

Part A

Report to: Cabinet

Date of meeting: 4 July 2019

Report author: Head of Planning Policy

Title: Watford High Street (North) and Cultural Hub Masterplan

1.0 Summary

1.1 Watford has seen the successful enhancement of its town centre and public realm improvements to the High Street. However north-west of the Exchange Road flyover there is a gradual decline in the retail offer. The area is identified as Secondary Retail in the current Local Plan. Emerging evidence for the new Local Plan identifies a need for intervention and the formation of a creative industry hub. Previous retail studies have also suggested regenerating the areas around Albert Road South/Sainsbury's.

1.2 To support Watford's Local Plan and future investment, the emerging Vision for the town centre is:

'A welcoming and vibrant town centre for everyone'

This means that we need a town centre that is *attractive*, has a *great environment*, is *family friendly* and *economically prosperous*.

1.3 This draft Masterplan helps to deliver this vision by setting out an ambitious and bold programme for regeneration and redevelopment to support the area's transformation over the next twenty years.

1.4 The final Masterplan will be used by the Council to engage with residents, landowners, stakeholders and developers to start the regeneration programme which will be delivered in three phases.

1.5 **Phase 1** encompasses the area north west of Rickmansworth Road, which is located around the Town Hall, the Library, Watford Colosseum and the surface level car parks at the Town Hall and The Avenue. The Masterplan will support Watford's Cultural Strategy by providing opportunities for cultural, community and creative uses in new and existing buildings.

1.6 **Phase 2** includes the area south east of Rickmansworth Road to the Exchange Road flyover area and encompasses development opportunities throughout its length, including Albert Road South, buildings facing the Parade and the Wellstones area. At least eight areas are being looked at and it is a long term project.

1.7 **Phase 3** contains the potential for major changes to road infrastructure, some of which have been explored before, but as the County Council and the Mayor has identified the need for Watford to become a Sustainable Transport Town we need to revisit them. This is likely to be the most challenging, but also one of the most beneficial aspects of the Masterplan. Further work is needed to fully assess the impacts and costs of the proposed changes.

1.8 The objectives of the Masterplan, which would be reflected in successful delivery of it, are to:

- Create a vibrant, economically successful NorthHub which would better balance the intu Watford and Met Quarter/Market street area of the Town Centre which is thriving and attracting increased investment as well as much higher levels of footfall. There is a risk that if the Council does nothing to reinvigorate The Parade area, it will stagnate and decline;
- Diversify the offer at the top of the town, with a new exciting mix of residential, cultural, community, evening economy and retail uses including the potential for a renewed market;
- Provide a strategy to protect the future of two of the Town’s key listed buildings - the Town Hall itself and the Museum. The high costs of long term maintenance of both sites mean that the investment required to bring them up to a fit for purpose standard which also secures DDA compliance is not deliverable. If the Council does nothing to find new uses for the existing buildings that will enable them to be sustainable they will continue to degrade.

2.0 Risks

2.1

Nature of risk	Consequence	Suggested Control Measures	Response (treat, tolerate, terminate or transfer)	Risk Rating (combination of severity and likelihood)
Lack of funding for other initiatives e.g. public realm improvements	Inability to achieve wider objectives including placemaking, greenspaces, play areas for children, public art	Actively seek external funding, channel CIL funding, use Section 106 monies, seek funding through LTP bids with the County Council	Treat	4

Fragmented ownerships makes land assembly difficult	Slow progress, ransom strips and possible inability to do comprehensive schemes	Investigate use of Compulsory Purchase Orders, preparation of an Area Action Plan to give more legal powers	Treat	9
Developers may proceed with individual planning applications	Loss of control and fragmented development with no long term vision underpinning it	Set out Policy controls in the new Local Plan to restrain them and ensure they align with the WBC visions and work	Treat	9
Viability of schemes	Inability to deliver and achieve objectives	Financial feasibility to be carried out	Treat	6
Maintaining existing businesses while redeveloping areas	Could cause some businesses to close, or customers to change allegiance	Seek solutions through discussions with local businesses and investigate temporary locations for traders	Treat	6
Unable to change road layouts	Pedestrian and cycle movements will still be constrained, road dominated layouts continue	Further modelling and viability testing of alternative solutions to inform business case and funding bids to support delivery	Tolerate	12

2.2 There are three high level risks associated with this project; *fragmented ownerships makes land assembly difficult*, which is common to many complex regeneration projects. There are ways to tackle this but it may create delays to the programme.

