



Watford Borough Council LGA Corporate Peer Challenge

12-14 September 2017



WE ARE WATFORD

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1. Welcome to Watford

On behalf of the councillors and staff at Watford Borough Council we welcome the peer challenge team to our borough.

Our borough motto is 'be bold' and we hope that, through this peer review, we demonstrate we are a council that thrives on challenges and are making the most of our opportunities to ensure we deliver the positive outcomes for our town that we know are important to our diverse and vibrant communities.

In 2010, we set ourselves the goal of building Watford's reputation as a town to be proud of. We firmly believe that, whilst similar towns and urban areas, have struggled over the past decade, the council's vision and commitment to invest in the borough's future means that it is, today, well-placed to continue to thrive and grow. We do not under-estimate the challenges of our 'bold and progressive' agenda for Watford both in terms of the [ambitious programme of work](#) we aim to deliver by 2020 but also in ensuring that we build our communities' understanding of what we have set out to achieve.

We face a number of issues common to local authorities across the country: significant financial constraints, with more reduction in our budget to come, demand for homes far outstripping supply, rising housing costs, high levels of homelessness, local concerns about growth in the borough and how we continue to deliver economic prosperity which benefits all our residents and communities. Our bold thinking has delivered new ways of meeting these challenges but we want to continue to build on our success and make sure we have the right solutions for Watford.

We recognise we have both a great opportunity but also a significant responsibility as place makers. We are creating new communities that will bring thousands of new families to Watford over the next 20 years and our decisions today are part of the legacy we will pass to future generations who will live, work and visit our town. Successful place making will not only depend on our ability to ensure infrastructure and services keep pace with this growth. We need to work with our communities to enable them to do more for themselves, improve engagement and we need to continue to successfully leverage other organisations and bodies to help us deliver.

At the same time we need to shape our organisation and prepare our staff for the next phase in our transformation journey. We are well set, having being awarded [IIP Gold last year](#), but know that our organisation will need to be more agile, customer-focused, digitally savvy and commercially-minded, which is where our [Watford 2020 programme](#) comes in. This aims to deliver over £1million of savings or additional income to support our future financial plans, building on the [£5million we have achieved since 2010](#).

Our position statement sets out some of our recent achievements but also an honest and realistic assessment of areas that need further focus. We believe that now is the right time to present our council for external challenge: firstly to help make sure there is on-going improvement and continued success; secondly as Watford will have a new elected Mayor in 2018 for the first time in 16 years, there is no better time to have a review of how we have done and what more we need to do.

Dorothy Thornhill

Manny Lewis

Baroness Dorothy Thornhill
Elected Mayor of Watford



Manny Lewis
Managing Director



2. Our strategy

- 2.1 Watford had its first election for Mayor in 2002. At that time, the council was in chaos with a legacy of problems and no clear plans on how to improve. It had had received three public interest reports and was the only council in the country to have its accounts disclaimed for two years running. We had received a warning from the then Office of the Deputy Prime Minister about our performance on planning applications (the government was about to step in) and a best value capacity inspection classed us as one of the highest spending, poorly performing councils in the country with some of the lowest satisfaction rates. The council had suffered from too much focus on its “nice to do’s” at the expense of its internal infrastructure and getting the basics in order. Staff sickness was running at around 15 days, our leisure, community and parks facilities were shabby and out of date, we had no plans for how to manage our housing stock to meet our tenants aspirations for better quality homes and our residents were deeply dissatisfied – we were in the bottom quarter nationally for people’s satisfaction with their council.
- 2.2 The first phase was to turnaround a failing council and create a high performing organisation. The council changed its leadership and put in a strong politically-led portfolio management system based on quarterly performance reviews and invested strongly in direct services such as through the delivery of two new leisure centres on time and to budget. In 2007, we were one of the first council’s in the country to put themselves forward for a second Comprehensive Performance Assessment. We were now judged to be a ‘good’ council that had taken on board the lessons from just five years earlier and had made considerable improvement. We were praised for our strong political and managerial leadership that promoted a culture of openness and support, which recognised innovation and learning. Our accounts were in good shape with a strong medium term financial strategy in place that meant the council had consistently set the lowest, or amongst the lowest, council tax rises in the county. Outcomes for the community were clear with improving parks, approval from our housing tenants for stock transfer to an innovative ‘gateway’ model, which would help deliver better quality homes, over £20 million secured for new, state of the art leisure facilities and plans underway to regenerate the town centre by improving our cultural offer. Local priorities such as street cleansing and recycling were prioritised and the change in the council’s relationship with its communities was recognised with better resident satisfaction ratings.
- 2.3 In 2008 it was clear that the Council had consolidated its service management to a very high level, the challenge was then how could the town facilitate its long term economic prosperity as well as reposition its image and reputation outside of Watford. The council had over £100m of property assets but had not captured the benefits, it had good performance but not a fully engaged workforce and Watford was still held back by an unfair negative reputation for being a characterless, unattractive place.
- 2.4 Our second phase focus was to address these big issues. The council appointed a chief executive with a regeneration background and set about a programme of leadership on the key issues, harnessing the strength of the private sector and public sector partners. In the phase from 2008 - 2016:
- The ‘Watford for You’ portal was grown to promote the town’s economic, cultural and visitor offer, chaired through a partnership with the Watford and West Herts Chamber of Commerce and John Lewis
 - The cultural leaders forum was established to catalyse a change in our art and events strategy, building on the culture led renewal of the top of the town, with an ambitious outdoor events

programme supported by the Arts Council, diversifying away from the dominance of the night time economy in the town centre

- The Colosseum concert hall was renewed
- The joint venture with Kier to form a local asset backed vehicle was formed
- The lease agreement with Orion to deliver a 500 unit residential led mixed use scheme was signed
- The development agreement to create a new 1.4 million sq.ft. retail and leisure destination was signed
- The indoor market was relocated to a newly-constructed eye catching setting
- The funding and delivery agreement for the extension of the Metropolitan line to Watford Junction, creating two new stations, was signed although the new Mayor of London is reviewing the cost.
- The Joint Venture with the Watford Community Housing Trust to deliver social and affordable homes was established
- The Property Investment Board to trade low value capital assets for higher yield investments was established and has already secured over £1m in increased revenue to the council
- Watford Commercial Services, the council's own trading company was formed
- Grounds maintenance, street cleansing and refuse collection was outsourced to Veolia, saving the council £594k per annum.
- The council's community centres were transferred to the third sector, bringing in new investment and generating savings.
- The council renewed its allotments by investing £800k of new money to bring them up to an unprecedented standard and achieved 8 green flags for its parks
- The council established and has successfully maintained the Developers Forum and Big Business Connect to engage with the private sector and this has produced significant reputational and investment benefits.
- The council has maintained strong, harmonious community relations notwithstanding rapid population growth and a rapidly changing demography
- The council has achieved IIP Gold and
- Successfully enabled the town centre BID and procured free town centre wifi

2.5 The council strategy in phase two has been characterised by moving towards a commissioner of services rather than a direct deliverer, embracing the private sector to provide improved services at a reduced cost, creating joint ventures to generate significant commercial returns, regenerating brownfield sites to create new communities and working with businesses and partners to transform the image of the town. The pace of growth and change is challenging for both the organisation and our community but is consistent with being a bold and progressive council.

