

East Herts Council Report

District Planning Executive Panel

Date of Meeting: Tuesday 19 May 2026

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

Report title: East Herts Open Space Assessment

Ward(s) affected: All Wards

Summary

- Members have agreed to prepare a new Local Plan, including an update of the evidence documents needed to support a new Plan. The Open Space Assessment replaces the previous assessment, published in 2017, and provides an updated analysis of public open space in East Herts, to inform future planning policy and planning application decisions in relation to the protection, enhancement and provision of open space. This report summarises the assessment and seeks agreement to use the document as part of the new Local Plan evidence base, and to inform Development Management decisions.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DISTRICT PLANNING EXECUTIVE PANEL: that the Executive be advised that:

A. The Open Space Assessment, attached as Appendix A, be agreed as part of the evidence base to inform the new East Herts Local Plan and as a material consideration for Development Management purposes in the determination of planning applications.

1.0 Proposal(s)

1.1 The purpose of this report is to agree that the Open Space Assessment can be used as part of the evidence base for the new Local Plan and as a material consideration in the determination of planning applications.

1.2 The role of the assessment is to provide a robust evidence base to inform future planning policy and planning application decisions in relation to the protection, enhancement and provision of open space in East Herts.

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 to ensure that plans remain relevant. In October 2023, the Council agreed that East Herts District Plan 2018 needs updating, and that work should commence on updating the technical studies and other preparatory work required to provide a robust evidence base to support this Review. The intention to formally start plan-making is the subject of a separate paper on this agenda.

2.2 A clear, relevant and proportionate evidence base is essential for efficient and sound plan-making to ensure that all future planning policy and decisions are based on up-to-date information. The National Planning Policy Framework sets out the requirement for the preparation and review of all policies to be, 'underpinned by relevant and up-to-date evidence' (paragraph 32).

2.3 The evidence base consists of supporting documents that will help inform the future policies and site allocations in the new Local Plan. It will cover a range of social, economic, and environmental topics and help identify local needs, constraints and opportunities.

2.4 The evidence base will be developed throughout the preparation of the new Local Plan and the planning policy team will seek agreement from Executive via the District Planning Executive Panel to include relevant studies as part of the evidence base. Because of the nature of the Open Space Assessment and its potential to influence policy formulation, it is considered appropriate to include it within the Council's evidence base.

2.5 Open space provision supports health and wellbeing, cultural heritage, landscape quality, education, climate change mitigation, biodiversity and physical activity. It is therefore vital for local authorities to know what provisions currently exist and what the priorities and requirements are for the future. When considered

with other evidence studies, such as the Local Nature Recovery Strategy, the Playing Pitch and Outdoor Sports Strategy and the Hertfordshire Green Infrastructure Strategy, this assessment will help develop a holistic understanding of green infrastructure in East Herts, to inform policies and allocations in the new Local Plan. The last open space assessment, which informed the policy and allocations in the current District Plan, was published in 2017. It recommended standards for open space that were taken forward by the Open Space, Sport and Recreation Supplementary Planning Document (2020) and have been implemented via planning decisions in the district.

2.6 The National Planning Policy Framework requires planning policies to be based on robust and up-to-date assessments of the needs for open space and recreation in order to understand opportunities for enhancement and new provision. Therefore, it is important that the new Local Plan is informed by a current understanding of the quality and supply of open space across East Herts, so this open space assessment updates the previous study.

2.7 The Council commissioned consultant Knight, Kavanagh and Page (KKP) to undertake the assessment, and since Autumn 2024 they have audited over 570 public open space sites. This process has been informed by engagement and consultation with council officers in planning, open space and property teams, parish and town councils and key stakeholders including the Herts and Middlesex Wildlife Trust, Countryside Management Service, the Woodland Trust and local park groups.

2.8 This assessment focuses on publicly accessible open space. However, it is important to recognise that as a rural district, East Herts also has a significant network of public rights of way providing access to the wider countryside, which has additional recreational and social value for the local community.

