



**North
Herts**
Council

Celebrating **50 years**

Corporate Peer Challenge Position Statement

October 2024

www.north-herts.gov.uk

Contents

Introduction	3
About North Herts	4
Advancements since our last review	17
Our Council Plan	20
Current situation	24
Sharing of successful practice - case studies	42



Introduction

Welcome to North Herts

We look forward to hosting the peer team in North Hertfordshire in this, our 50th anniversary year. Our last Corporate Peer Challenge was in January 2020. Due to the pandemic, the 2020 peer challenge did not receive a formal follow-up from the original peer team, but the Council produced a detailed action plan and implemented the vast majority of the recommendations. A follow-up focused Peer Review in 2022 was agreed which looked at our Overview and Scrutiny Committee and Finance, Audit and Risk Committee. Again, the majority of the recommendations were implemented, save for reviewing the terms of reference of the Finance, Audit and Risk Committee which is being considered as part of a wider review of the constitution.

Much has changed since the 2020 Corporate Peer Challenge. We've had the COVID pandemic and a move to all-out elections (from May 2024) following a Local Government Boundary Commission for England review of our ward arrangements. With a new Labour and Co-operative Party-led minority administration and a new Council Leader from May 2024 (succeeding the Labour and

Co-operative/Liberal Democrat joint administration of 2019-2024) we believe now is the perfect time for a Corporate Peer Challenge in the early days of this four-year administration. In North Herts we believe we do a lot well, despite the challenges we face, but recognise that our capacity to meet political ambitions is hampered by our financial realities.

The new political administration has worked with officers to develop a new 2024-2028 Council Plan, with a new vision and new priorities, that reflect the manifesto that the Labour and Co-operative group produced for the 2024 local elections. We have also worked together to produce a revised Medium Term Financial Strategy. These were adopted by Full Council on 19 September 2024 and create the bedrock for the administration moving forward.

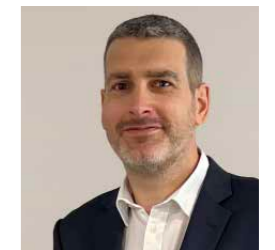
We are keen to work with the peer team to look at all five core components of the corporate peer challenge, but within that have asked for particular emphasis to be placed on finance and our digital transformation project. We believe that we are a prudently run Council, but after 14 years of budget cuts equating to £5.5 million in real terms, it is getting harder and harder to find politically

acceptable ways to balance the budget. Our digital transformation programme is key to modernising the Council, making us more efficient and more responsive to the community and is therefore critical to our future.

This background document will introduce you to North Hertfordshire the place, our communities, and North Herts Council. We look forward to sharing our story with you and engaging honestly and constructively to enable the peer team to assist us with the next stage of our journey to becoming the best Council that we can be for our communities.

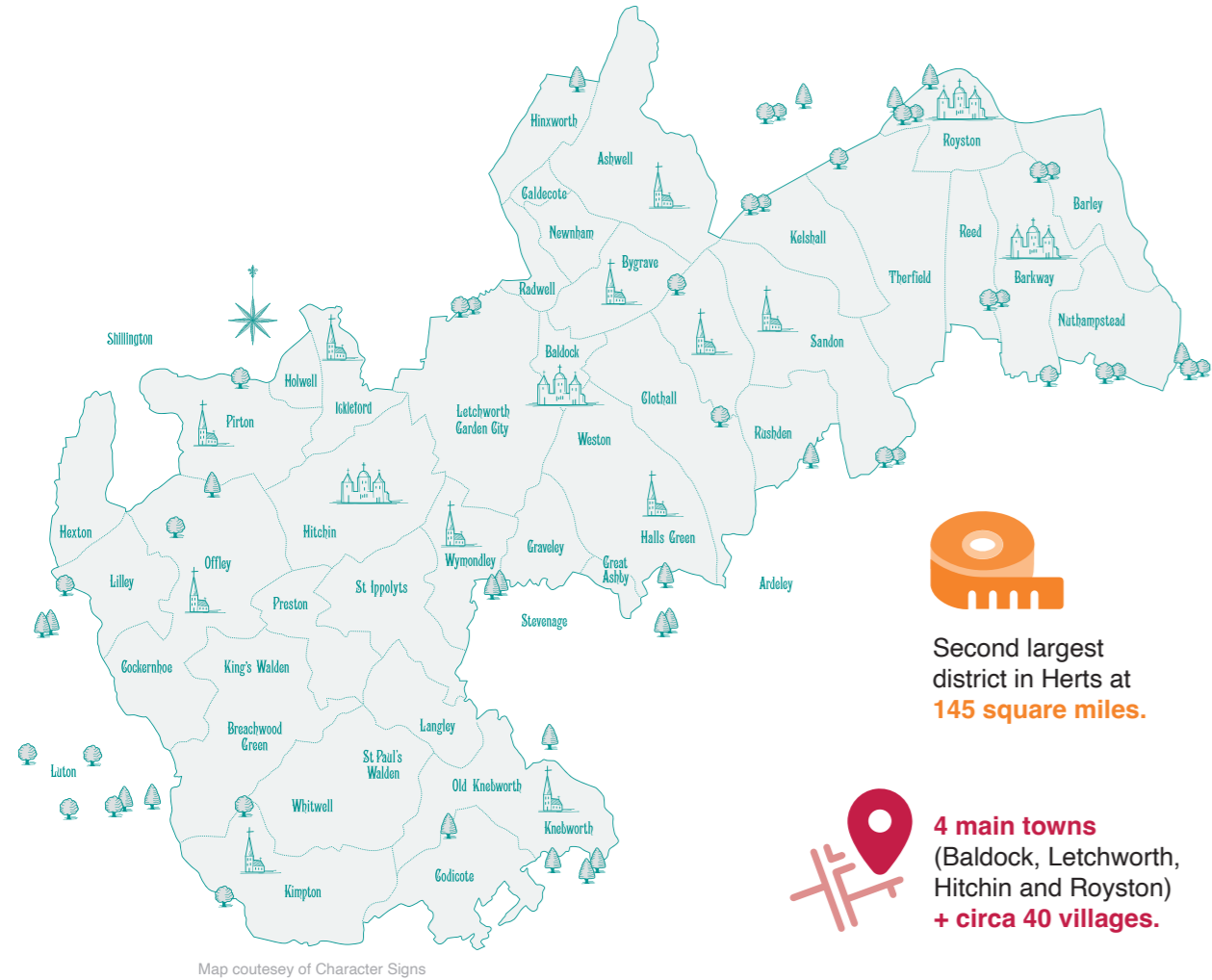


Daniel Allen,
Leader of the Council



Anthony Roche,
Managing Director

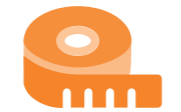
About North Herts



Map courtesy of Character Signs

Located less than 40 miles North of Central London, North Herts is a place where people come first and community matters. A mix of distinctly individual vibrant market towns, beautiful villages, and accessible, open countryside, that come together to make a sum greater than its parts.

The district:



Second largest district in Herts at **145 square miles.**



4 main towns (Baldoak, Letchworth, Hitchin and Royston) **+ circa 40 villages.**



59,000 dwellings



Working age population **82,133, 85.2%** economically active.



Approx. **66,000** jobs in North Herts. Source: ONS Jobs Density dataset



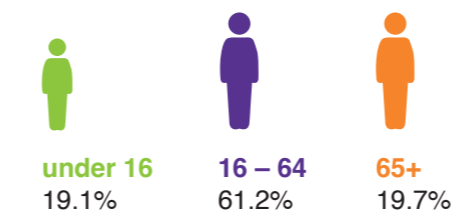
6,830 active businesses

Our communities:

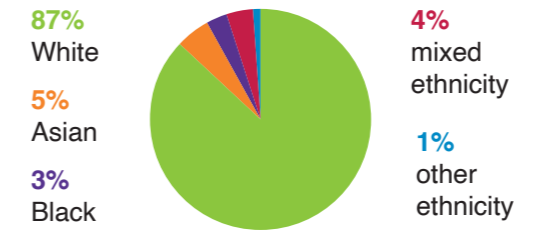
Who are they?

Total population 134,159 (2022 Census), projected growth 4.5%

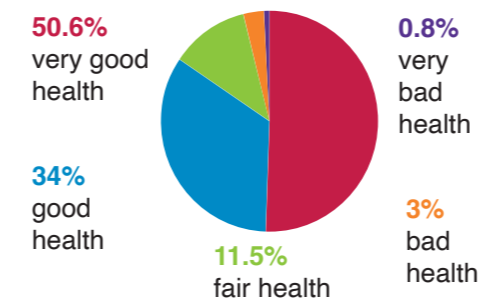
Age



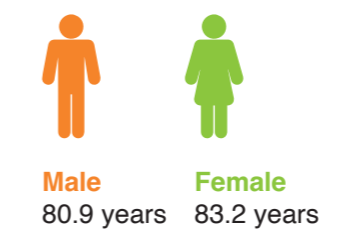
Ethnicity



Health (2011 census).



Life expectancy



Deprivation

North Herts ranked **269 out of 317** English Local Authorities (1 = most deprived) however there are pockets of deprivation across the district



Our communities:

What are their perceptions of the Council?

Following our last **District Wide phone survey** in 2022 (previously carried out every two years) the decision was taken to move to a digital Community Survey in 2023 which would enable us to hear 'of the moment' snapshot views from our residents on a more frequent basis.

Moving from a phone survey mode to a digital survey is a completely fresh start for us in terms of gathering feedback from our residents and the results from the two digital surveys we have run so far have been noticeably lower than previous phone-based surveys and the recent LGA Resident Satisfaction telephone surveys but are improving. The headlines from Round Two of our Community Survey are below and the full report can be [found here](#), alongside our 5-point action plan for Councillors and Communications.

74% satisfied with North Herts as a place to live

(on a par with LGA Oct 23 survey)

46% trust levels in North Herts Council

(5% higher than UK Gov ONS 22)

43% satisfied with the way we run things

(13% lower than LGA Oct 23 survey)

- Only 28% feel we offer value for money
- Only 30% are aware what their local Councillor does.
- 80% feel we should listen/consult more.



Our communities:

How we reach our communities

Our residents know the district best and we aim to provide them with as many opportunities to have their say on issues that are important to them and their community.

How we communicate to our residents:

- **Local media:** for example, The Comet and Crow newspapers.
- **Social media:** residents can find us on Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, LinkedIn and NextDoor.
- **Our website:** www.north-herts.gov.uk. This includes a dedicated page to live consultations: www.north-herts.gov.uk/consultations
- **Weekly email newsletters:** sent every Friday straight to residents inboxes.
- **Outlook magazine:** delivered twice a year to residents homes.
- **In-person:** at our monthly councillor surgeries and quarterly area forums.

How our residents can get in touch with us:

- **Our Customer Service Centre:** residents can contact us online or give us a call on 01462 474000
- **Facebook:** @northhertsdc
- **X (formerly Twitter):** @NorthHertsDC
- **Instagram:** @northhertsdc
- **LinkedIn:** North Herts Council
- **NextDoor:** <https://nextdoor.co.uk/agency-detail/england/hertfordshire/north-herts-council/>
- **Email newsletters:** <https://www.north-herts.gov.uk/subscribe-email-updates-and-text-alerts>
- **Outlook magazine:** www.north-herts.gov.uk/outlook
- **Councillor surgeries:** www.north-herts.gov.uk/councillor-community-surgeries
- **Community Forums:** www.north-herts.gov.uk/area-forums



Our communities:

HAVE YOUR SAY
on our Housing Strategy

Housing consultation highlights

Since our last edition, you have kindly given us your thoughts on two consultations regarding housing in the district: Proposed changes to how we prioritise people for affordable housing (also known as the Common Housing Allocation Scheme) and your thoughts on our new Housing Strategy for 2024-2029. Over 1,000 residents responded across both surveys. Thank you to everyone who took the time to give us your feedback, we really appreciate your views. This is what you told us:



Affordable housing (Common Housing Allocation Scheme)

Affordable housing is in high demand in the district and this scheme sets out who can apply and how people are prioritised i.e. households with the greatest needs, such as those whose housing is severely affecting their health, families living in overcrowded conditions and care leavers (someone who has spent time living in the care system, away from their family).

- An average of 74% of residents who responded to the consultation agreed with our proposals. Here is what you told us:
 - 73% of respondents agreed with proposed changes to the qualifying income thresholds, which now differ depending on the size of property you need.
 - 68% of respondents agreed with the new savings limit of £16,000 which means anyone with savings above this limit will no longer qualify for social housing.
 - 87% of respondents agreed that homeowners requiring general needs accommodation (as opposed to specific support needs) should no longer qualify for social housing.