2.6 As a result the council has made over £5million worth of savings whilst protecting and enhancing front line services overall, acting early on change management from 2010, it has a strong balance sheet, healthy reserves and is well on track to achieve a balanced budget in this medium term.

2.7 The third phase of the Council's strategy is the current one: 2017-2020. It builds on our success in embracing the private sector by setting out a renewed commercial approach; it focuses on the customer to further improve and integrate our services and it creates a digital strategy to enable full transformation. We have branded this as Watford 2020, whilst developing a new people strategy and refreshing the way we work. We would welcome the peer challenge team's assessment of our progress and further ambitions.

3. Knowing our borough

- 3.1 Watford is a [vibrant and diverse borough](#), located in the south-west of Hertfordshire. It is one of ten districts within the county and, as a major regional centre located just within the M25, it is Hertfordshire's most significant town and plays a vital role in its economic prosperity as a successful commercial hub and is a desirable place in which to live, work, study and enjoy leisure time.
- 3.2 The borough has a strong local, regional and national profile, although it covers an area of just 8.3 square miles – so it packs a lot of activity within a relatively small borough boundary. Whilst it does not have a common boundary with London, in terms of its regional profile and its young and diverse population, the borough has much in common with the energy and dynamism of the capital. However, one of Watford's key strengths is that retains its own strong identity, with a long and varied history as a market town and a much-loved premier league football team.
- 3.3 The borough has excellent transport links with mainline rail connections to London, the Midlands and the North, underground and overground connections to London, its north-west suburbs and the rural Chilterns, community rail connections to St Albans, coach services to Heathrow airport, bus services to Luton airport and convenient road connections via the M1, M25 and A41. These will be enhanced by the Metropolitan Line Extension (MLX), which will provide two new underground stations and significantly improve the east / west links across the town as well as to the wider rail and underground network. Its location, just 20 minutes travelling time from London, means it faces the pressures of being part of the London commuter belt such as high levels of traffic congestion, high house prices and limited land available for development.
- 3.4 Watford is the centre of a sub-region serving around 500,000 people, living within a 20 minute travelling time catchment. The town centre attracts visitors to enjoy its broad retail offer and vibrant night time economy, and recent initiatives such as the public realm enhancements, New Watford Market and comprehensive events programme have enabled the High Street to fare comparatively well during a challenging period for town centres across the UK. The forthcoming £100m redevelopment of the former Charter Place shopping centre by [Intu](#), due for completion in 2018, also demonstrates the town centre's continued attractiveness to the market as one of the premier retailing destinations nationally.



Figure 1: Watford's location in the region



Figure 2: Watford's centre, including the High Street area

3.5 Our population

Watford is predominantly an urban borough with a population of 96,800 (ONS mid-year 2016). Given the area of the borough, this size of population means it is the most densely-populated district authority area within England.

3.6 The profile of Watford's population differs significantly from the rest of the county. It is highly diverse and, more in line with London authority areas, saw a substantial increase in diversity between Census returns in 2001 and 2011 when the non-White British population rose from 21% to 38%. The town continues to welcome a diverse range of nationalities and community cohesion remains one of our key strengths, with new arrivals establishing themselves alongside longer-standing communities. Around 150 languages are spoken as the main language in Watford homes (Hertfordshire County Council's annual school census 2016). This diversity is also reflected in national insurance registrations to adult overseas nationals (Department of Work and Pensions statistics), which consistently show new arrivals to Watford remain high with the greatest number of people currently coming from Eastern Europe and the Asian sub-continent

3.7 Watford is also a young town. Like most areas its residents are living longer but, unlike the rest of Hertfordshire and the majority of the Eastern region, it has a high birth rate and continues to be somewhere that is predominantly made up of younger families and households. Watford has the fourth highest percentage population of 0-4 year olds in the Eastern region and the sixth highest 0-14 year olds. In comparison, Watford has the third lowest percentage population of 65+ in the region. The figure below shows how the distribution of Watford's population across age ranges differs from the profile of the UK, particularly in terms of a concentration of population below 45 years.

Watford population distribution mid-2016

UK population distribution mid-2016

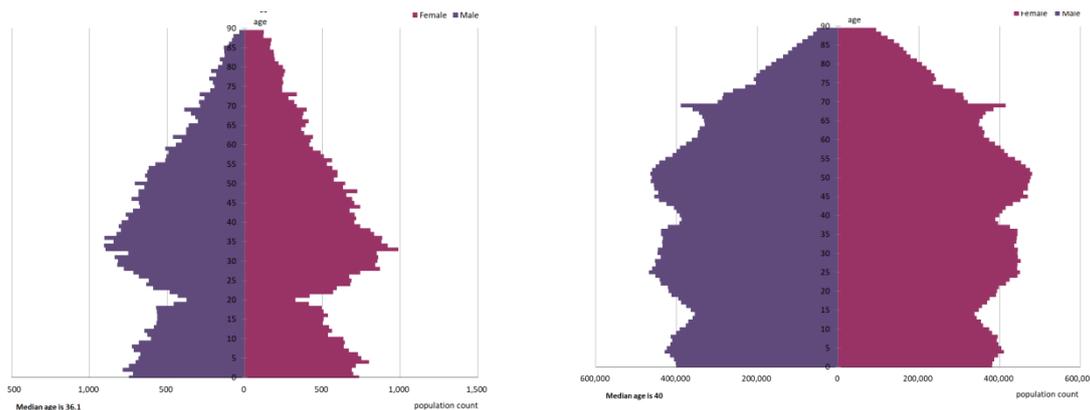


Figure 3: Watford’s population distribution mid-2016

- 3.8 The borough’s population has increased by around 7% since the 2011 Census compared with just under 4% for Great Britain overall and around 5% for the Eastern region. This growth is projected to continue. Government projections show that Watford will reach a population of 100,000 by the end of 2017 (ONS sub-national projections) and just under 110,000 by 2024. This increase represents a 14.7% increase in population from 2014-2024, higher than the projection for England overall (10%) and more in line with projections for London authority areas.
- 3.9 Our MOSAIC profiling of the borough enhances our understanding of our population and provides valuable context for our future plans and decision-making. Watford’s MOSAIC profile reinforces our understanding of the diversity of our population, its overall youth and also reflects the significance of the private sector rental sector in our housing market.

