

HERTFORDSHIRE GROWTH BOARD

Theobalds Enterprise Centre, Theobalds Business Park, Innovation Place, Platinum Way, Cheshunt, Waltham Cross, EN8 8YD

Wednesday 4 March 2026, 14.00-16.00

Agenda:

No.	Time	Item	Speaker
1.	14.00	Welcome & Introductions	Chair
	14.05	Incubating Success: The BEC Story	Zoe Galea, Centre Manager, BEC, Julie Creffield, Innovation Director Oxford Innovation Space
2.	14.15	Google's Data Centres in the UK	Jess Simmonds, Global Infrastructure Lead
3.	14.30	Digital Strategy Workshop with BT	All
4.	15.15	Healthy & Safe Places Framework	Donna Nolan, Victoria Leitner
5.	15.30	Devolution & Westminster Event / Local Growth Plan Timescales	Neil Hayes, Mark Doran
6.	15.55	AOB	Chair

HGB Members:

Council Leaders

Corina Gander, Broxbourne Borough Council
Sally Symington, Dacorum Borough Council
Ben Crystall, East Herts District Council
Steve Jarvis, Hertfordshire County Council (substitute attending: Cllr Zukowskyj)
Jeremy Newmark, Hertsmere Borough Council (Vice Chair)
Val Bryant, North Hertfordshire District Council
Paul de Kort, St Albans City & District Council
Richard Henry, Stevenage Borough Council (Vice Chair)
Stephen Giles-Medhurst, Three Rivers District Council
Peter Taylor (Mayor), Watford Borough Council (**Chair**)
Rose Grewal, Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council

Co-opted Members

Kate Vaughton, Exec Director – Neighbourhood Health, Place and Partnerships, ICB
Adrian Hawkins, Hertfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership Chairman
Julia Krause, Homes England
Jonathan Ash-Edwards, Hertfordshire Police & Crime Commissioner
Wendy Wills, University of Hertfordshire

HGB Executive

Lucy Gravatt, Director of Advocacy and Partnerships, Hertfordshire Growth Board
Brenda Harris, Programme Manager, Hertfordshire Growth Board
Neil Hayes, Director, Hertfordshire Growth Board

Guests

Zoe Galea, Centre Manager, BEC
Julie Creffield, Innovation Director, Oxford Innovation Space
Jess Simmonds, Global Infrastructure Lead, Google
Vincent Ballard, Business Development Manager – Strategy & Transformation, BT
Joseph Butler, Account Director, BT
Kevin Hoctor, Strategic Engagement Lead, Oxfordshire, Buckinghamshire, Bedfordshire, Hertfordshire & Northamptonshire at Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government
Victoria Leitner, Strategic Lead, Public Health

Digital Strategy

Hertfordshire Growth Board (HGB)

Author: Lucy Gravatt, Director of Advocacy and Partnerships

1 Purpose

- 1.1 This paper provides an update on the development of Hertfordshire's Digital Strategy (2026–2035) and outlines the activity undertaken to date to engage partners, gather industry insight and shape the emerging priorities. A full draft Strategy is not presented at this stage, as work is still underway to refine and test its core components.
- 1.2 Two supporting documents - the Digital Roundtable Briefing (19 February) and the Digital Innovation Workshop plan (4 March) - are appended for information.

2 Early Drafting of the Strategy

- 2.1 The Digital Strategy will form a key pillar of Hertfordshire's long term economic ambition, supporting innovation-led growth, digital inclusion, infrastructure planning and business competitiveness. Work over recent months has focused on building the evidence base and engaging partners to inform the emerging direction of travel.
- 2.2 Initial work has set out the broad structure for the Strategy, centred on four themes:
 - **Connectivity for All** (broadband and gigabit rollout)
 - **Coverage for All** (mobile capacity and addressing not-spots)
 - **Bridging the Digital Divide** (digital inclusion, skills and affordability)
 - **Digital Growth** (AI adoption, digital creativity, innovation districts, data infrastructure)

These themes will continue to be refined and tested through engagement before a full draft is produced for Growth Board review in the coming months.

- 2.3 **Industry and Partner Engagement:** To ensure the Strategy is shaped by real-world needs and opportunities, two engagement routes have been progressed:
- 2.4 **Digital Roundtable – BT Customer Experience Centre (19 February 2026)**

This session will bring together industry leaders, innovators, creative sector representatives and public sector partners to examine Hertfordshire's potential in AI, digital creativity and innovation. The session is designed to test and strengthen the Strategy's emerging AI, digital creativity and innovation themes. Key areas of discussion are expected to include:

- Growing appetite for practical support for AI adoption across sectors, including cost, capability and data readiness challenges.
- The value of Hertfordshire's unique blend of screen industries, advanced engineering, life sciences and digital infrastructure, and how these strengths can be better connected.
- The need for clearer conditions to support innovation-ready companies, including skills pipelines, data access, flexible workspace, finance models and practical guidance for businesses.

