

NORTH HERTFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL



HITCHIN TOWN CENTRE STRATEGY

FINAL VERSION NOVEMBER 2004



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PLANNING SERVICES

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The Vision for the Hitchin Town Centre Strategy is:

'To maintain the quality of the built environment based on its intrinsic historic character, and to develop an attractive, safe, accessible, vibrant and lively town centre for the local community and visitors to shop, work and live in'.

This Strategy was adopted by Full Council on 18 November 2004 as

' the Council's Statement of Policy in providing a framework for guiding the overall development and growth of the town centre over the next 10 years whilst recognising its historic character as a market town'.

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SECTION 1: INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 North Hertfordshire District Council (from here referred to as The Council) adopted a Town Centre Template in May 2001, which sets out the Council's intentions for developing town centre strategies. Hitchin is the first town centre strategy to be prepared in this way. With the benefit of two formal public consultation processes in January 2002 and September 2003, and working together with representatives from the local community, business, land owners and other partners, North Hertfordshire District Council has produced this final version of the Hitchin Town Centre Strategy.
- 1.2 This Strategy provides a context for promoting changes and improvements in Hitchin Town Centre. An important element of this is guiding physical development and maximising the opportunities that will benefit the future viability and vitality of the Hitchin town centre, whilst emphasising its historic character, its local distinctiveness and the needs of its local community.
- 1.3 It comprises an overall vision with aims and policy guidance. The Strategy looks forward to the next 10-years up to 2016 (and possibly beyond). It will be complemented by an Action Plan that will be developed for a 5 year period and relate to the Council's Service and Financial Planning process.
- 1.4 Like all strategies, it should be viewed not as a firmly fixed plan, but as a continuing process. It should inform other plans, strategies and service plans, and in turn, be informed and updated by them. This will require reviews every 3 to 5 years. In particular, this Strategy should be seen as contributing towards achieving the district's Vision which is:

'Making North Hertfordshire a vibrant place to live, work and prosper'

And the following strategic priorities for 2004 – 2007 which aim to:

- creating opportunity for all by promoting sustainable economic development;
- promoting sustainable development of the district to ensure we deliver adequate affordable housing, protect the environment and conserve the heritage of our historic settlements;
- promoting first class leisure and cultural facilities to contribute to healthy living for all our citizens; and
- encouraging responsible citizenship and creating safe communities with less crime and less fear of crime.

SECTION 2: CONTEXT AND A VISION FOR HITCHIN

2.1 National and Local Context

2.1.1 There have been important developments in national and regional policy particularly over the last 5 years, which will impact on the future development of town centres and local communities. National policy is set out in legislation, circulars, ministerial statements and planning policy guidance notes (PPG's). Sustainable development and Community Strategies are key priorities.

2.1.2 The Government is committed to creating sustainable communities; communities that will stand the test of time, where people want to live, and which will enable people to meet their aspirations and potential. Local Authorities have a critical role in delivering the government's four aims of sustainable development - economic development; social inclusion; environmental protection; and prudent use of resources. There is the recognised need for planning to facilitate and promote sustainable patterns of urban development and regeneration by:

- making suitable land available for development in line with economic, social and environmental objectives to improve the quality of life;
- contributing to sustainable economic growth;
- protecting and where possible enhancing the natural and historic environment and the quality and character of existing successful communities;
- ensuring high quality development through good design; and
- ensuring that development supports existing communities and contributes to the creation of safe, sustainable and liveable communities with good access to jobs and key services.

The Government has set out its vision for sustainable communities in *Sustainable Communities - building for the future* (Feb 2003) and other relevant guidance notes. This Strategy through its vision, aims and policy guidance contributes to fulfilling the aims of sustainable development.

2.1.3 The thrust of Government policy for retailing and similar uses is to, whenever possible, locate them within town centres, being sustainable locations, and to generally encourage mixed-use developments within town centres.

2.1.4 Of particular significance for guiding future development within town centres are *PPG6 on Town Centres and Retail Development* (1996), *PPG3 on Housing* (2000), *PPG13 on Transport* (2001) and *PPG15 on Planning and Historic Environment* (1994). The relevant key components are:

- *PPG6* encourages local authorities to provide a positive framework for promoting investment in town centres through a variety of means, including preparation of town centre strategies, facilitating site assembly, allocating sites for development, encouraging mixed-use developments and new housing development, promotion of town centre management and making more efficient use of town centre car parking;
- *PPG3* also adds impetus to residential development within town centres through the emphasis on brownfield sites being preferred development locations, as well as encouraging the reuse and conversion of floor space in vacant commercial properties and on upper floors above shops for residential purposes;

- *PPG13* encourages local authorities to actively manage the pattern of urban growth to make full use of public transport by focusing major travel generating development in town centres and near to public transport interchanges, and to plan for increased intensity of development at locations that are highly accessible by public transport, walking and cycling; and
- *PPG15* contains a statement of Government policies for the identification and protection of historic buildings, conservation areas and other elements of the historic environment. It explains the role played by the planning system in their protection. The guidance urges local authorities to maintain and strengthen their commitment to the stewardship of the historic environment.

2.1.5 As part of changes to the planning system introduced in the *Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004*, the government are publishing Planning Policy Statements (PPS) to replace PPG's. Of particular importance is draft *PPS6 – Planning for Town Centres*. The key messages of the new draft *PPS6* are:

- a re-emphasis of the 'town centres first' objective;
- the need for a plan-led approach at both regional and local levels;
- the need for local planning authorities to plan for growth and growing town centres;
- the need to tackle social exclusion by ensuring access for all to a wide range of everyday goods and services; and
- the need to promote more sustainable patterns of development with less reliance on the car.

2.1.6 The advice in Government policy at the national level is complemented by *Regional Planning Guidance for the Southeast* (RPG9) and adopted *Hertfordshire Structure Plan 1998*. The regional guidance was published in April 2001 and sets out various key principles to govern the continuing development of the region, of which the following are pertinent to this Strategy:

- urban areas should become the main focus for development through making them more attractive, accessible and better able to attract investment;
- the pattern of development should be less dispersed and more sustainable patterns of activity, allowing home, work, leisure, green spaces, cultural facilities and community services to be in closer proximity; and
- access to jobs, services, leisure and cultural facilities should be less dependent on longer distance movement and there should be increased ability to meet normal travel needs through say walking, cycling and public transport with reduced reliance on the car.

Hertfordshire now forms part of the East of England Region and the emerging *RPG14* will provide relevant regional guidance when it is adopted. A deposit draft is expected in autumn 2004.

2.1.7 The *Hertfordshire Structure Plan* reinforces the role of the planning system by seeking to provide a positive framework in encouraging appropriate investment in town centres, and identifies the role of local planning authorities in promoting town centre strategies. The Structure Plan identifies priorities by which the vitality and viability of town centres should be maintained and strengthened. It also states that local authorities should identify sites in town centres for key town centre uses and prepare development briefs for such sites. Once *RPG14* is adopted, it will supersede the Structure Plan.

- 2.1.8 The adopted District Local Plan – *North Hertfordshire District Local Plan No.2 with Alterations*, through its various policies provides guidance on development within town centres. The current Local Plan is in the process of being reviewed with a deposit draft anticipated in 2005. It will be in the form of a Local Development Framework (LDF). The provisions of the *Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004*, set out that LDFs should replace Local Plans.
- 2.1.9 This Strategy acknowledges these national and regional principles and policies and is intended to supplement and complement the Structure Plan and District Local Plan and other documents prepared by the County, District and other statutory authorities. Some of the policies stated in the Strategy may be taken forward as land use policies and included in the Council's Local Development Framework. The relevant Local Plan policies are indicated in *italics* next to those policies in the Strategy for information purposes and to show the links between the District Local Plan No.2 with Alterations and the Strategy.
- 2.1.10 The Hertfordshire County Council in conjunction with the Council and the local community produced a *Transportation Plan for Hitchin*, which was adopted in 1998. This Plan sets out objectives consistent with national objectives for transport, and presents a number of strategies, which offers a balanced approach to transport and makes provision for pedestrians, cyclists, passenger transport and the private car within and around the town centre. This Strategy through its 'Accessibility' section intends to complement the Hitchin Transportation Plan and identify and support its objectives through its policy statements.
- 2.1.11 A list of relevant Government Guidance notes and documents produced by other bodies on good practice for enhancing the economic, social and environmental role of town centres is provided in Appendix 1. In addition, other studies and relevant guidance are listed. The role of this Strategy is to provide overall guidance for all that live, work and visit the town centre and to ensure that change occurs in a positive way, so that it improves the economic, social and environmental well being of the town centre.

2.2 A Vision for Hitchin

- 2.2.1 Hitchin is an historic market town with a strong and vibrant town centre. The local economy offers a good mix of retail, business and leisure activities. Hitchin town centre has a strong local identity with its historic streets and buildings, independent specialist retail sector provision, vibrant market and attractive public spaces, which all help to foster civic pride.
- 2.2.2 Hitchin, like other market towns, faces a number of challenges in meeting Government initiatives in terms of delivering urban renaissance (i.e. delivering a better quality of urban development and living), creating more sustainable developments and promoting social inclusion. Vibrant, successful town centres can be the hearts of communities as they are an important source of employment as well as shops and services. They are also places to live and relax.
- 2.2.3 To ensure that Hitchin continues to thrive as a successful market town, the **Overall Vision** for Hitchin's Town Centre is:

'To maintain the quality of the built environment based on its intrinsic historic character, and to develop an attractive, safe, accessible, vibrant and lively town centre for the local community and visitors to shop, work and live in'.



2.2.4 The Key Aims to achieve this vision are to:

- *ensure the long term economic sustainability and viability of the town centre;*
- *promote a balanced mix and diversity of land uses within the town centre that contribute to its vitality and local distinctiveness;*
- *generate employment opportunities and housing for the benefit of the local community;*
- *enhance the environment of the town centre by promoting local distinctiveness, conserving the historic character of the town, achieving good quality design and preserving the public realm including public spaces;*
- *actively promote the market and ensure it continues to operate successfully;*
- *provide a safe and secure environment;*
- *encourage regeneration to the highest quality achievable which complements and enhances the historic character of the town;*
- *promote a town centre accessible to all by encouraging a choice of transport modes;*
- *improve access for pedestrians and other non-car users to and within the town centre;*
- *provide new and replacement community facilities;*
- *implement a strategy for long term management and maintenance of the town centre as a whole, for the benefit of shoppers, businesses and residents;*
- *improve tourism and inward investment to the town;*
- *encourage greater community involvement in the life of the town centre; and*
- *make the most efficient use of land, buildings, energy, water and waste.*

2.2.5 The Strategy is divided into a number of themes, which provide the relevant policies to help deliver the key aims identified above. The themes are:

- Built Environment and Public Spaces
- Land Use Activities
- Community Facilities
- Accessibility
- Community Safety
- Promotion and Marketing

2.3 Community Involvement & Partnership Working:

2.3.1 North Hertfordshire District Council recognises the value in consulting with and working in partnership with public, private and voluntary organisations, the local community including young people in producing a strategy for Hitchin.