MOSAIC GROUP	Group/Type Name	MOSAIC DESCRIPTION	Number of households in Watford	Watford Percentage	UK Percentage
1 J40	Career Builders	Singles and couples in their 20s and 30s progressing in their field of work from commutable properties	4508	11.69%	1.59%
2 J44	Flexible Workforce	Young renters ready to move to follow worthwhile incomes from service sector jobs	3123	8.10%	1.26%
3 D14	Cafés and Catchments	Affluent families with growing children living in upmarket housing in city environs	2837	7.35%	1.31%
4 I36	Cultural Comfort	Thriving families with good incomes in multi-cultural urban communities	2794	7.24%	1.37%
5 H35	Primary Ambitions	Forward-thinking younger families who sought affordable homes in good suburbs which they may now be out-growing	2391	6.20%	1.96%

Figure 4: Watford’s MOSAIC profile (2016)

- 3.10 Watford has experienced a substantial rise in housing prices and costs over the last five years (currently average house prices are around £450,000 almost twice as high as for the UK overall average of £220,000 and way above the East of England average of around £300,000; average rental costs are £1,390 per month compared to £915 for the East of England – home.co.uk figures-August 2017) making it an extremely attractive area for investment. This has impacted on housing affordability (the median annual salary for Watford residents is around £33,000), which is a key issue for the borough, and, in combination with our increasing population, has led to considerable and growing pressure for new housing development. This has also resulted in a sharp rise in the number of our residents living in private sector rental accommodation, which is shown by our MOSAIC profile, where our top two types are characterised by living in rental properties.
- 3.11 **Our economy**
The town is currently home to around 4,500 businesses with a good mix of company size and sector, with many international HQ’s and a higher than average start-up success rate, and a range of businesses in between. There is representation from financial and professional services sectors,

pharmaceutical, health sciences, creative media, manufacturing and retail and leisure industries, amongst many others.

- 3.12 The number of jobs in the borough is 84,000. Nearly half of these (47%) are part-time, which reflects the number of jobs within the borough in the retail, restaurant and bar and support services sectors. The borough also has a higher proportion of professional / technical professions than seen at a regional and national level. Overall, the borough's job density (jobs per head of population aged 16-64) is very high at 1.43 compared with 0.81 for the Eastern region and 0.87 for Great Britain. The Job Seekers Allowance and benefit claimant rates are relatively low – 0.9% and 7.8% respectively. (Data from NOMIS).
- 3.13 A key driver for our place shaping agenda is to retain employment opportunities within the town and to provide the flexible developments that meet the needs of current and future Watford businesses. At the same time, we know that access to the right workforce is critical for business success so we want our employment areas to be connected to good quality housing or linked through well-planned infrastructure and transport links.
- 3.14 Whilst the borough remains a prosperous place to live and do business there remain small pockets across the town where we know our residents are finding it harder to thrive. In national terms, our areas of deprivation are not comparable to other urban areas but we recognise the challenge of ensuring that Watford's prosperity does offer better economic opportunities for all our residents.
- 3.15 We see 'knowing our communities' as a fundamental part of our future planning for the council and the town. We are currently undertaking a project with our partners in the police to map our communities, including understanding what the information tells us about what type of place we will be in 5-10 years, which we see as critical to effective planning and decision making. This will be supported by focused engagement with key identified communities to build a fuller picture of their attitude to life in Watford and their aspirations for the future. This is a pilot project for Hertfordshire and has received funding from the Police and Crime Commissioner as they are keen to see other areas take a similar in-depth and longer-term approach to community safety.

4. Our leadership of Watford

- 4.1 Since 2002, the Council has been led by a Liberal Democrat directly elected mayor, [Baroness Dorothy Thornhill MBE](#). It is just one of three district councils in the country to have adopted the elected mayoral system. For Watford, this political leadership has been the driving force behind the council's achievements over the last 15 years, providing strong community leadership, clear direction on what needs to be done and offering our residents an important democratic link to the council. Next year, the borough will hold its fifth mayoral election and, as Baroness Thornhill has indicated she will not be standing for re-election, the town will have a new mayor from May 2018.
- 4.2 The elected Mayor model has also provided clear leadership and direction for the council's key partnerships, which means Watford has a strong voice and effective advocacy when issues arise of importance to the town and our residents. This is demonstrated in areas such as ensuring Watford retains the main acute hospital provision for south-west Hertfordshire, the delivery of the Metropolitan Line Extension, highlighting issues impacting the town like the housing crisis at government level and representing Watford in both public and private sector strategic partnerships. The Mayor chairs the borough's Local Strategic Partnership One Watford, which now incorporates Watford's community safety partners, and brings together leaders from the town's key organisations who all have a role in shaping the borough.
- 4.3 The council recognises the importance and effectiveness of partnership delivery and has a good track record of exploring options which both guarantee the quality of services and generate real cost savings to the authority. This has impacted across a range of service delivery. We were an early adopter of the shared service model, partnering with neighbouring Three Rivers District Council for IT, HR, Finance and Revenues and Benefits from 2009. This brought a combined savings of £1.5million per annum to both authorities but, as the model has matured, it has also evolved and the services are now delivered through a 'lead authority model'. One benefit of this has been the greater flexibility it has given the services and, for example, our HR service has pursued commercial opportunities, which currently achieve £125k of income by providing external services to fee paying clients. A joint management board between Three Rivers and Watford oversees the shared services.
- 4.4 Through its community leadership role, the council has provided the catalyst for bringing together key partners who, through their combined expertise, energy and commitment, can support our ambitions for the town. They are often in a better position than a local authority to exert the right levels of influence across their chosen sector and can also help unlock funding where this is appropriate. We have had particular success in partnership working that supports our place shaping agenda. Our [Developers Forum](#) is an opportunity for those companies and businesses that are making investment decisions about the town to come together to share experiences and to better understand how their input is contributing to the bigger picture in Watford. We have also used it as an opportunity to consult them on some key areas for their business needs such as local planning policy and how this impacts their investment plans. Our [Big Business Connect forum](#) brings together 35 of the borough's biggest companies. As champions of Watford as a place to do business, there is a lot we can learn from them in terms of retaining and attracting business and building the partnerships that mean they are ambassadors for the town is something we see as vitally important to our success. Some of our key town-wide initiatives have been led by this forum such as the plans in progress to renew Watford Junction and Clarendon Road and Skillmakers (a skills brokering service for employers led by the college).
- 4.5 One of the key decisions we made over five years ago was to put Watford's cultural offer at the heart of our regeneration and place-shaping story. This was a bold decision at the time of a world-wide recession. However, we knew Watford has some great cultural assets. By building on these, and the wealth of creative talent within the borough, we firmly believed this would encourage growth of our creative sector and those in associated businesses such as restaurants and bars and, overall, enhance the borough's reputation as a great place to work, live and visit. Bringing together the town's key cultural players in our Cultural Leaders' group has made a real impact in the town.

With their professional guidance we have created a hugely successful [Big Events programme](#), which has animated our town centre throughout the year but particularly during the summer and Christmas periods.

4.6 As a district council our relationships with Hertfordshire County Council and other county level partners are critical. The county council plays a central role in supporting our ambitions for schools, transport, health and parking infrastructure improvements. We are currently working with them, as well as Watford BID, Intu Watford, Lang O'Rourke and Project Centre, to develop an [improvement programme](#) for the main section of our High Street. This will create a high-quality, safer environment for pedestrians as well as significantly reducing the number of cars using the area to improve the look and feel of the area.

