

COUNCIL

14 July 2020

Present: Councillor A Dychton (Chairman)
Councillor B Mauthoor (Vice-Chair)
Councillors P Taylor, D Allen-Williamson, S Bashir, N Bell,
S Bolton, K Collett, K Crout, J Dhindsa, F Ezeifedi, A Grimston,
I Hamid, K Hastrick, M Hofman, P Jeffree, J Johnson, S Johnson,
A Khan, P Kloss, R Martins, M Mills, M Parker, J Pattinson,
G Saffery, N Shah, I Sharpe, R Smith, Stanton, J Stiff, I Stotesbury,
M Turmaine, D Walford, M Watkin, R Wenham and T Williams

Officers: Managing Director
Group Head of Democracy and Governance
Acting Shared Director of Finance
Group Head of Corporate Strategy and Communications
Senior Democratic Services Officer
Democratic Services Manager
Mayor's Political Assistant

The Chairman welcomed everyone to this virtual Council meeting. She introduced the councillors and officers present and advised members about the voting system which was being used for the meeting.

18 **Apologies for Absence**

Apologies were received from Councillor Scudder.

19 **Disclosure of Interests**

There were no disclosures of interest.

20 **Minutes**

The minutes of the Annual Council meeting held on 19 May 2020 were approved. It was noted that the minutes would be signed once officers and members were able to return to the town hall.

21 **Official Announcements**

There were no official announcements.

Mayor's Report

A report of the Mayor had been circulated with the agenda.

The Chairman invited members to indicate whether they wished to ask a question of the Mayor. Councillors Bell, Martins, Bashir, Saffery, Mauthoor, Smith, Stotesbury, Turmaine and Dhindsa indicated that they wished to ask questions.

1. Councillor Bell thanked the Mayor for his close partnership work with all members during the Covid 19 lockdown. He acknowledged the Mayor's responses to his questions regarding John Lewis's decision to close its Watford store. Stating that the John Lewis Partnership's intention to adapt its operations at a national level had been the subject of press speculation for some time, Councillor Bell questioned whether the Mayor had met with representatives from the Partnership only since its 2 July announcement or whether there had been meetings prior to this date

The Mayor acknowledged the benefits of regular cross-party working during Covid 19 which had played an important part in co-ordinating the council's response to the pandemic. Referring to Councillor Bell's substantive question, the Mayor confirmed that he had met with John Lewis's senior management team last week to discuss the closure. He confirmed that the Council would do all it could to support those individuals who had lost their jobs. There was a widespread desire for John Lewis to maintain its 140 year presence in the town. The Mayor underlined his commitment to ensure that Watford maintained a thriving town centre.

2. In a supplementary question, Councillor Bell cited articles which had appeared in The Guardian on 8 February and again on 5 March in The Guardian and Financial Times regarding the possibility of store closures and job losses in the John Lewis group. He asked why the Mayor had not sought an urgent meeting with the Chairman of the John Lewis Partnership, Dame Sharon White, at the time the articles had appeared. He noted that a meeting with Dame Sharon White had still not taken place.

The Mayor advised that he had written to Dame Sharon White to request a meeting and also maintained regular and on-going contact with the intu management to pursue the best possible outcome for the town. He outlined the broader difficulties faced by John Lewis and confirmed that the local store paid no rent and, since mid-March of this year, had paid no business rates. The Mayor invited positive input from all parties to promote the town, including its retail sector which had been hard hit by the Covid 19 lockdown.

3. Councillor Martins thanked the Mayor for his help for victims of Covid 19 in the town which had been widely appreciated. However, he remained concerned about the effects of Covid 19 on the welfare of children, particularly in regard to their mental health. Although responsibility for children's services rested with Hertfordshire County Council, those suffering lived in Watford. Councillor Martins asked what issues had been raised in the Mayor's conversations with head teachers and what help had been offered.

The Mayor thanked Councillor Martins for his actions to support the voluntary sector during lockdown, including in his capacity as the council's mental health champion. He acknowledged the work undertaken with head teachers to help identify families in need and those struggling with mental health issues. The Mayor drew attention to the Watford Together website (www.watfordtogether.co.uk), which had a section on mental health and wellness with signposting to sources of help. In addition, the Mayor outlined the recently opened healthy hub at the Town Hall, which had a focus on mental health issues.

