Hitchin town centre and surrounding villages should be included under “Action/Planning Considerations”.

We have no comments on the sections about **Letchworth (Q. 16-18), Royston (Q.19-21) and Baldock (Q.22-24)**.

Q.25. Do you consider it useful to have a summary table of the priority areas for each of the town centres? If yes/no, please explain.

As presented, it serves no real purpose as it merely repeats the headings for what has already been presented in greater detail.

Q.26. Do you have any comments on the Council's further proposed actions? If yes, please select the theme your response relates to: Land Use and Retail, Built Environment, Transport, Access and Movement, and Community.

It is good to see some definite proposals and firm actions (“will incorporate”, “will implement”, “reduce through-traffic”, “reduce traffic speeds” etc etc). For all of these it would be helpful to have included the policies from which these flow.

Q.27. Do you have any comments on the potential funding opportunities and key considerations for NHDC?

It is helpful to have these spelled out.

Q.28. Do you have any comments on the Glossary in the Town Centres Strategy? Have we missed any terms that should be included? If yes, please state the term and explain why it should be added.

No comments.

Q.29. Do you have any further comments on the Town Centres Strategy? If yes/no, please explain.

Yes.

Appendix 3A: Hitchin Town Centre Evidence Notes: Transport, access and movement - Para 2 under Access and movement (p.86).

“Hills around the town centre are also a barrier to cycling, as cycling routes that minimise climbs and avoid steep climbs are preferred.” This is utterly dismissive of Hitchin’s natural features – we live next to the Chiltern Hills! This is a negative view and implies inaction is OK. What is far more of an issue for cyclists in and around Hitchin town centre is heavy vehicle traffic – both volumes of traffic and the threat from HGV’s. This is even more reason for the need for cycling provision.

Appendix 3A: Hitchin Town Centre Evidence Notes: Community – Para 1 (p. 89)

In 2024 The Council issued the following statement: *“We are bringing Charnwood House back into community use . . . Our overriding aim is to breathe a new lease of life into Charnwood House, so that it can be used by local people and community groups, for the benefit of the town and wider district. We are acutely aware of the importance of this building to Hitchin. While bringing it back into use, we also are keen to see the historic elements of Charnwood House retained, so any refurbishment by the successful leaseholder will be sensitive to the special character of the building, in keeping with its Grade II listed status.”*

This needs to be reflected within the section on “Community”.

General Comments:

The final section (Appendix 3) of this document, specifically for our purposes "**3A Hitchin Town Centre Evidence Notes**", contains some of the most relevant information in the entire document, yet you ask no questions about it.

There is incredibly little reference to Hitchin Market, despite it being a key feature in the town centre and fundamental to Hitchin's character. This is a major failing and yet another illustration of how depending on planning consultants can lead to totally missing the point.

January 2026