4.7 The [Hertfordshire LEP](#) recognises the value of our place shaping plans for Watford and the benefits they will bring not just to the town but the county overall. We have benefited from significant LEP investment, including £6m for our [Watford Riverwell](#) regeneration project and £1.5m for our Watford Business Park project and remained fully engaged with the LEP's economic vision and plans for Hertfordshire. We have been bold to take a lead role in working with the Department for Transport, the LEP and Hertfordshire County Council to gap fund the original cost of the metropolitan line extension, with the council committing £13m and leveraging private sector contributions.

4.8 **Case Study: Watford Riverwell**

When looking for a solution to reinvigorate one of the town's most significant regeneration projects, Watford Borough Council established an innovative public / private sector LABV (known as Watford Health Campus Partnership LLP) that also provided our local hospitals Trust with a vehicle to bring forward its plans for the Watford General Hospital site.

This initiative took place against the back drop of the economic downturn in 2010 when private sector development partners were particularly cautious about where they took on long-term investments.

The council had significant land assets on the development site and wanted to retain a strong influence on how the scheme developed. This included ensuring that the Trust's aspirations for a new access road, backed by Department of Health money was delivered as well as making sure the council's vision of new homes, jobs and community facilities came to fruition. Simply selling the land to the private sector to develop out was not a route the council felt appropriate for the scheme. Whilst a more challenging solution, the LABV has proved a major success and, seven years on, the decision to join with the private sector, Kier Property, who has brought the right level of expertise as well as private sector financing, has proven the right one for Watford. The new road is built, cutting important journey times for emergency vehicles, the first employment zone, Trade City, is completed and planning permission has been granted for the first homes on site. The council will benefit from positive financial returns on its investment, which are supporting its medium term financial planning, whilst helping to shape what will be a vibrant and attractive new community in the west of the borough. In 2017, the partnership marked the scheme's progress and its move to delivery phase with the launch of the Watford Riverwell brand.

4.9 Our town centre plays a vital role in the economic prosperity and wellbeing of the town. It provides a significant number of our employment opportunities and is the engine that drives our local economy as well as the town's identity. We recognised that, whilst the council had an important role to play in improving the town centre and coordinating the agencies that all work to keep it safe, clean and vibrant, that the best lead for achieving this is the business sector itself. Working with our businesses, we pursued creating a Business Improvement District (BID) and, following a successful ballot in October 2015, [Watford BID](#) launched in April 2016. Through the additional BID levy, it is able to respond to town centre business needs and provide the focus required to keep Watford's place as one of the top retail centres in the country (we aim to be top 20 once the Intu redevelopment is complete in 2018). The BID now leads on the Purple Flag town accreditation for the management of the night time economy, which Watford has achieved since 2012.

4.10 **Case study: Community Protection Group**

As a major regional entertainment and retail centre, Watford experiences a range of community safety challenges that are not experienced elsewhere in Hertfordshire. Thousands of people visit the town each day and we know from statistics that this does impact on our levels of crime and anti-social behaviour. At the same time, we are experiencing many of the community safety issues faced by areas across the country including the impact of people suffering from mental health problems and other vulnerability related issues.

We have a strong track record of tackling our community safety issues through effective and coordinated partnership and agency working. This goes well beyond bringing together the council and the police and extends to other key partners whose input is essential in making a difference who meet regularly as part of Watford's Community Protection Group. Round the table and making a positive contribution to the borough's community safety work are: mental health services, housing providers, schools and colleges, Families First as well as third sector homeless organisations based in the town. The inclusion of mental health services is not something achieved in every area and is making a real difference to the outcome-led solutions Watford is able to put into action.

- 4.11 Watford's Mayor and Cabinet model has provided an effective and productive framework for member / officer working relationships at Watford. The clear lines of decision-making and accountability have been critical to the council's achievements. Currently, the Mayor is supported by a Cabinet of [five portfolio holders](#) who work closely with the [Leadership Team](#) to develop and deliver the council's agenda.
- 4.12 As well as the Mayor and Cabinet, political leadership is provided by [36 councillors](#) all from two of the three main political parties (portfolio holders are amongst these 36 elected members). Watford currently has [25 Liberal Democrat councillors](#), [11 Labour councillors](#) and no Conservatives). A recent Boundary Commission review recommended the number of councillors remained at 36 given the borough's current population and projected population growth.
- 4.13 We have an active and involved [scrutiny function at Watford](#). As well as an Overview and Scrutiny Committee we have the following standing panels, an Outsourced Services Scrutiny Panel, Budget Panel and Community Safety Task Group. In addition each year stand alone task groups are set up to review specific areas to recommend policy improvements to Cabinet.
- 4.14 A reflection of the politically more- inclusive approach is that the Budget Panel is chaired by a member of the opposition and Call-In is also chaired by an opposition member (the vice chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee). The chairs and vice chairs of our scrutiny committees are fully involved in shaping the committees' work programme each year and we have recently introduced an 'outcomes' section to the programme. In addition, the Mayor (as chair of Cabinet) has, by convention, allowed the opposition leader to attend Cabinet and ask questions directly to Cabinet members and our 'questions to the Mayor' at full Council are open and transparent with opposition members able to ask questions without prior notice. The Chairman of the council is rotated by length of service across all political parties.
- 4.15 Cohesive officer leadership is provided by the council's Leadership Team comprising the Managing Director, Deputy Managing Director (Place Shaping and Corporate Performance), Director of Finance and 7 heads of service (two are from our Three Rivers lead authority – Finance and Revenues and Benefits). Leadership Team is responsible for advising Cabinet and implementing its decisions as well as providing management to the council's 210 members of staff.
- 4.16 Our [constitution](#) is reviewed annually by our cross party Constitution Working Party, which considers suggestions for any change made by members or officers. The working party will make recommendations to Council. Procurement rules are also considered by the working party.
- 4.17 We have recognised that our strategic risk management is an area where we need to improve and give more focus. Whilst we have a [corporate risk register](#) that is overseen by [Audit Committee](#) and

we expect all our programmes and projects to be supported by actively managed risk registers, we know that there is work to do to embed a risk management culture more effectively, especially as we adopt a more commercial approach. We are revisiting this with a Leadership Team workshop in September, which will also start our corporate thinking on our risk appetite going forward