Visit: www.north-herts.gov.uk/housing-for-further-details-on-affordable-housing-in-north-herts

Our 2024 - 2029 Housing strategy

This strategy sets out our high-level priorities for meeting your housing needs and includes actions around tackling homelessness, delivery of affordable housing and maintenance and enforcement of housing standards.

Those who responded were overwhelmingly supportive of the priorities proposed within our strategy and many of you also provided us with additional views and experiences which reinforced our approach, as well as also highlighting other areas of concern such as action on under-occupation of social housing. Here's a selection of the comments we received:

"Thank you for allowing ordinary people a say in this myriad conundrum, one that affects so many people of all ages."

"Please build more social housing - we have a massive shortage across the entire country. Affordable rents should be available to all."

"Staying in a neighbourhood you have lived in for a long time is preferred as community/ neighbours help one to feel safe."

Our new Housing Strategy is now available to view at: www.north-herts.gov.uk/housing-and-tenancy-strategies

Exciting Updates on Churchgate Shopping Area Regeneration

We are excited to update you on the recent progress we've made in our journey of regenerating and enhancing the Churchgate Shopping area of Hitchin.

We have recently collaborated with industry-leading consultants, Lambert Smith Hampton, a UK commercial and residential real estate consultancy, and agency, to work with us throughout the initial review and proposal stages before we launch further public consultation later this year. These stages consisted of an overview of planning policy and the town centre's current retail, residential, leisure and office market, and a review of ownership for the site and surrounding area.

Together, we have crafted a compelling investment prospectus, based on a detailed review of the site, town and wider District, that showcases Churchgate as a future development opportunity within Hitchin. Essentially, an investment prospectus is a top-level brochure type document designed to attract

organisations that might wish to work with us, by setting out the opportunities and potential for growth within a specific area. It includes information such as the towns current offer (in terms of retail, food & beverage etc), transport links, areas of potential improvement (for example, opening up the River HZ and revitalising the market) and a review of the town demographics.

The prospectus was included as part of the 'Invest Hertfordshire' list of future opportunities taking place across the district at the UK Real Estate Investment and Infrastructure Forum (UKREIF) in May. This provided us with a great platform to share this amazing development opportunity with other local authorities, public sector organisations, investors, developers, and funders. There was quite a lot of interest in working with us on the Churchgate regeneration, which we will take into account as we consider how to move the project forward. Importantly the next major milestone is further engagement

with the local community on ideas for the future of the area - make sure you have your say when the consultation launches.

Since acquiring the leasehold for the centre in August 2022, we have been diligently working through a maintenance schedule to ensure the shopping centre is safe for our tenants and shoppers.

We have welcomed several new tenants and we look forward to welcoming more new tenants over the coming months, further diversifying the range of businesses within the centre. Additionally, we have received interest from several pop-up enterprises that may occupy our current empty units soon.

Sign up to the Churchgate Hub to receive all the latest news on this exciting project: www.north-herts.gov.uk/churchgate

Joined our online community hubs yet?

We're keen to hear your views throughout the year, not just when we're running a survey or consultation and our online community hubs are the perfect place for us to share future ideas and updates with you for your feedback and thoughts. We have three community hubs:

- Our Budget Hub** - be part of our future budget conversations and help us understand your priorities.
- Our Churchgate Conversations Hub** - help us shape the vision of the Churchgate shopping area of Hitchin by joining the conversation.
- Our Climate Hive** - a hive of ideas and activities to help us reach our climate targets for North Herts.

You can find them all at: www.north-herts.gov.uk/consultations

A key focus of our Community Consultation strategy, is to not only provide residents with the opportunity to have their say, whether through the in-person or digital channels highlighted on the previous page, but to also share the results and our planned next steps as you can see from the adjacent spread from the latest edition of our residents' magazine.



Our communities:

Following a review of our Marketing and Communications strategy in 2023, we know we need to communicate our services more, particularly the difference between the services we provide and those provided by Hertfordshire County Council. With that in mind, we have developed the handy guide below for residents and also started a series of 'did you know' films about our services and the people behind them.

Here to help you

Knowing who to get in touch with when you need help is important, so here's a handy guide of the different services we and Hertfordshire County Council support you with.

- Waste collection & recycling
- Street cleaning
- Parks & greenspaces
- Environmental health
- Licensing
- Council Tax & Business rates
- Planning
- Parking
- North Herts Museum & Hitchin Town Hall
- Housing advice & homelessness support
- Community safety & environmental crime
- Community grants
- Benefits including housing & council tax reduction

www.north-herts.gov.uk 01462 474000

- Highways and transport (including public transport, street lights, traffic lights, potholes, gritting, road repairs & verge maintenance)
- Adult social services, including blue badge applications, adult social care, day services and support for unpaid carers
- Fire & rescue
- Libraries & archives
- Children's social care, including fostering and adoption
- Registration Services
- Schools and education, including SEND, schools admissions & free school meals and transport
- Recycling, Re-use Centres & waste management
- Trading standards
- Public Health

www.hertfordshire.gov.uk 0300 1234040

How Your council tax is spent

Did you know? Your council tax helps us to...

Collect waste from over 58,000 households
57% of which is recycled

About North Herts

the Council, our services and our staff

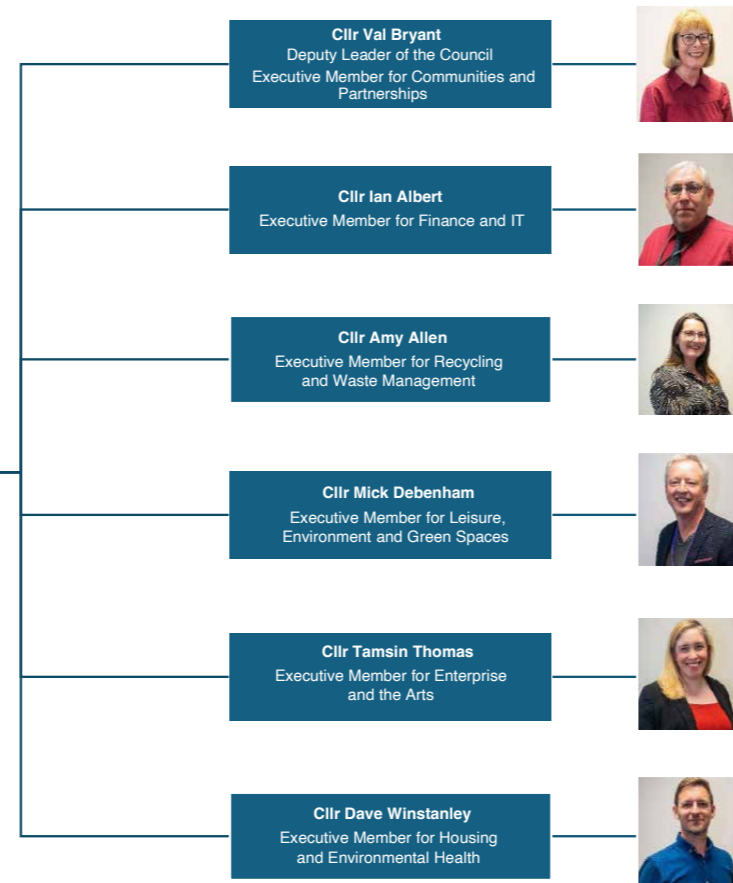
Our organisation

The Council operates on a Leader and Cabinet model and has done since the Local Government Act 2000. Prior to May 2019, the Council was Conservative controlled for 20 years. In 2019/20 the Labour and Cooperative and Liberal Democrat parties formed a joint administration, with eight members from those parties sitting on Cabinet. The Executive Members each also had a Deputy (from the other party in the administration), who whilst not legally part of the Cabinet, were able to attend their meetings, briefing sessions and be consulted on relevant decisions. Following a LGBC review of our ward arrangements (and an increase to 51 councillors) the Council moved to all-out elections from May 2024. The election returned 25 Labour and Co-operative councillors, 19 Liberal Democrat councillors and 7 Conservative councillors.

The Council administration is now a Labour and Co-operative minority administration, with a new Leader and Deputy Leader who were not previously part of the administration; two Cabinet members from the joint administration, three

deputies from the joint administration and one vacancy following the election of former councillor Chris Hinchliffe as MP for North East Hertfordshire. The Leader of the Council, Daniel Allen, is therefore temporarily also covering the Planning and Transport portfolio.

Cllr Daniel Allen
Leader of the Council
Executive Member for Planning and Transport (Interim)



The Managing Director, Anthony Roche, has been in post since July 2020 (following the deletion of the Chief Executive and Deputy Chief Executive roles), having previously been the Deputy Chief Executive from November 2017. Since June 2018 a senior management structure has been in place, with six Service Directors responsible for Resources, Regulatory, Place, Customers, Commercial and Legal and Community.

In September 2023, recognising capacity issues in the Leadership Team, a temporary Service Director Housing and Environmental Health was appointed on an 18-month secondment from Hertfordshire County Council. **The peer team's observations on the capacity of the Leadership Team would be welcomed.**

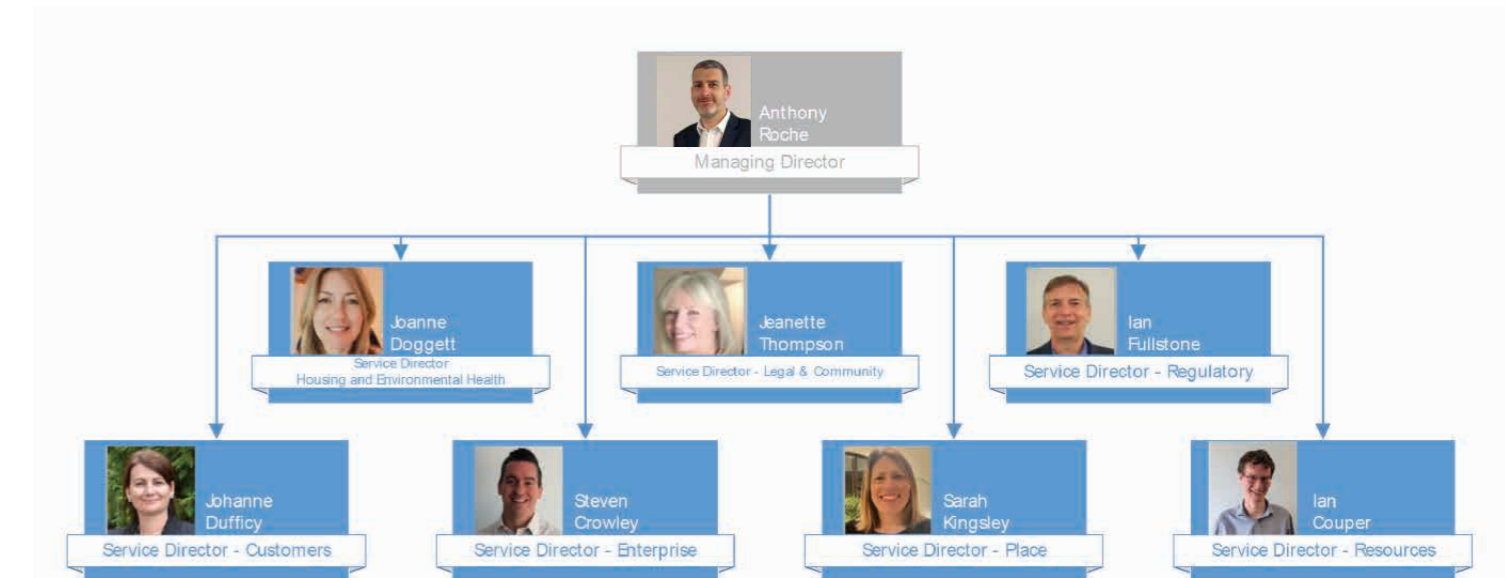
The current Leadership Team has a combined 120 years-worth of service at North Herts Council and a combined 180 years-worth of local government service. By contrast, since 2018 the Council has had three different political administrations, four different leaders and four different deputy leaders, with 19 new councillors from May 2024. To provide further context to that speed of political change, in the first 45 years of North Herts Council there were five Leaders of the Council, in the last 5 years there have been three different Leaders of the Council and three different Council Plans.