2.3.2 Local authorities are under a duty to prepare Community Strategies as set out in the Government White Paper: *'Modern Local Government – In touch with the people'* (1998) and *Local Government Act of 2000*. Community Strategies have been introduced to enhance the quality of life of local communities through action to improve the economic, social and environmental well being of an area and its inhabitants. The Council in partnership with Hertfordshire County Council, the Police, Fire Service, Primary Care Trusts, business representatives, community and voluntary groups has produced a Community Strategy for North Hertfordshire. The process of collecting information for the Community Strategy began in Hitchin with an Area Visioning exercise and the outcomes of this have been taken into account in preparing this Town Centre Strategy. It is also necessary that the results of this consultation and implementation are reviewed regularly; the separate town visioning plans will be tabled quarterly at Area Committee meetings and the Community Strategy itself reviewed each year, with a public conference to report progress.

2.3.3 The Council formally consulted the public on two earlier drafts of the Hitchin Town Centre Strategy. This was in January/February 2002 and again in September 2003. In response to the first public consultation exercise and the Hitchin Area Visioning Exercise, a Hitchin Town Centre Stakeholder Group was established in May 2002. The Stakeholder Group comprised individuals who represented various voluntary and commercial interests groups including local residents. A list of the Stakeholder Group is attached at Appendix 2. The Group worked together with Council Officers for the interest of the town as a whole and to devise positive inputs and ideas for the second draft of the Hitchin Town Centre Strategy.

2.3.4 Since consulting on the second draft of the Town Centre Strategy, the Council has continued to work together with interested individuals including landowners and young people to progress the work on the strategy in as open a manner as is possible. Meetings have been held through the Hitchin Visioning Group and also with young people from a local school and youth group. The Strategy attempts to recognise the varying interests of the town and the needs of the local community expressed through the various meetings and comments made throughout the consultation process. These views have been addressed and incorporated into this final version of the Strategy and the more detailed views will be reflected in the Action Plan. (See Section 4)

SECTION 3: THEMES AND POLICY GUIDANCE

3.1 BUILT ENVIRONMENT & PUBLIC SPACES

BUILT ENVIRONMENT

- 3.1.1 The environmental quality and historic character of Hitchin are important as they influence the way people perceive the town. In turn, they influence how people use and are attracted to a town centre and this ultimately affects its success commercially, socially and environmentally. Hitchin is fortunate that many of its old buildings remain in the town centre core creating the unique character and layout which defines Hitchin.
- 3.1.2 Hitchin is a very fine historic market town. The town centre has retained its street pattern virtually unaltered since the mid-15th century. This is reflected in the continuous back of pavement edge building lines and the long narrow burgage plots at right angles to the streets. Most buildings are domestic in scale and are mainly two- with some three-storey buildings. The town centre lies within a designated Conservation Area. It has many important historic buildings, some dating back to the 15th century. Many are Listed and others are included in the Council's Register of Important Local Buildings. St Mary's Church (Grade 1 Listed building dating largely from 14th and 15th centuries) is a landmark building and plays an important part in the town's character and in understanding the layout of the town centre. The setting and key views of St.Mary's Church are important aspects which will need to be retained. Since the 1930's, with the removal of houses in Queen Street in front of St.Mary's Church, the public have enjoyed open views of the Church across St. Mary's Square from Queen Street. Key views of St.Mary's Church should be protected.



POLICY 1:

The Council will resist the loss of Listed Buildings and other Historic Buildings of Local Importance that are important to the character and appearance of the town.

(LP Policy 18)

POLICY 2:

The Council will refuse development proposals within the Hitchin town centre which do not respect the historic layout and existing character and domestic scale of heights and proportions of buildings, (including the features of varied roof heights and narrow building frontages).

(LP Policies 20 and 57 G2)

POLICY 3:

The Council will require development proposals around St.Marys Church to retain keys views of the Church in particular the views from Queen Street.

(LP Policies 12 and 20)



3.1.3 In 1998 when the Council reviewed the Conservation Area it produced a *Character Statement for Hitchin*. This identifies the positive and negative aspects of the current appearance of the town's historic character. The Character Statement also identifies particular parts of the town where improvements could be made to respect and enhance the character and appearance of the Conservation Area. These are:

- **The Park Street Triangle** is an important gateway into the town centre that has a weak character and poor appearance in comparison to the rest of the Conservation Area.
- **Queen Street** - the original character of the southern end has been lost with the 20th century development on the corner with Bridge Street.

- **St Mary's Square** - A neutral area of inappropriate uses with open views of the church, contributing nothing to the town centre's character
- **Portmill Lane** - Poor quality townscape as a result of the open areas for car parks and servicing areas for the shops fronting Bancroft.
- **Market** - Relocated in the early 70's this creates poor townscape views of unattractive and out-of-date stalls and the Churchgate Shopping Centre.
- **Market Place** - The Churchgate Shopping Centre provides a weak eastern elevation
- **Hermitage Road South side** - More recent buildings fail to retain the existing building line and are poorly detailed e.g. the Post Office Site and immediate buildings adjacent to it.
- **Bridge Street** - The design and materials of Crown House are unattractive to the appearance of this area.
- **River Hiz** – The environment of the river corridor is poorly maintained, from Bridge Street to Hermitage Road, and in the vicinity of the Sainsbury's site.
- **Bancroft** - There are some examples of unsympathetic modern infill, such as the building occupied by Wilkinsons.
- **Paynes Park** - There are some examples of unsympathetic modern infill.

The Hitchin Town Centre Stakeholder Group made similar comments on these areas and opportunities for their redevelopment or enhancement are included in this Strategy.

- 3.1.4 New development within the town centre must respect the historic environment and reinforce local distinctiveness in terms of scale and form of surrounding buildings. This does not have to replicate local historic buildings, but should be of a high standard of design using good quality materials and add positively to the architectural development of the town. Guidance produced by CABE (Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment) and English Heritage (see Appendix 1) suggest that it is possible to bring forward modern designs of architectural distinction which understand and respect local character.

POLICY 4:

The Council will support the conservation and enhancement of the historic character of the town centre through the design and maintenance of a high quality attractive environment that builds upon existing features that make up the distinctive appearance of Hitchin. This will be achieved by requiring developers to demonstrate that their proposals :

- are of a high quality design through the application of principles contained within planning policies, Supplementary Planning Guidance, Planning Development Briefs, the Hitchin Conservation Area Character Statement and other relevant guidance;**
- have regard to the character and setting of historic and listed buildings, and**
- make use of high quality materials in their design.**

(LP Policies 12, 20 and 57 G2)

PUBLIC SPACES

- 3.1.5 The Market Place and Churchyard formed the heart of the medieval town and today remain as part of the main town centre core. Market Place is a hard surfaced public space enclosed by a variety of building styles and ages on all four sides with entrances into it at the corners, which contain views into and out of the square. The eastern elevation of Market Place is weakened by the unsympathetic design of the Churchgate Centre. One of the policies of this Strategy is to promote the redevelopment or refurbishment of the Churchgate Centre. Such a scheme must make a positive contribution to Market Place and respect its existing buildings and character. Market Place has adapted well to change over time and is still able to support a number of functions, which serve to attract visitors to the town.
- 3.1.6 Other smaller public spaces have the potential for improvement to make them visually more attractive and encourage greater use by the public. These include Churchyard, Seebohm Gardens, the Hine Memorial Gardens, the Hitchin museum and library grounds, Moss's Corner, as well as parts of the River Hiz.
- 3.1.7 To the north and east of the town centre are larger areas of formal and less formal open spaces. Bancroft Recreation Ground comprising formal gardens, recreation and children's play facilities provides an attractive gateway when entering the town centre from the north. These grounds are linked to the rest of the town centre along Bancroft and the River Hiz walkway. Windmill Hill and the Dell are areas of less formal open space located on the eastern edge of the town centre. These spaces provide an attractive setting for the town and pedestrian links to the town centre from Woodside Car Park and from residential areas located to the east of the town.
- 3.1.8 There is a lot of semi-public space within the town centre including the many surface car parks and the green space surrounding St Mary's Church, the Cloisters and the Arcade. Along Queen Street and Portmill Lane, these surface car parks provide a poor setting for the Church and could be improved by a high quality hard and soft landscape scheme. A longer term aim would be to develop St. Mary's Square car park into a formal public open space.

POLICY 5:

The Council will seek to protect and enhance or improve public and semi-public open space and seek to create new spaces within new development proposals within the town centre that are accessible to all.

(LP Policy 21)

The River Hiz:

- 3.1.9 The River Hiz is a feature of the town that should be enhanced as part of any development within the river's vicinity. In addition to improving the natural environment there is the opportunity to improve the river as a focal point in the town, which people can use as an amenity and as an attractive pedestrian walkway linking areas of the town (see plan HTC1). For several years, the Council's long-term aim has been to create an open, safe and accessible continuous walkway along the river from Bancroft Recreation Ground through to Bridge Street. Much has already been achieved in the recreation ground and along the new Sainsbury's boundary. The walkway needs to be well illuminated at night. The Council would not support the river being covered over by development, except for access ways. There are two main areas for opening up the River Hiz walkway:
- (a) Between Hermitage Road and Bridge Street, these would include development schemes at the Post Office and Crown House. Parts of the river could be uncovered

in the market area. Along this stretch greater access could be achieved with level footpaths alongside visually attractive areas of open space, seating, planting and complementary land uses such as cafes and restaurants.

- (b) Between Hermitage Road and Bancroft Recreation Ground, with the proposed development at the Ransom site. The riverside walk will be attractively landscaped, illuminated at night and clearly signposted from Hermitage and Whinbush Roads. A longer term aim would be to link the river walkway from the Ransom site through to Hermitage Road to achieve a continuous walkway.

The Council previously prepared Development Guidelines for the River Hiz, and many of the design principles are still relevant. The Guidelines will be updated in light of this Strategy.

Moss's Corner:

- 3.1.10 Moss's Corner located on the southern most part of Bancroft has the highest pedestrian footfall in the town centre core area (see Plan HTC1). The existing hard landscaping treatment detracts from the appearance of this part of the town centre. The changes in level, together with the clutter of street furniture, make pedestrian access through this area difficult. Moss's Corner could be a well-defined and attractive hard open space, which could contribute to the character of the town and could be easier for pedestrians to use. There is the opportunity to strengthen the pedestrian linkage between Moss's Corner, Bancroft, Churchyard and the Portmill Lane area with a high quality landscape scheme. An enhancement scheme will be prepared for this area.

THE STREET SCENE

Sun Street and Bucklersbury Enhancement Scheme:

- 3.1.11 Sun Street and Bucklersbury Enhancement Scheme was the Council's priority set in 2000/2001. The aim of the scheme was to create an attractive environment and improve pedestrian movement in order to encourage people into the area whilst still allowing necessary vehicular access as well as contributing to the overall vitality of the town centre. The objectives for the scheme include:

- creating a pedestrian friendly environment;
- allowing vehicular access for deliveries and servicing;
- linking the schemes visually with the existing materials and design of Market Place; and
- considering access requirements for disabled people.

- 3.1.12 The scheme has been implemented and the Council will continue to work together with the Hertfordshire County Council, Hitchin Town Centre Initiative, the Hitchin Chamber of Commerce and with local businesses and residents to maintain and improve the environment making it attractive and accessible for visitors.