4. Councillor Bashir added his thanks for the cross-party partnership, liaison and dialogue which had been maintained during the Covid 19 lockdown. He also welcomed the considerable work undertaken to provide shelter for Watford's rough sleepers. Referring to media reports about the problems facing intu, Councillor Bashir queried the Mayor's high-level plan to maintain Watford as a premier destination for shopping in the south east of England.

The Mayor welcomed praise for the council's housing team, which had worked hard with New Hope and One YMCA to move rough sleepers into accommodation. In response to Councillor Bashir's question, the Mayor emphasised the profitability of intu in Watford, which had been one of the busiest centres since lockdown restrictions had eased. He reiterated the changing nature of retail which saw people wanting to combine shopping with other activities, such as bowling, seeing a film or going climbing. The Mayor remained confident of finding a new owner for intu Watford.

5. Councillor Saffery asked the Mayor about rumours relating to a government White Paper on local government reorganisation, specifically whether the Mayor had seen any proposals to abolish Watford Borough Council and to confirm his determination to ensure that the town continued to determine its own future rather than being subsumed into a wider unitary authority.

The Mayor agreed that the current government appeared set on a reorganisation of local government. His priority remained the interests of local residents and these were not best served by a single authority in Hertford looking after the diverse interests of 1.2 million people in

Hertfordshire. The timing of the proposals was poor; residents were currently facing real economic and health concerns. The Mayor was proud of the officers at Watford Borough Council and would oppose rigorously any proposals to form a single unitary council.

6. Councillor Mauthoor thanked the Mayor for his cross-party working and officers for their hard work during the Covid 19 pandemic. She questioned whether voluntary charities would be able to sustain services should there be a second wave of the virus.

The Mayor agreed that the voluntary sector faced significant challenges. Over recent weeks, there had been huge demands on its services at a time of financial pressure not least due to lost income streams. For this reason the Mayor had set up the Watford Covid Appeal, which had raised over £150,000 to date to help local charities. The Mayor stated that he would continue to do everything he could to support Watford's voluntary sector and welcomed help from all councillors in this endeavour.

7. Councillor Smith outlined the importance of Watford's performance and events venues, including Watford Colosseum, and asked what work was being undertaken to reopen their doors.

The Mayor described the Watford Together initiative, which had brought together a number of important local venues including the Watford Palace Theatre, the Pump House and Watford Football Club. Citing the government's £1.5 billion funding package for the arts, the Mayor confirmed that he would be arguing for a fair share of this money for the town's cultural sector. The council was keen to open venues as soon as it was safe to do so and officers were working to secure this outcome.

8. Councillor Stotesbury asked the Mayor to provide an update on the council's green initiatives, including the Beryl bike usage figures. He asked whether the Mayor would be attending the council's Sustainability Forum event which was taking place at 7pm on 28 July.

The Mayor welcomed the nearly 40,000 journeys, or around 195,000 kilometres cycled, on Beryl bikes since their launch in March. Earlier this month the on-demand buses had been launched creating another sustainable transport choice for local residents. Mayor Taylor underlined the importance of Watford's environment. During lockdown there had been a reduction in congestion resulting in cleaner air in the town. He would continue to work with businesses to promote environmental issues in the future. The Mayor confirmed his attendance at the Sustainability Forum on 28 July.

9. Councillor Turmaine added his thanks for the council's work helping the homeless during the lockdown. He considered that it would be a tragedy if they were allowed to return to the streets. Considering Watford's retail sector, Councillor Turmaine asked the Mayor if he knew what was happening with other flagship stores in the town.

The Mayor added his praise for the work which had been undertaken to alleviate homelessness in Watford, including the One YMCA initiative to provide addiction support. Addressing Councillor Turmaine's question, the Mayor reiterated his responses to earlier questions about his contact with Watford's retail sector and the underlying problems it was facing. He underlined the importance of the council retaining its freehold, and therefore influence, on the shopping centre which had been opposed by Labour councillors previously.

10. Councillor Dhindsa echoed his thanks for the close partnership working between Watford's political parties and the efforts of officers to alleviate the impact of Covid 19. Moving on, Councillor Dhindsa focussed his comments on the £150,000 which had been raised in the Watford Covid Appeal. He expressed concern about the lack of funding provided for BAME groups.