Our staffing structure contains the equivalent of 330 FTE (Full Time Equivalent) staff, including apprentices. As of October 2024, we employed 403 people, 124 part-time and 28 on casual contracts. The Council delivers its services through a mix of

out-sourcing (e.g. waste collection and recycling, grounds maintenance, leisure centres), in-house service delivery and shared services (e.g. Internal Audit, Anti-Fraud, Building Control and waste client team). The Council's general approach has been to look at the merits of each model for a particular service and determine which provides the best outcome for our community in terms of service delivery and value for money.











In addition, the Council pursues commercial activity to generate income (e.g. selling services to other authorities, £1.7 million investment property income, commercial property income, trade waste) with a desire from the administration to focus on generating new income and increasing existing income as the primary means to balance the budget.

North Herts Council Leadership structural chart



Our services

Among our 'statutory' duties are:

-  Waste collection from 58,000 households
-  Recycling over 57% of waste collected
-  Street cleansing over 400 miles of roads
-  Food inspection of around 700 premises per year
-  Collecting Council Tax and business rates from almost 59,700 homes and 4,700 businesses
-  Planning for the second largest district in Hertfordshire at 145 square miles
-  Issuing and enforcement of approximately 3,700 licenses to premises and licensed individuals, around 600 licenses to taxi and private hire vehicles and drivers and around 625 temporary licenses to premises/individuals
-  Housing Benefit to around 2,861 claimants
-  Administering our Council Tax Reduction scheme to 7,634 claimants
-  Homelessness and Housing Advice

Among our 'non statutory' services are:

- Ownership of the Churchgate Shopping Centre in Hitchin
- Leisure centres in Hitchin, Letchworth and Royston and two lidos
- Maintenance of 100 hectares of parks and gardens
- Splash parks in the four towns
- Museum provision at the North Hertfordshire Museum in Hitchin
- The Active Communities Service – which provides indoor and outside activities within local community settings.
- Chargeable collection of garden waste
- Herts Careline

Underpinning the provision of these services are the following considerations:

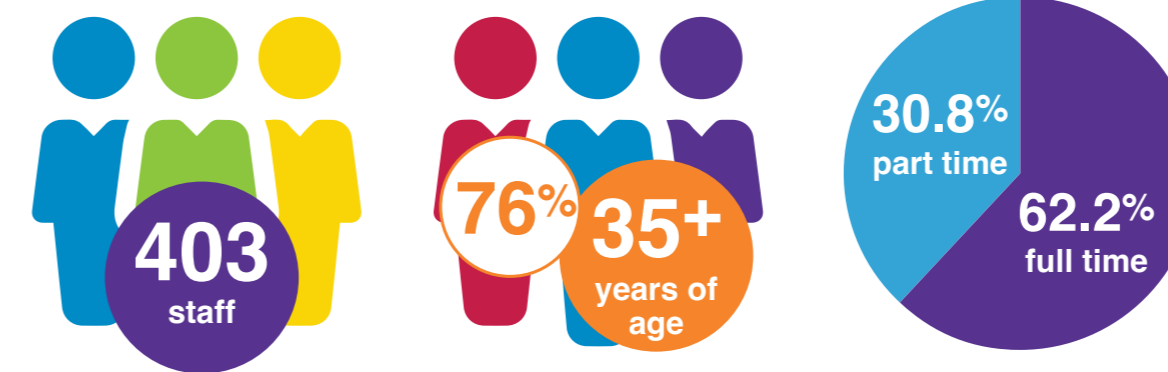
- Ensuring that we are a welcoming and engaged Council and ensure that our services are accessible to everyone and easy to use
- Providing value for money to residents
- Considering the environmental and ecological impact of the way we provide our services and responding to the Climate and Ecological Emergencies declared by Full Council
- Actively engaging in partnerships, shared services or alternative delivery models
- Seeking new service provision which can generate income for re-investment by the Council to protect long term delivery of non-statutory and other Council services
- Prioritising consideration of the impact of any service changes or introductions on service users



Our staff

Who are they?

We employ 403 people, working in a wide variety of roles. Our 2024 staff survey showed that 90% of staff would recommend us as an employer and this is reflected in our turnover rates, which were 9.4% for 2023/4. Despite our reasonable staff retention, we have several areas that are hard to fill, many due to national skills shortages, including Environmental Health, Planning, Legal and IT.



Staff survey headlines

78% agree/strongly agree their work is meaningful

90% recommend North Herts Council as a place to work.

76% see themselves working for the council in two years.

Key improvements

better pay and reduced workloads.

For the 2024 calendar year so far, 4.61 days per full time equivalent (FTE) short term absence, and 4.46 day per FTE long term absence were lost. We see high levels of cold/flu absences through autumn and winter months and provide a GP helpline service and offer flu vaccinations to those not covered by the NHS roll out.

The past year has shown an increase in mental health related absences and helping our employees to look after their wellbeing and develop a positive work life balance is a priority. We provide extensive support and guidance to employees through our Employee Assistance Programme and have a group of trained Mental Health First Aiders. Our flexible working policy and how we work statement supports informal discussions about how, when and where people carry out their work.

Our Gender Pay Gap for 2024 is 14.6%. We have seen a significant improvement in this area since 2017 (when it was 25%), however, we acknowledge that this remains too high and continue to work on improving the gap through our Inclusion group and action planning. Our approach includes ways to increase the number of females at middle and senior management levels.

Our staff

Recruiting the best

To help us attract good candidates we have reviewed and improved how we advertise jobs on our website and social media, including using striking imagery and video footage and giving real examples of what it's like to work for the council, to encourage good candidates to apply.



Looking ahead, we understand that growing our own can support succession planning and fill skills gaps. Where there has been difficulty in recruiting, we have developed career graded roles allowing us to recruit and develop good people.





Our apprentice scheme has been running since 2012 and has enabled various success stories with apprentices obtaining other roles with us after their apprenticeship ends. This has supported

succession planning and enabled us to retain skills and experience. This year we have joined the Local Government graduate scheme, Impact, for the first time and taken on two new graduates from 1 October.

Ways of working

How we work has changed since the pandemic. Prior to this we supported homeworking, however we are now even more flexible in how employees carry out their work, with managers and teams finding solutions which work best for them, while maintaining service delivery standards. This supports recruitment and retention, work-life balance and wellbeing.

The way that we work is determined by our Council Priorities and our Values. This means that it reflects:

-  Our ability to serve our residents / customers
-  Our environmental impact
-  The wellbeing of our staff and being able to look after each other
-  Finding the best ways to learn from each other and working as a team

We will consider all the factors above when determining how this will work in practise for each person. We will also aim to seek to:



Reflect individual preferences to support an effective work life balance in coming up with that collaborative solution.

In 2022 we carried out a benefits survey and review, further developing our reward package for employees. As part of this we increased annual leave entitlement, introduced further salary sacrifice options and improved our service recognition scheme. Following a successful trial in 2019, we also offer Christmas closedown.

Our values



Our staff

Equality and Diversity

Equality Diversity and Inclusion Strategy

The Council's 2022 – 2027 Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) strategy has four objectives around youth engagement; improving engagement with marginalised, seldom heard, and new communities; improving our understanding of broader EDI issues, such as neurodiversity and the intersections between inequalities; and achieving consistency in measuring equality impacts of our decisions and policies. The Policy and Strategy Team also publish an annual Cumulative Equality Impact Assessment report, which is based on the Equalities Implications section of each Cabinet and Council report by civic year.

Inclusion Group

In 2021, the council introduced an Inclusion Group which includes officers from teams across the council. The main purpose of the group is to drive the equality and diversity agenda forward within the organisation. The group aims to gain an understanding of the perspective of all employees, including the experiences of minority, disadvantaged and vulnerable staff.

The group meets quarterly with each meeting focused on one of the protected characteristics

under the Equality Act, providing staff with an opportunity to discuss their experiences and any issues. The group have considered topics including age, disability, race and ethnicity, sex, sexual orientation and gender reassignment, religion, marriage and civil partnership and pregnancy and maternity. Having worked through the protected characteristics, the group have also worked through the LGA's 'Diverse By Design' 15-point framework. This has included looking at inclusive leadership, flexible working culture, recruitment processes, reward and recognition, equalities training and the council's Gender Pay Gap.

Since it's conception, our Inclusion Group have taken time to discuss each protected characteristic. More recently, there has been focus on awareness raising and understanding the impact of microaggressions. The Inclusion group and Leadership team have attended training on microaggressions, and we have developed and displayed posters both in our office and on our Intranet to start conversations and raise awareness of microaggressions which were shared with our Senior Managers Group ahead of National Inclusion week this year. Additional work to support National Inclusion week in September 24 has included the launch of our 'importance of EDI' e-learning and a webinar on how to be an inclusive colleague.

Networks have been developed through the Inclusion group, including the Menopause Kitchen and the upcoming Neurodiversity at work network. Discussions at Inclusion group also feed into small

amending the EDI wording on our recruitment webpages or providing a focus for a personal development morning.

How equality and diversity inform our prioritisation and delivery arrangements

Committee reporting processes were updated to reflect the new obligations from the Public Sector Equality Duty 2011 and the template report has for many years included an equalities implications section. This analysis is a way of considering the effect of an organisation's services on different groups that are protected from discrimination by the Equality Act. Report authors are required to:

- Provide sufficient information to enable a public authority to show it has given due regard to the equality duty in its decision making.
- Identify methods for mitigating or avoiding adverse impact (either disproportionate disadvantage or unlawful discrimination) where relevant.

All new staff are required to complete mandatory training on Equality and Diversity, currently through workshops with further modular e-learning training if desired, with appropriate records retained to evidence attendance and completion.



Our staff

How we develop our staff

We are committed to developing our employees for current roles and to equip them to face future challenges and opportunities. We recognise the value which the learning and development of employees adds to the efficiency and quality of service delivery and provide opportunities for people depending on individual needs.

We support the development of our staff in a variety of ways including, a wide range of e-learning via GrowZone, Regular Performance Reviews (RPR), monthly Personal Development Mornings, career graded roles, supporting studying for professional qualifications, coaching and mentoring, workshops and training programmes. In line with our Digital programme, our Digital team have launched a Digital and Data Academy with the aim of equipping staff with the skills to develop their careers and create efficiencies through new technology. 20 staff have joined the programme so far.

RPRs are the appraisal framework. Objectives are developed from service plans and the framework supports an annual snapshot review and regular 1-1 meetings to review previous

objectives and achievements, consider performance against our values, set new objectives and discuss areas/ opportunities for development.

Keeping staff engaged and informed

How we communicate and engage with staff has changed since the pandemic with a mixture of online and in-person sessions enabling us to be as inclusive as possible.

Staff briefings

Held on a regular basis to keep communication open between the Leadership Team and staff. They are recorded so staff can catch up if not able to attend. We also hold quarterly in-person meetings for our Senior Managers which are an opportunity to discuss thoughts on bigger topics before taking them to staff briefings, or to discuss political priorities, current issues etc.

Staff magazine

Insight (our digital staff magazine) is the place to go for the latest internal news and information for staff and councillors. A full edition of Insight is posted on our intranet, The Hub and is issued at the start of each month. Articles then get posted in real-time throughout the month.

Intranet

The Hub is where information about council policies, procedures and services can be found. There are also several articles to support general staff wellbeing on topics such as the menopause and financial wellbeing.

Viva Engage

An internal message board which both staff and councillors can use to post important news in real time; social and charitable event information and items for sale/wanted. People can share thoughts, ideas and updates, ask a question or pose a straw poll, and even praise someone! It allows people to comment on things posted and react with an emoji – a bit like a chat forum or social media platform.

Staff Consultation Forum (SCF)

The SCF meets monthly and includes staff representatives from across the Council as well as Unions and management representatives. The group discusses proposed restructures and other major changes, receives updates from management and HR and has an opportunity to ask questions, raise issues and suggest ideas.



Advancements since our last review

Corporate rebrand

We decided to rebrand from North Hertfordshire District Council to North Herts Council in 2021 as we felt this was more welcoming and how most residents already referred to us anyway. Our existing brand was very old, used a font that wasn't readily available anymore and wasn't suitable for digital communications. A working group was set up with councillors and officers and various concepts tested.



The four hearts represent each of our North Herts towns and their surrounding villages, with the North-facing heart highlighted in a different colour to represent North Herts. In addition, the hearts are arranged in a flower as a nod to our sustainable priorities. We timed the launch of the rebrand to coincide with the launch of the new website and

to minimise costs our in-house designer created the branding and items were only replaced as and when they were due to be renewed anyway.

Place Narrative

The need for a North Herts Place Narrative was first recommended in our 2020 LGA Corporate Peer Challenge as a way of 1) broadening the Council's future focus to include ambitions for North Herts the place and 2) giving North Herts a clear identity and a point of differentiation within the county.

