

East Herts Council Report

Pre-Executive

Date of meeting: 4 March 2025

Report by: Councillor Vicky Glover-Ward – Executive Member for Planning and Growth

Report title: East Herts District Plan Review - East Herts Strategic Vision

Ward(s) affected: (All Wards);

Summary – Members have agreed to undertake a review of the District Plan, and set out a timetable to achieve the completion of this review. Alongside updating the evidence base and the ‘Call for Sites’, a Strategic Vision has been prepared to facilitate a discussion and informed debate about how the district should develop in the future, and provide a unified direction for the Council’s approach to growth. In advance of formal plan-making, this Vision will form the basis of community discussions about the new District Plan later this year.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EXECUTIVE to recommend to Council that:

- a) The East Herts Strategic Vision is made available to stakeholders and the wider community to begin a discussion about the new District Plan, and to seek comments on the Vision;**
- b) Engagement on the Strategic Vision should commence, and take the form of a six week period of activity during Spring / Summer 2025 through a range of different forums, including online and in-person; and**
- c) A further report detailing any feedback is prepared following engagement to agree a final version of the Strategic Vision, and to set the out the next stages of plan-making.**

1.0 Proposal(s)

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to agree that engagement on the East Herts Strategic Vision is undertaken with stakeholders and the wider community.

2.0 Background

- 2.1 Local Planning Authorities are required to complete a review of their local plans at least once every 5-years from the adoption date of a plan to ensure that plans remain relevant and take account of changing circumstances. Members resolved to undertake an update of the East Herts District Plan at its Executive meeting on 3 October 2023, with a view to formal work commencing in early 2026.

- 2.2 Since that time, officers have been taking preparatory steps to facilitate progress on the District Plan update, including:

- Undertaking a ‘Call for Sites’ - an opportunity for landowners, developers, agents and site promoters to submit sites which may be considered to have the potential for future development – the initial outcome of which was discussed at the Executive meeting on 11 February 2025.
- Agreeing a revised timetable for the preparation of the District Plan in the form of a Local Development Scheme (LDS), which was agreed by the Executive on 3 September 2024. The LDS sets out the key plan-making stages and timetable for the new District Plan and takes account of the Government’s prospective plan-making reforms. Further guidance on this process is due later this year, but the LDS anticipates the commencement of formal plan making in January 2026, following preparatory work and updates to evidence.
- Developing a ‘Strategic Vision’ as required by the NPPF to chart a clear and ambitious course for the district’s future which will serve as the golden thread for the new District Plan, informing

policies and decision-making that will shape East Herts in the years to come.

2.3 The 'Strategic Vision' is the focus of this report. It sets out the background, work to date and next steps to develop a Vision, and how this will inform plan-making. An updated Vision is required for the district because of the many changes that have occurred since the adoption of the previous plan, including amongst other things:

- A recognition that plan visions are a tool to give communities a much stronger voice in the plan-making process. The role of visions has generally been strengthened in plan-making, with policies and allocations linking directly to delivering the outcomes set out in the vision;
- A change in Government, which has shifted the emphasis of planning for development in England;
- A corresponding increase in the housing numbers expected to be delivered by the Council;
- The greater emphasis on adapting to, and mitigating, the effects of climate change; and
- Societal changes that have occurred more broadly as a result of COVID-19, Brexit and other external changes that influence our ways of life.

3.0 Reasons

Background to the Visioning Work

3.1 East Herts district comprises around one third of the county of Hertfordshire. It is predominantly a rural district, with attractive towns and villages set in a rolling landscape and a dispersed settlement pattern that includes the five market towns of Bishop's Stortford, Buntingford, Hertford, Sawbridgeworth and Ware. Residents enjoy a high quality of life, with a good level of health and life expectancy. Educational attainment is also high with students performing better in East Herts than the wider region.

3.2 However, there are important issues and challenges facing the district. These are mainly related to managing high levels of growth and the effects of population increase, and include:

- Ensuring that our high-quality environment is recognised and protected whilst still allowing the necessary development to take place;
- Protecting the rich biodiversity in the district and responding to the challenge of climate change;
- Supporting a vibrant local economy and getting the balance right between the delivery of new housing on previously developed sites and ensuring there is enough employment land to meet current and future needs;
- Achieving housing development that responds to the specific accommodation and housing needs of different groups (including that of an ageing population), whilst recognising environmental and other constraints;
- Providing the infrastructure and services needed alongside growth to support new development, including transport infrastructure, education and health provision, utilities such as water, wastewater and energy and improved broadband provision;
- Ensuring that development is directed to sustainable locations, to reduce the need to travel and, where journeys need to be made, the distance of those trips;
- Reducing reliance on the car and promoting healthier lifestyles;
- Supporting the main town centres, which are all different, all serve a particular purpose, and all have particular needs;
- Resisting the loss of important rural facilities and to support the delivery of new ones;
- Understanding and taking account of the significance and impact of cross boundary issues.

3.3. In order to develop a Strategic Vision with an overarching set of aims and objectives to guide and directly inform plan-making, Officers issued a tender in early 2024 to appoint consultants to oversee, facilitate and manage this process. The brief set out a desire to develop a Vision that challenged current thinking, considered future societal, lifestyle and technical changes, and considered the unique features of East Herts including location,

future sustainable growth and technological advancements for its residents, businesses, and the wider community. The emerging Vision for East Herts needed to be:

- succinct and focused to best achieve its purpose;
- locally distinct to anchor the plan;
- provide strategic direction for the underpinning policies, and
- set out measurable outcomes for the plan period.