2.3 *Developers may proceed with individual planning applications*, this is a challenge where a development company has acquired a parcel of land and is unwilling to wait on the requirements of the Masterplan. There is currently no up to date plan for the Town Centre and the sooner the Council has a plan in place the risk can be reduced. The Council can also use its CPO powers to help deliver the regeneration objectives.

2.4 *Unable to change road layouts* contains the highest risk because of the complexities of changing the established road pattern, the associated costs and potential opposition from road users. Securing County Council support and Government funding will be key to delivery. This will be challenging, hence the current high risk

score. Failure here would not fundamentally undermine the delivery of the rest of the Masterplan.

3.0 Recommendations

- 3.1 To approve the draft Watford High Street (North) and Cultural Hub Masterplan (attached at Appendix A) which provides a 20 year blueprint to regenerate and enhance the Town Centre area north of Exchange Road flyover through to The Avenue Car Park for consultation.
- 3.2 To proceed with public consultation on the draft Masterplan and further engagement with key stakeholders including the County Council, landowners, local businesses, Watford Chamber of Commerce and Watford BID.
- 3.3 To delegate to the Managing Director in consultation with the Mayor and the Portfolio Holder for Regeneration and Development authority to make editorial changes to the document prior to external consultation.

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4.0 Detailed proposal

- 4.1 The purpose of this report is to introduce the draft Watford High Street (North) and Cultural Hub Masterplan and to request an eight week public consultation starting in July 2019.
- 4.2 Watford has a vibrant town centre which developed historically along the axis created by the High Street and The Parade, which used to terminate at The Pond.
- 4.3 Today the town has grown to dominate the retail offer in South West Herts. Despite being 16 minutes by train from London, Watford has maintained its own identity and has through significant investment fended off the decline seen in many other towns. The new intu Watford extension has enhanced the shopping experience, created a new leisure area with IMAX multi-screen cinema, bowling and new restaurants and a 'wow' factor public realm. The High Street has been repaved and reprioritised for buses, pedestrians and cyclists and there is an extensive events programme to bring people into the town. It is the right time for the council to make improvements in the north of the High Street help rebalance the High Street.

- 4.4 The town centre is beginning to suffer its own version of a north-south divide. North-west of the Exchange Road flyover the quality of the retail offer changes with a general reduction in visitor footfall at the top of The Parade for much of the day.
- 4.5 There are however a number of restaurants and bars which contribute to an outdoor café culture, including both independents and national chains.
- 4.6 The later night time economy is well served by a cluster of nightclubs which people come from a wide area to visit.
- 4.7 Parts of the area lack vibrancy, with a range of professional services, charity shops, vape shops, takeaways, betting shops and also empty properties.
- 4.8 The Masterplan will help to transform this area with:
- A cultural quarter with a modern museum
 - A new future for our heritage assets
 - The creation of new public open spaces
 - Support for businesses and new jobs
 - An exciting retail and leisure offer
 - Improved access within the town centre
 - A variety of high quality homes
 - A strengthened early evening economy
- 4.9 Through the draft Masterplan the council wishes to develop a new and improved quarter for the town centre and to extend this to the existing Town Hall area. As part of this, more restaurants in this area would enhance the early evening economy for people who live locally or to use after work. It is becoming clear from national trends that the new role of town centres are as places for people to live, eat, socialise and spend their leisure time as well as shop.
- 4.10 The aim is to also attract local entrepreneurs and independent businesses. This could include craft businesses such as small jewellers and glassmakers, thereby creating an interesting area in the daytime that complements the end of town. Mixed use buildings on underused sites will provide more jobs and customers for the improved local facilities creating a virtuous circle of investment and footfall. The Masterplan also seeks to encourage further cultural uses by bringing vacant units back into use.
- 4.11 The draft Masterplan is proposing a three phase approach to redevelopment, although this is unlikely to be a strictly linear process. It is likely that some elements of the phases will be running in parallel, with Phase 1 taking between 3 to 10 years

to deliver, while Phase 2 and Phase 3 are likely to be long term (up to 20 years to complete).