Paynes Park:

3.1.13 Consideration needs to be given to improving the environment; to visually enhancing the street frontage along Paynes Park and to improving the pedestrian linkage from the Lairage Car Park to the High Street and Market Place. (See plan HTC1). The pedestrian routes need to be safe, attractive and clearly sign posted. The requirement to improve pedestrian links between the Lairage multi-storey car park, the Hitchin Library and Museum are referred to under traffic circulation (Para.3.4.4), which identifies the need to carry out a feasibility study of the one-way system on Paynes Park, Old Park Road and Bedford Road. This feasibility study should consider the possibility of reducing through traffic along Paynes Park. It is important that new development and improved pedestrian links enhance this area. The Council is working together with respective landowners in preparing a Planning Brief for Paynes Park (Policy 21).

Queen Street Frontage:

3.1.14 Consideration needs to be given to visually enhancing the street frontage by:

- working together with Hertfordshire County Council to consider recovering space from motor traffic, i.e. reducing the width of the carriage way, to enhance the street scene and provide better bus interchange and improved bus facilities at St Mary's Square Car Park, better cycle facilities and cycle lanes and improving pedestrian crossing points;
- providing a better setting for St Mary's Church and other historic buildings;
- using hard and soft landscaping where appropriate; and
- ensuring that new developments and refurbishment of buildings enhance the character of the street scene.

A Design Guide will be prepared for Queen Street frontage; which will include the gateways at Park Street Triangle and Windmill Hill/Walsworth Road. (See para 3.1.16).

Gateways:

3.1.15 Some areas, because of their layout and their groupings of buildings, have been identified as important visual gateways when approaching the town centre by vehicle or on foot. Through public consultation, the following gateways have been identified as opportunities for enhancement: See Plan HTC 1.

3.1.16 **The Park Street Triangle and Windmill Hill / Walsworth Road** are to be included in the preparation of an overall Design Brief for Queen Street's frontages. Enhancement opportunities include: encouraging the redevelopment/refurbishment of the building on the north-west corner of the Park Street Triangle to provide a positive and sympathetic addition to the character and appearance of this part of the Conservation Area; narrowing the Queen Street and Walsworth Road carriageway to include cycle lanes; improving pedestrian links and footpaths to the town centre, the Woodside Car Park and Windmill Hill; and adding hard and soft landscape features including planting to visually enhance the Queen Street frontage.

3.1.17 **The Park Way** (including the roundabout at Park Way, Upper Tilehouse Street, Old Park Road and Paynes Park) and **Bedford Road / Old Park Road**, will be considered in the light of a traffic feasibility study needed to examine whether traffic circulation can be altered in this part of the town centre. The conclusions will determine what enhancements can be proposed to help pedestrians across Paynes Park and enhance the surrounding areas including Butts Close and routes into the town centre.

POLICY 6:

The Council will promote opportunities for enhancement within the town centre that improve the street scene and public spaces, and will work together with the Hitchin Town Centre Initiative, Hertfordshire County Council and other public and voluntary sector organisations including landowners to promote these opportunities.

Design Briefs will be prepared for:

- a) Moss's Corner
- b) Queen Street frontage including the Gateways at the Park Street Triangle and at Walsworth Road/Windmill Hill
- c) Gateways at Parkway and Old Park Road/Bedford Road

The Council will revise the River Hiz Development Guidelines and include enhancement opportunities at Paynes Park as part of the Paynes Park Planning Brief.



3.2 LAND USE ACTIVITIES

3.2.1 The competitiveness of a town centre largely reflects its vitality and viability. To be successful, a town centre needs a balanced mix of different land uses. Modern thriving town centres are not only viable in terms of the shops present but also the leisure and entertainment opportunities, financial services, business activities and health services on offer. Residential accommodation also adds to the vitality, with people being present throughout the 24-hour day and to the viability by being potential customers. These uses will be encouraged to come together in such a way that is complementary and sympathetic to the size and character of Hitchin as well as promoting its vitality and viability. Market towns such as Hitchin can be successful as long as the right balances are achieved between investment and development with attractiveness and scale.

Shopping:

3.2.2 Hitchin (together with Letchworth Garden City, Baldock and Royston) lie within the sub-regional shopping catchment areas of Cambridge, Stevenage, Welwyn Garden City, Luton, Bedford and Milton Keynes. Hitchin is an historic market town and identified in the *Hertfordshire Structure Plan* as a minor sub-regional shopping centre. It serves both its local community and a number of surrounding rural villages with a good range and choice of shops, services and community facilities. A sizeable number of the town's visitors also come from Letchworth Garden City and Baldock. The town has a reasonably stable town centre composition as identified in the *MVM (2001) 'Hitchin Town Centre Retail and Business Strategy Report'*. In January 2004, the Council commissioned *Nathaniel Lichfield and Partners (NLP)* to carry out a *Town Centre and Retail Study*. This study was completed in June 2004. The NLP Report identifies the following strengths in terms of shopping:

- Hitchin Town Centre has a reasonable range and choice of shops and has the best quality and range of comparison shops in the District. The Market also helps to attract customers to the town.
- The vacancy rate is significantly lower than the national average, which suggests demand for premises is relatively strong.
- The centre has a good range of small specialist independent retailers.

3.2.3 A Visitor Survey carried out by the Council in February 2004 found that the most common reason why people visit Hitchin is to do non-food shopping (67.8%). The second most popular reason was to visit the market (61.4%), followed by food shopping (55.9%).

3.2.4 The NLP (2004) report identified Hitchin as serving shoppers from across the District, particularly for comparison-shopping. However, the study found that a significant proportion of the available retail expenditure in the District was spent outside of the District's four main town centres. This was particularly the case with non-food (comparison) shopping. This money was spent elsewhere in the larger retail centres within the sub-regional catchment. These centres offer a greater number of comparison shopping outlets and leisure activities than Hitchin. Also, they have either improved or are seeking to improve their retail and leisure provision and so meet the changing needs and trends in retailer representation and consumer spending patterns. While retaining its local character and identity, and making the best use of its attributes, Hitchin needs to maintain and promote investor and consumer confidence in the town centre.

3.2.5 Apart from land use change, the town centre's existing and potential attractions relate to its environment and the range of regular promotional activities. Market Place and High Street were enhanced in the early 1990s, and the Council has undertaken an improvement scheme

for Bucklersbury and Sun Street. People have expressed views, which support giving more priority to pedestrians and therefore potential customers in the shopping core (see Section 3.4 Accessibility). Shopkeepers and landowners in Hitchin created the highly successful Hitchin Town Centre Initiative, which the Council supports financially. This is run by the Town Centre Manager and provides practical help and undertakes a wide variety of activities to support and promote the town.

POLICY 7

The Council will encourage:

- (a) the retention and improvement of shopping in the core of Hitchin town centre and,**
- (b) other measures to attract customers and investors whilst enhancing its local character and identity.**

The Council will support appropriate regeneration including redevelopment and environmental enhancement, a mix of land uses outside the shopping core including housing.

(LP Policies 42, 43, 44 and 45)



3.2.6 The existing main shopping areas, which include Market Place, High Street, and Bancroft as far as Hermitage Road and the western part of Hermitage Road, are currently vibrant. These areas attract the higher rental levels in the town centre and are where the national multiples are located. The remainder of the town centre core provides a greater mix of uses – shops, food/drink and financial services. This area includes Sun Street, Bucklersbury, Brand Street, Churchgate, Churchyard, Churchyard Walk, the Arcade and the remainder of Hermitage Road and Bancroft.

- 3.2.7 The main shopping areas are under constant pressure for more food and drink (A3) activities. Although A3 uses add generally to the vitality and viability of the town centre during the day and in the evening, the loss of too many shopping (A1) uses detracts from the overall functioning of the shopping core of the town centre. As part of the Local Development Framework process the Council will consider designating areas of the town centre core as either primary or secondary shopping frontages. Strict controls over loss of retail uses would apply, particularly in the primary shopping frontages.

POLICY 8:

The Council will support shopping within the town centre, and refuse non-shopping proposals within primary shopping frontages. The mix of uses will be reviewed regularly to ensure the continued vitality and viability of the town centre.

(LP Policies 42 and 43)

POLICY 9:

The Council will encourage and approve proposals for the appropriate location of food and drink and leisure uses in the town centre, at street level or above, that will actively contribute to the vitality and viability of the town centre and not to the detriment of primary shopping frontages or the amenity of local residents.

(LP Policies 39, 43 and 44)

- 3.2.8 The NLP (2004) report assessed the quantitative and qualitative scope for new retail floorspace in North Hertfordshire in the period from 2004 to 2016. The report contains broad guidance on the amount of extra retail floorspace, which could be accommodated in the District, based on changes to population and levels of expenditure. The Council will use the findings of this report as an input into policies and possible allocations, in the Local Development Framework. It will be for the Council to consider how to distribute any new retail development between the main towns in the District, although it is likely that any increase in retail floorspace would be accommodated mainly within Hitchin and Letchworth Garden City. Any new retail development must support and complement the existing shopping provision.
- 3.2.9 In the 2004 report, NLP concluded that there was no overriding need to identify further opportunities in the District for foodstore development up to 2011. If a qualitative need does exist for convenience shopping, then this would have to be demonstrated by the developer.
- 3.2.10 In considering possible future retail development, the Council needs to take account of the potential expenditure available, the potential demand from retailers and their unit size requirements, and the potential available sites. The NLP report has considered a number of sites in Hitchin, which may be suitable for retail development, including Churchgate, Paynes Park and the Post Office site. Any refurbishment or redevelopment will also create the opportunity to improve the physical environment in these areas. New retail development must relate well to the existing pattern of development, scale of existing buildings and to the historic fabric of the town centre. (See section 3.1 Built Environment and Public Spaces).

POLICY 10:

The Council will expect any significant additional retail development within the town centre to be based upon up to date quantitative and qualitative assessments. Developers will need to demonstrate that there is a need for additional retail provision within the town centre based on current planning advice and policies, and indicate how development will meet demand. Any new retail development must relate well to the existing pattern of development, scale of existing buildings and historic fabric of the town centre.

(LP Policies 42 and 43)

POLICY 11:

The Council will undertake regular ‘health checks’ of the retail economy in accordance with the guidelines set out in PPS6. These will be used to assess the vitality and viability of the town centre and monitor the effectiveness of policies in the Council’s Local Development Framework. It is envisaged that monitoring of uses in the town centre will be undertaken annually.

(LP Policies 42, 43 and 44)

Hitchin Market:

3.2.11 Hitchin market is important to the town’s character and economic success. For many years the market has been successful. According to research undertaken by consultants, Michael Felton associates (October 2001), this is contrary to the documented trends of most markets operating within similar towns. The market operates three days a week and is an important visitor attraction for the town and contributor to the local economy. The results of the Council’s Town Centre Visitor Survey 2004 found that visiting the market was the second most common reason for coming to the town centre. Hitchin market is an important retail asset.

3.2.12 The Council operates an ongoing maintenance programme to ensure that the Hitchin market is fit for purpose in providing a safe and pleasant environment for both traders and customers.