Funded by the LGA, eight in-person focus groups were run in 2022 by the Hackney Council Consultation Team. The focus groups included the key district partners (whom further consultation was also carried out with) of: Letchworth Heritage Foundation, Letchworth BID, Hitchin BID, North Herts Citizens Advice Bureau, North Herts CVS; plus North Herts residents from our Citizens Panel, North Herts College students, settle residents, local businesses and North Herts Council Leaders, Councillors and Officers. Using the research findings and partner feedback, the 'bringing communities together' strapline above was chosen by our district Partners, Leaders and Officers. This was due to its focus on people,

the link to our then council priorities 'People First' and 'Brighter Future Together'; its positivity and differentiation to the other Hertfordshire Councils' Place Narratives.

As you will see in our Place Narrative Brand Guidelines, our Place Branding is used across all our external comms channels with more work to do on Partner use.



Bringing Communities Together



Digital transformation

As a local authority we have always pursued digital innovation but with limited resources. Our journey has been one of progressive evolution and reflective adaptation. The Council previously embarked on a traditional transformation programme that yielded modest results. However, the onset of the pandemic brought about significant changes in our work practices and customer interactions, providing us with an opportunity to accelerate work in this area and we have developed a comprehensive digital strategy.

We want to make life easier for everyone that interacts with the council, including our residents, local businesses, partners, and our staff. As you will see from our Digital Strategy it signifies an exciting opportunity and a clear commitment to continue to deliver on our digital transformation across the whole council. The strategy will act as our digital compass so that we all understand the direction of travel and what needs to be done as well as being able to recognise successes as we deliver on these commitments.

Our digital strategy is not just about integrating new technologies; it's about fundamentally transforming our operations to better meet the needs of those we serve. It's a commitment to continuous improvement and innovation in our service delivery.



Recruitment refresh

Since our last review, we have carried out a recruitment refresh both in terms of our processes and our external communication of job roles with the aim of attracting the best candidates.

In terms of our processes, we have introduced a trial of transparent interviews; a recruitment incentives policy to support hard-to-fill posts; an increase in career-graded posts; developed a 'rolling recruitment' approach to respond to the speed of the jobs market, and made our job profile documentaiaon and interview invites more friendly.

In terms of our external communication, we have improved how we advertise jobs on our website and social media, including using striking imagery and video footage and giving real examples of what it's like to work for the council.

When we compared the 5 months post-refresh with the 5 months pre-refresh, our main job vacancies listings page received 13.85% more views, and we saw an average of 3 more applications per role. Social engagement also increased, ranging from 87% LinkedIn to 107% Facebook.



The adoption of our Local Plan

After a five-year public examination, the Council adopted its [Local Plan](#) on 8 November 2022 to deliver 11,600 homes. While the majority of these homes will be delivered through strategic sites following the release of land from the green belt, the same exceptional circumstances existed to justify the designation of a significant new area of green belt within the district.

The Local Plan also requires the production of masterplans for large scale and other developments to seek to deliver high quality places that everyone can enjoy. Good design is an essential part of master planning, and the Council approved its Sustainability Supplementary Planning Document in September 2024. Work on a Design Code has begun with the involvement of Members through site visits in October 2024. We are also reviewing our Town Centre strategies to support the redevelopment of Hitchin and Letchworth.



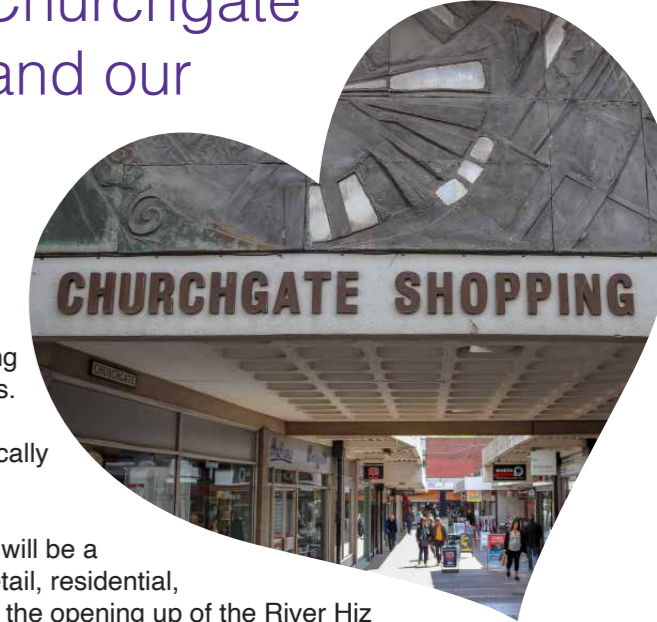
The purchase of Churchgate shopping centre and our future plans

We acquired the leasehold of the Churchgate Shopping Centre in August 2022 for circa. £4 million which meant that we are now the sole owner of both the leasehold and freehold of the shopping centre, market, and surrounding car parks. This has unlocked a large town centre regeneration opportunity that will dramatically revitalise the area.

The project, which is just over five acres, will be a mixed-use development, comprising of retail, residential, food and beverage, leisure, green space, the opening up of the River Hiz and car parking. This project has a large number of key stakeholders including the current Churchgate tenants, Hitchin Market traders, other town centre tenants/businesses, residents of Hitchin, residents of the district as well as users of the town from outside the district.

The project has also attracted the attention of multiple developers who have met the project team and visited the town since UKREiif in May 2024 and we are working alongside consultants Lambert Smith Hampton, who are advising on the work programme required to take us from acquisition to procuring a development partner.

Following a very-high level consultation in February 2023, we are currently part-way through our next, more detailed consultation to ensure we seek the views of and engage with as many people as possible to help us shape our vision for the regeneration of the Churchgate shopping area of Hitchin.



Our Council Plan

Previous

2022 - 2024 Council Plan

Vision



We put **people first** and deliver **sustainable services**, to enable a **brighter future together**.

Priorities



People first



Sustainability



A brighter future together

Strategic themes



Our environment



Our local economy



Our places



Our services

2022 - 2024 Council Plan deliverables

2022/23:

- Local Plan adoption.
- COVID Business Recovery Grants.
- Installation of first EV charging points at DCO.
- Rebuilding visitor no's at HTH & NHM following the pandemic.
- Customer experience and self-service option improvements.
- Council Tax Reduction Scheme review, new scheme 1 April 2023.
- Opened interactive play areas in each town.
- Introduced wilding initiatives, now established.
- Supported and consulted on the Local Government Boundary Review.

2023/24:

- North Herts Place Narrative created and communicated.
- Serby Avenue Rec and Bancroft Rec playground improvements.
- Procurement of new leisure contract, awarded to Everyone Active.
- Funding secured from HCC to deliver health inequalities projects.
- Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan and Herts Active Travel Strategy adopted.

2024 Labour manifesto

Five missions:

- | | |
|------------------------------|---|
| 1 working with and for you | 4 building better homes |
| 2 protecting our environment | 5 expanding opportunities for good health |
| 3 saving our town centres | |

Vision: A fairer, greener, North Herts

Future

Full Council approved a new Council Plan on 19 September 2024. The 2024 – 2028 Council Plan reflects the administration's vision and priorities. The decision to review the Council Plan was taken by the new Labour administration, which was formed following North Herts Council's move to all-out elections in 2024. The four-year term enables the administration to take a longer-term approach to setting a vision and priorities which are as follows:

Our Vision:



Working with you for a fairer, greener North Herts

Our Priorities:



Thriving Communities



Responsible Growth



Accessible Services



Sustainability



www.north-herts.gov.uk

Working with you for a fairer, greener North Herts

Council Plan 2024 - 2028

It is hoped that the new Accessible Services priority will enable a focus on the Council's day-to-day activity in addition to the emphasis placed on standalone projects. These priority areas and the key initiatives identified within the plan will help shape the budget-setting process as well as documents like the Medium-Term Financial Strategy, the Council Delivery Plan, and service delivery plans.

Our future Council Plan priorities

Thriving Communities

North Herts is a mix of vibrant towns and beautiful villages, each with their own unique sense of place and a range of communities. We want to support all the communities across our district to thrive.

We know that inequalities still exist here, including health inequality, and economic and social inequality. We will make sure we support our communities to improve their health and wellbeing. We will consider how we can reduce social and economic inequalities and continue to support local groups who provide important services to our residents.

We also want you to feel safe. We will continue working with partners like the Police through The North Herts Community Safety Partnership to identify current crime and disorder issues and set priorities for tackling these.

We know that residents across our towns and villages are proud of their communities and want to preserve the things that make them special. We will continue to support local people to have a say in the future of where they live and on the issues that matter locally.

Accessible Services

We provide a wide range of services for you, our residents and communities, from waste collection and planning, to benefits and leisure facilities. We want to make sure that our services are accessible to everyone and easy to use.

Our Digital Strategy sets out our vision for transformation, and as part of this we're investing in projects which make our services more modern and more accessible to you. This means that we're making our services available online, including on mobile devices, wherever possible so that you can access them 24/7.

We recognise that some of our residents can't or don't use online services, so we're committed to remaining accessible in other ways including by post, phone and via our Customer Service Centre.

We also want to deliver high-quality services and to do this we need to be able to retain and recruit high-quality staff. We will continue to look at ways to improve recruitment and retention, making sure North Herts Council is an excellent place to work.

Responsible Growth

We want North Herts to be a thriving and prosperous district, where we meet the current and future needs of our communities. We need responsible growth to deliver much-needed homes including social housing and homes that residents can afford to live in. We want the places that are created here to have the necessary infrastructure to make new development sustainable and to be well-designed, reflecting the local landscape and character of the area.

Over the course of this Council Plan, we will be implementing our Local Plan which sets out the development planned for our district. Supporting guidance like Supplementary Planning Documents and Masterplans will help ensure good design, appropriate infrastructure, connectivity and opportunities for active and sustainable travel. We will review our Local Plan to see where we can strengthen and improve it to deliver more sustainable growth.

We also want to support economic growth across our district. We will prepare Town Centre Strategies and an Economic Development and Tourism Strategy to outline our approach to enhancing our town centres, business engagement and support, tourism, and emerging economic growth opportunities. We will work closely with businesses and other partners to deliver on our key objectives.

Sustainability

Sustainability means the ability to fulfil the needs of today's generation, without compromising the needs of future generations. Sustainability is important to us. We recognise the climate and environmental challenges our district faces, as well as the financial challenges that we face as a council.

The previous government reduced funding to our district by around £5.5 million in real terms since 2010, whilst our population increased by 4.8% between 2011 and 2021. This puts us in a difficult position and means that careful financial planning is necessary to achieve financial sustainability for the council so that we can continue to provide the services you use every day. Our finance strategies support the delivery of our priorities, and we regularly review these to make sure we make the best use of taxpayers' money.

We have also declared a climate emergency and an ecological emergency, and set goals to become net zero, to show we understand the seriousness of these crises, the impact on our district, and that we will do what we can to act on these issues.

We strive to be sustainable in our service-delivery and will continue to follow a policy-led budget, while placing our environmental responsibilities at the centre of our policymaking. We will work with you to achieve balanced

budgets, improve environmental sustainability, and reduce carbon emissions as much as we can to work towards our net zero ambitions. We aim to be net zero in our operations by 2030 and for our district to be net zero by 2040. Net zero means achieving a balance between the carbon emitted into the atmosphere and the carbon removed from it.

Promoting our new Council Plan

Once the Royston Palace by-election has been held on 17 October 2024 and we are no longer limited by PERP, the new council plan will be communicated on our website, across our social media and ENews channels and in the Winter 24 edition of our residents' magazine Outlook. We will also issue a press release to local media.