The Mayor refuted any suggestion of racial bias in decision making when allocating money from the Watford Covid Appeal. It was unhelpful to suggest improper process. Money had been distributed to over 40 organisations representing Watford's diverse communities and targeting those most in need. The fund raising effort had been supported by Councillors Saffery and Allen-Williamson and the assistance of other councillors would be welcomed in the future. Full information about all recipients was available on the Watford Covid Appeal website.

23 Questions by Members of the Council under Council Procedure Rule 10.0

Questions had been received from Councillor Bell. The questions and answers had been circulated and published on the council's website.

24 Questions by Members of the Public under Council Procedure Rule 11.0

No questions from the public had been received.

25 Petitions presented under Council Procedure Rule 12.0

No petitions had been received.

26 Business especially brought forward by the Chairman or the Head of Paid

Service which in the opinion of the Chairman should be considered as a matter of urgency.

There was no urgent business.

27 **Amendment to the Council Scheme of Delegation**

Council received a report of the Group Head of Democracy and Governance requesting changes to the council scheme of delegation in relation to planning and enforcement matters.

RESOLVED –

that the amendments to the council scheme of delegation as set out in appendix 1 to the report be approved.

28 **A new Council Plan for Watford (2020-24)**

Council received the report of the Managing Director and Group Head of Strategy and Communications which had been considered by Cabinet on 6 July. An extract from the Cabinet minutes had been published as part of the supplementary agenda.

The report explained the framework to ensure an integrated approach to addressing the challenges of the post Covid-19 era, including the Council Plan, Our Road to Renewal Plan, Organisational Development Strategy and recast budget for 2020-21.

RESOLVED –

That Council:

- Approves the Council Plan 2020-2024, at appendix 1 to the report.
- Approves the Delivery Plan 2020-2022, at appendix 2 to the report.
- That the Managing Director be authorised to make minor amendments to the Council Plan 2020-2024 in consultation with the Elected Mayor.
- Authorises the Managing Director to make minor amendments to the Delivery Plan 2020-2022 in consultation with the Elected Mayor.

- Notes that progress on delivering the Council Plan 2020-2024 will be reported on a quarterly basis to Cabinet, with an annual report being published.
- Notes the actions outlined in the report that will contribute to the delivery of the Council Plan 2020-2024.
- Agrees the establishment of the new role of Executive/Group Head Assistant.

29

Budget update for 2020/2021

Council received the report of the Director of Finance which had been considered by Cabinet on 6 July. An extract of the Cabinet minutes had been published as part of the supplementary agenda. In addition an addendum to the budget had been published relating to the contract with SLM.

The report outlined the significant impact of Covid-19 and the subsequent lockdown on the finances of the council both in terms of additional expenditure and reductions in income levels. The report set out the latest forecast along with proposed actions to rebalance the budget and fund recovery activity during the remainder of the year.

RESOLVED –

That council:

1. Notes the financial impact of Covid-19 and the work being done to balance the budget.
2. Authorises the Director of Finance to make the necessary adjustments to individual budgets to reflect the expenditure and loss of income arising from Covid-19 contained in the report, including the expenditure savings set out in Appendix 1 and the capital programme changes set out in Appendix 2.
3. Agrees the use of Earmarked Reserves as set out in Appendix 3 in order to create a Recovery Fund and that approval of expenditure from the Fund be delegated to the Managing Director in consultation with the Mayor.
4. That Council delegate to the Director of Finance, in consultation with the Mayor, the authority to authorise the variation to the SLM contract and amend the budget accordingly.

Motions submitted under Council Procedure Rule 13.0

Council was informed that three motions had been received:

Motion 1

The following revised motion had been proposed by Councillor Ezeifedi and seconded by Councillor Bashir:

“The COVID 19 pandemic has had a devastating impact on our Watford Community. According to a recent Hertfordshire Public Health report Watford and Hertsmere have both the highest rate of COVID 19 cases and the highest crude mortality rate of COVID 19 registered death per 10,000 population in Hertfordshire (12.7 in Watford and 17.6 in Hertsmere – as of 23 June 2020.)