- A strong case for defining and strengthening Hertfordshire's innovation ecosystem, including clearer roles for anchor institutions, BT and national partners.
(Appendix A)

2.5 Growth Board Digital Innovation Workshop (4 March 2026): This session will allow Leaders and Chief Executives to shape the **innovation and digital creativity** element of the Strategy. The workshop will:

- Share insight gathered from the February roundtable
- Explore Hertfordshire's digital and creative strengths
- Identify emerging opportunities at the intersection of AI, technology and industry
- Define the conditions for an innovation-ready county
- Agree a shortlist of 5 priority actions to anchor the Strategy's innovation chapter
(Appendix B)

3 Next steps and recommendations

3.1 Following the workshop, officers will:

1. Refine and strengthen the Strategy using roundtable and workshop insight
2. Develop a revised emerging draft for internal testing
3. Produce a full public-facing draft for Board review in June with view to publish later that month
4. Establish a clear engagement and communications plan ahead of publication

3.2 Recommendations

That the Growth Board:

- Notes progress made to date
- Participates in the Digital Innovation Workshop on 4 March
- Supports the next phase of development ahead of a full draft later this year

Appendix A

BT Customer Experience Centre, 1 Braham Street, London, E1 8EE

19 February 2026, 10-1pm, including lunch

Participants

Prof. Kate Asante, Professor of Skills and Innovation, Director of Lifelong Learning and Student Success, University of Hertfordshire

Vincent Ballard, Business Development Manager – Strategy and Transformation, BT

Linda Chandler, Co-Founder, Spatial Sound and Guidance Company; Director, Digital Place Futures

Johanne Dufficy, Service Director – Customers, North Herts District Council (via Teams)

Cllr Paul de Kort, Leader, St Albans City and District Council; Chair, Hertfordshire Digital mission

Lucy Gravatt, Director, Advocacy and Partnerships, Hertfordshire Growth Board

Neil Hayes, Chief Executive, Hertfordshire Futures

Sophie Mance, Senior Project Manager, Digital Hertfordshire

Simon Mercer, Managing Director, Pearldrop Video Production

Dr Nicola Millard, Principal Innovation Partner, BT

Damian Hart, BT Business Leader, SW Region

Detlef Nauck, Head of AI and Data Science Research, BT (via Teams)

Cllr Jeremy Newmark, Leader, Hertsmere Borough Council, Vice Chair, Hertfordshire Growth Board; Chair, Elstree Studios

Celia Taylor, Head of Films and Underrepresented Talent, Media Trust; Co-Founder, Distant Voices

Purpose of the Roundtable

Hertfordshire is developing a new Digital Strategy (2026–2035) to sit alongside the county's Economic Strategy and support its ambition to become the UK's innovation heartland. The Strategy will focus on how digital technologies - including AI, data and modern digital infrastructure - can help businesses grow, improve productivity and strengthen Hertfordshire's competitive position. This roundtable brings together industry leaders, innovators and digital specialists to help shape **one specific part** of the Strategy: the AI, digital creativity and innovation strand.

This roundtable will also explore how Hertfordshire can lead the UK in digital creativity - bringing together screen production, IP generation, advanced construction, financing models and future workforce skills - and ensure these strengths are fully aligned with national industrial strategies and the emerging AI landscape.

Draft Agenda

1. Welcome & Purpose

BT Host & Hertfordshire Futures/HGB

- Welcome - BT
- Overview and Purpose: shaping the AI/innovation component of Hertfordshire's new Digital Strategy – Hertfordshire Growth Board

2. BT Insight: The AI Landscape

- Key trends and technologies
- What BT is seeing across UK industry/other regions
- Any key takeaways for Herts?

3. Discussion: AI Adoption – Opportunities & Challenges

- Current and emerging use cases
- Barriers to adoption (skills, cost, culture, data readiness)
- What support industry needs

4. Discussion: Creating an Innovation-Ready Hertfordshire

- Conditions for innovation-led growth
- Infrastructure needs specific to AI (data centres, connectivity, energy)

5. Prioritising Actions for the Digital Strategy

- Identify top priorities for the AI/innovation chapter

6. Summary & Next Steps

- How input will shape the draft
- How we can work better together

Background

Hertfordshire's **Economic Strategy 2025–2035** sets a clear ambition for the county to become the **UK's innovation heartland**, driven by high-value sectors such as life sciences, defence, creative industries and advanced digital technology.

To support this ambition, Hertfordshire is developing a **new Digital Strategy (2026–2035)**. The Strategy will provide a countywide framework for how digital technologies can help to:

- improve productivity,
- support innovation and commercialisation,
- strengthen business competitiveness, and
- ensure residents and communities benefit from digital transformation.