Current situation

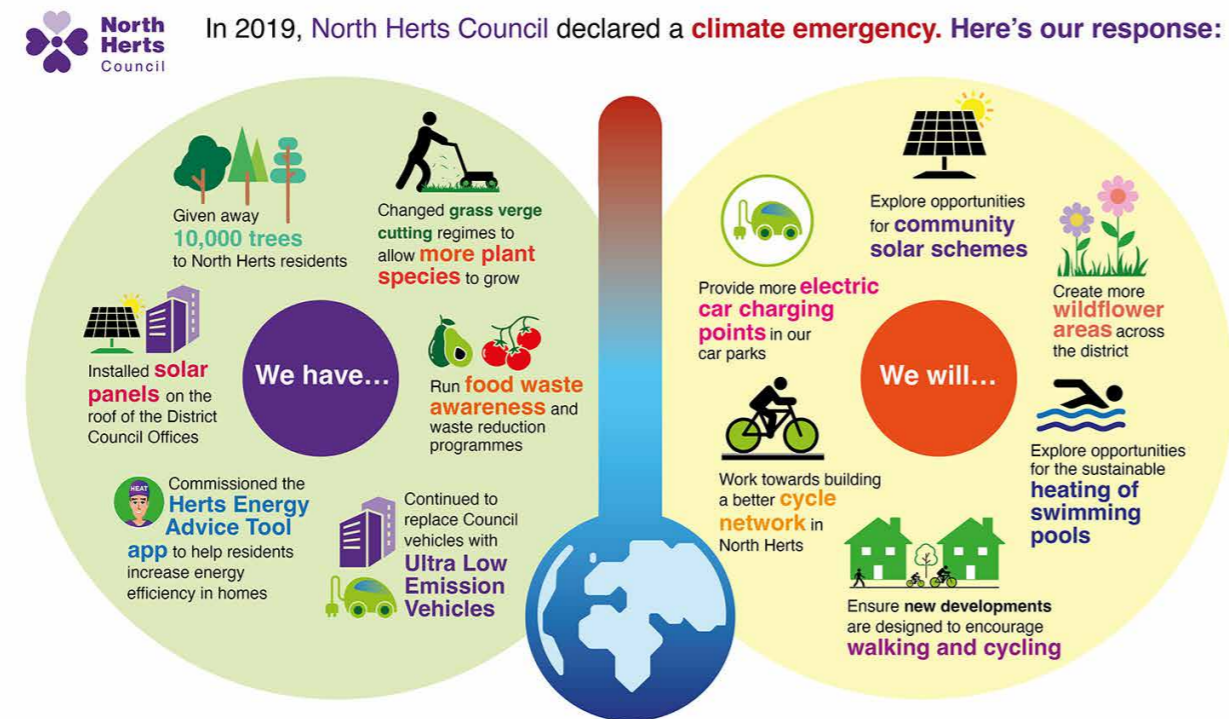
Place Leadership and Partnerships

Place Leadership

As part of our place leadership role, we have declared climate and ecological emergencies, with net-zero targets for both the Council (by 2030) and the district (by 2040) and created a Place Narrative for North Herts in 2023 (see page 17).

In addition, we lead by:

- Recognising and embracing the diversity of our communities and place
- Having a district-wide view, whilst recognising the differing demands and priorities of local communities.



Partnership working

Partnership working is key to the current and future success of North Herts, the place. We, alongside other local authorities are facing significant funding challenges and as such we are committed to working collaboratively with all of our resident and business communities to maximise what we can deliver. We know we can achieve far more by working together and given the diverse nature of the district, our overarching principle is that there is no “one size that fits all” in terms of our partnerships. In some instances, it is right that we are the lead, but on others other partners are best placed to take that role and we will support them through collaborative working.

Specifically, we work closely with Hertfordshire County Council; Parish, Town, and Community Councils; our town centre Business Improvement Districts (BIDS); Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation and our Voluntary, Community, Faith, and Social Enterprise sectors. We have also changed our five area committees into area-based community forums, to be a focus for engagement and participation across our communities.

We are currently undertaking a community governance review, looking at the parish/town/ community council arrangements within the district. One option we will need to consider is whether to propose new town councils in the un-parished areas of Hitchin, Letchworth and Baldock. At the time of writing, we are currently coming to the end of the first stage consultation, after which

we will consider draft recommendations for future consultation.

Key local partnerships

Our Community Safety Partnership (CSP)

The CSP has a long-standing track record of success in coordinating the work of a wide range of statutory and non-statutory partners and looking at innovative joint solutions. The CSP is represented by senior members of each of the partner organisations including the Police (Chief Inspector), Council (Service Director), Fire Service (Area Commander) in addition to Police & Crime Commissioner's Officer, County Council, major housing association ('settle' and First Garden City Homes), Probation and Clinical Commissioning Group. We undertake an annual strategic assessment of community safety issues in the district and, having agreed priorities, develop and undertake a coordinated action plan. www.north-herts.gov.uk/home/community/community-safety/north-hertfordshire-community-safety-partnership

The Partnership monitors community safety indicators, delivery of the action plan as well as horizon scanning for issues that the partnership may need to consider in the future. Current priorities for the CSP are:

- Anti-social behaviour
- Violence Against Women and Girls
- Environmental crime

Our Housing Partnerships

As a stock transfer authority, we work with over 30 registered providers who collectively own/manage around 11,500 units of affordable housing in the district. The largest of these is called 'settle', who own over 70% of these homes. We have a very close and productive relationship with settle, supporting their efforts to develop additional affordable housing units to help meet local housing need. We also share our housing allocation policy and software system with settle, allowing for the dynamic and efficient letting of rented vacancies, as well as working closely to help homeless households into settle's temporary accommodation.

MOUs

We sustain ongoing relationships through Memorandum of Understanding (MOUs) with partner organisations such as North Hertfordshire Centre for Voluntary Services (NHCVS), Citizen's Advice North Herts (CANH) and North Herts Minority Ethnic Forum (NHMEF). These MOUs seek to support the organisations to deliver key outcomes that address the needs of North Herts residents and share current issues that residents are presenting to these organisations.

Our Partnership Boards

With key contractors for Waste (FCC Environmental), Grounds Maintenance (John O'Conner) and Leisure Everyone Active), Partnership Boards review performance, consider service development opportunities and have a strategic oversight role for the contracts and the relationship between the contractor and Council.

Healthy Hub

The Healthy Hub provides an online, telephone and face to face advice and guidance service signposting members of the public to organisations that provide health and wellbeing support for issues such as increasing physical activity, improving emotional wellbeing, gaining financial advice and finding things to do in the local area to tackle social isolation.

The service is further supported by the Council's Community Wellbeing offer that provides a range of services to address local wellbeing gaps in service provision. This includes a range of exercise classes for people needing low impact, regular group activities to improve wellbeing and tackle social isolation, family food education opportunities, a falls and frailty programme, horticultural therapy for mental health, digital inclusion and energy efficient cooking.

We greatly value the work of the Hub; however, it is funded from Hertfordshire County Council's Public Health grant and there is no guarantee of future funding for this work, which North Herts Council would struggle to be able to fund.



Careline

Herts Careline is a service area of North Herts Council which celebrated its 40th Anniversary in July 2022. It is an award-winning provider of assistive technology and telecare services, supporting individuals both nationally and across Hertfordshire to live independently. Operating in partnership with Hertfordshire County Council (HCC) since 2014, Careline provides a wide range of services, including community alarms, GPS pendants for outdoor use, and advanced telecare solutions for people with complex needs. These services cater to a diverse customer base, with over 16,000 individuals currently supported. Careline responds to over 7,400 medical emergency calls per annum, ensuring safety and wellbeing for thousands of vulnerable residents. Working in partnership with HCC, as well as with well-regarded services such as The British Red Cross who are Careline's first responder service, Careline is making a positive difference to both health and social care across the county.



Climate and environment

Through regular information sharing meetings and through various thematic groups we continue to develop relationships with other stakeholders i.e., Hertfordshire County Council and neighbouring Hertfordshire districts and boroughs (through the Herts Climate Change and Sustainability Partnership (HCCSP), which looks to work collaboratively to tackle climate change and environmental degradation across Hertfordshire. The group currently works across 6 key themes: Water, Biodiversity, Carbon Reduction, Transport, Behaviour Change, and Adaptation. North Herts leads on Biodiversity.

We are also part of the Hertfordshire Waste Partnership which concentrates on changing waste behaviour by focusing on the 4Rs: reduction, re-use, recycling and recovery. We have a Cabinet Panel for the Environment which aims to set a work programme which enables open discussion that may lead to recommendations to Cabinet from the relevant Executive Members or Service Director, regarding actions that they believe the Council should be taking to address climate and environmental issues.

Hertfordshire Growth Board:

The Council's Managing Director and Leader participate in the Hertfordshire Growth Board, a joint committee involving all 10 Hertfordshire district/borough councils and the County Council. The Board also involves other key partners such as Hertfordshire Futures and public bodies partners

such as the NHS, University of Hertfordshire and Homes England. Following public consultation the Growth Board has recently adopted a new strategy, setting out a vision for good growth - <https://www.hertfordshiregrowthboard.com/>

The six missions are: World Class Economy; Digital Access for All; Transport for Hertfordshire; Sustainable County; Healthy and Safe Places for All and Right Homes, Right Places (of which our Managing Director and Leader are Chief Executive lead and co-political lead).

Key regional partnerships

Within Hertfordshire, we actively participate and lead in strategic planning to shape the district at a local, county, and regional level with member and officer involvement and participation in:

- The North, East and Central Hertfordshire authorities' group (five district/boroughs plus the county council): a Chief Executive and Heads of Planning grouping to develop a Joint Strategic Plan/ Spatial Development Strategy. Our Managing Director has just been nominated to take the lead Chief Executive role on the group, which has developed a vision for the area that will shortly be consulted upon
- Hertfordshire Infrastructure Planning Partnership. A partnership that seeks to resolve complex technical issues that affect all 11 Hertfordshire authorities, respond jointly to consultations, and commission work on behalf of all partners. The former LEP (Hertfordshire Futures) are also represented and provide

regular updates to the partners

- Herts Leaders Group is an informal meeting of the Leaders of the 11 Hertfordshire authorities, plus the Police and Crime Commissioner, supported by the Chief Executives. It meets several times a year and provides an opportunity to discuss strategic issues of importance to Hertfordshire, for example the devolution agenda
- CECG is the Chief Executive Co-ordinating Group, made up of the Chief Executives of the 11 Hertfordshire authorities, plus the Chief Constable and health representatives. This meets weekly, with longer face to face sessions on an ad hoc basis. The meeting discusses operational and strategic issues, shares intelligence and promotes closer working relationships
- North Hertfordshire has strong connections with the neighbouring unitary authorities of Luton and Central Bedfordshire. As such it actively participates in joint working, particularly around infrastructure, such as the proposed Luton Airport expansion
- We engage with the East of England LGA and provided input into the regional strategy for economic development [Opportunity-East-Report.pdf \(eelga.gov.uk\)](https://www.eelga.gov.uk/Opportunity-East-Report.pdf)

Economic Development

The Council has an out-of-date Economic Development Strategy, which is currently in the process of being updated. We are working with the same consultants being used by Hertfordshire Futures to update their strategy and so we expect to align with the vision for the wider county. We have used UK Shared Prosperity Funding to fund several programmes in conjunction with partners, for example:

- Working with business support and skills programmes across the district to raise their profiles and increase their activities with North Herts Businesses and residents
- Helping to create a business database to give a more personalised support service to business, along with systems to promote local supply chains and business to business interaction.

We will also work with larger high value-added companies in North Herts to ensure their views are reflected in our strategic economic plans and activities in the A1 - A505 corridor. We look to attract and retain these businesses in future and give them the sense of belonging to the district as a part of our inward investment offer.

We look to build on the success of our towns and town centres by working with the Business Improvement District (BIDs), Royston Town Council, the Letchworth Heritage Foundation and other town centre partners. Town Centres are at the heart of our communities and their success is key to the economy of the district.

Company shareholders

The Council is a Shareholder of three companies, Herts Building Control (HBC), Herts CCTV (HCCTV) and Broadwater Hundred (BWH). HBC and HCCTV are made up of several Councils, however, BWH is the Council's own company. The Service Director for Enterprise is a Director on both HBC and HCCTV and the Service Director for Regulatory and the Service Director Resources are the Shareholder Representatives. BWH has recently commenced trading (with the letting of 4 flats, converted from the previous Careline office) and has 4 Service Directors and a Service Manager as Directors of this company. The Council has a Cabinet Sub-Committee (Local Authority Trading Companies' Shareholder) which is responsible for relevant approvals and receiving performance updates.



Financial planning and management

Our current financial position

For 2024/25 our original revenue budget was £20.9 million. Our Medium-Term Financial Strategy forecasts that we need to deliver net savings of around £2.5 million. The focus is on delivering these during 2026/27, which includes a manageable use of reserves in the intervening period.

Our capital programme for 2024/25 is £30.4 million, with £28.3 million forecast for later years (up to 2033/34). During 2024/25 we expect to move into a borrowing position, although that may be affected by reprofiling of spend in to 2025/26.

As of 31 March 2024 (subject to audit) we had a General Fund balance of £14.1 million and a usable reserve balance of £29.9 million. That was an increase of £3.6 million compared with 2023. Our budget for 2023/24 had assumed that we would use £1.1 million of our retained Business Rates reserve to balance the budget. The main reasons behind our reserves increasing were additional treasury income from investing surplus cash (£1.3 million), delayed projects resulting in budget carry forwards (£1.5 million) and further business rate surpluses.