Watford Borough Council has risen boldly to the unprecedented challenge of COVID 19 through an effective partnership with various agencies, the voluntary sector and the wider community. It is great to note that over the past months, political differences have been put aside in pulling together to support our community.

However, the Public Health England (PHE) review (report published 16 June 2020) confirmed that death rates from COVID-19 were higher for Black and Asian ethnic (BAME) groups when compared to white ethnic groups. The disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on BAME communities presents an opportunity to create a fast but sustainable change that would mitigate further impact.

As part of its response to COVID 19 and associated recovery strategy, this council resolves to:

1. Write to the NHS, Public Health Hertfordshire, Hertfordshire County Council and other health and regulatory services partners to ensure they have reviewed the PHE report and recommendations and have in place practical actions and support that will have a positive impact on Watford’s BAME community now and in the longer-term and, through our Overview and Scrutiny Committee, request regular (quarterly) updates on the progresses achieved for our community.
2. Establish an Overview and Scrutiny Task and Finish Group to provide research and insight into our local BAME community, focusing on the issues that matter to them and working with them to develop recommendations that will deliver change and improved outcomes.

3. As part of Hertfordshire County Council's Local Outbreak plan, work with partners, including the NHS and PHE to implement culturally competent COVID-19 education and prevention campaigns, working in partnership with local BAME and faith communities to prepare the communities to take full advantage of interventions including contact tracing, antibody testing and ultimately vaccine availability.
4. Review the council's equalities objectives and equalities and diversity policy in the light of the findings and recommendations of the Task and Finish Group and use these to provide a robust and focused framework for COVID-19 recovery strategies to make sure they actively reduce inequalities caused by the wider determinants of health to create long term sustainable change."

Members debated the motion.

On being put to Council the motion was agreed.

RESOLVED –

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Motion 2

The following revised motion had been proposed by Councillor Khan and seconded by Councillor Collett:

“Changing Street names – celebrating the rich diverse heritage of Watford.

The Council notes that Watford has a rich, diverse and positive history which must be celebrated. One way to celebrate this is to ensure that street names, buildings, statues and monuments reflect our town and that they do not contain any the negative history which this town abhors. The Black Lives Matter campaign has rightly focussed on the serious concerns of symbols of oppression and slavery.

The council also notes that there are street names that are named after people who were involved in the slave trade, colonisation and oppression, which does not reflect the forward thinking, outward looking Britain and our town.

The council notes that it is not tenable to continue to have these existing names for these streets.

Watford has been enriched by its ethnic minority citizens that have come from right across the world or born in UK. The likes of Luther Blissett, Anthony Joshua, John Barnes are but a few, who have made contributions to our town, but there are many more.

Council resolves to:

1. Rename street names such Rhodes Way, Clive Way, Colonial Way and Imperial Way.
2. Consult with the Royal Mail, local businesses and residents to ensure that their views are considered.
3. A task and finish group is set up to report back with suggested names to replace these street names.
4. When naming new buildings, street names, statues or monuments that the council ensure that they reflect our town and its history and diversity.

That this motion be referred to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee with a recommendation to set up a task and finish group to consider the question of appropriateness of street names etc., as outlined in the motion, and the need for a formal council policy on street naming, providing opportunities for all relevant stakeholders to participate in its work, before making recommendations to Cabinet.”

Members debated the motion.

On being put to Council the motion was agreed.

RESOLVED –

The Council notes that Watford has a rich, diverse and positive history which must be celebrated. One way to celebrate this is to ensure that street names, buildings, statues and monuments reflect our town and that they do not contain any the negative history which this town abhors. The Black Lives Matter campaign has rightly focussed on the serious concerns of symbols of oppression and slavery.

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Waiving of Council Procedure Rule 8.0

The Chair moved that Council Procedure Rule 8.0. be waived to allow the meeting to finish at 10.45 pm.

On being put to the meeting the motion was declared to be carried.

Motion 3

The following motion had been proposed by Councillor Sharpe and seconded by Mayor Taylor:

"Council notes that the government have placed significant pressure on Watford Borough Council to deliver more homes, tripling the council's housing target to deliver 793 dwellings a year.