5. Setting our ambitions and priorities

- 5.1 Each year through our corporate planning we review our ambitions and priorities for the borough and for the organisation. Through this review we ‘sense check’ our vision and priorities as well as our organisational values to understand if they are still providing the drive and direction for the council, based on our understanding of Watford, emerging opportunities and challenges and what we know is important to our residents.
- 5.2 Our current framework was developed in 2016 and strongly reflects how we see our role as a council. It makes clear that ‘more of the same’ is not an option, given some of the issues we face but also the significant opportunity we have to do things differently in the face of continuing pressure on our finances. **Bold** and **progressive** lie at the heart of our ambitions for the town and the council and clearly demonstrate that we have positively embraced our challenges. We recognise that we need to be more creative, innovative and entrepreneurial and champion new ways of working that will transform Watford and deliver our ambitions.
- 5.3 Supporting our corporate vision, the council has identified five priority areas of work. Each of these reflects areas that we know need additional focus and resource to 2020. By choosing these and setting out what we need to do to deliver outcomes that make a real difference we are sending a well-defined message to our residents and staff about what is important for Watford over the next three years. It is also the means by which we assess our own performance – have we delivered what we have said we would do and with our focus on programme and project management through the [Programme Management Board](#), we have strong governance in place to ensure we deliver ‘on time and on budget’.
- 5.4 Through our [Corporate Plan](#) we highlight the importance of seizing every opportunity that comes our way to deliver new homes, create jobs and opportunities for our residents and to make economic growth work for Watford so that our residents can benefit and share in our borough’s success. We make clear that we need to support and encourage housing growth but in sustainable locations with appropriate infrastructure in place (working to the ‘i’ before ‘e’ principle – infrastructure before expansion). In this way we can protect the town’s character and residential areas. We set out the challenge of securing our finances to protect services we know are important to residents whilst also ensuring we listen and respond to our community in a way that meets their needs. The corporate priorities are to:
1. Identify ways to manage the borough’s housing needs
 2. Champion smart growth and economic prosperity
 3. Provide for our vulnerable and disadvantaged communities
 4. Deliver a digital Watford to empower our community
 5. Secure our own financial future
- 5.5 We involve our staff as we review and refresh of our corporate framework and corporate plan to ensure there is good organisational understanding and ownership of our agenda. The corporate plan is also a key part of the service planning, which then links through to our PDR process with staff using it to inform their personal objective setting and to prompt discussions with their manager. This year we have also produced an [‘at a glance’ corporate plan](#), which identifies our priority areas of work on just one sheet of paper and assigned icons to each priority to support better staff recall. Our [core brief](#) and weekly staff e-newsletter [Wat’s Up](#) are used to reinforce our priorities and through our council magazine [‘About Watford’](#), social media channels and website we also communicate and engage with our communities on the work we are doing to deliver our priorities.

- 5.6 Through our [community survey](#) we regularly test our residents' views of the council and aspirations for the town. However, we have recently reviewed our engagement approach as we want to go beyond the more traditional ways of engaging through surveys and focus groups. This is particularly important for us, given that we have a young population, many of whom are recent arrivals in Watford and whose communications preferences are online and digital. We are looking to create online communities using the approach adopted by multi-national companies to understand their customers.
- 5.7 We recognise that keeping on track and making sure we deliver on our promises is critical to the council's reputation and to ensuring we are not slipping on budgets or milestones. We have established a Programme Management Board, chaired by the Managing Director, which meets monthly to review our major projects. Each project manager is responsible for [reporting to Board](#), for reporting on the benefits realised by their projects and, importantly, the lessons learned for the rest of the organisation. We have strengthened our programme and project management capability with the creation of a Programme Management Office and have a renewed focus on corporate and service performance with the appointment of our Deputy Managing Director who has this within his remit. Performance information is considered regularly by both officers and members. Leadership Team receives monthly and quarterly 'managing the business' information, which also forms part of our scrutiny arrangements with in-house services reporting to [Overview and Scrutiny Committee](#) and outsourced services to [Outsourced Services Scrutiny Panel](#). At the latter, our outsourced partners (including those services shared with Three Rivers District Council) are regularly invited to update members on how they are performing and the quality of their outcomes they are achieving for Watford.
- 5.8 Our focus on better performance has seen significant improvements in our Benefits performance. In 2013/14 our new claims result was over 31 days and change of circumstances over 15 days. At the end of 2016/17 and with significant changes to the service led by the head of service and Portfolio Holder we are now at 18 days and 10.5 days respectively. This focus has also had a considerable impact on the subsidy we would otherwise have lost in relation to payments classified as local authority error. We now receive 100% subsidy (confirmed for the second year running).
- 5.9 **Case Study – leadership in priority setting**
Through the [Mayoral manifesto](#) the council has clear direction of where it will need to bring forward plans and investment decisions. Whilst Watford is an urban borough, it benefits from a number of parks and open spaces, including the nationally renowned [Cassiobury Park](#). These 'green lungs' across the town are a strong part of the town's identity and extremely important in a densely populated borough where, due to the nature of the housing, not all residents have access to outdoor space. Over her period in office, the Mayor has prioritised investment in parks and open spaces, which has included a £4.8million programme of improvements to every play area within the borough and a £6.6 million investment in Cassiobury Park, with council funding matched by HLF and Big Lottery funding, and over £800,000 investment in our allotment sites. The impact of this investment on our town and on the health and wellbeing of our residents is significant. Parks and open spaces consistently achieve over 90% satisfaction rating and this year we have celebrated achieving 11 green flag awards. This includes a green flag for one of our allotment sites, which is one of only 21 in the country and the only one in the Eastern region. It is also the highest number of awards in Hertfordshire, which is a real achievement for the most urban district in the county.
- 5.10 Whilst we recognise the importance of setting the right vision and priorities we also know that successful delivery requires our people to bring the right attitudes and behaviour to their work, which is why we reviewed our values as part of our corporate framework. Talking to our staff, we discovered that the 'bold' value had extremely strong resonance. They felt motivated by having the permission to step outside of the usual ways of working, think the unthinkable and make things happen. Staff also responded to having a value that encourages them to work creatively and innovatively, so we included 'progressive' to capture this Watford staff behaviour.

This will be essential to ensuring the success of our Watford 2020 programme, our major transformation programme that will fundamentally change how the council functions.