£m	18/19	19/20	20/21	21/22	22/23	23/24
General Fund	7.86	9.38	8.87	10.61	11.99	14.06
Usable Reserves	18.56	21.60	31.65	30.64	26.31	29.90

The increase in General Fund reserves reflects:

- Achievement of savings in advance of expected funding reductions, including waste contract savings from May 2018 and implementation of garden waste charging
- Retained Business Rates above baseline funding levels, including gains from Business Rate pooling. Initially put into usable reserves and then released to the General Fund

- In recent years, increase in income from investment of surplus cash
- Project delays that have led to budgets being carried forward

Over the last six years we have achieved savings as follows:

£m	18/19	19/20	20/21	21/22	22/23	23/24
Savings achieved	2.9	0.6	0.5	0.3	1.2	2.8

Not all savings (e.g. treasury investment income) will have an ongoing impact. Our budget process ensures that savings are reflected over the correct period.

We have always received a positive Value for Money conclusion from our External Auditors. The interim report for 2022/23 did not identify any significant weaknesses in the Council's VFM arrangements. The only recommendation was that we consider the accounting categorisation of one of our assets. We have done this as an update to our draft 22/23 accounts, as well as reflecting in our 23/24 accounts.

Medium-Term Financial Strategy (MTFS)

We produce a MTFS in late Summer/ Autumn each year. This is reviewed by our Finance, Audit and Risk (FAR) Committee, before being recommended by Cabinet for Council to approve. The biggest risk is the expected need to make savings in the medium term. These are linked to expectations of further real terms cuts to our funding, and the impact of cost increases from our waste contract retender and capital investment.

Our MTFS is open in terms of options for delivery of savings. This reflects that we want to consult with residents on their priorities. We are part of (and have often supported the creation of) many of the local shared service arrangements. We will continue to be open to new ideas where they help improve resilience and/or deliver better value for

money. We are open to using commercialisation (e.g. through our trading companies) to improve our financial position but are mindful of the risks involved and the lead-in times involved.

Future saving thoughts

We have put in place a digital transformation programme with the aim of reducing software spend (through use of low-code alternatives) and process efficiency and automation. The efficiencies are mainly expected to be non-cashable time savings that reduce current work pressures, but we will track whether any can be released as cashable savings. As we believe we have delivered most of the other available efficiency savings, any further savings would need to come from service reductions and increases to fees and charges. As the impact will therefore be felt by our residents, we do not want to deliver the savings before they are needed. But we are also aware of the need to have time to plan, consult and implement any proposals. This is supported by our General Fund reserves currently being significantly above the recommended minimum level of around £2.5-3 million.

As we have recently retendered our contracts for leisure and waste & street cleansing, we have reasonable cost certainty for most of our contracted-out services. However, that also means that there is now little scope for further cost savings in these areas. Our biggest areas of risk in relation to spend relate to pay costs (unresolved

pay awards, agency costs to cover hard-to-fill vacancies), homelessness accommodation, the unbudgeted costs of planning appeals and recycled material prices (subject to a new contract, market price volatility and future volumes). As we deliver large capital projects (e.g. leisure centre decarbonisation), we will also add the risks of cost increases and delays. Our income risks relate to usage/demand, especially where we look to increase or extend charging. However, our largest financial risk relates to our funding uncertainty.

A lot of the above risks are outside of our control, so are managed through budget monitoring and setting a minimum General Fund balance to reflect the risks. On pay costs, we have an ongoing project to improve our job advertising and extend/promote the non-pay benefits we offer. We are also looking at how competitive our pay is compared to other local councils. This will help us determine the level of any gap and if any action we could take to try and address it. For homelessness, we look to support partner organisations to develop and extend provision, especially for those that have support needs.

Our budget process

We provide monthly updates to budget managers on their spend and have an overview of these to ensure that there are no significant movements. We carry out our formal budget monitoring on a quarterly basis. This reflects the general level of risk in our budget movements and the capacity (finance team and budget managers) available. The budget reports (revenue and capital) are reviewed by the Leadership Team and Executive Member for Finance, before going to FAR and Cabinet. This can take a while with the Committee cycle, so would be highlighted more quickly if a particular problem and decision was required. Budget managers (and in turn Service Directors) are required to consider how any overspends can be managed. They are only reported to FAR and Cabinet where there are no available mitigating options - other than in-year service changes which would require a Cabinet decision. Underspends must be reported and should not be used for additional service delivery.

During September, we carried out a review of our capital budgets with the Leader, Executive Member for Finance, Managing Director, s151 Officer and the relevant Service Directors and Executive Members. This review was to look at the timing of the spend, the realism and capacity for delivery, and whether it aligned with Council priorities. The outcomes of this review will form the proposals for the 2025/26 (and onwards) capital programme. Our leisure investments help to deliver the income levels contained within our new Leisure and Active communities contract. Our other capital

investments are focused on maintaining ongoing service delivery.

Our budget process starts in August when Budget Managers are asked to highlight any savings or investment options available for the following years budget. This also includes any new or updated capital investments. This is then discussed with the Leadership Team and Political Liaison Board, before formulating what options will be taken to the Budget Workshops at the start of November.

There are separate workshops for the administration and the opposition groups. The opposition group evening has previously been sub-divided in to the two party groups. The workshops are a chance to ask questions about the proposals, for political groups to provide comments to Cabinet on the proposals, and for Councillors to raise any new ideas.

The outcomes of the budget workshops are reported to Cabinet (with input from FAR) alongside any updates on funding settlements. That is then used by Cabinet to formulate their budget proposals for the following year. Those proposals form the budget papers (Revenue Budget and Investment Strategy) that go to Cabinet (again reviewed by FAR) at the start of February and referred to Council at the end of February. The Investment Strategy incorporates the treasury strategy, capital programme and Minimum Revenue Provision policy. The revenue budget incorporates the revenue costs of capital investment.

Where there are no major budget decisions, engagement is focused on the required Business Ratepayer consultation. Area Forums are consulted where there are specific area impacts. For the 2025/26 budget process (and the expected need for significant decisions), more detailed public budget engagement and consultation is planned,

Productivity Plan

Following the request from DLUHC, the Council submitted its Productivity Plan to Government following approval by Cabinet on 9 July 2024 North Herts Council Productivity Plan.docx.pdf (north-herts.gov.uk). Producing the plan gave the Council an opportunity to reflect on how we have transformed over the past few years, on staffing including recruitment and retention, prudent use of capital investments, how we deliver our services (including use of shared services) and how we have, and are, embracing new technologies to modernise the Council and our services. The Plan reflected on our digital transformation journey and the work still to be done, particularly with the use of data to inform decision making and strategies.

Strategic Performance Management

Our strategic process for performance reporting is through our Council Delivery Plan. The Council Delivery Plan is made up of the:

- Council's key projects (to support the delivery of the Council Plan) with progress against key milestones and risks to the achievement of each project
- Over-arching strategic risks that could impact the achievement of Council objectives
- Performance indicators to show overall performance in key areas (including key services)

Our performance management framework provides more detail on how we set and manage performance. This includes our service action plans, which sit below the Council Delivery Plan. It includes tasks that support the delivery of the priorities within the Council Plan (but don't meet the threshold for including in the Council Delivery Plan) and ensuring the delivery of our core services. We share our service action plans at a Leadership Team meeting to give a shared understand of the resource requirements.

Strategic Risk Management arrangements

We have a Performance and Risk Management Group. Core attendees of the group are:

- Service Director: Resources (Officer Risk and Performance lead)

- Executive Member for Finance and IT (Councillor Risk and Performance lead)
- Controls, Risk and Performance Manager
- Risk and Performance Officer
- Shared Insurance Manager
- Client Audit Executive (Internal Audit)
- Health and Safety Officer

There is also a standing invite to the Chairs of Overview and Scrutiny and FAR (and all members of both committees). Service Directors attend on a rolling basis. The group discuss all Council projects and risks (on a rolling basis aligned to the attendance of the relevant Service Director), as well as any emerging risks and issues. The input from insurance, audit and health and safety helps with identifying emerging issues. The Performance and Risk Group review the regular reporting on the Council Delivery Plan and Risk.

The Officer Leadership Team has oversight of those reports. These reports include:

- Setting the projects for the forthcoming year to be included in the Council Delivery Plan (input from O&S, before decision by Cabinet)
- Agreeing the key performance indicators for the forthcoming year (input from O&S, before decision by Cabinet)

- Quarterly reports on the Council Delivery Plan (O&S and Cabinet)
- Mid-year report on risk management governance (Audit Committee and Cabinet)
- End of year report on risk (Audit Committee, Cabinet and Council)

The FAR Committee has risk management within its terms of reference. They make recommendations to Cabinet, who are ultimately responsible for risk management. The Leadership team is also responsible for risk management and receives reports (at least) quarterly.

For major projects, risks are identified and managed through a risk log, maintained as a live document throughout the project, and reported regularly to the Project Board. A summary of the project risks will also be reported to FAR (as appropriate).

Our risk management framework also covers the process that we go through to ensure that risks are considered when developing our Annual Governance Statement. Our policy statement sets our approach to risk, as we seek to be risk aware and acknowledge that where we are doing things differently (e.g. new projects, acting more commercially) it will come with greater risk.

Risk and Performance Management process and reviews

We use IdeaGen to record risk, project and performance information. All officers and councillors can access IdeaGen, and we have provided guidance to councillors on how to access it. Our Risk and Performance Officer assists officers in providing information to go into IdeaGen. This includes both how to enter the information and professional support (e.g. on carrying out a risk assessment that consider relevant factors, mitigations and target risk scoring).

Risks are reviewed on a regular basis linked to their risk score. The Council's key projects (which form the Council Delivery Plan) are updated at least every quarter. IdeaGen is also used to record progress against higher priority audit recommendations. The IdeaGen system and the Risk and Performance Officer provide reminders to relevant managers to carry out these tasks.



Governance and culture

Our Governance arrangements

We are committed to maintaining effective governance structures that ensure transparent and accountable decision-making processes. Our governance framework is structured around our Constitution, which sets out clear delegations and decision-making protocols. These arrangements ensure decisions are lawful, procedurally fair, and aligned with the Council's strategic priorities.

The Council Constitution, which is regularly reviewed and updated (most recently in July 2024), serves as a vital governance tool by providing clear guidelines for Member-Officer relationships and setting out the terms of reference for each committee. The Council operates a Leader-Cabinet model, which is further supported by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and the Finance, Audit, and Risk (FAR) Committee, ensuring robust checks and balances. We ensure all reports to committees are accompanied by legal, financial, social value, environment, human resources, and equality implications, as per constitutional requirements.

A key component of our governance culture is our Annual Governance Statement (AGS).

This statement reviews the effectiveness of the Council's governance, ensuring that processes meet the standards outlined in the CIPFA/SOLACE Delivering Good Governance Framework. The AGS identifies areas for improvement and oversees the implementation of corrective actions, reported quarterly to the FAR Committee.

In addition to the AGS, we monitor the governance of our wholly owned and partnership entities, through regular reporting and performance monitoring. Governance oversight extends to partnerships such as the Hertfordshire Growth Board, where collective leadership plays a critical role in shaping strategic development across the region.

Risk management is another integral part of the Council's governance arrangements. Through its Risk Management Framework, the Council identifies and addresses both corporate and operational risks, with regular reporting to the FAR Committee (see page 35 for more details). Furthermore, the Council's Code of Corporate Governance (last reviewed in March 2024) ensures

that we adhere to the principles of integrity, ethical values, and the rule of law, aligning with the Seven Principles of Public Life (Nolan Principles).

The three statutory officers (Head of Paid Service, Monitoring Officer, s.151 officer), plus the deputy MO and deputy s.151 meet regularly to discuss governance issues. The frequency of the meetings varies but is currently monthly whilst the political administration is still new, with both Internal Audit and External Audit also invited to attend some of the meetings. The Statutory Officer Group has a standing agenda which covers governance, finance, complaints, reputational issues, political issues and staffing issues.

Regarding staff and member development, we maintain a structured Member Development Programme, focusing on training members to effectively carry out their responsibilities, with compulsory training elements for key roles. The staff development framework encourages continuous learning and personal development, ensuring we retain a capable and motivated workforce.

Overall, our governance arrangements are designed to foster a culture of respect, transparency, and challenge, ensuring that both elected Members and officers work collaboratively to achieve our strategic objectives while upholding the highest standards of public accountability.