3.0 Reason(s)

3.1 To help inform decisions in the Local Plan about which open spaces should be protected from development and where new provision or enhancements are required, it is important the Council has update-to-date evidence about the quantity, accessibility and quality of open space across East Herts. Since

the previous open space assessment was undertaken nearly 10 years ago there have been some changes to open space provision. Most notably, there has been significant housing growth in parts of the district where new developments have delivered open spaces and enhanced existing sites, via S106 contributions. A number of neighbourhood plans have also been adopted and these often identify publicly accessible open spaces for protection.

3.2 In accordance with government guidance and best practice, the open space assessment includes the following open space typologies:

- Parks and gardens
- Natural and semi-natural greenspaces
- Amenity greenspace
- Provision for children and young people
- Allotments
- Cemeteries and churchyards

3.3 Sites have been categorised based on their primary function for the purposes of the assessment, but in practice it is important to recognise that open spaces are often multi-functional, particularly in terms of amenity greenspace, natural green space, and parks and gardens. Any site recognised as sports provision but with a clear multifunctional role, where it is also available for wider community use as open space, is included in this assessment. Provision solely for sporting provision is the focus of the Playing Pitch and Outdoor Sport Strategy (2025).

3.4 The Open Space Assessment is attached to this report at **Appendix A** and is structured around assessment of each typology:

- Part 1- Introduction
- Part 2- Methodology
- Part 3- Summary of audit
- Part 4- Parks and gardens
- Part 5- Natural/ semi-natural greenspace
- Part 6- Amenity greenspace
- Part 7- Provision for children and young people
- Part 8- Allotments

- Part 9- Cemeteries and churchyards
- Part 10- Provision Standards

- 3.5 For each type of open space, provision levels/ standards focusing on quality, quantity and accessibility are used to identify specific qualitative and quantitative deficits and surpluses of open space in a local area. To allow for more localised analysis reflecting the role and population distribution of settlements, the district has been sub-divided by 16 analysis areas. Ward boundaries have been used to define the largest settlements (towns and Group 1 villages) whilst the rest of East Herts is grouped into three rural areas.
- 3.6 Quantity analysis is based on open space provision in hectares per 1000 population. Each section sets out the current provision of each typology by sub-area. Part 10 of the report compares this provision against current and recommended provision standards to identify areas with potential shortfalls in particular types of open space. Tables 10.3.3a and 10.3.3b of the assessment demonstrate that all areas have shortfalls in some form of open space.
- 3.7 To understand the distribution of open space, best practice accessibility catchments are used in each section to highlight any potential deficiencies in access to provision. The results are shown on maps in each section of the report. Generally, the population has good access to a range of open spaces across East Herts, but there are gaps in provision. Where appropriate, the assessment identifies where gaps may be served by other forms of open space and this information can usefully inform land-use and site allocation decisions in the emerging Local Plan.
- 3.8 Qualitative analysis in the assessment is based on quality and value assessments. Approximately 229 sites were visited in late 2024 / early 2025 and assessed. The large number of sites overall meant it was not feasible to assess all sites, so thresholds were applied to some open space types, as explained in Part 2 of the report (methodology). Assessment criteria and scores are individual to each open space typology and informed by national benchmark standards and the consultant KKP's professional judgement. Separate quality and value scores were given to help explore how valuable the open space is to the local area. For example, a poor quality play area may be of high value to the

local community if it is the only one in the area. Feedback from the town and parish councils also helps inform understanding of quality issues. Appendix 1 of the Open Space Assessment shows the quality concerns raised during consultation and the site assessment scores are set out in Appendix 2.

Assessment recommendations

- 3.9 Building on the assessment work, Part 10 compares current open space provision against East Herts existing standards and national benchmarks in order to derive the suggested standards for East Herts. In summary, the Assessment recommends that existing provision standards are retained to inform future planning policy and decision-making. For parks and amenity green spaces (combined as part of existing standards in acknowledgement of their multifunctionality) and allotments the existing standards are in line with current provision and consistent or higher than national benchmarks. The existing standard for the provision for children and young people is consistent with the national Field In Trust standards and for natural and semi-natural greenspace the existing standard is greater than the national benchmark. Table 1 shows the recommended standards for open spaces.

