

**CABINET (Extract)**

**7 March 2016**

**Present:**

Mayor Dorothy Thornhill	(Strategic partnerships/ external relationships and community safety)
Cllr Scudder	(Deputy Mayor and Portfolio Holder for Corporate Strategy and Client Services)
Cllr Johnson	(Portfolio Holder for Housing)
Cllr Sharpe	(Portfolio Holder for Regeneration & Development)
Cllr Taylor	(Portfolio Holder for Community & Customer Services)
Cllr Watkin	(Portfolio Holder for Democracy and Governance and Shared Services)

**Also present:**

Councillor Nigel Bell (Labour)  
Councillor Binita Mehta (Conservative)  
Councillor Rabi Martins (Liberal Democrat)

**Officers:**

Managing Director  
Head of Finance  
Head of Corporate Strategy and Client Services  
Head of Regeneration and Development  
Head of Community and Customer Services  
Planning Policy Section Head  
Legal and Democratic Section Head  
Communications and Engagement Section Head  
Housing Section Head (Interim)  
Client Manager Waste, Recycling and Streetcare  
Democratic Services Manager

58. **MANAGEMENT OF CONSERVATION AREAS TASK GROUP – FINAL REPORT AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Cabinet received a report of the Committee and Scrutiny Officer regarding the final report and recommendations of the Management of Conservation Areas Task Group.

Councillor Rabi Martins, Chair of the Task Group, attended the meeting and introduced the report. The Task Group comprised Councillors Martins, Collett, Joynes, Haley and Topping.

Councillor Martins commented that the Council had always taken pride in the town and in conservation areas. The first conservation area was created in 1973, since that time the Council had continued to look at parts of the town and nominate them to be conservation areas e.g., an area of Oxhey in 2013.

Councillor Martins stated that he had requested the scrutiny task group as there was a conservation area in his ward, Central, where it had been noticed that some properties were beginning to ignore that they were in a conservation area and had made inappropriate modifications. Following this he consulted with other wards and felt that there was a problem so the task group was set up to see what could be done better. The work of the task group took place over three months and met on four occasions and held a public drop-in session. There was engagement with officers from Watford Borough Council and from other councils. The final report was a document which addressed the issues and looked to improvements for the future.

The task group's main recommendations were around communication. In areas such as Central Ward there had been a change in ratio from owner-occupier properties to a greater number of rented properties. The survey carried out showed that only 10% of landlords knew or told their tenants that they were living in a conservation area. There needed to be greater communication to the public, councillors and staff about conservation areas.

With regards to recommendations around legislation there was a changing environment in this area with an increase in permitted developments. The task group recommended that a review of Article 4 directions should be undertaken regularly to reflect changes in legislation and to address the impact of changes in technologies such as solar panels.

Councillor Martins continued that there were plenty of examples in planning where the conservation team had made comments on significant developments. He commented that the conservation team needed to be consulted on the impact of developments

adjacent to conservation areas as this issue had arisen in a recent application.

In conclusion, Councillor Martins stated that three months had not been sufficient time to complete the work and that the task group should reconvene to continue at a future date.

Councillor Sharpe thanked Councillor Martins and the members of the task group. He commented that the report made constructive suggestions. In the management of conservation areas the council had led the way compared to other authorities. Last year the council had been short listed for planning awards. The council had also been proactive in identifying where there was a threat to an area and responding to this e.g., MacDonnell gardens and the King Street area. With regards to the Met quarter it could be seen in action that without a conservation area the whole area would have faced demolition or fundamental change. The council had benefited from a truly inspirational officer who was a Senior Planner (Design and Conservation) who had successfully brought in funding for war memorials and worked to declutter the conservation areas. The officer had now left the council but Councillor Sharpe hoped that the new recent appointment would be able to continue the work.

Councillor Sharpe continued that the recommendations gave suggestions for immediate action and others were pause for thought. With regards to the suggestion for roundels on street lamps for somewhere in the Oxhey conservation area it may be seen as divisive. For an area such as MacDonnell Gardens it was already a clearly defined area. However, he could see that it might be of use in Central ward. The Article 4 directions were an important strategy and kept under review for reasons set out by the task group.

Councillor Sharpe stated that there would be engagement with all the recommendations to see what could be implemented by letter or spirit. There was a conservation area management plan which was designed to last for five years. This was due to be reviewed and updated in 2018, if scrutiny was engaged with the process in updating the plan that would tie into a specific piece of work.

Councillor Bell welcomed the report and was disappointed that there had not been greater input from all the councillors to the survey. He commented that the Conservation Area Task Group could continue its work as legislation changed.

The Mayor commented that with regards to the recommendation on communication it was important that landlords knew whether they had a property in a conservation area and it could not be assumed that this knowledge would be there. It was therefore important to be proactive. Residents needed to be reminded what it meant to live in a conservation area.

Councillor Martins responded that communication was key and the task group's recommendation regarding the roundels was to remind people that they lived in a conservation area and to take care.

The Head of Regeneration and Development commented that whilst she did not disagree with comments about the impact of rented accommodation, it was the case that rented properties were less likely to have additions/alterations than owner-occupier properties. The most interesting part of the task group was the survey of residents and businesses which had been promoted through posters and social media. There had been a good number of responses and this was something that could be looked at as an additional way of consulting on planning policies in the future.

The Head of Regeneration and Development continued that there had been roundels placed on lampposts in conservation areas which were largely unnoticed. The council would need to look at each area and make a decision on whether they would be effective. People were made aware that they were in a conservation area when they bought properties. The council would look to use the website to make information more available. They were also looking at making Facebook groups for those in a conservation area. The time for the task group to reengage would be when there was a review of the conservation area management plan in 2018, so that the recommendations could feed into something tangible.

The Mayor thanked the scrutiny task group.

RESOLVED

That Cabinet agrees to consider the Task Group recommendations below to inform the review of the conservation area management plan.

Task Group Recommendations:

### **Communication**

1. Include information about conservation areas in annual council tax and business rates notices for properties with postcodes in these areas.
2. Introduce a symbol on lamp columns or existing street furniture to show that the street or neighbourhood is in a designated conservation area.
3. Improve access to comprehensive information about conservation areas on Watford Borough Council's website, including guidance to residents about living or owning property there.
4. Encourage Councillors to play an active role in raising awareness of conservation areas, for example through public meetings, promoting local history projects, arranging for officers to speak at local meetings etc.

5. Consider alternative ways to engage with residents and businesses about the need for planning permissions for certain alterations in conservation areas. This might include utilising social media to sign post them to the Council's website for comprehensive information.

### **Legislation, Council policy and procedures**

6. Review current Article 4 directions to reflect changes in the General Permitted Development Orders and consider whether other classes should be included.
7. Ensure that procedures remain in place to undertake regular reviews of Watford Borough Council's Article 4 directions in order to address the potential impact of changes in technology or legislation.
8. Continue with the regular review of Watford Borough Council's toolkit of documents ensuring that these remain relevant.
9. Ensure that Watford Borough Council's development management officers continue to consult with the conservation and policy team when considering applications adjacent to conservation areas, in order to minimise the impact of new developments on properties within those areas.

### **Council resources**

10. Continue to assign conservation area management responsibility to a designated officer and commit to providing adequate council resources to continue the excellent work that has been done to manage Watford's conservation areas and protect the character of Watford's built environment and street scene, particularly within designated conservation areas.

### **Training**

11. Include conservation, design and enforcement issues in the induction and development management training for Councillors to establish a comprehensive training programme.