Audit and Governance

FAR Committee

The FAR Committee acts as the Council's Audit Committee. The Committee has an independent Member who has been in place for just over two years. The remit of FAR and how it aligns with Overview and Scrutiny was covered by the follow-up to our last peer review. The FAR Committee reviews our quarterly budget reports and supports the budget setting process. This is in addition to its core functions in relation to external audit, internal audit, annual governance statement, fraud arrangements, financial regulations, procurement and risk oversight.

Our internal audit function is delivered via a shared service (Shared Internal Audit Service), with the County Council as hosts and six other district and borough Councils. The shared service helps to provide resilience, access to greater expertise and shared learning. We focus on internal audit to support improvement and use the audit plan to target areas of opportunity and risk. We are making increased use of embedded assurance on key projects and starting work on assurance mapping.

Annual Governance Statement (AGS)

The Policy & Strategy Team take the Local Code of Corporate Governance to the Finance, Audit, and Risk Committee (FAR) each year to do an annual review of the Code, as is good practice. Once the Code is reviewed and approved by the Committee, the Policy & Strategy Team compile the AGS self-assessment with input from the Leadership Team, and other teams where necessary. The draft is then taken to the Leadership Team for review, which enables a discussion about the areas for improvement and potential actions to support this.

Each member of the Leadership Team is asked to provide assurance statements for their area across a range of topics, including compliance with legislation; compliance with financial regulations; performance management; project management; risk management, and training and skills development. The key themes and issues identified within these assurance statements help to further develop the action plan. The Policy & Strategy Team use the self-assessment document, and the discussions and assurance statements provided by the Leadership Team to complete the Annual Governance Statement.

The draft AGS is taken to FAR Committee and is also sent to the external auditors, the Shared Internal Audit Service (SIAS), and the Shared Anti-Fraud Service (SAFS) for comment. When the most recent AGS draft (2023/24) was taken to FAR Committee in June 2024, it was resolved that the AGS would be finalised for approval once the

Council's External Audit had been completed, in line with CIPFA guidance. The external audit backlog makes a delay likely in the approval of the finalised AGS, so it was noted that work would commence on the action plan from the point of the draft being reviewed by the Committee.

Previously we have updated FAR committee on the action plan progress during the year and we will do this by way of information note for the current action plan. In terms of the current action plan, progress has been made on various actions. This includes HR and the Leadership Team reviewing and evaluating officer uptake of essential e-learning modules. All essential modules, except for Fraud Prevention, now have completion rates above 75%.

Reviewing/refreshing governance arrangements

The Constitution includes the Contract Procurement Rules and Financial Regulations. The Service Director for Legal and Community is responsible for ensuring the main Constitution. This should include an annual review with a more substantive change every three years.

The overall responsibility for ensuring that the Contract Procurement Rules and Financial Regulations are kept up to date is the responsibility for the Service Director for Resources (albeit that these are reviewed in conjunction with relevant officers and at relevant Officer/ Member groups/ decision making bodies). The Contract

Procurement Group has representation from the Executive Member, as well as Officers and meet regularly to review the Procurement Rules.

The Constitutional review arrangements should include an annual review and a substantive review every three years, as well as additional reviews if they are required e.g. due to changes to legislation. Over the last 6 years, this has, however, been much more frequent, with requests from the administration for changes, or due to legislative and organisational change to review and amend arrangements. This has both positive and negative implications – in that, the Constitution is up to date, but a negative one in terms of officer (and indeed Member) time involved.

It is worth noting that minor changes can be made by the relevant Service Director, but still require Delegated Decision notices and reports through post these, in most cases, to Full Council for such amendments to be approved.

The process for reviews of the Constitution (and more detailed changes) is to seek views of Senior Officers and relevant Members in the first instance and thereafter all Members. Where appropriate, workshops and surveys are conducted prior to presenting a report or any recommendations being made to Full Council. We have one ongoing at the present time, designed to review arrangements so they are fit for purpose for the subsequent 3-year administration period.

Potential changes to the Contract Procurement

Rules are discussed through a Contract Procurement (officer-based) group annually, and appropriate changes take through to FAR by the Service Director of Regulatory. They will be considered by the Committee and any changes recommended to Full Council. We have updated our procurement rules to be ready for the enactment of the new Procurement Act 2023, although these will not come into force until the current amended commencement date of 24 February 2025. As well as reflecting the changes required by the Act, we have also taken the opportunity to make it easier for Managers to understand what they need to do. We have also reflected the focus on supporting smaller businesses. This adds to our existing Go Local policy which we will review over the Autumn.

Ensuring timely scrutiny, challenge and performance management

We now have a dedicated part time officer to provide scrutiny support, who presents reports at each meeting of Overview & Scrutiny on the Decisions and Monitoring Tracker (which replaced the previous Resolutions Report) and the future work programme of the Committee.

The Scrutiny Officer, alongside the Committee, Member and Scrutiny Manager, attend monthly catch-up meetings with the Chair and Vice Chair of the Committee to discuss ongoing developments, consider upcoming agenda items and to apply

longer term thinking to the Overview & Scrutiny work programme. These meetings are supplemented by ongoing communication via email. The work programme is then presented to the Committee, alongside the most recent version of the Forward Plan, to allow input and suggestions from other Members of the Committee. Key themes that the Committee might want to look at are discussed, as well as items on the Forward Plan, giving committee Members opportunity to input into the topics that are scrutinised. This approach reflects that the Council follow the model of pre-decision scrutiny, with Cabinet able to consider any recommendations prior to making decisions. Post-decision call-in is of course still possible but has rarely been used in recent years. Additionally, the Committee has held two Calls to Account on specific projects.

Overview & Scrutiny has performance management within its terms of reference, with relevant indicators set by the Executive. The Committee receives a Council Delivery Plan report before the start of the year that enables them to comment on the performance management measures that will be presented to them on a quarterly basis throughout the year. Members are asked to consider any questions they may have on projects ahead of the meeting and to communicate these to the Scrutiny Officer to ensure that, where possible, answers can be researched ahead of the meeting and provided at the meeting (or where lengthy responses, published alongside the agenda documentation). The Leadership Team also

monitors performance. As well as regular quarterly updates they will be kept up to date more quickly if there are any significant issues to be aware of. For particularly large projects there will be Project or Partnership Boards. These boards have Member involvement and will discuss all the key issues, including any deviations from the project plan. This therefore gives an ideal forum for timely project scrutiny and challenge.

In partnership with the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, the Committee, Member and Scrutiny Team and the Scrutiny Officer, there is a will to continue to promote scrutiny as a positive engagement tool.

There are still outstanding actions from the previous 2022 focused Peer Review, and these are being developed or actioned by the Chair, in conjunction with the Scrutiny Officer. We would welcome any comments on progress made against the previous recommendations, as well as anything further that's required to enforce the role of Scrutiny and the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

Supporting our Members

Approach to Member Development

We have a Councillors' Learning and Development Protocol which has been developed and endorsed by the Learning and Development Member

Champions, who are currently the three Group Leaders. The Protocol is reviewed annually. It sets out elements of training that are compulsory, how training will be delivered and other useful information about Member development. The Learning and Development Member Champions meet with the Committee, Member and Scrutiny Manager and have reviewed the recent Members' Induction Programme and discussed Member development going forwards, following our whole council election. It has been agreed to hold a Member development week in May 2025 and the Champions have been involved in developing this program of events. Members are invited to submit feedback after attending any internal training event, as a commitment to improve the training offered. Within the calendar of meetings there are Member Development sessions scheduled where officers request dates to brief or deliver training on set topics.

Whilst the feedback on the Member induction programme has been positive and training is offered via various methods (remotely, in person on site and off site, visual presentations, recordings available on catch up on the councils training site) we would welcome views from the Peer Team as to how to improve attendance at training/information sessions as this remains a challenge.

The success of the Member Induction Programme has been evaluated by the Committee, Member, and Scrutiny Manager in conjunction with party group leaders. Members also completed surveys to give feedback on the programme and points have been noted for future inductions.

Member briefings and workshops

Budget proposals are discussed at informal Budget Workshops. These are based on political groups and give all Members an opportunity to comment on the proposals. These comments are provided back to Cabinet when they discuss the draft budget.

We also run appropriate workshops to discuss potential changes to policies, for example workshops have been held on Constitutional changes, the Parking Strategy and the emerging Council Plan.

The ability for non-executive Members to influence decision making is more limited under the Cabinet system and there are no delegations specifically to any Executive Member.

We are currently reviewing our constitutional and governance arrangements. Whilst there is no appetite to change to another form of governance, such as a committee system, Members made a commitment to review post the May 2024 elections following several constitutional changes and areas that needed consideration such as the changes to the public speaking scheme for planning control committee.

Member ability to inform/influence decision-making and policy development

We have several non-executive decision-making Committees, for example Planning Control, Licensing and Appeals, Finance, Audit and Risk, Overview & Scrutiny, Joint Staff Consultative Committee, Standards and Employment, as well as Full Council, where non-executive Members are involved and can influence decision-making.

There is also a Cabinet Panel on the Environment. Each meeting is themed on issues relating to climate change, acting as an advisory Panel to the Cabinet when formulating policies and strategies, having engaged with Members and the community via the Panel. We would welcome views on how to make this Panel, and any other Cabinet Panels created, more effective at making suggestions or recommendations on policies to Cabinet.

Keeping Members informed

A 'Members Information Service' (MIS) bulletin is sent to all Members on a weekly basis, as a link to a page on the Hub. This includes the Chair and Vice Chair's calendars, decision sheets from recent meetings, notification of delegated decisions, monthly CCTV reports, planning applications and decisions, pertinent information from respective teams within the council, press releases and relevant news from partners (e.g. the Police). We would welcome views from the Peer Team as to whether there are better ways to

communicate this information, as MIS does not seem to engage all Members (whether it has been in hard copy, or attached to an email, the previous methods of distribution). Similarly, any views on best practice on how to engage with Members would be welcome.

Members can access all pages on the Hub (our intranet), which includes ongoing and timely news relating to Council and includes our monthly staff newsletter, Insight. The magazine includes new news, articles highlighting projects, teams and key calendar dates as well as information on starters, leavers and staff moves. Members are emailed a digital copy of our residents' magazine: Outlook which is delivered to every household in the district twice a year.

On the Council's Hub there are dedicated web pages for Officers, and separate pages for Members. These have been developed following previous recommendations made by a Corporate Peer Review.

Member-officer relationships

We have a protocol for Member/Officer working arrangements that sets out the framework of how Members and officers should interact. The protocol forms part of our Constitution (section 18) and is required to be followed by the Employee Code of Conduct and Councillor Code of Conduct.

Senior officers (in particular) work closely with relevant Executive Members, Shadow (Opposition) Executive Members and Deputy Executive Members (where in a joint administration) and as such have regular briefings. Similarly, the Managing Director has weekly briefings with the Leader and Deputy Leader of the Council, as well as separate monthly briefings with the Leaders of the two Opposition Parties. The Political Liaison Board meets monthly and is made up of: Executive Members of the Cabinet; our Managing Director and our Service Directors.

Following a recent staff survey, one of the questions 'has anyone at work behaved in a way that has made you feel uncomfortable?' 83% of responses said no, 16% of responses said yes (equating to 36 people). 23 examples were provided some of which involved Councillor behaviour so there is some work to do in this area.



Capacity for improvement – how the council adapts, learns and improves

Service design

The council's approach to service design is to choose the best method for delivering a service, whether than be in-house, outsourced or a shared service. It is fair to acknowledge that the preference of the administration would usually be for in-house services, but they have recognised that this will not always be possible.

We have been steadily transforming and evolving our services, working towards a digital first approach for many years. Having already embraced homeworking, implemented collaboration tools, and desktop mailing solutions, when the pandemic arrived in 2020, we were able to continue with minimal disruption to our customers. The legacy of the pandemic has seen a huge shift in consumer behaviours and expectations with the adoption of strong digital services being more in demand now than ever before. This has informed our Digital Strategy [Appendix A - Digital Strategy.pdf \(north-herts.gov.uk\)](#) and the digital transformation programme. The Digital Strategy has created a vision and set of guiding principles, with an approach of digital first for our customers.

Our major outsourced contracts are for waste and street cleansing, recently awarded to Veolia to start in May 2025, green space maintenance with John O Conner and leisure and active communities, recently awarded to Everyone Active from April 2024. We work with partners to shape those services, to deliver the best service that we can afford. For example, we made changes to our outsourced green space maintenance contract that deliver savings such as reduced grass cutting frequency in some areas, as well as several environmental benefits including increased biodiversity, reduced vehicle travel and lower water consumption. We also decided (as part of the procurement of the new waste collection contract) to implement a cycle of three weekly waste and recycling collections to improve levels of recycling, reduce vehicle mileage and deliver financial savings. The draft statutory guidance on frequency of collections was considered as part of the decision-making process.

