

East Herts Council Report

District Planning Executive Panel

Date of meeting: Tuesday 23 June 2026

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

Report title: Local Plan: Retail and Town Centres Study

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 the new Plan. The Retail and Town Centre Study provides an assessment of each of the five town centres and retail more generally in the district. It sets out future retail trends in the district and provides recommendations in relation to potential future retail and town centre policies for the emerging Local Plan. This report summarises the key outcomes of the Study and seeks agreement to use the document as part of the new Local Plan evidence base, and to inform Development Management decisions.

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

A) The Retail and Town Centres Study and appendices (attached at Appendices A and B) 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 advise Members of the completion of the Retail and Town Centre Study, and to agree it 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.

2.0 Background

- 2.1 In October 2023, the Council agreed that the 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. The intention to formally start plan-making was agreed by the Executive in June 2026.
- 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 (NPPF, 2024) 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 Plan Executive Panel to include relevant studies as part of the evidence base. Due to the nature of the Retail and Town Centre Study and its potential to influence policy formation, it is considered appropriate to include it within the Council's evidence base.
- 2.5 A previous Retail and Town Centres Study was published in 2013 to inform the policies and development strategy in the adopted District Plan. It provided information on retail and commercial leisure needs within the district, as well as retail and town centre specific policy recommendations.
- 2.6 The current Retail and Town Centre Study updates the 2013 work. The Council commissioned The Retail Group, supported by CPW Planning, to produce the study. This was completed using a range of secondary data, as well as household surveys with over 800 responses, business surveys and stakeholder engagement.

3.0 Reason(s)

- 3.1 The vitality and viability of town centres is a key consideration in the NPPF. Town centres provide opportunities for shopping, leisure, employment, key services and can act as transport hubs. Healthy and vibrant towns, as well as sufficient retail opportunities help to provide local convenience and opportunities for communities which in turn can help to promote sustainable movements.
- 3.2 Since the 2013 Retail and Town Centre Study there have been a number of changes occurring nationally which has had an impact on retail and town centres. Most notably this includes Brexit and the impact to businesses, the Covid pandemic impacting consumer habits and behaviours, and changes to the Use Classes Order (UCO) which allowed for a more flexible approach to 'controlling' retail, commercial, business and service uses than previously.
- 3.3 The purpose of this Study is to provide an up-to-date picture of the health and functions of each of the five town centres in the district. Additionally, retail provision more widely across the district has been explored within the Study in assessing the future needs for retail and commercial leisure needs. This work will help to inform the contents of the emerging East Herts Local Plan in relation to town centres and retail, as well as a tool for the Council and stakeholders to understand how improvements to town centres can be made.
- 3.4 The Retail and Town Centre Study, along with appendices is attached to this report at **Appendices A and B**.
- 3.5 The Study comprises the following sections:
- Executive summary – provides a summary of the key findings within the Study.
 - Introduction – sets out the background and the structure of the Study.
 - Planning policy context – provides detail on the national policy requirements for retail and town centres and existing local policy. Additionally, it notes potential future changes to national planning policy within the sector.

- Market context and trends – sets out the context and challenges faced nationally to retail, town centres and commercial leisure.
- Town centre hierarchy and health check / place reviews – provides the current context and health for each of the town centres in East Herts based on a number of health indicators, such as accessibility, environment, diversity of uses, customer experience etc. The baseline data is based on secondary and primary research and leads to a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) analysis for each town.
- Catchment area and market share analysis – provides the study area used for the household surveys and an appropriate catchment area for each town. Additionally, it models the market share of each area and allows comparison with nearby towns and retail outlets.
- Retail capacity: approach and baseline evidence – sets out how retail capacity is forecast with local baseline evidence such as the household survey. This is split into convenience (foodstores, everyday items) and comparison (non foodstore goods such as clothing, furniture, cosmetics etc) goods.
- Retail capacity forecasts – summarises the capacity forecasts for convenience and comparison retail.
- Commercial leisure needs assessment – identifies the current and future needs of commercial leisure such as cinemas, restaurants and gyms.
- Retail strategy and policy recommendations – provides recommendations for a retail strategy and potential updates to the retail policies within the adopted District Plan. This includes town centre boundaries, primary shopping areas, the retail hierarchy, impact thresholds and the sequential test.

3.6 In addition to the Retail and Town Centre Study, Town Centre Strategies are being prepared for each of the five town centres within the district. These will draw upon the work in the Retail and Town Centre Study and provide a unique strategy for each place, seeking to enhance its vitality and viability. Once completed this work will go to the Council's Executive, through the District Plan Executive Panel to be formally agreed.

Study conclusions and recommendations

Retail strategy and policy recommendations

- 3.7 The assessment split the forecast retail needs up into each of the five town centres, 'other centres in East Herts' which is based on the smaller designated retail centres and parades in East Herts, Madford Retail Park and other non-central stores (such as supermarkets). In relation to convenience and comparison goods floorspace, the research found that there is no quantitative need to plan for additional floorspace or allocate sites in the Local Plan. Where proposals come forward it is recommended that the sequential test should be applied for both convenience and comparison retail where appropriate.
- 3.8 Madford Retail Park is the only retail park in the district and was also submitted through the call for sites process. The Study therefore assessed it separately to determine its function and market share. It found that it secures a relatively high market share of catchment area expenditure on hardware, DIY and garden products at 18%. The Study highlights that if the centre is redeveloped for another use then the most likely scenario is that a high proportion of its current market share will be redistributed to retail parks/warehouses outside of East Herts (e.g. Harlow and Stevenage) as no suitable alternative site in the district has been identified at this stage.
- 3.9 In terms of commercial leisure, Hertford and Bishop's Stortford are the principal destinations for commercial leisure facilities and food and beverage offer, although Ware does have a range of restaurants and cafes. In the most part there is a reliance on neighbouring authorities for leisure, in particular for cinemas. The Study found that there is scope for improvement in the district's commercial leisure offer although the potential for growth is limited by market factors, supply-side constraints and accessible competing destinations. It is therefore recommended that the emerging Local Plan does not allocate land specifically for commercial leisure, but has a more flexible approach which supports proposals in appropriate locations.
- 3.10 In relation to the retail hierarchy it has been recommended that Bishop's Park in Bishop's Stortford is reclassified as a 'district centre' rather than a 'neighbourhood centre' as it is in the adopted District Plan. A 'district centre' is described as '*principally serving the convenience-based retail and service needs of a hinterland*