3.2.13 The market could, however, be improved and upgraded in terms of layout, accessibility and facilities to meet the needs of traders and customers, and would contribute to the overall development of the town. The Council has worked with market traders and local people to identify key factors for an improved and successful market. These are:

- Location: - pedestrian footfall and links to other retail and leisure activities within the town centre is of the utmost importance for a viable market. Access and good pedestrian links to car parks and public transport facilities are also important, as are visibility of the market to passing trade and signage. The market must be accessible to all.
- Size: - it is important to provide similar facilities for existing traders that provide both economies of scale and operational efficiency. An improved market should be designed to cater for all the regularly used capacity, and be flexible to cater for varying demands for space.
- Layout: - for the market to function well there needs to be sufficient space between stalls for on-site circulation of traders and customers, as well as service/cleaning vehicles. The market should comprise a good mix of stalls in terms of size, type and location to encourage the circulation of visitors through the market.
- Types of stalls: - The market should accommodate a mix of permanent, enclosed and demountable stalls to allow for flexibility and to create a vibrant and lively market.
- Design: - The market should remain as an open market and be designed to contribute to and respect the historic character of Hitchin.
- Vehicle parking: - appropriate provision is to be made for traders' vehicles.

POLICY 12:

The Council will work together with the Hitchin Market Traders' Association and other organisations to actively promote the market and to ensure that the market will continue to operate successfully.

POLICY 13:

The Council recognises that work is essential to rejuvenate Hitchin Market to enable it to flourish in the contemporary retail sector. The Council will seek to work together with the Market Traders' Association through the formulation of an action plan to improve the market for Hitchin by:

- (a) achieving the best design that will improve the appearance, layout and functionality of the market and respect its historic surroundings;**
- (b) ensuring that the market is accessible to all and that there are strong pedestrian links between the market and retail core of the town centre, bus services and car parks;**
- (c) ensuring that the market continues to operate during any redevelopment; and by**
- (d) Providing appropriate signage for and to the market.**

Commercial and Leisure Uses:

- 3.2.14 Hitchin town centre has a diversity of uses at upper floor levels, the two most important uses being residential and business followed by retail (mainly as ancillary storage to ground floor units), food/drink and leisure uses.
- 3.2.15 The office sector in Hitchin is currently very localised and traditional, with primarily small space occupiers in the town centre for local and service businesses. The majority of office/business uses tend to be concentrated along Hermitage Road, Bancroft (north of Hermitage Road), Bridge Street, Tilehouse Street, Paynes Park and at the Priory. The demand for office space within Hitchin town centre is not high, as indicated by the number of vacancies. Nevertheless, with care, older buildings can generally be converted to provide prestigious office accommodation, should there be a demand for such uses. There are opportunities for some offices at upper floor level to be converted to leisure or residential uses, and these would help to bring people into the town and contribute to its vitality and the local economy. It is also recognised however that there is a need to retain a reasonable level of office accommodation within the town centre to support the local economy.

POLICY 14:

The Council will work together with its partners, including Business Link, Hitchin Chamber of Commerce and Hitchin Town Centre Initiative to facilitate commercial development opportunities within the town centre.

POLICY 15:

The Council will approve office proposals only as a part of mixed use developments outside the shopping core of Hitchin Town Centre.

(LP Policies 37 and 44)

- 3.2.16 Over the latter half of the 1990's the bar/restaurant sector of the leisure market in town centres has rapidly expanded, and Hitchin is no exception. The number of food/drink and leisure uses within the town centre has increased. They are mainly located along Sun Street, Bucklersbury, Bancroft (north of Hermitage Road) Hermitage Road, and Market Place. On the whole, these have been successfully integrated into the local environment and retain the town's traditional diversity of shops and services.
- 3.2.17 However the town centre is under increasing pressure from food/drink operators. Whilst it is recognised that these uses add vitality and viability to the town centre and also form part of the evening economy, the challenge is to find an acceptable balance between these uses that will contribute to the character and viability of the town centre and ensuring that they will not undermine the shopping function of the primary retail frontage, or conflict with adjacent land uses such as residential properties. The NLP report recommends that 10-15% of any new retail floorspace should be set-aside for food and drink uses. Such uses could be accommodated within potential development sites such as Churchgate, Paynes Park and the Post Office site.
- 3.2.18 Food or drink and entertainment premises can be the source of high level noise and anti-social behaviour. This can cause conflict or loss of amenity for other users or residents in the town centre. Under *The Licensing Act 2003*, the Council will be responsible for licensing functions and is required to publish a *Licensing Policy for the District* by 7 January 2005. This Policy will be subject to ongoing consultation and formal review every three years. In Hitchin, this will be an additional means of encouraging a wide range of activities to benefit the town

socially and economically. The Act encourages responsible licensing with a view to the promotion of the reduction of crime and disorder, public safety, the prevention of public nuisance and the protection of children from harm.

- 3.2.19 In addition to utilising the provisions of the Licensing Act the Authority is currently investigating the implications of adopting alcohol free zones in town centres with a proven history of alcohol related anti-social behaviour. Statistical analysis will need to support the need for this and will be in the form of reports of disorder, drunkenness, possession of open cans/bottles of drink providing evidence of need.

POLICY 16:

The Council, in the near future, will be publishing a Statement of Licensing Policy for North Hertfordshire. This will assist in reducing conflict at late night entertainment venues by encouraging longer licensing hours and minimising anti-social behaviour attributable to licensed venues.

Residential Land Uses:

- 3.2.20 The government places considerable emphasis on achieving brownfield site development. This includes the reuse and conversion of vacant commercial buildings or of upper floors above shops as a means of meeting new housing requirements. Hitchin town centre over the last 10 years has experienced a significant amount of new housing development, for example:

- conversion of part of the Telephone Exchange in Queen Street to flats, and redevelopment of the Hitchin Laundry site to elderly persons dwellings, and of 40 Queen Street for houses and flats;
- development of terrace dwellings to the rear of properties in Tilehouse Street and Jill Grey Place;
- demolition of a car show room and development of flats in Bancroft; and
- conversions of various commercial premises at upper floor level to residential within the town centre core.

- 3.2.21 The main residential areas at first floor level are along Hermitage Road, Market Place and High Street. There are significant residential properties along Queen Street, Tilehouse Street and the northern end of Bancroft at the edge of the retail core. The majority of housing is either private sector to buy or to rent. The more people who live in the town centre, the more they contribute to the local economy and in particular to the evening economy. Refurbishment and sensitive re-use of historic and older buildings plus occupation of vacant flats improves the attractiveness and vitality of the town centre. This in turn adds to the feeling of security and encourages more visitors and therefore more investment into the town.

- 3.2.22 It is necessary to provide an appropriate mix of dwelling types, sizes and tenures within town centres as a way of preventing the occurrence of social segregation. A *Housing Needs study* conducted by the Council in 2002 identified the need for an element of affordable housing to be provided within town centres, and recommended that the Council negotiate with developers towards providing 35% subsidised affordable housing. Affordable housing should be provided in a suitable mix of types, sizes and tenures in order to meet the identified needs. Current planning policy require developers to make provision for at least 25% of the total housing to be affordable housing. In North Hertfordshire, this currently relates to all housing

developments comprising 20 or more units. This policy will be reconsidered as part of the LDF process and in light of the findings of future Housing Needs Studies.

POLICY 17:

The Council will promote, within all tenures, a mix of dwelling types and sizes within the town centre to encourage activity throughout the day and to contribute to the area's safety and security, especially outside normal business hours.

(LP Policies 27A, and 57 G4)

POLICY 18:

The Council will promote and where appropriate approve well designed proposals for housing through the re-use and conversion of floor space in vacant commercial buildings or in upper floors above shops, or as part of new developments. Net losses of housing will be refused.

(LP Policy 27A)

POLICY 19:

The Council will seek appropriate levels of affordable housing in accordance with development plan policy. Currently a minimum of 65% of affordable housing should be social rented housing, and the remaining 35% being tenures suitable for intermediate incomes. However this ratio/percentage may change in light of future Housing Need surveys. Policy 17 will also apply to affordable housing.

(LP Policy 29A)

Key Development Sites:

3.2.23 Both Government guidance and the Hertfordshire Structure Plan promote policies that encourage mixed-use development in town centres by: (a) identifying suitable sites, and (b) issuing planning briefs. The following sites are identified for mixed-use development: (See Plan HTC 2)

- The Churchgate Centre, the market and the car park at Biggin Lane (Site A1, A2 and A3)
- Land at Paynes Park including linkages to the Lairage multi-storey car park (Site B)
- Crown House in Bridge Street and land to the rear (Site C)
- Post Office site between Hermitage Road and Portmill Lane (Site D)
- William Ransom site in Whinbush Road rear of Bancroft and Hermitage Road (Site E)

3.2.24 Development on all these identified sites should accord with the policies outlined in this Strategy. Such developments should be of a high standard of design, using good quality materials and accord with the Conservation Area objectives/policies. Local distinctiveness in terms of scale and form should also be respected. (See section 3.1 on Built Environment and Public Spaces)

3.2.25 The Council considers an opportunity exists for development and enhancement of the area comprising the Churchgate centre, the market and the car park at Biggin Lane, including retaining and enhancing the market. This could include the redevelopment or refurbishment

of the Churchgate Centre for mixed-use development including a mix of retail, food and drink, leisure and residential uses. It will be important to promote a scheme that is built to the highest quality and contributes to the historic character of the town.

3.2.26 The redevelopment or refurbishment of the Churchgate Centre could provide a better mix and size of retail unit that could accommodate:

- national multiple retailers wishing to re-locate or locate for the first time in the town
- independents looking to expand into larger premises
- other retail/leisure uses that attract people to the town centre.



3.2.27 In addition to refurbishing/redeveloping the Churchgate Centre, retaining and enhancing the market, the Council would like to see the overall enhancement of the areas outlined at Sites A3, A4 and A5 on Plan HTC2 to improve the eastern edge of the town centre by:

- improving and upgrading the market. This would be in accordance with the key factors identified in Para. 3.2.13 of this Strategy.
- opening up and enhancing the River Hiz walkway across Sites A2, A3 and A5, as per the guidance provided in Para. 3.1.9 of this Strategy for enhancing the River Hiz walkway and also in accordance with the River Hiz Development Guidelines.
- enhancing St. Mary's Square car park at Site A4 with hard and soft landscaping and incorporating it in to the Queen Street Frontage Design Brief (See Para. 3.1.14). Such enhancement would improve the setting of St. Mary's Church.
- enhancing the overall character and appearance of sites A1, A2 and A3 through refurbishment/redevelopment proposals, enhancing Portmill Lane East and West Car Parks at Site A5 with hard and soft landscaping. This will also include improving the service areas to the rear of the Bancroft shops and improving the pedestrian links to the Garden of Rest, to Bancroft and to Hermitage Road through the proposed redevelopment

of the post office site. The provision of public conveniences in the general area will be considered as part of the Churchgate Planning Brief.

