



VOLUNTARY AND COMMUNITY SECTOR STRATEGY

SUMMARY

POST COVID RECOVERY & RENEWAL

1 Review the Watford Helps triage and referral processes

Many entities offer information, advice, direct support and referrals elsewhere ('signposting') including:

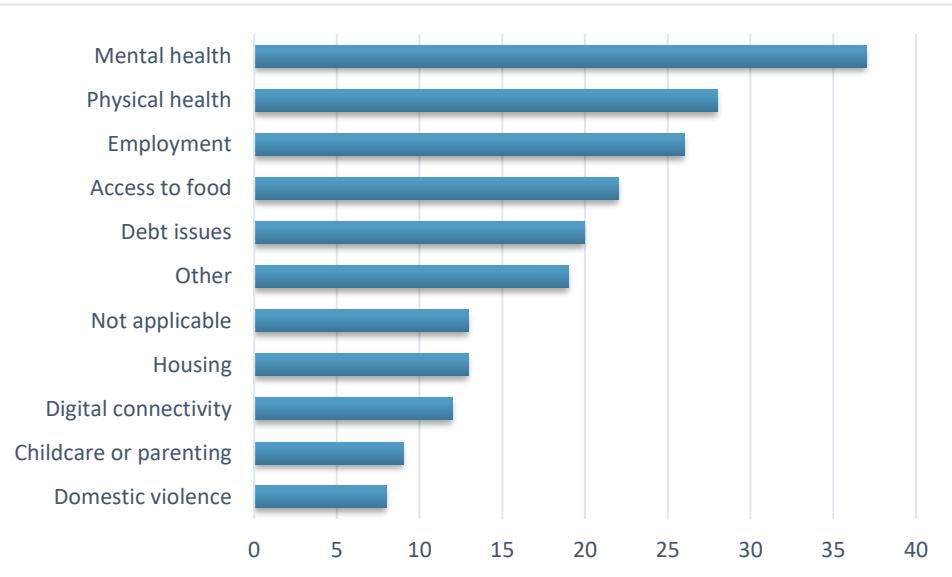
- Watford Helps, which coordinates voluntary activity and signposts vulnerable residents to support they might need.
- Watford Together, an opportunity for cultural and heritage partners to boost community spirit with activities.
- Reach Out West, a hospital-to-home volunteer-led service run by Team Herts Volunteering.
- HertsHelp, an information advice, signposting and direct support service with a direct helpline 7 days a week.
- Social prescribing is also crucial and W3RT play a key role in this area.

2 Ensure that 'HertsHelp' can support Watford residents effectively to ease local services

Many organisations try to signpost residents to longer-term or more specialised support to create community resilience. Some Watford groups have created leaflets to put into food packs with details of helplines and information for residents, for example with benefits advice or mental health support. The situation created by the Covid-19 pandemic may continue for many months to come and many local organisations, such as W3RT who run a recently set-up Wellbeing Hub, may need to assess whether the support and service they offer is sustainable.

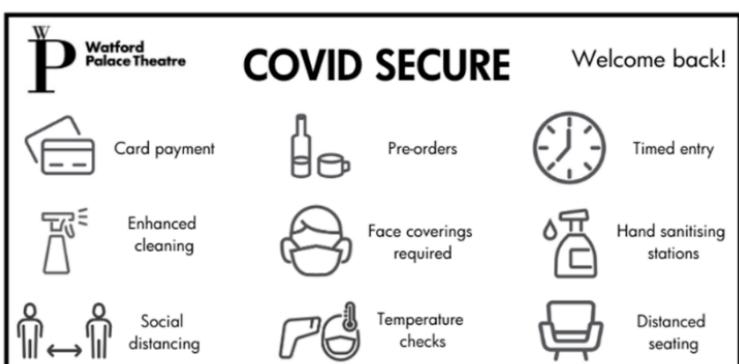
3 Consider a town-wide approach to social isolation and mental health

The number one issue which came up on the survey question about recent increases in the number of people seeking support was mental health. In comments for this question, various respondents also explicitly listed isolation, loneliness and another listed suicide prevention. This issue will merit proper attention and strategic response.