- 5.11 The vision for our [Watford 2020 programme](#) is to deliver a 'customer-focussed, digitally-enabled, commercially-minded council, demonstrated by:
- High-performing services that will provide an excellent customer experience and will be designed from the customer's perspective.
 - Services that will be digital by design, exploiting opportunities provided by existing and emerging technology to deliver significant efficiencies.
 - An innovative, bold and entrepreneurial organisation that is in continually challenging ourselves to reduce costs, generate income and improve performance.
- 5.12 We have set an ambitious timetable for the programme, with recommendations for a new operating model to be in place by March 2018. We expect this to be transformational, with the council of 2020 looking very different from the organisation today. It will inform and drive our approach to being a more commercial organisation building on where we have already identified opportunities to raise income through marketing and selling services.
- 5.13 Alongside our move to improve the council's digital offer, we are transforming the town through better digital infrastructure. Our first offer was free town centre [wi-fi](#). This went live in summer 2016 and currently has 68,000 subscribers; it forms an important part of our 'Watford's open for business' campaign. In addition, our agreement extended free wi-fi to the town's community centres and sheltered accommodation to improve digital inclusion for some of our more vulnerable residents. We have also introduced roof top broadband capability in the town centre so that our businesses, particularly our SMEs have cheaper broadband access.
- 5.14 **Case study – the Internet of Things and LoRaWAN comes to Watford**
- 'LoRaWAN' is a low powered wireless network which Watford Borough Council have installed across the town with the help of Digital Catapult, a government funded organisation responsible for improving digital infrastructure across the UK. LoRaWAN provides a new, low cost platform to support the 'Internet of Things' (IOT), a concept which allows devices to talk to each other to provide real time information and data. Unlike Bluetooth or 4G technologies, the network itself is both wide ranging and low energy meaning that relatively few supporting gateways are required and associated devices can be battery operated for periods up to ten years, removing the need for costly cabling or other infrastructure. When deployed across an entire town, as in Watford, the network can start to provide some real benefits. For example, bins can let you know when they are full, parking bays can tell you how long vehicles have been parked and pest traps can let you know when they have been activated – all of which means that a council officer only has to visit the location when action is needed.
- Whilst there are many conceptual uses of the technology, these can only operate when a network is in place and, currently, the UK trails behind other countries. However, Watford is one of the first Local Authorities to work with Digital Catapult, taking the bold step to implement its own LoRaWAN network across the borough to support the IoT and enabling us to do things differently and more efficiently. Our current network is a two year trial to prove concept but, after this period, we will have the opportunity to commercialise the network, which could have real income generation implications for the council.
- We are currently running two trials – one for our electric charging bay points and another to measure bus stop layover times and pollutions levels in the High Street. However, we are hoping to support many more trials over the two year trial period and our local college and partner, West Herts College, is including LoRaWAN in their 2017/2018 curriculum, using the network to provide their students with an unrivalled opportunity to learn about the new technology and develop devices to use it. The network will also provide a foundation for ideas generation during the internal Service Innovations tranche of the Watford 2020 programme, encouraging staff to consider the way in which LoRaWAN can be used to improve and transform the delivery of their service.

Our digital town agenda is another area where we have recognised the value of partnership working. We established a Digital Watford Board last year to provide direction and governance to support plans to improve the digital connectivity of the borough and recognised that there were key partners whose influence and innovation would play an important role. West Herts College, Watford UTC, Watford and West Herts Chamber of Commerce, Watford Bid and Hertfordshire County Council are now all on the Board and contributing to the future success of a digital Watford.

6. Our financial plans

- 6.1 Like all local authorities, the council continues to face significant financial pressure. Since 2010 the council has achieved significant savings of circa £5million. This was achieved through two major programmes – [service prioritisation](#), which explored where savings and income could be generated across all our service areas- and our Future Council programme, which significantly reduced our senior management costs and generated savings through service redesign and moving towards a commissioning authority. This resulted in the outsourcing of our waste, recycling, streetcare and parks services to Veolia, which has proven a highly successful partnership for Watford since 2013.
- 6.2 Our [Medium Term Financial Strategy \(MTFS\)](#) is our key financial planning document. It is monitored through the year and is reviewed through discussion with our members. Our Finance Digest is produced five times a year. This is shared with budget holders, and discussed at Leadership Team then scrutinised by our Budget Panel and discussed at Cabinet. With the news in 2015 that our Revenue Support Grant will reduce from £2.5million to nil by 2019/20, we established a Finance Review Board, which is an officer and member forum, chaired by the Mayor to ensure that, whilst we make the savings necessary to deliver our financial strategy, our budget remains priority led.
- 6.3 The Finance Review Board considers the council’s financial sustainability beyond the current MTFS and brings together both revenue and capital. It also includes the implications of projects which are being planned and identifies their impact on the financial position. The documents include details of each of the significant projects and/or programmes and easily identify their impacts, splitting them into capital and revenue.
- 6.4 Underlying features of our MTFS include:
- £1million worth of savings from our Watford 2020 programme. This will be achieved through a number of strands of the programme, including our emerging commercial strategy. Whilst we have taken some steps to being a more commercially-minded organisation, we know there is a lot more we need to do. We have established a trading company, Watford Commercial Services Limited, which will allow us to pursue business opportunities outside of the constraints that apply to local government.
 - To support the commercial agenda the council has built a cost model, which will allow services to cost the price of their services for trading. This will also allow decisions to be made on the type of cost recovery to be adopted for each traded service. Some services may opt for full cost recovery and others may opt for delivering a ‘contribution’ to our overheads. This will be considered on a case by case basis and will easily identify if the proposed pricing will generate a return for the Council.
- 6.5 **Case study – Managing our housing crisis to support our financial position**
- Watford’s proximity to London and the overall attraction of the town as a place to live has meant that we are facing a perfect storm of issues that are seriously impacting on local people’s ability to access affordable housing. Rising house prices and rental costs, reduced government support for individuals and families in housing need and limited land for development mean that Watford has seen a significant increase in demand on our housing services.
- Analysis shows that the primary reason for people presenting as homeless is the ending of private sector tenancies (this is an even bigger cause of homelessness in Watford than in the London area) as landlords find they can demand, and achieve, higher rents. Local housing allowance is far below the average rental cost in Watford and so we have seen an increasing number of local people presenting as homeless and, in many cases, unable to afford Watford rental costs. This has seen our temporary accommodation numbers surge – reaching over 220 last year – and, without the right intervention and more innovative solutions, we were facing some very costly solutions to ensure we meet our homeless duties. This was having a direct impact on the council’s finances. Over the last 12 months we have put in place new ways of working to help tackle the borough’s housing problems and reduce the impact on our budget. These are:

Harts Homes

In January 2017, the council, in partnership with Watford Community Housing Trust, formed a ground-breaking joint venture (Hart Homes Watford Limited and Hart Homes Watford Development LLP) to help tackle the borough's housing crisis by developing much-needed affordable homes. As one of the first such joint ventures between a local authority and a housing association, the new entities offer a pioneering approach to addressing housing need. By working in partnership, the two organisations will be able to access additional sources of funding for new homes and make more effective use of their land, helping to enhance Watford's housing infrastructure by delivering modern homes fit for 21st century living. The newly formed entities aspire to deliver more than 500 new homes over the next five years. The first development has involved a transfer of council land to the Hart Homes Watford Limited to deliver both temporary and affordable accommodation. The development was granted planning permission in early 2017 and will see 36 residential apartments and 40 dwellings for temporary accommodation. The apartments include a mixture of one- and two-bedroom homes, the majority of which will be available for affordable rent. Work has now started on site with completion due in spring 2018. The development is being built via the LLP but will be managed long term by Hart Homes (Watford) Ltd with the Council having nomination rights and full access to the temporary accommodation.

Hart Homes (Watford) Development LLP is the first project the council has taken forward under our new trading company Watford Commercial Services Limited, which has a 50% interest in the LLP.

The council has senior officers on the boards of both these joint vehicle companies.

Modular housing

With demand for temporary accommodation exceeding the council's current supply, we are quite often forced to use more expensive options (such as bed and breakfast) to support the increasing number of people who have presented themselves as homeless as a result of rapidly rising rent or unaffordable mortgages.