We work with local authority partners in several different ways. A Shared Internal Audit Service and Shared Anti-Fraud Service; shared services for insurance, CCTV and disabled facilities grants; a joint waste, recycling and street cleaning collection contract with East Herts Council; a shared Building

Control service, including a Local Authority Trading Company, which has enhanced the offer to the building sector and created an award-winning graduate scheme. Previously, all these services were delivered in-house and partnering with other authorities has saved money, improved resilience and modernised services.

How the council demonstrates an organisational-wide approach to continuous improvement

Improving and evolving our services is a key focus of ours, ensuring that we continue to reach and help customers with both efficiency and excellent customer service. A key area of this is our digital transformation programme. Our digital services team is dedicated to assessing needs across our organisation and developing solutions that allow customers better access and understanding and give colleagues better processes. Using an agile approach, we've been able to develop apps for several services that are easier to use, streamline processing time, and save on external supplier costs.

This focus reaches beyond the direct remit of the digital services team, and through staff briefings, case studies and regular sharing of updates we have fostered collaboration and ambition across the council to improve our offering. Both the Digital Services and IT programme of works are now scheduled for a minimum of the next three years, with many service areas actively reaching out for new digital solutions and improved processes. Personal development has also been encouraged through the introduction of apprenticeships through Multiverse, offering colleagues across the council an opportunity to gain a qualification up to degree level in either Data Analysis, AI or Business Transformation. We've seen a strong response to this, with a large sign up to our first cohort, which will improve understanding and drive innovation across the council.

Programme management and transformation

Over the past year we've made significant progress with our digital programme management and transformation. Transformation in particular is now explicitly featured on the council delivery plan and is monitored at a corporate level through an oversight group to challenge and improve our delivery. Regular progress updates allow for teams across the council to see our progress and consider how their own services could be improved through digital transformation.

The management of the programme has been improved through the addition of a dedicated

project manager, and the use of corporate project management methodology. We've adopted an agile and iterative approach, that makes the most of the diverse skills across the team – from technical expertise to a thorough understanding of the different services areas and their requirements. By playing to our strengths, we can identify opportunities and develop collaboratively, streamlining processes and reducing the timelines to deliver improved services.

Thorough planning from the top down allows us to visualise and account for each element, from individual project tasks to the wider programme of works, so we can scope accurately, plan appropriate resourcing and manage delivery expectations.

Our IT team provides invaluable support to the programme, through sharing of expertise and providing advice and sounding boards in the planning and development phases. External resources such as the LGA and Socitim (Society for innovation, technology and modernisation), Local Gov Digital and the Netcall community (our low-code software platform) further bolster our offering, allowing us to tap into skillsets that don't exist full time within our team, and learn from the progress of councils across the country who have been open and collaborative.

Digital and data

By working closely across service areas, and through our learning and development programmes

(including the Multiverse apprenticeship) we are actively encouraging a deeper understanding of digital and data, and its applications across the council to improve our processes and our performance.

A good example is within our Customer Services team, where we're using data analysis for service improvement and quality, measuring against KPIs to show tangible improvements in our response times and outcomes. We've also recently restructured to combine this team with the digital team and allow them to work more closely so that Customer Services can assist in identifying and suggesting digital improvements as they speak with teams across the council.

In each of our projects, we are establishing metrics against which we can measure success e.g. in reducing time spent logging tickets in our new Careline out of hours service app. We've also introduced new roles to facilitate improvement across the council with a focus on digital and data, including a business analyst within our digital team whose role is centred on identifying and defining areas for improvement through digital transformation and accessing graduate placements to work with us on data strategy and how we can better utilise our data in the future.

The Cyber Security Board has now met twice and includes Senior Leadership plus Members (both from the administration and the opposition). The board is actioning work to reduce our exposure to cyber risks.

Climate and ecological emergencies

Like many local authorities, the council declared a Climate Emergency in 2019 and an Ecological Emergency in 2023.

Our latest Climate Change Strategy was published in 2022 and focuses on delivery of our two targets: to be carbon neutral for our own operations by 2030 and our ambition for a Net Zero Carbon district by 2040, as well as adapting our services to the impacts of climate change.

An internal audit report identified a need for additional capacity to deliver projects set out in the strategy. In 2023, a Climate Change and Sustainability Project Manager was recruited to increase capacity, working across teams to deliver projects, such as decarbonisation of our own estate.

Opportunities for external funding have been identified and the council was awarded a £7.74m grant through the Public Sector Decarbonisation Scheme to decarbonise our three leisure centres. Gas use in our leisure centres is the biggest source of our emissions and so utilising this external funding alongside our own capital will make a significant contribution towards our climate targets.

As the council looks to embed the Biodiversity Duty across the council, work is ongoing to develop a broader sustainability strategy. This will encompass climate action, adaptation, biodiversity and other environmental issues to maximise co-benefits, to have the greatest impact with limited resources.

Community capacity

Face to face conversations with our community are a key enabler to us learning from the people who know North Herts best. Our Community Partnerships team work closely with our North Herts community in the following formalised ways (as well as being out and about in the community generally):

Community Forums

These are held in each of the five geographic areas. The Forums each meet four times per civic year. These take the form of informal meetings between Councillors, community groups / third sector/ statutory organisations (Police and Youth Services) and the public. Meetings are themed to relevant topics for individual areas and topics are selected jointly by Councillors and the public.

Councillor Surgeries

These are held monthly in each of four market towns. These provide the opportunity for individuals to raise issues that might either affect them directly or where there is a community need.

Voluntary, Community, Faith & Social Enterprise (VCFSE) conference

This is held annually in partnership with local CVS and Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation. The conference provides the opportunity to hear from the VCFSE organisations to identify ways that we can work together to best use limited resources, e.g., funding, volunteers, partnership working.



Case Study: Investment in Leisure and Active Communities



Through a combination of council and contractor capital investment and grant funding, we have ensured we can continue to provide high quality leisure services, which attract a wide range of users, including those who were previously less active.

The challenge

Our leisure contract was due to come to an end in March 2024. As the procurement was carried out while leisure facilities were still recovering from the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, the likely financial return on the new contract was uncertain. Alongside this, the focus of the contract had previously been solely based around the operation of our leisure facilities. However, our new Active North Herts Strategy highlighted the need to design activities for those who may not traditionally use leisure centres, to try and encourage people to be more physically active.

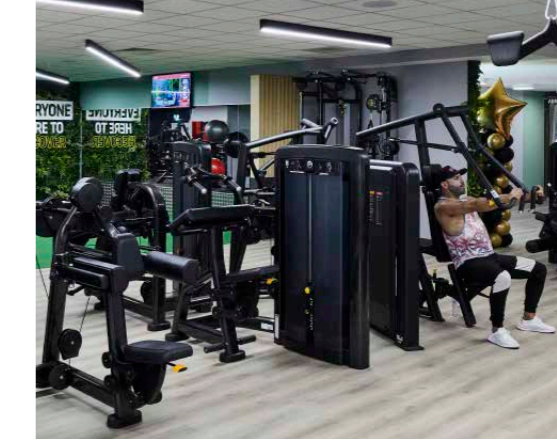
The solution

We carried out a procurement using competitive procedure with negotiation (CPN), enabling us to test different scenarios through variant bids before receiving final tenders. We developed a procurement strategy with clear strategic objectives and incorporated Active Communities as a key element of this. The new contract is designed to deliver more impactful health and wellbeing outcomes, delivered through targeted work within less active communities.

We also utilised £365K of UK Shared Prosperity Funding to fund active communities programmes, including installation of outdoor gyms across the district, providing low-cost outdoor fitness classes and a relaunch of our exercise referral scheme for people with health conditions, who would benefit from increased physical activity.

The impact

A new 10-year Leisure and Active Communities Contract, was awarded to Everyone Active, commencing on 1 April 2024. As well as delivering a robust new contract with a broader remit to help tackle local health inequalities, it secured the business case for circa. £1M of council investment for a gym extension at Royston Leisure Centre and has resulted in a significantly improved financial position. Despite broadening the scope of services to include a new Active Communities Programme, the new arrangements improved the management fee to the council by circa. £6M over the term of the 10-year contract. In addition, Everyone Active have committed £3 million in Capital investments towards extensive refurbishments and expansion efforts across facilities over the course of the contract.



How the new approach is being sustained

We have allocated £50k per annum to support delivery of the new Active Communities service. In support of the Active North Herts Strategy, Everyone Active will deliver an outward-facing Community Activity and Wellbeing service to support our overarching strategy. The Active Communities Programme will be developed using the demographic profile of North Herts to ensure programmes are aimed towards our population's health and areas of need.

Use of Competitive Procedure with Negotiation enabled some negotiation with bidders on the specification. This also allowed us to consider a range of variant bids at Invitation to Submit Initial Tenders stage, which could then be reviewed and agreed whether to include in the final specification.

The timeline for completing the procurement and mobilising the next contract was short (9 months) and normally a procurement of this nature would have commenced anywhere between 6-12 months earlier.

Lessons learned

The use of specialist leisure consultants and lawyers ensured we had a robust procurement strategy and services specification. Consultants guided the project team throughout the whole process, using their expert market knowledge and insight to ensure we achieved the best outcomes. The use of specialist lawyers with expert knowledge of leisure procurements, also ensured the legal process ran smoothly and were in our best interests.

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Case Study: Herts Careline's "All OK" Reassurance Service

Introduction

Herts Careline is a service area of North Herts Council which celebrated its 40th Anniversary in July 2022. It is an award-winning provider of assistive technology and telecare services, supporting individuals both nationally and across Hertfordshire to live independently. Operating in partnership with Hertfordshire County Council (HCC), Careline provides a wide range of services, including community alarms, GPS pendants for outdoor use, and advanced telecare solutions for people with complex needs. These services cater to a diverse customer base, with over 14,000 individuals currently supported. Careline responds to over 7,400 medical emergency calls per annum, ensuring safety and wellbeing for thousands of vulnerable residents.

The All-OK Reassurance Service from Herts Careline is a daily wellbeing check designed to support vulnerable individuals, especially those living alone.

By offering an automated phone call every day, the service enables users to confirm their wellbeing, providing reassurance to both the users and their families. Launched in 2024, the service operates at a low monthly cost and has shown potential for national rollout. It offers early intervention when needed, reducing the risk of health crises for those living independently. The service is a simple yet effective tool for supporting wellbeing, particularly for isolated or elderly individuals.

The challenge

With over 11 million people aged 65 and above in the UK, many of whom live alone, there is a growing concern around undetected health deterioration and delayed medical interventions. These individuals often lack daily visits from family or carers, putting them at greater risk of experiencing health emergencies without timely help.



Families and carers worry about their loved ones' safety when they cannot provide regular, in-person support, particularly in cases of illness or falls.

The solution

Herts Careline developed the All-OK Reassurance Service to address these concerns. The service provides a simple daily check-in via an automated phone call, which can be answered using any landline or mobile. Users respond by pressing '1' to confirm they are well or '2' to request assistance. If no response is received, Careline staff follow up with the user's emergency contacts and, if necessary, call emergency services. This service requires no specialised equipment, making it accessible to a wide audience across the Hertfordshire.

The impact

The service is priced affordably at £15 per month (plus VAT), with an additional £10 setup fee. For existing Herts Careline customers, the service costs £8.75 per month. By providing early intervention and reassurance, the All-OK service helps to prevent emergencies from escalating, reducing the need for more costly interventions by health and social care services. It has proven to be a cost-effective and scalable solution for supporting independent living.

How is the new approach being sustained?

The All-OK service, following its pilot success, has now been rolled out locally. To ensure sustainability, the service is promoted through multiple channels, including a dedicated webpage on the Herts Careline site, and it is supported by a simple application process. The fee-based model covers operational costs, ensuring the service is both sustainable and affordable for users.



Here's what our customers are saying:

"If anything untoward should happen to me in the night, I would be discovered."

"Just to say very good service, in fact I look forward to my morning call."

"It's like having a friend call each day."

"It's reassuring to have a daily phone call at a set time."



Lessons learned:

The pilot phase reinforced the importance of simplicity in service delivery. Many elderly individuals found the single button press easy to use, and the service has been positively received for its non-intrusive approach. The local rollout has underscored the value of digital marketing and outreach to ensure wide awareness of the service, particularly for those without existing alarm systems.

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