which includes a few surrounding suburbs and villages'. Bishop's Park is seen to provide a destination to the local area due to the range of offer of existing retail that it provides and therefore this change is proposed to policy RTC5 in the District Plan. Furthermore, the Study recommends changing the terminology to accord with the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) 2024 and use the term 'local centre' rather than 'neighbourhood centres' or 'local parades' where '*centres with a limited range of shops and services catering for the basic needs of their walk-in catchments and passers-by*'. Any centres or parades, previously defined in table 16.1 in the District Plan, meeting those needs are recommended to be classified as a 'local centre'. Additionally, as per the NPPF small parades of shops purely for neighbourhood significance should be excluded from the hierarchy.

- 3.11 Following a review of the towns some minor changes have been recommended to all of the town centre boundaries (see Appendix B), excluding Bishop's Stortford. The changes proposed are a consequence of the uses present on the ground. For example, small pockets of residential on the edge of the existing town centre boundary have been excluded, and additional land has been included where town centre uses can be found outside of the town centre. This is particularly apparent in Sawbridgeworth, where the Town Council offices and additional town centre uses have been included. Minor recommended changes have also been suggested to the Primary Shopping Areas, these are a consequence of the town centre boundary changes or minor changes based on existing uses in the town centres.
- 3.12 A recommendation has also been made to the thresholds of the impact test which are set out in policy RTC1 of the District Plan. The Study recommends that a new threshold for the impact test is applied to any new floorspace of 350sqm or more, this would apply to applications for town centre uses (retail and commercial leisure) that are out of town centre locations. This approach is based on the assumption that shops and leisure facilities below this threshold would probably not have a significant adverse impact. Whereas shops and leisure facilities exceeding this level of floorspace are unlikely to be a local facility and have the potential to draw trade outside of the immediate catchment and away from town centre locations.

Town centre health and strategies

- 3.13 Bishop's Stortford was found to be in good overall health and is well liked by consumers, existing businesses and stakeholders as it provides a number of reasons for consumers to visit the centre. Opportunities for the town include increasing the appeal and offer of the markets, promoting the existing offer, improvements to cycle parking and facilities and increased food and beverage offer.
- 3.14 Hertford presented a mixed picture of health and vitality, with both positive indicators present, as well as negative ones. The town has a good representation as a place to visit with a mix of independent shops and offer, however a number of businesses report challenging trading prospects of the town. The Study proposes a number of opportunities for Hertford including partners working together to create a program of events, more secure cycle parking, growing the existing markets and expanding choice of retail, food and beverage offer.
- 3.15 Ware is the only town within the district that has evidence of issues with health and vitality. There are a number of long-term vacant units within the town, and the town had the lowest satisfaction levels from households undertaking the survey. Opportunities for Ware town centre include targeting the reoccupation of vacant units, key stakeholders working together to create events and more activity within the town, improving the market offer and public realm improvements.
- 3.16 Sawbridgeworth has high satisfaction levels from the local area and is described as being in good health with businesses performing well and optimistic for the future. The Study highlights opportunities in Sawbridgeworth town centre such as improvements to the public realm, management to improve the parking provision and increasing the reasons for frequent trips including more food and convenience offer.
- 3.17 Buntingford is a small centre which appears to be in good general health. It benefits from frequent visits from a local resident base for a variety of reasons. Businesses report that trade is challenging, however want to remain trading in Buntingford. Opportunities identified for Buntingford town centre include improvements to the convenience retail offer, as well as markets,

improvements to the public realm and creating more events in the centre to attract visitors.

- 3.18 The recommendations within the Study can help to inform future policy and strategy decisions in relation to retail and town centres in the emerging Local Plan. When considered alongside other studies and emerging studies, such as the Town Centre Strategies, within the evidence base, it will effectively support decisions about the future town centre strategy for the district. Therefore, it is recommended the Study is agreed as part of the new Local Plan evidence base and as a material consideration in the determination of planning applications.

4.0 Options

- 4.1 The Council could choose not to agree to endorse the Retail and Town Centre Study as part of the new Local Plan evidence base. This would mean that the Local Plan would not be able to rely on this evidence to inform emerging policy and strategy, and it could compromise the progression of the plan. It would also likely cause difficulties during the plan-making process, particularly when the Council defends its strategy at the Examination stage.

5.0 Risks

- 5.1 If the Retail and Town Centre Study 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 a current understanding of the retail and town centre needs within the district. 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 As part of their research the consultants undertook consultations with key stakeholders and businesses for each of the towns and over 800 households. The study 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 report. 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. Town centres and retail opportunities can impact environmental sustainability by providing key services and facilities close to communities which can help reduce the need to travel longer distances.

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 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:** Retail and Town Centre Study 2026

7.2 **Appendix B:** Retail and Town Centre Study Appendices

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