We have recently approved plans for our first modular homes, which can be constructed relatively quickly and will provide a flexible solution to the need for quality and well-designed temporary accommodation. 11 units will be delivered through this first initiative, which will make a significant impact on our current temporary accommodation numbers (212) and reduce the cost to the council.

7. Our capacity to deliver

- 7.1 Watford recognises that a skilled and motivated workforce is vital to the organisation achieving its ambitions and priorities. Alongside this, we know our members need to be equipped to guide the council through what will be a significant period of change. Whilst we have had to make savings, we recognised the importance of continued training and development for both staff and members and so have protected our training budgets.
- 7.2 An integral part of this investment has been our innovative 'STEP' personal development programme, which was designed in-house and has run across all levels of the organisation, increasing the skills and confidence we need to respond to the fast moving environment in which we work. In particular, all managers are expected to undertake the STEP programme as it clearly sets the standard that we expect from our senior staff.
- 7.3 The STEP programme was one of the many strengths recognised in our IIP Gold assessment in 2016, which also noted that many staff said that their job at Watford was the best they had ever had and the council the best employer they had worked for. This is correlated through our annual PDR process (which was also recognised as excellent by the IIP assessors). All staff are asked to consider both motivation and job satisfaction – scoring between 0 and 10). For 2015 the scores were: 7.63 for motivation and 7.43 for satisfaction. Our sickness absence rate is currently (June 2017) 4.83 days per employee. Tackling sickness absence has been a key indicator for our organisation, showing that senior staff are managing their teams effectively and that staff are motivated to be at work. This current result shows a 20.5% improvement on last year and benchmarks favourably with other district authorities.
- 7.4 We have a long established approach to devolved and empowered management. We hold an [Extended Leadership Team \(ELT\)](#) meeting each quarter, which brings together heads of service and our 'section heads', which are the next tier of management. The sessions are led by the Managing Director whilst the agenda covers priority areas of work requiring collective discussions and decision-making. We also see it as an important opportunity for networking away from the office and so always commit a portion of the day to allow informal discussions and catch up. Similarly, we hold a [Managers Forum](#) twice a year for our next tier of managers which includes a development session, often provided by external providers as well as key organisational updates and networking.
- 7.5 We celebrate success with our staff throughout the year. In January, we introduced the '[star of the month](#)' award, where we recognise members of staff who have made an 'above and beyond the call of duty' contribution to their work and delivering our corporate priorities. We also hold an annual '[We Make Watford Awards](#)', which is another opportunity to thank our staff for their hard work. This is sponsored by some of our key partners who also attend the celebration.
- 7.6 Our approach to managing change has been directed by our [Managing Change Framework](#), developed by our staff. We will always support any significant organisational change with a dedicated communications and engagement programme to ensure staff feel involved and have the opportunity to feedback and share their views. Our current Watford 2020 programme is underpinned by a full communications and engagement plan, with a range of channels identified to ensure staff are engaged and feel able to influence the programme and proposed changes. One of these will be a refreshed Employee Council (which has a mix of union and non-union staff) that will act as a 'pulse group' to test our thinking and how the transformation is impacting our staff.
- 7.7 Our recent LGA HR peer review has provided an important improvement framework for our organisational development. This is timely as it coincides with the roll out of our Watford 2020 programme. Our 'People Strategy' is a key supporting strategy and will be critical to driving the cultural change we are looking for to embed our new operating model and ways of working. Through our strategy we will also address how we attract and retain the talent we need as an authority including how we 'develop our own', which is an area where we have already had successes, and ensure we can be agile in terms of deploying our staff to where we need resource.

We are engaging with staff throughout the development of the strategy and have held a series of workshops through the summer to empower our staff to contribute to, and shape, our approach.

7.8

Case study: Contract management and relationship forum

Since 2013, we have built our expertise and knowledge around contract and client management to reflect the changing focus of our service delivery from direct to commissioned services. Whilst, in some circumstances, we had the opportunity to recruit this expertise and knowledge, we recognised, for future organisational resilience, we needed to embed effective contract and relationship management across our services. An initial audit showed that we had staff in many areas and at all levels undertaking a client function but they needed to be equipped to do so more effectively. In 2014, we established our [Contract Management and Relationship Forum](#), led by a head of service, with the remit of promoting better ways of managing contracts and working commercially. Now over 70 staff meet on a quarterly basis to network, share best practice and discover how to achieve cost savings, higher values and quality through a more business-like approach to contract management. Those attending include staff from our neighbouring authority, Three Rivers, who saw value in what Watford is achieving. A peer review on our progress last year by an associate of the East of England Local Government Association found we were well ahead of other councils and that our approach was innovative. The assessors were so impressed they nominated Watford for an International Association of Commercial and Contract Management (IACCM) Excellence in Contract Management Award, which we won.

7.9

Our members complete an annual self-assessment, which reviews their work in the previous year and sets targets for the next 12 months. Our cross party member development group sets training priorities and emerging training needs for the year ahead. All our members are now equipped with surface pros and so, from the start of the municipal year (May), we were able to go 'paperless' for our council meetings. We know we need to make our council meetings more accessible and will be introducing webcasting of full council and development management committee.

7.10

Unlike many district councils, the council has retained a substantial budget for commissioning services from the voluntary and community sector. This is in recognition of the important role the sector plays in our community and that they are often better placed to deliver services where they have more expertise and insight into the needs of service users. Our most recent [commissioning framework](#) identified the priority areas of need for the borough we sought to achieve through commissioning services (infrastructure support to the voluntary and community sector, enabling people with physical mobility problems to access services in the town centre, advice services, arts and culture, community centres and sport activities) and invited service proposals from the voluntary and community sector (VCS). We currently commission services from Watford & Three Rivers Trust (W3RT), Shopmobility, Watford Citizens Advice, Watford Palace Theatre and five VCS community centre