Table 1: Recommended open space provision standards

Typology	Recommended quantity standard (ha per 1000 population)	Recommended accessibility catchment
Parks and Gardens	1.40	710m
Natural and semi-natural greenspace	3.20	720m
Amenity greenspace	Included as part of parks standards figure	480m
Provision for Children and Young People	0.25	LAP- 100m LEAP- 400m NEAP- 1000m Casual (e.g. MUGA, skate park)- 700m
Allotment	0.30	No standard set- travel behaviour varies depending on

		individual circumstances and site availability. Waiting list data provides a more reliable indicator of demand.
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3.10 The Open Space Assessment concludes with the following key principles and recommendations that will help inform the policy and strategy of the new Local Plan and the consideration of open space in planning applications:

- The recommended standards can be used to determine open space requirements in the plan-making and decision-making process. When considering new housing development, quantity levels should be explored to indicate the potential lack of provision in an area. However, this should be done in conjunction with the accessibility and quality of provision.
- Sites helping, or with potential to help, serve areas identified as having gaps in catchment mapping should be prioritised as opportunities for enhancement. Explore possibilities to adapt these sites or sites in areas with sufficient provision of one type of open space, to provide a stronger secondary role to help address the gap/ shortfall of a particular type of open space.
- Where possible, lower quality sites in accessibility catchment gaps should be prioritised for enhancement.
- Use recommended quantity standards to ensure delivery of open space requirements in future housing growth.
- As a number of new housing developments are underway or committed, the Council will need to update the open space audit to reflect changes in provision.
- Ensure the Council's approach to developers contributions is reviewed to reflect, as best possible, real-time costs.

3.11 These recommendations can usefully inform policy and strategy decisions in the emerging Local Plan. Therefore, it is officers' view that the Open Space Assessment provides robust evidence on the quantity, quality and accessibility of public open space across East Herts, providing a framework for the new Local Plan to protect existing open spaces, direct new provision to areas of deficiency and identify priorities for enhancement. When considered alongside other studies, such as Hertfordshire Green Infrastructure Strategy, the Local Nature Recovery Strategy, Playing Pitch and Outdoor Sport Strategy and the Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan (LCWIP), it will also contribute towards understanding how green infrastructure in East Herts functions as an interconnected, multifunctional network and how it can be protected and enhanced in the new Local Plan. As such, it is recommended the Assessment is agreed as part of the new Local Plan evidence base.

4.0 Options

4.1 The endorsement of the Open Space Assessment ensures there is an up-to-date evidence base for the protection, enhancement and provision of open space, which has multifunctional benefits for quality of life, health and wellbeing, climate change mitigation, biodiversity and flood mitigation.

5.0 Risks

5.1 If the Open Space Assessment is not agreed as part of the evidence base, it may be considered as having reduced weight in informing the new Local Plan and planning application decisions. It would mean the Council would not have an up to date understanding of open space provision in East Herts. This is contrary to Government policy to have an up-to-date evidence base and could undermine the Council's position in terms of successfully bringing forward the new Local Plan.

6.0 Implications/Consultations

6.1 Targeted consultation as part of the assessment was undertaken with town and parish councils and key stakeholders. The Assessment will be made available on the website, in the Local Plan evidence base section, and be subject to a number of statutory public consultations as part of the production of the new

Local Plan.

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 evidence document. An Equalities Impact Assessment (EqIA) will be carried out of the new Local 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. Open spaces are part of the district's green infrastructure, which alongside social benefits to health and well-being, has many environmental benefits, such as climate change mitigation, habitat creation and sustainable drainage.

Financial

There are no financial implications arising from this report

Health and Safety

There are no health and safety implications arising from this report

Human Resources

There are no human resource 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: Open Space Assessment

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