- 4.12 Phase 1 includes the area north-west of Rickmansworth Road, including the Town Hall, The Colosseum, Watford Central Library, two NHS clinics, the Market, The Avenue Car Park and the car park to the rear of the Town Hall.
- 4.13 Proposals include a change of use for the Town Hall to a 4 or 5 star hotel, a new building for Watford Museum (adjacent to the library) which will include a gallery/exhibition space, a redeveloped Avenue Car Park which will have two storeys below ground and three above, potential redevelopment and reprovision of the NHS buildings, demolition of the offices to the rear of the Town Hall and replacement with residential use. Most of this land is in public sector ownership and the vision is achievable.
- 4.14 There is an exciting opportunity to create a new integrated cultural, community, residential, retail, high quality public realm setting that in addition protects the long term future of the listed buildings. This would help drive footfall to this part of the town and substantially enhance the visitor economy.
- 4.15 Phase 2 involves the area from Rickmansworth Road to the area around the Exchange Road flyover. The proposals here will be more challenging, due to the preponderance of multiple landowners, and long term leases on buildings (125 years in some cases). There are around eight areas of interest, depending on how land can be assembled. Some possible uses are clear, others are more areas of opportunity. One of the key drivers is the need to improve the appearance of the buildings fronting The Parade with high quality design and regenerate poor quality areas to the rear of buildings (for example the southern end of Gaumont Approach).
- 4.16 Further work with landowners and developers is required; some landowners have been approached in the past as part of the writing of the Local Plan and shown interest, others have not responded to overtures. However it is important that the Borough Council sets out a clear and ambitious vision for change to maintain Watford's importance and ensure the area north of the Exchange Road flyover is as popular as the area to the south.
- 4.17 Phase 2 includes the following areas being considered for major change and regeneration in the next twenty years:
- The Sainsbury's building and car park and the areas of land off Gaumont Approach could see a new supermarket with a mix of other uses above it, making better use of the existing space
 - The building that contains Iceland and Pryzm nightclub, and the area including the car park to the rear

- Gade House, Gade Car Park and the area around Bentine Lane
- Wellstones and Wells Yard including the Watford Telephone Exchange
- The Corner of Upton Road and Exchange Road (which may need land for future road layout/transport improvements)
- The areas around New Watford Market and Watford House Lane where a mixed use scheme could be developed and a new indoor/outdoor market reprovided
- Woodford Parade/The Studios, an area of three storey buildings encompassing small retail units adjacent to Watford Pond

- 4.18 Phase 2 (and potentially Phase 3) may require a proactive approach to land assembly to avoid ad hoc and opportunist development which does not complement the wider aspirations for the Masterplan. It may require the legal protection of an Area Action Plan and the use of compulsory purchase powers to ensure land is assembled in a sensible and coherent fashion.
- 4.19 Phase 3 contains a number of complimentary changes to transport movement in the area, and as noted above is the most challenging aspect of the Masterplan. Watford Borough Council will work with Hertfordshire County Council (the Local Highways Authority) and transport modelling and viability specialists to examine the feasibility of the options and how impacts can be mitigated.
- 4.20 The road dominated principles of the 1960s and early 1970s have left Watford with a legacy of one way streets and fast roads creating a severance effect across the Town Centre. The A411 Ring Road and Rickmansworth Road have turned the Town Centre in some places into wide, multi lane highways with highly engineered public realm more suited to a major city rather than a market town.
- 4.21 There are two proposals being looked at to reprioritise pedestrians, cyclists and public transport over private motor vehicles. These will support the Draft *Hertfordshire Local Transport Plan 2018-2031* in its aims to return priority to pedestrians and cyclists.
- 4.22 The Avenue Car Park is encircled by a one way gyratory system, it is proposed to see the lower section of Hempstead Road closed and create a two way road system to the north of the car park. Preliminary transport modelling suggest this is feasible but may cause queuing. However further benefits may exist if there is signal control, and further investigation is required. This scheme could be delivered as part of Phase 1.

4.23 The Civic Core Conservation Area appraisal identifies Rickmansworth Road dual carriageway as the most intrusive feature affecting the Conservation Area. It is also of note that the pedestrian subway below the dual carriageway is often congested, and sees conflict between cyclists and pedestrians. The road has severed the traditional street layout and suggested changes here include creating a new pedestrian and cycle route across the road. As part of this the Council is proposing to raise the road and close the underpass for cars, while also removing the roundabout. It will create a new set of road junctions at street level. Preliminary transport modelling suggests this will cause traffic issues and more work is needed on all the options affecting movement nearby to mitigate this.

