

NORTH HERTFORDSHIRE: TOWN CENTRES STRATEGY – CONSULTATION

Some Comments

Please refer to the current Draft Town Centres Strategy prepared by consultants in October 2025 -

* I agree strongly with the comments submitted by Hitchin Forum in January 2026 that this latest exercise is much poorer in concept and understanding, certainly for Hitchin, than the previous exercise of twenty years ago.

* Hitchin is indeed the largest urban centre in the District with the most varied and vibrant town centre economy. Within this context much more importance should be given to reinforcing its retail and service provision as an asset within the District ie it should be given priority and focus in Council policy in these spheres. Policy should maintain key retail frontages/locations (eg the former Woolworths in High Street) and not allow these to be eroded by over intensive residential/leisure proposals.

* It should also be noted that the town serves an important portion of southern Bedfordshire as well as the west of northern Hertfordshire.

* The Market should be strongly underlined as an asset – a ‘historic market town’ must have one.

* It is nonsense to compare Hitchin’s retail provision adversely with much bigger centres nearby such as Stevenage and Luton (where much of retail is ‘out of town’ anyway). Provision in Hitchin is critically different, should be recognised as such and, if this is done, your strategy might stand some chance of helping (see Churchgate point below). Retail is still of major importance for a basic critical mass of town centre activity. In this context Hitchin BID currently underestimates that importance ie leisure/hospitality is supportive not central to the town’s function.

* The District Council has in its hands the means to support local independent retail in a crucial way in Hitchin. Churchgate should be refurbished to regain its original 1970s character (as an increasingly rare ‘retro’ attraction). In pursuing this aim the Council should use Churchgate’s flexible spaces and the ability to pitch rents in a more varied and less extractive way to encourage smaller scale independent retail. This effort should be linked to a proactive Hitchin Markets policy and it is possible to envisage a bridge between start-up retail on the Market and graduation to units in an affordable attractive Churchgate.

* In looking at support for Hitchin’s retail/service role it is nonsense to criticise its historic/conservation area character as mainly a ‘constraint’. In the ‘anytown’ environment of today it is an asset and needs proactive and imaginative policies to help accommodate new businesses within its framework.

* Hitchin’s attractions as a ‘historic market town’ are absolutely central to the town earning its living. It is not about ‘aspic’ but about creative adaptation. Much better integration of the retail/service/leisure aspects with the historic attractions (St Mary’s/British Schools/Town Hall Museum) is needed.

* I disagree strongly that Hitchin’s historic environment is well maintained by its public authorities. This is an area of continual failure where both the District and County Councils could make an immediate (coordinated?), positive and sustained contribution eg pavement maintenance in High Street, signage, street furniture repair, better street and open space cleaning/care (have you looked at the Seebom and Hine Gardens recently??). The best maintained open space is currently the

Physic Garden (looked after by volunteers and the Hitchin Historical Society) and should be a benchmark for similar areas in public hands.

* Access to the town centre does face problems. The District Council has an extractive policy on car-park charging (these funds are sucked out of the town and not used for eg car park care or augmentation and wider maintenance). Bus provision is patchy (ie we need more frequent and better focused buses rather than a bus station). The railway station is not immediately central but better bus planning could improve linkages to the town centre and make much better provision for interchange as Hitchin's rail connections to other areas of north Hertfordshire and southern Bedfordshire are reasonably good and much better than any other station in the District.

Concluding Remarks

Overall this Strategy, as it applies to Hitchin, is a thin and disappointing document. I appreciate that the ability of the Council to affect many of the wider influences impinging on town centres is limited. But it is therefore of critical importance that it gets policy 'right' where it can influence things (eg Churchgate in Hitchin). This document does not convince in this regard and the Strategy needs much more careful thought.

30 January 2026