3.2.28 Development at Paynes Park and the Post Office site will need to be mixed-use developments where:

- at Paynes Park in the northern part, the Council would consider shops, food and drink outlets or leisure/community facilities as acceptable at ground floor level and residential above. This will provide a range of customer attractions as part of enhancing the pedestrian network between the Lairage multi-storey car park and the town centre core. In the southern part, residential would be an acceptable predominant use; and
- at the Post Office site the Council would expect retail at ground floor with leisure, commercial and/or residential at upper levels. Included in the design would be a pedestrian link between Hermitage Road and Portmill Lane in addition to the link along the River Hiz walkway. (See Plan HTC2 sites B and D)

3.2.29 Redevelopment of Crown House and the land to the rear provides a major opportunity to reflect the predominantly surrounding residential use but with small shops or commercial use fronting Bridge Street. The Council would also like to see the River Hiz opened up by linking the walkway from Bridge Street to Biggin Lane, through the present market site and its surroundings to Hermitage Road. (See Plan HTC2 site C)

3.2.30 The William Ransom site to the rear of Hermitage Road and Bancroft, has recently become available. A Draft Development Brief has been prepared and has been the subject of public consultation in the late summer of 2004. The Draft Development Brief has proposed residential development for the site. The Brief may be amended in light of comments received during the consultation process to include other land uses. (See Plan HTC2 Site E).

POLICY 20

The Council will work with landowners, potential developers and others to stimulate and guide the redevelopment of the Paynes Park area, Crown House and the Ransom site.

(LP Policies 8 and 57)

POLICY 21

The Council will enter into negotiations with the landowners of the Post Office site at Hermitage Road as a means of promoting the site for redevelopment

(LP Policies 8 and 57)

POLICY 22:

The Council, working together with potential developers and landowners, will prepare Planning Briefs for the following key development sites in accordance with the aims and policy guidance set out in this Town Centre Strategy for:

- a) The Churchgate Centre, the Market and the car park at Biggin Lane, retaining and enhancing the market (Sites A1, A2 and A3)**
- b) Land at Paynes Park (Site B)**
- c) Crown House and land to the rear (Site C)**
- d) The Post Office site (Site D)**

- e) **The William Ransom site (Site E)**

(LP Policies 8 and 57)

POLICY 23:

The Council through the preparation of a Planning Briefs as in Policy 22 will promote the development and/or environmental enhancement of the area comprising the Churchgate Centre, the market and the adjoining car parks at Biggin Lane, St. Mary's Square, and Portmill Lane to provide for mixed retail, commercial/leisure, residential and other appropriate town centre uses, subject to:

- a) **A retained/improved market,**
- b) **Retention of public car parking provision,**
- c) **Improved pedestrian and vehicular access**
- d) **Retaining key open views of St. Mary's Church, particularly from Queen Street,**
- e) **Opening up and improving the River Hiz walkway,**
- f) **Improving and enhancing the above-mentioned car parks.**
- g) **Facilitating continuity for Churchgate and market traders during the transition period.**

Such a development scheme should be of a high standard of design, use quality materials and respect the scale and form of surrounding buildings.

(LP Policies 8 and 57)

POLICY24:

The Council will promote the environmental enhancement of the market, Biggin Lane Car Park, St. Mary's Square Car Park and Portmill Lane East and West Car Parks in accordance with other policies in this Town Centre Strategy.

3.3 COMMUNITY FACILITIES

3.3.1 Town centres are important foci for a range of community facilities that are accessible to the local community and contribute to the health of the town centre. Those in Hitchin are particularly important in adding to the attractions of, or reasons for visiting, the towns centre. They include:

- local government area presence, possibly in the context of a 'one-stop-shop';
- health centres;
- education centres;
- various religious and related buildings;
- cultural and entertainment facilities;
- public buildings such as the Hitchin Library, Hitchin Museum, Hitchin Town Hall, and Bancroft Community Hall at Bancroft Recreation Ground;
- public conveniences;
- shopmobility schemes;
- a youth centre in Bancroft;
- historic buildings and walks, including the British Schools building;
- voluntary and advisory services;
- public art and performance space; and
- public open spaces such as Market Place, the Garden of Rest and area around St. Mary's Church, Bancroft Recreation Ground, The Dell and Windmill Hill.

3.3.2 The Council has produced a *Leisure & Cultural Strategy for North Hertfordshire*, which identifies leisure and cultural initiatives as being particularly effective in developing community confidence, local identity and pride. These initiatives are considered as important tools to enhance the physical fabric of town centres, to stimulate the local economy and to improve its image with outside investors and tourists/visitors. The Leisure and Cultural Strategy has policies and objectives, which complement this Strategy and seeks to encourage developments and activities on a scale and form appropriate to the town centre.

3.3.3 Residents and businesses in the town centre through the *Community Strategy* and *Hitchin Visioning Action Plan* have expressed their wish for a good range of public facilities within the town centre. This includes, the provision of high quality, safe and well-maintained public conveniences accessible to all, and particularly at night for evening visitors. The provision for a community cultural centre for all ages within the town centre has also been identified. Following the outcomes of the Council's Youth and Children Fundamental Service Reviews in 2001, and following the recent consultation with young people a need has been expressed for a centre for children and young people within the town centre, which is accessible to all and offers a range of activities. The opportunity to include a centre for children and young people in key development schemes within the town centre will be promoted by the Council, or alternatively the Council will seek funding from developers towards the provision of new or enhancement of existing community facilities within the town centre. The Town Hall for

example is an important building in the conservation area and has been included on the Council's Register of Important Local Buildings in Hitchin and may undergo major refurbishment and remodelling to meet modern local needs.

- 3.3.4 For many of these community facilities and interests, the Council is working with or has supported interested organisations and agencies responsible for these buildings to improve accessibility or their use; the provision of a Shopmobility facility in Bancroft is one such scheme. (See Para. 3.4.15) *Part III of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995* (DDA) places duties on service providers to make "reasonable adjustments" for disabled people, such as providing extra help or making changes to the way they provide their services; and to make other "reasonable adjustments" in relation to the physical features of their premises to overcome physical barriers to access. The Council will work together with the Disability Forum and the recently established Access Consultancy Forum when considering and implementing such policies, practices and procedures for disabled people. (See also Policy 40).
- 3.3.5 The Council, through its Asset Management review and review of Public Halls and Public Conveniences, is presently undertaking an assessment of all its public assets, i.e. buildings and facilities, to find out if they meet the needs of the community, the DDA access requirements, and whether they require improvement, refurbishment or replacement. In addition, the Council, through its Access to Services review is examining how, in future, people can access Council services. This will include reviewing all public offices and examining more effective means of delivering services locally including the possibility of developing with partners a 'one-stop-shop' facility. Following these reviews the Council will prepare an action plan which will identify and prioritise which buildings in Hitchin will be retained and what adaptations will be needed. Some buildings may be sold or redeveloped for other purposes. This could release funds, which should be channelled into improvements or refurbishment of existing facilities or provision of new facilities in partnership with other organisations and potential developers. Funding for improvements, refurbishment or replacement of community facilities could come from a combination of receipts from disposal of Council assets, S106 agreements and partnership funding.

POLICY 25:

The Council will enhance the existing level of community services and facilities available in Hitchin Town Centre using the outcomes of reviews into Access to Services, Asset Management, Public Halls and Public Conveniences, Hitchin Area Visioning and the Community Strategy.

POLICY 26:

The Council will work in partnership with the local community and local organisations to establish the appropriate use for, and ways of running, community buildings and facilities within the town centre, that address the aspirations across the range of age groups. Where necessary appropriate funding will be identified.

POLICY 27:

The Council through the Access to Services Board will seek to provide a 'one-stop-shop' facility within the town centre that is appropriately located, clearly sign posted and easily accessible.

POLICY 28:

The Council will resist the loss of community facilities and will require the replacement of existing community facilities in development proposals or through enhancement schemes.

POLICY 29:

For new developments that do not include community facilities within the scheme, the Council will seek commuted payments from developers through S106 agreements towards the provision of new off-site facilities or enhancements to existing community facilities within the town centre where there is a demonstrated need.

3.4 ACCESSIBILITY

- 3.4.1 The ease with which people can travel to and from the town centre and move around it will influence its attractiveness and success as a town centre. It is important that the town centre is equally accessible to all, be it by bus, on foot, by bicycle or in the car. The government is seeking ways of reducing car use by widening travel choice, which would have the benefits of a better environment, less congestion, less noise and air pollution, and more space for non-motorised transport and buses. The Northern Hertfordshire Area Transport Plan produced by Hertfordshire County Council in 2004 seeks to address these issues and sets the framework for the production of future Town Transport Plans, which will consider the wider aims of national and regional guidance and set a vision and objectives for each town. The Town Transport Plan for Hitchin will be produced in 2006/7 and will replace the current Hitchin Transportation Plan prepared by Hertfordshire County Council in 1998. Both the current Hitchin Transportation Plan and the future Hitchin Town Transport Plan will provide the necessary transport policy guidance for this Strategy.
- 3.4.2 Developments can significantly alter the traffic patterns and working of a town centre, particularly at peak periods. To this end, development proposals need to be assessed and judgements made in terms of their traffic, highway and transport impacts. For developments involving a potential or existing large single employer, Green Travel Plans provide a further means of encouraging less use of cars.

POLICY 30

The Council will require, for significant developments, (a) transport assessments; and (b) if there is a large single employer, a Green Travel Plan. All developments will be expected to contribute either as part of the development or financially to the accessibility aims of this strategy.

Road Network and Traffic Circulation:

- 3.4.3 Hitchin, like other areas of Hertfordshire, is suffering from increasing traffic growth. This is due in part to its position on the primary route network. The A505, A600 and A602 are the most heavily used routes and tend to experience the greatest delays during peak hours. These routes run along the northern and western edge of the town centre carrying a significant proportion of through traffic as well as local traffic. The A505 links Hitchin to Luton and Letchworth, the A600 to Bedford and the A602 forms an important link to the A1(M) at Stevenage. The Baldock Bypass once completed in mid 2006 could have an effect on Hitchin town centre by routing some of the strategic east-west traffic onto the A602 instead of the A505. Future transport/traffic assessments to be undertaken by Hertfordshire County Council post the Bypass will need to take into consideration the possible effects that the Baldock Bypass may have on the Hitchin town centre. Such an assessment and associated impacts will be reviewed as part of the Hitchin Town Transport Plan.
- 3.4.4 The circulatory pattern, especially the one-way system around Paynes Park directs a significant amount of traffic through the western part of the town centre and has the effect of isolating the Lairage multi-storey car park, the museum, the library and the Waitrose (formerly Safeway) food store from the heart of the town centre. One of the measures of the Hitchin Transportation Plan was to consider traffic route improvements around the town centre including a feasibility study of the one-way system around Paynes Park, Old Park Road and Bedford Road. Such a study should investigate the possibility of reducing through traffic along Paynes Park and consider two-way traffic along Bedford and Old Park Road.

POLICY 31:

The Council will work with Hertfordshire County Council to assess ways in which the primary route network can be enhanced to encourage its use and discourage unnecessary cross-town travel. Developments will be expected to contribute to such assessments.

POLICY 32:

The Council will seek to improve pedestrian links between the Lairage multi-storey car park, the library and museum and the retail core at Market Place by working together with Hertfordshire County Council to investigate the existing traffic routing within the town by carrying out a feasibility study of the one-way system around Paynes Park, Old Park Road and Bedford Road. Developments will be expected to contribute to such a study.

- 3.4.5 Visitors to the town often travel through the centre to find a parking space closer to the main shopping area rather than parking in the first car park reached on their approach into the town centre. This is partly due to poor signage and visitors' lack of awareness of all the available parking stock within the town centre.

POLICY 33:

The Council together with Hertfordshire County Council will seek to provide directional signing to public car parks and, in certain instances signage that indicates the number of available spaces.