4 Build on best practice in the VCS to tackle digital isolation as part of the Council's Road to Renewal

Voluntary and community groups have been incredibly creative, running everything from online counselling to tai chi lessons via platforms like Zoom. However, there are still barriers to access, such as: a) accessibility to hardware like phones and laptops, especially where a family is large, (b) access to the internet where the usual outlets like libraries are closed and/or Pay As You Go accounts on phones are limited, (c) ICT literacy, especially for older people, (d) accessibility for different groups, such as those with different sensory or learning abilities, and also for non-English speakers. One participant, from a group that supports residents with disabilities, said '*People think the internet solves everything, but there will always be some people that need face-to-face support, or at least someone sitting with them at a computer.*'



5 Create a collection of Covid-response case studies with innovations and best practices

Face-to-face services are vitally important not just directly for the beneficiaries they support, but often for the family and carers that support them. Despite challenges, many local groups have responded creatively to social distance measures. Watford Workshop have given their users washable face coverings with different colours for different days of the week and One Vision marked 'Harvest' with a Drive Through And Drop event.

ENGAGING VOLUNTEERS

6. Review the Watford Helps volunteer brokerage system

As of 5 May, over 10,000 volunteers had been recruited across Hertfordshire via the three key recruitment organisations working collaboratively on this: 'TeamHerts Volunteering', Watford3RT and Communities 1st. The number deployed at that stage was 4,030. 'TeamHerts Volunteering' is a countywide Hertfordshire volunteering service. Watford residents that approached either 'TeamHerts Volunteering' or Watford Borough Council to volunteer were directed to W3RT to help match them to local roles in the community. This was a very large increase in the workload of W3RT with no extra funding. Volunteer brokering itself may lie long-term more with 'TeamHerts Volunteering' than W3RT, alongside complementary digital tools such as the national do-it.org website and app.

7. Ensure that 'TeamHerts Volunteering' has accessible local information to ease local services

Whilst the 'lockdown' period caused isolation for some residents, it simultaneously had an effect of freeing up time for others. Hence as well as many more vulnerable residents needing support, there were also many more people willing and able to supply that support as volunteers. The sheer number of volunteers directed to W3RT meant that capacity was stretched. One local councillor, speaking at a Watford Borough Council Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting, said, "I am not blaming W3RT, but they were overwhelmed." This may explain why, despite the large number of potential volunteers, around half of those who responded to the survey conducted said they did not receive news of any extra offers of help. By ensuring that 'TeamHerts Volunteering' have details of as many Watford VCS organisations as possible, it may be that they can help take some of the load going forward, and will no longer have to rely on referring to W3RT to identify suitable local matches.



8. Ensure that there is a formal process for volunteer referrals to organisations

Unlike 'TeamHerts Volunteering', W3RT are not a direct volunteering service. They promote volunteering but are not set up to play a key part in managing individuals' volunteer journeys. The commissioned CVS work at W3RT does not include specific KPIs in terms of volunteer brokerage and this could be reviewed and/or 'TeamHerts Volunteering' might be used more effectively for volunteer brokerage. At the moment the roles can overlap. A formal process may need to be established, showing engagement through tracking key milestones, such as date of signup, date matched, first day in role, etc. Alongside the milestone tracking above, feedback from volunteers themselves should be taken into account, including feedback on how they were used and whether they felt they were appropriately matched to their role and tasks.

9. Coordinate approaches for the recognition of volunteers

Whilst many Watford residents might not call themselves 'volunteers', there have been those who participated in fundraising, by donating food, and by helping neighbours informally. Local businesses too have donated time, goods, spaces. VCS organisations spoke passionately and gratefully about the hard work of their volunteers, with one group calling them "silent soldiers". Equally, it is clear that volunteers themselves benefit in terms of increased wellbeing and renewed confidence. At present recognition is done in many ways: the Local Hero Awards, the Audentior Awards, Volunteers' Week, Watford Borough Council certificates, social media campaigns and more. In light of the special situation that Watford has been through in 2020, it may be time to refresh the processes of recognition and better coordinate the local approach.

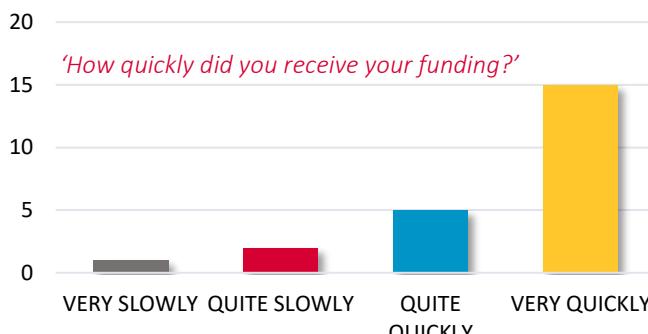
10. Build on Covid-19 response as a basis to change attitudes to support the most vulnerable in society, by building opportunities for long-term roles and volunteer development

Organisations greatly value volunteers who can support them with tasks requiring a relatively small amount of supervision, such as bag packing. However there are organisations whose work requires staff and volunteers to have either specialised skills or to undergo a significant period of training. One participant spoke at length about the need to provide proper CPD (continuous professional development) for volunteers as well as for staff. The recent report by Danny Kruger MP goes one step further and suggests that volunteers should be redirected to take on duties of public service, such as VCS trustees, but also as magistrates and Special Constables. This longer-term approach (rather, perhaps than the short-term brokering) may be an area that W3RT can support. The Overview & Scrutiny Committee W3RT Task Group recommended that "W3RT needs to clarify its long-term strategy for recruiting and sustaining local volunteering activities".