5.0 Heritage

- 5.1 Positive initial discussions have taken place with Heritage England on the proposed uses for the Town Hall and the relocation of the Museum. The proposals worked up in recent years for HLF co-investment to extend and refurbish the Museum in its existing location was not deliverable. A commitment was made that an alternative strategy would be developed to provide the Museum with the accessible high quality setting that was needed. The proposal is to design and develop a new purpose built facility, producing a creative hub with the Colosseum and the Library. The new Museum would be fully accessible, have state of the art storage facilities and provide space for the many events the Museum would like to host, including touring exhibitions and exhibits from national collections. The existing Museum was originally a family home and it is considered that it could be returned to appropriate residential use that would respect its listed status.
- 5.2 In terms of the town hall, there is a recognition that of all the successful alternative uses for such an important asset, a sensitively developed hotel use would maintain its heritage standing. Civic use of the Committee Rooms and the Chamber could continue, protecting community access but the remainder of the building would serve as a 4 or 5 star hotel, strengthening the visitor economy and complementing the surrounding cultural venues.
- 5.3 Without long term sustainable uses, heritage sites can fall into disrepair and eventually face closure.
- 5.4 The administrative offices of the council could be reprovided on site or in another town centre location, as employee numbers have reduced significantly and the amount of space the council needs is small compared to the scale of the building and its costs.

6.0 Delivery

- 6.1 Underlying the draft Masterplan is a desire to improve the public realm for cyclists and complement the Mayor's Cycle Hire Scheme, which will make cycling more accessible and convenient. The overall strategy is in line with the work of the County Council on rebalancing the needs of all users. The Council will have to weigh up the benefits against the dis-benefits once the modelling and feasibility is completed.
- 6.2 The other key aspect of work on the Masterplan is to ensure that the area is urban design led and better meets Watford's housing need, particularly with regard to the provision of more family homes and homes for the elderly. This will bring a stronger social mix and help with the Council's ambition to create a town centre for everyone.
- 6.3 Bringing all this together will be a challenge for officers and members, including a relocation of the Town Hall administrative functions, repurposing of the Town Hall building, and major redevelopment of the area around it. There is also the ambitious programme of regeneration and redevelopment of the wider area between Rickmansworth Road and The Exchange Road flyover along with the proposed road layout changes. The delivery of the Masterplan will require significant long term resourcing but this will help ensure Watford continues to thrive into the 21st Century.

6.4 Next Steps

- 6.5 Subject to member endorsement an 8 week consultation will be undertaken starting in July 2019. Normally a 6 week consultation would be undertaken but a further 2 weeks have been added to allow for holidays. The consultation will be advertised, public events held and extensive social media coverage will be undertaken. Interested parties will be able to access the document on line, with paper copies held at the Town Hall and libraries. Responses will be encouraged on line but written responses will also be accepted. Members will be given a briefing so they can help with their engagement on the Masterplan.
- 6.6 Once the consultation is completed, officers will review the responses and draft a final version of the Masterplan, together with a consultation statement. These documents will then be presented to Cabinet for adoption.

7.0 Implications

7.1 Financial

- 7.2 The Shared Director of Finance comments that the consultation will be funded from existing budgets. The financing of any final adopted Masterplan will be considered as part of future annual budget setting processes as required.

8.0 **Legal Issues** (Monitoring Officer)

The Group Head of Democracy and Governance comments that any final adopted Masterplan will be a supplementary planning document and have weight for Development Management purposes.

9.0 **Equalities, Human Rights and Data Protection**

Having regard to the council's obligations under s149 of the Equality Act 2010, an Equalities Impact Assessment will be undertaken as part of the report to Cabinet after the consultation.

Data Protection

Responses to the consultation and personal details will be managed in accordance with Watford Borough Council's retention policy.

10.0 **Staffing**

No additional requirements

10.1 **Accommodation**

No additional requirements

11.0 **Community Safety/Crime and Disorder**

11.1 The emergency services will be engaged as part of any consultation and on Planning Applications.

12.0 **Sustainability**

12.1 Re-use of brownfield land, with newer buildings built to higher environmental standards and new greenspaces that act as 'carbon sinks', as well as new facilities for walking and cycling will create a more sustainable town.

Appendices

Appendix A: Draft Watford High Street (North) and Cultural Hub Masterplan.

Background papers

Watford's Local Plan Part 1 Core Strategy 2006-31 Adopted 30 January 2013

[https://www.watford.gov.uk/downloads/file/114/watford local plan core strategy 2006-31 adopted 2013](https://www.watford.gov.uk/downloads/file/114/watford%20local%20plan%20core%20strategy%202006-31%20adopted%202013)

Hertfordshire Local Transport Plan 2018-2031 Adopted May 2018

<https://www.hertfordshire.gov.uk/media-library/documents/about-the-council/consultations/ltp4-local-transport-plan-4-complete.pdf>