Work to date on the Vision

3.4 Prior and Partners (P+P) responded to the brief and were appointed to develop the Vision. P+P are a planning and economic consultancy with an expertise in successfully delivering plans and masterplans across a multitude of scales, from region, to neighbourhood, and to street. P+P undertook high level research and mapping of existing data, intelligence, insight, and future predictions information alongside the Council's own evidence base and local strategies to understand East Herts today and to look ahead to the future (patterns, trends, innovations) and consider how national and local trends might influence change. This thinking was brought together through engagement, via workshops, with Councillors, the Council's Leadership Team, and other officers at East Herts principally involved with the built environment and our communities.

3.5 The primary outcome from this process was the production of a Strategic Vision for East Herts (**Appendix A**).

3.6 Alongside the Vision, P+P delivered a branding strategy to help bring distinctiveness and continuity to the development of the District Plan through its various stages. The branding has been used in the Vision to help to express its ideas and priorities.

The Vision Document

3.7 The Strategic Vision sets out the process undertaken in delivering the work, the engagement undertaken and the timeline in which this was achieved. In its final format, it utilizes the branding

developed as part of the process, defining six key themes – people, place, economy, environment, infrastructure and movement – through specific colours and icons. The Vision is set out in two halves, the first describing the district as it is today, with key facts, illustrations and statistics culminating in a statement addressing strengths and challenges within each theme, and the second defining our aspirations under each theme and drawing inspiration from existing ideas and initiatives within our own district and beyond.

- 3.8 The Vision concludes with a timeline for the preparation of the District Plan (which reflects the agreed Local Development Scheme) and is intended to serve as the ‘golden thread’ for the Plan, informing policies and decision-making that will shape East Herts in the years to come. It is expected that the Strategic Vision will have a strong influence on the form, nature and content of the new adopted District Plan.

Next Steps

- 3.9 The Strategic Vision is presented in **Appendix A** in a form that reflects the discussions had with Councillors, the Council’s Leadership Team and key planning and built environment officers. The document was prepared with wider engagement planned with our communities, and this is the next step.
- 3.10 Preparation for the formal plan-making stages of the District Plan is continuing, with planning policy officers currently assessing and / or updating existing evidence and information with a view to outlining a new plan strategy to meet the district’s needs. This includes an assessment of the 283 sites submitted during the Call for Sites exercise, and is mindful of policy changes taking place both nationally in respect of the Government’s ambitions for growth, and regionally given the expectation of changes in local government at a regional / sub-regional level.
- 3.11 In order to aid the development a spatial strategy for the District Plan, as well as introduce the key aims of a new Plan, it is the intention to introduce our communities to the Spatial Vision and

have a conversation about its content. This will be the first major piece of engagement in the process, and it is an opportunity to present both a clear Vision and to discuss the process of plan-making, the steps that will be taken and the ways in which people can become involved.

- 3.12 Engagement on the Vision will take place during the late Spring and Summer of 2025. The nature of the engagement will be akin to other statutory planning consultations, utilising the District Plan contacts database and writing to statutory consultees and other organisations, including Town and Parish Councils, to seek their involvement in the process. The Vision will be made available on the Council's website and in key community buildings across the main town centres, and promotional material will be made available to parishes. In addition to this, officers are proposing a series of in-person events during the consultation period to allow individuals and organisations to discuss the Vision and the forthcoming plan-making process.
- 3.13 It will be important to shape the engagement to ensure that comments and conversations can be recorded and respond to the key issues, themes and priorities set out by the Vision. It is expected that the document will be available alongside key questions that seek to determine the levels of support or otherwise for the Vision, so that it can be refined later in the year and support the start of formal plan-making in early 2026.

4.0 Options

- 4.1 The Council could choose not to engage on the Strategic Vision with our communities and stakeholders

5.0 Risks

- 5.1 If engagement is not undertaken on the Strategic Vision then the opportunity to take account of the views of our communities and stakeholders from the outset of the District Plan update will be lost.

5.2 Visions are an important means of setting the wider context and detailing the local planning authority's key aims and priorities, and to lay the foundations for a plan in a way that can be clearly understood by communities and other stakeholders before they engage with the full detail.

6.0 Implications/Consultations

6.1 Engagement on the Vision will be undertaken in Spring/ Summer 2025 with key stakeholders and the wider community, including the younger demographic, minority and hard to reach groups. As well as traditional consultation and engagement methods, opportunities for greater use of digital technologies will be explored.

Community Safety

There are no community safety implications arising from this report.

Data Protection

There are no data protection implications arising from this report.

Equalities

There are no direct equality, diversity, or inclusion implications in this report. An Equalities Impact Assessment (EqIA) will be carried out of the updated District Plan in accordance with The Equality Act 2010.

Environmental Sustainability

The purpose of the planning system is to contribute to the achievement of sustainable development, including the provision of homes, commercial development and infrastructure in a sustainable manner.

Financial

The District Plan is being updated from existing budgets, including reserves that have been safeguarded for this purpose.

Health and Safety

There are no health and safety implications arising from this report.

Human Resources

There are no human resources implications arising from this report.

Human Rights

There are no human rights implications arising from this report.

Legal

There are no legal implications arising from this report.

Specific Wards

All

7.0 Background papers, appendices, and other relevant material

7.1 Appendix A – East Herts Strategic Vision

Contact Member

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