The Digital Strategy will bring together work on:

- AI and innovation adoption,
- digital skills and inclusion,
- digital infrastructure (including connectivity, data centres and energy requirements), and
- business growth and commercialisation.

This roundtable contributes to the strand focused on **AI, digital creativity and innovation**.

Why Digital is an Essential Enabler

Digital technology including AI and data-driven tools - increasingly shapes how people live, work and access services. The Economic Strategy highlights that these technologies are transforming Hertfordshire's key sectors, creating new opportunities for growth while also reshaping skills needs across the foundation economy (health, care, logistics and retail).

A strong digital foundation is important for:

- innovation-driven business growth
- sector competitiveness
- reducing economic inactivity
- improving access to jobs and services, and
- ensuring inclusive benefits for all communities.

The Governance Context (in brief): LGR & Devolution

Hertfordshire is progressing through **Local Government Reorganisation (LGR)** and the Government's wider devolution programme. Future governance arrangements will require:

- integrated digital systems,
- shared data standards, and
- modern, efficient tools that support accountable service delivery.

Hertfordshire County Council already has an internal **Digital and Technology Strategy** focused on service transformation. The new countywide Digital Strategy will not duplicate this work. Instead, it will look outward - at how digital infrastructure, AI adoption, innovation and skills can support economic growth, business competitiveness and cross-sector collaboration. Both strategies will run in parallel and complement one another.

Emerging Considerations: Data Centres & Innovation Districts

Data Centres

Hertfordshire is seeing significant investment in data centres, including large schemes such as Google's Waltham Cross site. These developments position the county as an emerging digital infrastructure hub and could support:

- data-intensive and AI-driven businesses
- sector-specific innovation clusters, and
- Hertfordshire's wider digital and economic ecosystem.

However, they also raise important practical considerations, including:

- energy and water demand
- grid capacity
- land use, and
- how economic benefits flow to local communities.

The Digital Strategy will help form a position on their future role.

Innovation Districts

The Economic Strategy proposes a network of **innovation districts** aligned with Hertfordshire's strongest clusters. These districts have the potential to:

- bring together businesses, universities and skills providers
- accelerate commercialisation
- provide flexible, energy-efficient workspace, and
- support growth along key innovation corridors.

The concept is not yet defined at county level. The Digital Strategy provides an opportunity to clarify:

- potential locations
- the digital and AI-related infrastructure they require, and
- how they could support balanced growth across the county.

Scope of This Roundtable

This session is intended to focus specifically on areas where industry insight is most valuable for shaping the **AI, digital creativity and innovation** strand of the Digital Strategy, including:

- AI adoption in practice
- the strength of Hertfordshire's innovation ecosystem
- industry needs and skills requirements, and
- infrastructure considerations relevant to AI-driven growth.

Appendix B

Theobalds Enterprise Centre, Theobalds Business Park; Innovation Place,
Platinum Way; Cheshunt, Waltham Cross, EN8 8YD19

4 March 2026

1 What Digital Innovation Means for Hertfordshire

Purpose: Turn roundtable insight into a set of clear Digital Strategy priorities

Summary of Roundtable (5 minutes)

Led by: Neil Hayes / Lucy Gravatt

- Why the Strategy needs a stronger digital innovation & creativity core
- What we've heard from the roundtable so far
- The ambition: *Hertfordshire as the UK's innovation heartland, powered by AI + digital creativity + world-class infrastructure*

1. BT Input — What Digital Innovation Means for a Global Tech Leader (10 minutes)

Led by BT (Vince Ballard/Joseph Butler)

A short, sharp insight piece covering:

- The UK's AI and digital innovation trajectory
- What "innovation readiness" looks like across sectors and regions
- What BT sees as Hertfordshire's unique strengths and gaps

2. Table Discussion: Conditions for an Innovation-Ready County (15 minutes)

Prompt questions: (15 minutes)

1. What conditions must be in place for Hertfordshire to lead nationally in digital creativity and AI?
(skills, financing, data access, workforce pipelines, flexible workspace, regulatory clarity)
2. How do we ensure alignment with national Industrial Strategy?
3. What role should BT + Herts Futures + local leaders play?

Output: **A practical list of enablers** (skills, infrastructure, investment levers, cross-sector partnerships).

4. Prioritisation (10 minutes)

Led by Neil Hayes/Lucy Gravatt

- Table to feedback priorities

5. Close (5 minutes)

- Summarise agreed actions
- Next steps: incorporating the insights into the revised Digital Strategy
- Confirm milestones/timeline ahead of publication

Healthy and Safe Places Framework

Hertfordshire Growth Board (HGB)

Author: Lucy Gravatt, Director of Advocacy and Partnerships

1 Purpose

- 1.1 This paper provides an update on the development, progress and impact of the [Healthy and Safe Places Framework](#). It outlines the work completed to date, highlights early success and national recognition, and seeks the Board's endorsement for the Framework adopted and embedded within future planning policy and strategic documents across Hertfordshire.