Car Parking:

- 3.4.6 Hitchin has a significant number of public and private car parking spaces spread throughout the town centre that are mostly located within 5 mins walking distance of the retail core. The short-term car parks are well utilised and are used to full capacity at certain times on market days. Any future growth or significant amount of development within the town will have an impact on the availability and usage of existing car parking facilities.
- 3.4.7 Government guidance encourages local authorities to adopt a more sustainable approach to car parking and to reduce reliance on the car by promoting alternative modes of transport. In light of government guidance and as a means of addressing any significant development within the town centre, the Council considered it necessary to assess the volume and management of parking provision in the town centre against existing and likely future demand. To assist with this assessment, the Council appointed transport-planning consultants, namely ARUP in 2002 to undertake a Car Parking Study and to prepare a Car Parking Strategy for the Hitchin Town Centre.
- 3.4.8 The study included assessing current parking numbers, costs and vacancy levels, as well as comparing parking levels with existing and proposed floor space within the town centre. Amongst other findings this work has shown that:
- Overall, the town centre car parks in Hitchin are seldom full; there is generally spare parking capacity somewhere and normally in the long-stay car parks. In some ways, the strategy identifies the problem as not about the lack of spaces, but about: the location, access to car parks and circulatory pattern within the car parks; the quality/maintenance

and perceived safety risks of using some of the car parks, particularly the Lairage multi-storey car park; poor information; lack of or inappropriate signage to and from car parks; ownership and parking tariffs, and the easy availability and location of on-street parking. As a result, visitors tend to maximise the use of the short-term car parks in and around St. Mary's Square and Portmill Lane.

- A 'zonal approach' to parking standards would accord with the Government's sustainable approach to car parking. The main aim of the zonal approach is to introduce a degree of parking restraint for new developments in areas better served by public transport and other modes of transport. This is where urban areas are categorised on the basis of their accessibility to public transport and attractiveness as focal points for services and facilities. For higher rated areas with good accessibility and high attractiveness, the parking provision for new developments should be reduced to reflect the accessibility by other modes of transport. For lower rated areas, where car travel is the only means of mobility, provision for new developments should be closer to the requirement. The ARUP study revealed that there is a high level of parking within the town centre relative to commercial floor space, and a zonal approach would bring about a balance between floor space and parking within the town. The Hertfordshire County Council has produced Supplementary Planning Guidance on car parking standards and encourages local authorities to adopt the zonal approach.

The ARUP recommendations are outlined in Appendix 3.

3.4.9 The Council in June 2004 adopted a Car Parking Strategy for the district following public consultation. As it was district wide, the strategy did not pick up in detail on any of the individual parking issues in the various North Hertfordshire towns and villages, although a number of key issues for Hitchin and the other towns were identified such as:

- ensuring that any publicly available parking lost through redevelopment is at the minimum replaced by additional provision from either developers or through additional public provision to ensure the continuing economic vitality of the town;
- providing additional opportunities for the provision of short-term car parking provision within the town, both on-street and within public car parks including working with private sector providers;
- reviewing the balance between short stay and long stay car parking;
- seeking to improve the Council's car parks over a 5 year period to ensure that they are fit for purpose and meet the expectations of the users;
- providing sufficient, convenient and suitable parking spaces for orange (blue) badge holders in the Council's car parks and on-street within the town centre; and
- seeking to adopt a zonal approach to parking provision for new and/or re-developments within the town centre.

These issues together with other more detailed aspects of parking within Hitchin as outlined in the Council's Car Parking Strategy will be progressed over the next 5 years and implemented through various Council priorities and initiatives, the Hitchin Area Visioning Action Plan, the Local Transport Plan and Hitchin Town Transport Plan, as well as through policies in the Local Development Framework and this Town Centre Strategy.

POLICY 34:

The Council will work in partnership with the Hertfordshire County Council, the police, local businesses, residents and local organisations to progress and implement the key aspects of the North Hertfordshire District Council Car Parking Strategy that are important in sustaining the economic viability and environmental quality of Hitchin town centre.

POLICY 35:

The Council will make greater use of car parks, for example Woodside and the Lairage by:

- a) reviewing circulation and layout;
- b) improving signage and pedestrian access;
- c) examining the potential for creating additional spaces;
- d) improving security of the Lairage through the installation of CCTV and possibly through better design of pedestrian access and stairways thereby making it more attractive to users; and
- e) reviewing the balance of short term and long term spaces.

Public Transport:

3.4.10 Excess provision for the car within Hitchin Town Centre can reduce the need for people to use passenger transport thereby reducing its viability as an alternative to the car. Hitchin has three major bus stop areas serving the town centre, in Bancroft, Hermitage Road and Queen Street. All three areas are well located in close proximity to the retail core and the Market. The *Hitchin Transportation Plan* (1998) suggests that a bus interchange facility should be provided. The Council considers that the provision of such a facility should be kept under review. The immediate challenge is to improve the attractiveness of passenger transport as an alternative mode of travel. The recent rail/bus interchange facility at Hitchin Station shows how the profile of public transport can be raised. The Council is working together with the Hertfordshire County Council and bus operators to prepare a Passenger Transport Strategy for Hitchin Town Centre. The strategy will consider improvements to services, infrastructure and information for passenger transport users. Consideration will also be given to improving the passenger transport facilities and pedestrian links to the bus stops at Bancroft, Hermitage Road and Queen Street, bus integration with other forms of transport and to improving pedestrian links from bus stops to the town centre.

POLICY 36:

The Council together with the Hertfordshire County Council will seek to reduce the reliance on the private car for access to and from the town centre by identifying ways of improving access to public transport. In doing so regard will be given to the Hitchin Transportation Plan, the Northern Hertfordshire Area Transport Plan and other relevant documents including Hertfordshire's Bus and Intalink Strategies. The Council will also prepare a Passenger Transport Strategy for the Hitchin Town Centre.

POLICY 37:

The Council together with the Hertfordshire County Council will investigate ways in which bus priority measures may be introduced alongside qualitative enhancements to the location and infrastructure at bus stops including real-time information on bus services.

Pedestrians:

- 3.4.11 The main pedestrian routes through the town centre tend to follow the highway network thereby placing pedestrians in conflict with traffic travelling through the town centre. The high pedestrian flows in the primary shopping area are along High Street, Bancroft and Market Place. An aim of the Hitchin Transportation Plan is to increase the priority given to people making journeys on foot including those mobility impaired. Included in this is the need to develop high priority, safe and clearly signed footpath links within the town centre between the retail core and car parks, the town centre and nearby residential areas and other transport modes such as the railway station and bus stops.
- 3.4.12 There are identified opportunities to improve pedestrian linkages to and within the town centre by:
- strengthening the link between the Lairage multi-storey car park, the library and museum to the retail core at Market Place as part of the redevelopment of Paynes Park;
 - opening up, enhancing and creating a level walkway along the River Hiz between Hermitage Road and Bridge Street and between Hermitage Road and Bancroft Recreation Ground;
 - strengthening the pedestrian links to the Portmill Lane area from Bancroft by enhancing the existing walkway and by providing an additional link from Hermitage Road as part of the redevelopment of the Post Office site; and
 - improving the surfacing and signage of the pedestrian link along Walsworth Road to the Woodside car park and to the railway station.

POLICY 38:

The Council will seek to improve the pedestrian network within and to the town centre, and will ensure that future developments have regard to strengthening and improving pedestrian links in terms of the physical appearance, signage and safety. Regard will be given to the measures outlined in the Hitchin Transportation Plan, and the priorities outlined in the Hitchin Area Visioning Plan.

- 3.4.13 The Council together with the Hertfordshire County Council has implemented pedestrian priority measures in High Street, Market Place and will do so in future in Sun Street and Bucklersbury. The High Street is closed to through traffic on Saturdays. The closure of High Street at certain times has proved successful and suggests that the users of the town centre may support further limits to through traffic in the town centre. The implementation of a 20mph traffic zone from the junction of Brand Street with High Street through to Sun Street and Bucklersbury serves to create a larger pedestrian friendly environment.

POLICY 39:

The Council will work with Hertfordshire County Council and all town centre interests including local businesses and St. Mary's Church to assess the potential for extending pedestrian priority measures to other days, times and streets.

Access for the Less Mobile:

- 3.4.14 The ease with which disabled people can move around the town centre is important in terms of the design of buildings, pavement widths, surfacing materials, the location of street furniture, suitable crossing points across streets and access to disabled parking and public transport. Accessibility is not just about disabled people it also assists the elderly or infirm and, those people pushing a pram or carrying shopping. The Forum is presently working with Hertfordshire County Council in identifying access routes, streets and pavements that require improvement thereby improving the accessibility for disabled people around the town. There has also been a pilot national survey undertaken regarding access into some of the main buildings in Hitchin. The Council will work together with the Disability Forum and the recently established Access Consultancy Forum when considering and implementing future policies, practices and procedures of relevance to disabled people.
- 3.4.15 The Hitchin Town Centre Initiative (HTCI) together with the Council has given support to a private and independent charitable organisation, which has developed a scheme providing "shopmobility" facilities within the town centre. The scheme, Hitchin Shopmobility, is in its infancy and will need continuing and increased support and funding from the Council, local businesses, the HTCI and other service providers to develop and flourish, and thus provide the wide ranging access services, for disabled people, that it envisages. Dial-a-ride services as well as other community based transport services are available to assist those persons who are disabled and have difficulty using public transport, particularly from the surrounding Hertfordshire villages.

POLICY 40:

The Council together with Hertfordshire County Council and the Disability Forum and Access Consultancy Forum will aim to secure an accessible town centre for disabled people by ensuring that:

- (a) the design and maintenance of the urban fabric will accommodate the needs of all people;**
- (b) adequate provision will be made for disabled parking and access within the town centre, and**
- (c) passenger transport facilities are improved and made more accessible to disabled people. The Council, local businesses, developers and other service providers are encouraged to support the continued development of the current embryo shopmobility scheme in Hitchin town centre.**

Cycling:

- 3.4.16 The main cycling routes through and into the town centre tend to follow the highway network thereby placing cyclists in conflict with traffic travelling through the town centre. In order to meet the Government initiative of reducing reliance on the private car and promoting alternative modes of transport such as cycling, there is a recognised need to:
- improve the safety of cycle routes to and through the town centre;
 - avoid unnecessary conflict with pedestrians;
 - make provision for and maintenance of cycle parking and equipment storage facilities within the town centre; and
 - encourage local businesses to provide facilities for employees cycling to work.
- 3.4.17 The Council has produced a *Cycling Strategy for North Hertfordshire* to encourage cycling. An outcome of the strategy was the production of a Cycle Route Network, which identifies potential safe and direct cycle routes through and within Hitchin.

POLICY 41:

The Council will work with Hertfordshire County Council to identify ways in which access by bicycle can be improved, such as cycle lanes, cycle crossings, cycle signage and cycle parking. In doing so, regard will be given to the Hitchin Transportation Plan and to the Council's Cycle Route Network Survey for Hitchin where the proposed routes covering Hitchin Town Centre have been identified with engineering works costed. Consideration will also be given to establishing a development programme for further cycle parking and equipment storage facilities within the town centre. All new developments will need to reflect the Council's Cycling Strategy, Cycle Route Network Survey and provide facilities for employees and residents.