Council notes that the government, as part of the National Planning Policy Framework, are planning to meet their promise to build 300,000 new homes a

year by building heavily on brownfield land. Watford is made up of 95% brownfield land, meaning we will be under increased pressure to build more homes. The Secretary of State for the Ministry of Housing and Local Government Robert Jenrick MP recently stated he wanted ‘much greater building in urban areas’ particularly ‘above and around major train stations’.

Council notes the recent proposed changes in the government’s Planning for the Future White Paper. These include handing powers away from Development Management Committees and to government run development corporations and a further expansion of permitted development rights, including the right for developers to build upwards without planning permission.

Council believes that we have a housing crisis across the country and therefore we should build more good quality homes, particularly for local families and young people who may otherwise find it difficult to get on the housing ladder.

Council believes that the government’s current National Planning Policy Framework seriously constrains council’s powers to insist that developers provide affordable housing or infrastructure such as schools, doctors surgeries or improved public transport in new development.

Council believes that effective planning policy should require improvements to public transport and to infrastructure such as schools, health facilities etc. as part of new development to ensure there is a good quality of life for existing and new residents.

Council calls on the government to reform its current rules surrounding development to give councils more power to:

- Challenge unrealistic targets.
- Insist on improved infrastructure with new developments.
- Challenge viability assessments that allow developers to get away without providing adequate affordable housing for local young people.
- Scrap permitted development rights that lead to substandard homes being built, such as the recent case of windowless flats in Wellstones.

Council resolves for the Mayor to write to the Secretary of State for the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to call on reform to planning rules to give councils more powers.”

Councillor Bell proposed the following amendment to the motion, seconded by Councillor Smith:

“We are also calling on the Mayor and his Cabinet to urgently reinforce their affordable housing policy of 35% affordable homes for every application of 10 or above units and to not allow developers to get round this by using the ‘affordable rooms ‘get out, again the Council should look to increase the social rented quota in any affordable homes policy.

It is right that we should as a united Watford Council here across Party strongly criticise the Conservative Government’s plans to steamroller local planning democracy ,and resist any attempt to take away our rights of scrutinising and questioning developers as they are given the green light to cram as many units into such small space which will make our town one of the most overdeveloped and densely crammed boroughs in the Country which we must strive to resist on behalf of all our residents.”

Members debated the original motion and amendment.

In accordance with Council Procedure Rules, paragraph 18.4, the requisite number of councillors requested that it be recorded in the minutes how members cast their votes on the amendment to the motion.

Those members voting for the amendment to the motion:

Councillors Bashir, Bell, Dhindsa, Ezeifedi, Khan, Mauthoor, Mills, Shah, Smith and Turmaine

Those members voting against the amendment to the motion:

Mayor Taylor and Councillors Allen-Williamson, Bolton, Collett, Crout, Dychton, Grimston, Hamid, Hastrick, Hofman, Jeffree, J Johnson, S Johnson, Kloss, Parker, Pattinson, Saffery, Sharpe, Stanton, Stiff, Stotesbury, Watkin, Walford, Wenham and Williams

Those members abstaining from voting on the amendment to the motion:

Councillor Martins

On being put to Council, the amendment was lost by 10 votes to 25 with one abstention.

Members then voted on the original motion. On being put to Council the motion was agreed.

RESOLVED –

Council notes that the government have placed significant pressure on Watford Borough Council to deliver more homes, tripling the council's housing target to deliver 793 dwellings a year.

Council notes that the government, as part of the National Planning Policy Framework, are planning to meet their promise to build 300,000 new homes a year by building heavily on brownfield land. Watford is made up of 95% brownfield land, meaning we will be under increased pressure to build more homes. The Secretary of State for the Ministry of Housing and Local Government Robert Jenrick MP recently stated he wanted 'much greater building in urban areas' particularly 'above and around major train stations'.

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Council believes that we have a housing crisis across the country and therefore we should build more good quality homes, particularly for local families and young people who may otherwise find it difficult to get on the housing ladder.

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Council believes that effective planning policy should require improvements to public transport and to infrastructure such as schools, health facilities etc. as part of new development to ensure there is a good quality of life for existing and new residents.

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Council resolves for the Mayor to write to the Secretary of State for the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to call on reform to planning rules to give councils more powers.

Chair

The Meeting started at 7.30 pm
and finished at 10.40 pm