8. Our focus on place shaping

- 8.1 Watford is a borough with a strong identity and a cohesive and vibrant community. It has now established an enviable reputation as a great place to live, do business and visit but we know that this current success has required a strong vision, decisive action and targeted investment, which, as we shape our town for the future will need to continue.
- 8.2 We also know that place shaping comes with significant challenges particularly in a borough that has limited development space but where there is strong demand for residential, business and retail space. But it also opens up outstanding opportunities for the town, which we are working closely with both the private and public sector to progress.
- 8.3 Directing the spatial element of our place shaping is our [Local Plan Core Strategy](#), which was approved in January 2013. In this we set down our principles for sustainable growth within the borough, which we focused within a number of [special policy areas \(SPAs\)](#). These SPAs are identified for planned regeneration because they are in need of improvement and have access to sustainable transport links. In this way, we aim to protect the character of our current residential areas and the character and identity of the town overall.
- 8.4 The SPAs are, therefore, the focus for our major regeneration projects, which we have estimated will bring around £1.5billion of investment to the town over the next decade. These projects are a central part of our place shaping as they will deliver the majority of our housing need, which is currently set at 570 new homes per year, although we will be testing this through the next phase of our local plan. Delivering this level of housing in our borough is a challenge. Our boundaries are tight and the duty to cooperate has not yet impacted sufficiently to enable us to work with neighbouring authorities to effectively meet our housing targets. The projects will also deliver new infrastructure, including new primary schools (we have so far directly facilitated three schools), improved public transport links, cycling, pedestrian improvements and enhanced public realm.
- 8.5 Our portfolio of major projects transforming our town are of various are complexity and are being delivered through a range of different vehicles, bringing together the private and public sector financing and influence. As well as the Watford Health Campus Partnership LLP (delivering Watford Riverwell), the Intu redevelopment and our housing projects we are working to deliver the following schemes:
- 8.6 **Ascot Road**
We have developed the supplementary planning document: [‘Skyline Watford’s Approach to Taller Buildings’](#), which sets out our approach to determining planning applications for taller buildings. In terms of place shaping we believe that where appropriately located and, if well-designed, they can enhance the skyline and provide iconic landmarks. In July 2017, planning approval was granted for our first iconic tall building at Ascot Road – a 23 storey mixed use building offering 485 residential units including 170 affordable units, retail space surrounded by community areas and extensive landscaping. This building meets our skyline criteria; it stands at the western gateway to the borough and, in our view, is a good example of a well-designed tall building that sets a high standard for other developments.
- 8.7 **Watford Junction**
Watford Junction station is the key gateway to the town but both the station and the surrounding area are in significant need of regeneration. As the area where many people experience the borough for the first time or, for those who commute in or visit on a regular basis, it is far from showcasing what Watford has to offer. However, in place shaping terms it also provides some of our biggest challenges. It is a site on which we do not have land ownership, which means we have to play a critical role in bringing together the public and private sector organisations with an interest in the site including Hertfordshire County Council, London Midland, Network Rail, HSBC and Redrow Plc and to understand their aspirations alongside our own.

Our shared vision for the site includes a new neighbourhood and gateway to the town, an improved train station and commercial centre and high quality public realm, which we have shared with our community.

8.8 **Clarendon Road**

Over the years, Clarendon Road has established itself as the borough's main area for office accommodation and is where some of the town's largest employers are located. However, much of the office space is dated and does not meet the needs of 21st century business. For us this meant there was a risk of losing some of the town's major business players and the employment and prosperity they bring to Watford. We knew to keep Clarendon Road thriving, we needed to invest in developing a different approach to its future prospects. This has involved revisiting the mix of uses to allow residential and community infrastructure as well as office accommodation, should this mix bring forward an acceptable development. This infrastructure includes a two form entry primary school.

The new TJX Europe head office (operators of TK Maxx) was granted planning approval in Clarendon Road at the end of July. This is focused around a group of three distinct buildings including an iconic 12-storey building, which will act as an impressive gateway to the area as well as providing additional retail and green space. This not only launches the transformation of Clarendon Road it is also a vote of confidence in Watford as a great place for business.

8.9 **Watford Business Park**

This is a 67 acre industrial site and is an important location for many of our local businesses. However, it has low density employment and is generally out-dated and in need of refurbishment. The council owns the freehold of the land but there are a range of different leasing arrangements across the site. We are currently looking to assemble the land and bring forward a strategy for securing a private sector partner to work with us on re-development.

8.10 **Building understanding of the impact of our transformational plans**

Understanding the impact of our transformational plans and other major planning applications on our townscape is a vital part of effective place making. We have introduced a number of mechanisms to help test the coherence of the proposals in advance of the decision making process:

- **Major application review forum:** this is an opportunity for developers to present their proposals to the council at pre-application stage. The forum is made up of members and officers and provides direct feedback to developers at a stage when they can review their proposals
- **Major projects board:** this is a cross-party meeting where updates on major projects are shared and next phases of delivery discussed
- **PPAG and HPAG:** Planning Policy Advisory Group (PPAG) and Housing Policy Advisory Group (HPAG) are cross party forums that enable members to scrutinise and comment on local plan policies and housing policies
- **Watford town model:** we have invested in a 3D model of the town that allows us, and developers, to generate their plans so that they can be assessed for how they will fit into the current, local environment. This has been particularly helpful during our debate on tall buildings as we were able to show members and other stakeholder just how a variety of heights would appear against the borough's skyline
- **The Watford vernacular:** we are working to develop an agreed understanding of the look and design of our new developments so that they contribute to and enhance the character of the borough. This arose from a scrutiny task group on conservation areas where members identified a need to establish better understanding of what good design should look like for Watford. The next step will include a further workshop to explore their feedback to officers.

- 8.11 We know that economic prosperity remains a top priority for our residents and businesses, but we are also aware that growth, particularly where it means new housing, is not greeted with the same enthusiasm. One of our major place shaping challenges is to work with our community to build better understanding of our approach and the benefits of growth to the town and to our communities. We believe we are taking an effective, proactive approach to shaping Watford. We know the consequences there would be for the town if we did not have a sound Local Plan in place and definite plans for where sustainable growth can happen. Where we haven't been so effective is getting these messages across to our residents and building a more shared consensus of the town's future.
- 8.12 Whilst we know we need to improve how we engage with our communities on place shaping, we do have some positive examples of working well with local residents as we develop plans. The new road that was built as the first phase of Watford Riverwell runs through the edge of a much-loved local park. The council approached the active park friends' forum and other interested residents to work with them and local councillors to review the plans for the road. This empowered our community to shape the design, layout and mitigation elements, turning what could have been a very negative response to the new infrastructure. We are currently running a similar forum with our community regarding the relocation of our town centre skate park to a park location and incorporating additional leisure and sports activities elements. The proposal has not met with universal approval but through the engagement, which is being led by a Portfolio Holder, issues have been aired and addressed in advance of the planning application being submitted. Suggestions from our community have been included within the proposals and, overall, the engagement has helped create greater community ownership for the new facility. The scheme is being funded through £4million of council investment and will deliver not only a new skate boarding facility but also facilities for BMX, mountain biking and scooting (all popular activities in the borough) as well as a café, community room and toilets for the park.

9. Conclusion

- 9.1 Through this position statement we have aimed to provide an honest and balanced assessment of Watford Borough Council and the achievements we have delivered for our town and communities. Whilst we believe we have a lot to be proud of, we are realistic that we cannot be complacent and continually need to challenge how we are performing and how we are responding to what will certainly continue to be a rapid range of change for local government. Our main goal is always to ensure we are delivering the right outcomes for Watford, particularly in terms of how we are shaping the town for the future. We believe we have an outstanding track record of not just planning but also for delivery and are confident that we can build the long term relationships that are at the centre of effective, high quality place shaping.
- 9.2 We have commissioned a peer challenge to support us on our journey and are looking forward to bringing this statement to life when the team visits Watford and welcome hearing your findings and recommendations on how we can enable further success for the town.



WELCOME TO WATFORD

Watford Borough Council

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