Taxis:

- 3.4.18 A number of private taxi services operate in the town, serving a market for journeys both within the town and to surrounding areas. A main taxi rank is located in Bancroft with smaller ranks at St. Mary's Square car park in Queen Street and in Sun Street. The town centre provides a focus for taxi activity and provides a service to those who choose not to use the bus or for whom suitable bus services are unavailable. The increase in the number of food and drink and leisure facilities within the town centre in recent years has contributed to an increase in the demand for taxi services.

POLICY 42:

The Council will work together with taxi services to ensure that taxi ranks are located in appropriate locations that serve the day and evening economy within the town centre.

Accessibility contributions:

3.4.19 As a means of achieving a more sustainable approach to transport infrastructure and car parking provision, government guidance encourages local authorities to consider means of achieving alternative sources of funding to improve transport infrastructure within towns. Accessibility contributions are made by a developer as a contribution to improving more sustainable modes of transport within the town centre that will benefit the local community and minimise the transport impacts resulting from new development. Examples of such contributions include:

- pedestrian facilities, including pedestrian crossings and improved street furniture;
- cycling infrastructure, including cycle lanes, crossings and secure bike parking facilities;
- public transport facilities, including bus shelters and timetable information, funding bus priority measures on the surrounding road network, and providing or supporting bus services to and from the site for customers and staff; and
- being used for transport feasibility studies associated with this Town Centre Strategy.

3.4.20 Payments would be made to the Council who together with Hertfordshire County Council, would develop and implement proposals for improving transport modes within the town centre. This would allow the Council to maximise the benefits from the contributions of both the public and private sectors. It is considered that accessibility payments would help “swing the balance” of transport investment towards more sustainable modes.

3.4.21 In addition, and if there is a need to address a shortage of parking spaces within the town as a result of any major redevelopment proposal, then it may be appropriate to seek payments from developers for the provision of off-site car parking elsewhere within the town centre. These are called ‘commuted payments’. Off site parking provision has been tried in many towns and cities in the UK and has often proved beneficial. However in a town like Hitchin, the opportunities for providing additional parking spaces at other sites in the town centre are very limited although this opportunity should not be ruled out and is an issue of consideration in the Council’s Car Parking Strategy.

POLICY 43:

The Council will secure accessibility or commuted payments depending on the nature, scale and location of the developments. These payments will be used for the transport aspects of this Town Centre Strategy.

3.5 COMMUNITY SAFETY

- 3.5.1 The quality and design of public spaces and buildings is important in terms of safety. New development and on-going maintenance of the urban fabric create impressions about the town centre's image and people's care for it. This affects people's perception of their safety and vulnerability to crime. Environments that are perceived as safe will attract people.
- 3.5.2 Recognising the importance of providing a safe and secure environment, the Council produced a Community Safety Strategy for North Hertfordshire in 2002 in partnership with the Hertfordshire Constabulary, Hertfordshire County Council, Primary Care Trusts, community and voluntary sector. One aim of the Strategy is to ensure that the Hitchin town centre remains an area with low crime rates and high levels of community safety and that design and layout of development proposals contribute to the prevention of crime.

POLICY 44:

The Council, through partnership working and the Community Safety Strategy, will seek to ensure that the town centre remains an area with low crime rates and high levels of safety.

- 3.5.3 The town centre benefits economically from a variety of leisure and entertainment facilities, and meets the social needs of many people who live locally or in nearby towns and villages. There is also a significant local residential community. In many ways, these activities and residents help to create natural surveillance thereby increasing safety and reducing crime. Unfortunately there are also an increasing number of evening activities that result in anti-social behaviour. This can cause conflict or loss of amenity for other users of the town centre. The council has developed a graffiti database, for the identification of multiple offences, together with a graffiti busting team for swift removal. Home Office funding for the employment of an Anti-social Behaviour Officer from April 2004 until 2006 is now confirmed and this will allow the council to provide a much needed resource to those concerned with visiting, working or running businesses in our town centres.
- 3.5.4 Under the *Licensing Act* and the Council's *Licensing Policy* the Council recognises that fixed and artificially early closing times can lead to peaks of disorder and disturbance on the streets when large numbers of people tend to leave licensed premises at the same time. Longer licensing hours regarding the sale of alcohol are an important factor in reducing friction at late night food outlets, taxi ranks and other sources of transport. However each application would be considered on its individual merits and have to meet the four licensing objectives, which are:
- The prevention of crime and disorder
 - Public safety
 - The prevention of public nuisance
 - The protection of children from harm

It is hoped that the new Licensing Act and Licensing Policy will help to reduce anti-social behaviour within town centres. The requirement for preparing a 'Licensing Policy' is referred to under food/drink and leisure (Policy 16). The Council is also currently investigating the implementation of alcohol free zones within town centres, based on evidence of alcohol related crime and disorder. (Another issue is to give consideration to the design of leisure/

community buildings to prevent noise escaping and thereby minimise disruption to local residents.) (Leisure facilities not necessarily related to public entertainment or liquor licensing.)

POLICY 45:

The Council will aim to ensure that the balance and location of evening uses is acceptable in the interests of maintaining and promoting a safe and secure environment for the local community, and that buildings for such uses are designed to minimise noise disruption to local residents.

(LP Policy 57 G2)

POLICY 46:

The Council will promote best practice guidance to landowners and developers for designing out crime. Developers must demonstrate how through design, layout, usage, lighting and landscape of proposals, they will create a safe and accessible environment for all.

(LP Policy 57 G2)

- 3.5.5 A major part of the town centre core area is covered by CCTV, which contributes towards people's perception of a safe environment. However, certain parts of the town are not well illuminated at night, such as the Market area and the pedestrian routes from Market Place and Churchyard to St. Mary's Square Car Park. Adequate street lighting is also an effective means of reducing crime, enhancing public safety and so attracting residents and visitors to use the town centre. The Council recognises the need to enhance street lighting and CCTV coverage of the town centre. The rolling out of CCTV is an action from the Community Safety Strategy in dealing with the 'fear of crime'. All Hitchin Town Centre car parks are covered by CCTV including part of the Lairage multi-storey car park. CCTV will be extended to the Lairage, this is agreed as part of the Council's Car Parking Strategy (adopted June 2004).

POLICY 47:

The Council will continue to provide and monitor the provision of CCTV within the town centre, especially in car parks. Within financial resources, the Council will expand CCTV coverage and improve lighting.

3.6 PROMOTION & MARKETING

3.6.1 Hitchin town centre by its nature is multi-functional. It acts as a market place for retailing and businesses and as a focus for a variety of social and economic uses, as well as a cultural and entertainment venue. Hitchin is an historic market town and is part of the heritage of Hertfordshire and lowland England. The town is also promoted and marketed through the Herts County Tourism Officers' Group. The Town Centre Manager through the Hitchin Town Centre Initiative acts as a 'champion' for the town centre and helps to foster civic pride and local identity. This is achieved through effective marketing and promotion of the success and prosperity of the town as well as organising regular events throughout the year.

3.6.2 The Council supports the Hitchin Town Centre Initiative who via the Town Centre Manager promote the town by:

- working in partnership with key people involved with the town centre – this includes local businesses, the Hitchin Chamber of Commerce, North Hertfordshire District Council, Hertfordshire County Council, various public and voluntary organisations and local residents;
- forging a link between business and civic interests;
- encouraging co-operation and co-ordinate activities and events that promote the town; and
- identifying and defining management targets for the town.

POLICY 48:

The Council will continue to support and work together with the county tourism officers and Hitchin Town Centre Initiative to raise the profile of the town centre and enhance its vitality, viability and local identity.

3.6.3 Included in raising the profile of the town is the work and events of various groups and organisations in promoting the historic and cultural features of the town as a mechanism of increasing tourism and visitors to the town. Public art can equally make a contribution to the local character and distinctiveness of the town as well as enhance the legibility of certain areas and should be encouraged in appropriate locations.

POLICY 49:

The Council will support and work together with local and voluntary organisations to enhance the quality of visitor experience within the town centre through the provision of appropriate signage, public art, interpretation and information material.

3.6.4 Good quality signage and street furniture, which are sympathetic in design to the character of the town and are sited in appropriate locations, can also enhance the identity of the town. The Council has an agreed Hitchin Town Centre Design and Colour Scheme for street furniture – this is midnight blue (BS 20.C.40) and gold.

POLICY 50:

Any future enhancements within the town centre that include street furniture should make a positive contribution to the character of the area and continue the agreed Hitchin Town Centre Design and Colour theme.

(LP Policy 20)

- 3.6.5 Good maintenance and high standards of cleaning of the town centre is important in raising its profile. Clean, safe, accessible and attractive streets, well maintained street furniture and signage, are all fundamental elements, which contribute to creating a pleasant environment for community life within the Town. The Council and other agencies provide a range of services including public facilities, street cleansing, waste management, highway and car parking services, and grounds maintenance, which maintain the 'street scene'. Concerns were raised about deteriorating standards of maintenance within the town centre, which have already started to be addressed both within public and privately owned spaces. The Council has prepared an action plan to address maintenance issues within the town centre in partnership with the Hitchin Town Centre Initiative, various service providers within the Council and other organisations including the Hertfordshire County Council and the local community.

POLICY 51:

The Action Plan, setting out the priorities for maintaining the 'street scene', will be monitored and updated on an annual basis.



SECTION 4: THE WAY FORWARD – MONITORING PERFORMANCE

- 4.1 The production of this Strategy is not an end product in itself. It is the start of a continuing process of identifying policies and setting targets. It is to provide the overall framework for guiding development and opportunities for change within the town centre. It has important links to other strategies, such as the Community Strategy for North Hertfordshire, the NHDC Car Parking Strategy, the NHDC Community Safety Strategy plus the Hitchin Passenger Transport Strategy and the NHDC Licensing Policy, (both under preparation at the time of producing this Strategy) which together provide the necessary guidance to inform identified and other development/enhancement areas within the town centre.
- 4.2 An Action Plan will be developed which will set out targets to achieve the policies and aims of the strategy, and will be linked to other relevant Action Plans to ensure continuity and efficient use of resources. Policies and targets will be monitored on a regular basis and include Quality of Life and Town Centre 'health check' factors as set out in current government guidance. Monitoring will include observation of key town centre features as well as noting progress on implementing this Strategy. These will be linked to the Council's Improvement Plan.

POLICY 52:

The Council will prepare an Action Plan that will identify the priorities, resources and time scales for schemes and projects that will deliver the aims identified in the Strategy. This Action Plan will be reviewed annually linked to other relevant Action Plans, in particular the Hitchin Visioning Action Plan, and will be made available to the public.