2 Background

- 2.1 The Healthy and Safe Places Framework has been developed as a countywide, evidence-based approach to embedding health, wellbeing and safety at the heart of spatial planning. It has been co-designed by Hertfordshire Growth Board partners, local councils, Public Health, the NHS, Police and the voluntary and community sector, drawing on extensive expertise in place-making, public health intelligence and planning policy.
- 2.2 The Framework brings together seven core Healthy Placemaking Principles: Healthy Homes; Movement and Connectivity; Community Infrastructure; Natural Environment; Economy; Places and Neighbourhoods; and Healthy and Safe Communities. These principles provide a shared baseline for assessing and shaping new developments, regeneration schemes and Local Plans. A supporting [digital hub](#) hosts mapping tools and datasets to ensure decisions are informed by high-quality, accessible evidence.

3 Aims and intended outcomes

- 3.1 The Healthy and Safe Places Framework aims to ensure that health, wellbeing and safety are systematically embedded in all spatial planning decisions across Hertfordshire. It seeks to achieve the following outcomes:
 - Healthier communities where the built environment actively supports physical and mental wellbeing.
 - Reduced health inequalities by using data driven insights to prioritise need and ensure consistent standards across all districts.
 - Safer places through design that reduces crime, improves community safety and strengthens resilience.
 - Stronger cross sector collaboration by providing a single shared evidence base and language for planners, health partners, community safety teams and developers.
 - Better quality developments shaped by clear, evidence based principles understood and endorsed by all partners.

- More efficient decision making through accessible tools that support earlier engagement, stronger justification for planning policy and more transparent development proposals.

4 Work to date – Framework development

- 4.1 Significant progress has been made in designing, refining and launching the Framework. The digital hub continues to evolve, with further datasets being integrated and work underway to establish agreements and processes for maintaining and updating the information. Feedback from partners has been positive, with many already expressing interest in using the Framework to support specific planning and development projects.
- 4.2 A dedicated Steering Group representing councils, Public Health, the ICB, the Police and key place-shaping leads has overseen development and early implementation. Regular meetings have supported alignment between planning and health objectives, ensured momentum, and enabled practical feedback to refine digital tools and documentation.
- 4.3 The Framework is now being aligned with major strategic agendas including work on devolution, the Spatial Development Strategy, the Local Transport Plan and the Economic Strategy. This is positioning the Framework as a core tool for health improvement, prevention and inclusive growth as Hertfordshire transitions to new governance and delivery arrangements.
- 4.4 The Framework has attracted strong interest since its launch in November 2025. Partners have requested additional datasets, and several engagements - including national conference sessions, internal briefings and regional roundtables - are planned or underway. A communications plan has been put in place to support wider awareness and adoption across planning, health and community stakeholders.

5 Success to date

- 5.1 The Framework has already achieved notable national recognition as the first of its kind in the UK. It is to be profiled at a major national public health conference, where it will demonstrate how this pioneering model enables health to be systematically embedded in planning. This recognition positions Hertfordshire as a national leader in healthy placemaking.
- 5.2 It has been commended publicly for setting a new benchmark for planning practice - clear, practical, grounded in evidence, and able to unite planning, public health and community safety. Commentary has highlighted its potential to influence national policy and to be replicated in other parts of the country.

6 Next steps: embedding into policy and practice

- 6.1 The priority for the next phase is to embed the Framework into all relevant planning and strategic processes. This includes Local Plans, supplementary planning documents, design codes, regeneration programmes, the emerging Spatial Development Strategy and the Local Transport Plan. Embedding the Framework will ensure health and safety considerations become routine and consistent across the planning system.

7 Recommendations

The Board is asked to:

- Endorse the Healthy and Safe Places Framework as Hertfordshire's agreed approach to incorporating health, wellbeing and safety considerations into all place making and planning activity.
- Agree that the Framework should be used to guide future planning policy, including Local Plans, Local Development Documents, design codes, strategic planning frameworks and regeneration strategies.
- Support the continued alignment of the Framework with devolution, the Local Growth Plan and related strategic programmes, ensuring it forms a central part of Hertfordshire's future approach to health improvement and spatial planning.
- Request a progress update in six months covering adoption, governance arrangements and the development of Phase 2.

Devolution and Westminster Event / Local Growth Plan Timescales

Hertfordshire Growth Board (HGB)

Author: Neil Hayes, Director of HGB

Please note this agenda item will be a verbal update