- 4.3 It is proposed that the Strategy will be reviewed at least every 5 years as part of the Council's Service and Financial Planning Process. The Strategy has been formulated assuming that the resources for its implementation will be little different to those actually available. To ensure success, staff and financial resources will need to be redirected towards achieving the aims and policies outlined in this document. Every opportunity will be taken to gain additional funding from sponsors and partners to give added value to the Council's existing resources and to assist in the delivery of various development and enhancement schemes outlined in this Strategy. The review will be informed to the Local Strategic Partnership in order to maximise the effects of partnership working, pool resources and budgets to deliver change.
- 4.4 The Town Centre review will take into account views expressed through the local visioning work, reported quarterly to the relevant Hitchin Area Committee; this will include decisions on small grant funding by the Committee and prioritisation of works based on local input. In addition, ongoing consultation via the councils' Citizens Panel, District Wide Survey and Best Value Reviews will provide a valuable check on progress to improve the town centre, as perceived by residents.
- 4.5 The council has undertaken to review progress against the Community Strategy (published November 2003) to be reviewed each year; SMART targets are currently being agreed with partners for actions against the given work programme, either undertaken by the council or by its partners, and will be included into a formal Performance Management Framework shortly. The outcomes of this review must be made available to the public each year and will form the major focus of reporting via the Local Strategic Partnerships bi-annual conferences.

POLICY 53:

The Council will review the Hitchin Town Centre Strategy in the light of regular monitoring and of views expressed through the processes to prepare and review the Community Strategy.

APPENDIX 1

Government Guidance Documents include:

- Sustainable Communities - building for the future (Feb 2003). Annex A sets out some of the key requirements of a sustainable community
- RPG6 Regional Planning Guidance for East Anglia to 2016
- RPG9 Regional Planning Guidance for the South East (2001)
- Draft RPG14 Regional Planning Guidance for the East of England (Feb 2004)
- PPG1 General Policies and Principles (1997)
- Draft PPS1 Creating Sustainable Communities (Feb 2004)
- PPG3 Housing (2000)
- PPG6 Town Centres and Retail Development (1996)
- Draft PPS6 Planning for Town Centres (Dec 2003)
- PPG13 Transport (2001)
- PPG15 Planning and Historic Environment (1994)
- PPG16 Archaeology and Planning (1990)
- PPG17 Planning for Open Space, Sport and Recreation – (July 2002)
- By Design – Urban Design in the Planning System: Towards Better Practice (2000)
- By Design – Better Places to Live (A companion guide to PPG3) (2001)
- Building in Context: New development in Historic Area by Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment 2001

Local Documents include:

- Hertfordshire County Structure Plan: 2001 – 2016 - Deposit Draft February 2003
- Hertfordshire County Structure Plan: Adopted 1998
- North Hertfordshire District Local Plan No.2 with Alterations (1996)
- Hertfordshire Local Transport Plan – 2001/02 to 2005/06 (2000)
- Northern Hertfordshire Area Transport Plan (HCC, 2004)
- Hitchin Transportation Plan (1998)
- Leisure and Cultural Strategy for North Hertfordshire 2001 – 2005 (2000)

- Community Safety Strategy for North Hertfordshire 2002 – 2005 (2002)
- North Hertfordshire Retail Study for North Hertfordshire District Council – Prepared by MVM Planning in 1998.
- Report for North Hertfordshire District Council in Relation to Hitchin Market - Prepared by Michael Felton Associates in October 2001
- Hitchin Town Centre Retail Study – Report for North Hertfordshire District Council Prepared by MVM Planning in November 2001
- NHDC Town Centre and Retail Study (June 2004) prepared by Nathaniel Lichfield & Partners
- Conservation Area Character Statement for Hitchin (1998)
- River Hiz Development Guidelines (1994)
- North Hertfordshire Cycling Strategy (2000)
- North Hertfordshire Towns Cycle Route Network (2000)
- Hitchin Car Parking Study: Report by ARUP (Oct 2002)
- Hitchin Car Parking Strategy :Report by ARUP (April 2003)
- North Hertfordshire District Council Car Parking Strategy 2004-2009 (June 2004)
- Hertfordshire County Council: Supplementary Planning Guidance on Parking Provision at New Development: (Adopted December 2000)
- Community Strategy (November 2003)
- Visioning Action Plan 2004 onwards

APPENDIX 2:

Members of the Hitchin Town Centre Stakeholder Group –Formed May 2002

- Hitchin Forum
- Hitchin Society
- Hitchin Historical Society
- Hitchin Town Centre Manager
- Hitchin Chamber of Commerce and Industry
- Hitchin Town Centre Initiative
- Hertfordshire Constabulary
- Herts Association for Disability (now called Herts Action and Disability)
- North Herts Forum for Physical Disability (now called Disability Forum)
- Hitchin Market Traders Association
- North Herts Ethnic Minority Forum
- Herts County Council Environment Department
- Wastell & Porter Architects
- Hitchin Transport Group
- St. Mary's Church Wardens
- Local Residents (4)

APPENDIX 3:

Extract from ARUP Report on North Hertfordshire District Council Hitchin Parking Study: Car Parking Strategy

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 5.1 The results from the car parking survey carried out in April 2002 showed that the off-street car parks were particularly well used and operated close to or at capacity in particular the car parks close to the market on market days. The long stay car parks had spare capacity in particular Woodside and Lairage. The uncontrolled parking areas are less well used than the controlled parking areas. There were a significant number of spare private non-residential parking spaces within the town centre. Of the parking spaces within the town centre only a small percentage were used by long stay visitors.
- 5.2 Hertfordshire County Council has recently adopted a zonal approach to maximum parking standards. With this zonal approach applied to Hitchin town centre, the current parking numbers are likely to exceed the zonal standards. Therefore with current national and local parking policy there is no justification in increasing parking spaces or replacing those due to be lost. Many parts of this strategy therefore include utilising existing capacity.
- 5.3 The elements of the strategy are as follows:

Short Term

- Develop the zonal approach for town centre;
- Utilise existing capacity at Lairage by the following measures:
 - Improve signage for drivers approaching the town from the south;
 - Change signage to direct drivers approaching from Stevenage along Park Way;
 - Change of tariff from long stay to short stay;
 - Refurbish of the Lairage car park including the installation of CCTV;
 - Improve pedestrian links to the town centre;
- Utilise existing capacity at Woodside by the following measures:
 - Improve signage along Queen Street and additional signage at the exit from Portmill Lane and St Mary's Square car parks;
- ◆ Ensure provision of parking space for market traders close to the market; .Increase the long stay parking tariff;
- Introduce a charge for on-street parking;
- Introduce an additional cross aisle within Portmill Lane East car park to improve circulation;
- Investigate the possibility of a ramp between St Mary's Square car park and the market.

Long Term

- Introduce variable message signs to inform drivers of spare spaces at Lairage and Woodside car parks;
- Introduce a Saturday Park and Ride at the Railway station car park;
- Utilise the spare capacity at the private non-residential car parks;
- Encourage modal shift for all day commuters;
- Investigate the decriminalisation of parking enforcement;
- Consult residents on the extension of the residents parking permits system.

APPENDIX 4:

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Accessibility	The ability of people to move around and through an area.
Affordable Housing	Housing made available based on the evidence of need, to people who are unable to afford housing at market prices. Legal agreements can be used to restrict the occupation of property to people falling within categories of need.
Brownfield Site	Is correctly known as previously developed land as defined in Annex C of PPG 3 – Housing: March 2000
Building Line	The line formed by the frontages of buildings along a street.
Burgage Plots	Long narrow mediaeval property boundaries with narrow frontages comprising the trading part of the burgess - (merchants or traders allowed to make profits) - facing onto the street.
Community Facilities	Facilities used by the local community to meet their day to day needs. These include community buildings (places of worship, community halls, libraries), health and education facilities (schools, doctors and dentists surgeries, pharmacies).
Commuted Payments	A sum of money paid to a Local Authority by a developer (often under a Section 106 Agreement) to provide facilities or improvement connected with a development.
Comparison Shopping	Non-food goods such as clothes and electrical equipment, for which the consumer generally expects to invest time and effort into visiting a range of shops before making a choice.
Conservation Area	Area of special architectural or historic interest which has been determined by the Local Planning Authority as one where the character or appearance is worthy of preservation or enhancement (s.69, Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990).
Design	Relates to the layout, character, enclosure, ease of movement, legibility and diversity of a building or development scheme. It also includes construction materials, orientation, density and open space provision. Good design can create spaces that people are proud of and somewhere they want to live.
Design Brief	See definition for Planning Brief
Dwelling	A self-contained unit of accommodation that includes both houses and flats.
Enhancement	To positively add to a building or area that already has high quality.
GFA – gross floor area	The total floor space of a building measured to the outside of all external walls.

Hard and soft Landscaping	Refers to hard surfacing materials such as block paving and planting and street furniture for soft landscaping.
Green Travel Plan	A package of measures usually put together by an employer to encourage staff to travel to work, and for work, by more sustainable modes of transport.
Health Checks	Information on town centres, which should be gathered on a regular basis to assess the vitality and viability of a centre, and includes, amongst other things: pedestrian flows, level of vacancies, diversity of uses, shop rents.
Housing Needs Study	Studies/Assessment done by district and borough councils to assess the level and types of unmet needs for accommodation, particularly affordable housing.
Landmark	A building or structure that stands out from its background by virtue of its height, size or other aspect of design.
Legibility	The degree to which a place can be easily understood and traversed.
Listed Building	A building identified by the Secretary of State for the Environment as being of special architectural or historical interest and entered on the statutory list (Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 S.1(5)).
Local distinctiveness	An architectural design term used to refer to building materials or design features that can be identified as belonging to the local area (Hitchin and surrounding area).
Local Plan	Statutory document produced by District Councils setting out detailed land use policies for the area concerned, to implement the development strategy set out in the County Structure Plan.
Local Development Framework	Statutory document produced by District Councils setting out detailed land use policies for the area concerned, will replace Local Plans.
Mixed use development	Developments which include a mix of uses including housing, employment, leisure and community facilities.
One-stop-shop	Is where visitors can find out information, making bookings for services, make payments etc at one location. It may also include a self-service computer terminal for those who do not have this facility at home. This might be a shop hosted by the local authority, but could equally include a space for our partners - perhaps health or police - in order to best meet the community need in that area.
Passenger/Public Transport	Those services on which members of the public rely for getting from place to place when not using their own private transport. It includes bus, rail and taxis.
Planning/Development Brief	A non-statutory document produced by the local planning authorities in partnership with other interested parties that sets out the main principles for the design, siting and layout of a development site or sites.

PPG's - Planning Policy Guidance Notes	A series of notes that set out the Government's policy guidance on planning issues, such as housing, shopping, the countryside etc.
Public Realm and Spaces	Areas that are available for the public to use, without charge such as streets, squares and parks.
Qualitative and Quantitative Need	Need determined by the shortfall quality or quantity of the existing facilities.
Retail Hierarchy	Hierarchy of shopping centres ranging from regional and sub-regional centres through town centres, district and local centres. Structure plans outline the hierarchy within a county and local plans indicate the hierarchy within districts.
Shopmobility Scheme	This is a nationally run scheme to enable people with physical disabilities to loan a self-propelled or battery operated wheelchair or scooter to travel around shopping centres. This service is usually free, although there may occasionally be a small charge to cover local costs.
Shopping Area	An area within the Town Centre which is identified for mainly shopping uses
Shopping frontage	Areas within shopping areas identified on the District Local Plan Proposals Map as the main frontages for shops.
SMART	Refers to the setting of challenging, <u>S</u> pecific, <u>M</u> easurable, <u>A</u> chievable, <u>R</u> elevant and <u>T</u> ime defined objectives.
Structure Plan	Statutory document produced by County Councils outlining their strategy for development over a 10 –15 year period.
Sustainable development	Development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.