DIVERSIFYING FUNDING

11. Review the Watford Helps Community Fund to clarify its role in relation to similar funds

The W3RT-distributed Community Fund was supported and promoted closely in 2020 by Watford Borough Council, growing to more than £155,000. Watford Borough Council's Overview & Scrutiny Committee W3RT Task Group recommended that "*The Community Fund should be established as a lasting pillar of support for Watford's voluntary sector.*" If this effort is to be continued, an exercise to explore the nature of other funding sources will be useful.



Some participants were unclear as to why their application was turned down. A couple of participants shared concerns about criteria and decision-makers. To maintain confidence, decision-makers should perhaps be explicitly named going forward, and reasons formally recorded. More information might be collected to monitor the reach of the fund. Examples include: Is the HQ in Watford?; Is the turnover less than £10,000? ; Do you work with groups affected by the Equality Act's protected characteristics?

13. Consider aligning Community Fund grants more closely to strategic priorities.

At present, the expenditure of the Community Fund has not been need-led, but in fact demand-led. That is, it has gone to organisations that have bid for it. There is a need to decide whether the Fund in future will be used for non-Covid projects and if so, how it will align with changing needs and the priorities of Watford Borough Council. It might be that pots of money are ring-fenced for certain priorities such as mental health and wellbeing, or digital isolation.

14. Consider allocating part of the Community Fund to projects lasting more than 12 months

In response to the questions '*What will be the main challenge facing your organisation in the next 12 months/ 5 years?*' the most popular answer on both was '*Sustainability of income*'. Many participants spoke about the need for medium- and long-term funding. Groups are limited to planning in short-term financial cycles, impacting the way that residents are supported. One participant said, "*That's just not the way that you change someone's life – you can't give it a deadline*".

15. Align reporting schedules of all Watford Borough Council expenditure with the VCS

Alongside the Community Fund, WBC funds the sector in the following ways: Commissioned contracts; The Mayor's Small Grants Fund; Neighbourhood Locality Funds; Financial assistance such as rate relief and rent subsidies; Development projects funded through the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL). In various discussions with participants the issue of Social Value came up and VCS groups are broadly warm to incorporating this into discussions on expenditure since many of them offer extraordinary added social value – for example, supporting people into employment through volunteering.

16. Consider a full-time fundraising post

Money invested in the VC sector is crucial because the support offered plays a key preventative role. At present W3RT has only one part-time fundraiser. The Overview & Scrutiny Committee recommended that "W3RT and the wider local voluntary sector would benefit from a dedicated fundraiser at Watford and Three Rivers Trust." The co-location of the fundraiser at WBC is to be considered. If a fundraising officer were based even partially at WBC then it would help them feed into the strategy to develop the Community Fund and also look at income diversification models.

17. Consider how to support the VC Sector to build financial resilience and diversify income streams

There is a fear that while 'there has been a lot of money out there', emergency funding will soon dry up and the future may be problematic. Groups have lost money where fundraising events have been cancelled, charity shops have been shut and face-to-face donations have ceased. Online opportunities like the 2.6 challenge can help and some local groups have used it to good effect. Support for 'alternative' approaches like this is not explicitly offered by W3RT as a standalone project, although the bespoke support W3RT offers can include looking at this for groups. There are organisations which offer standalone projects to support capacity-building on income diversification, such as Impactful Governance. Hertfordshire Community Foundation also offer a comprehensive course, but numbers able to access it are short.

INFORMATION SHARING

18. Review the Watford Helps networks and ensure scope for both strategic and operational input
Every single group asked about its relationship with Watford Borough Council expressed positive opinions of the current Mayor. Groups also felt that WBC officers were supportive and aimed to treat them as equal partners. However, in an online session it was pointed out that the VCS were not always sure of council priorities and there was not a clear sense of long-term planning for Watford's voluntary and community sector. Despite this, 65% of survey respondents said 'yes' to being encouraged and supported to be a part of local decision-making. There are many networks, forums and groups which meet to share information, many with something of an informal nature. This is attractive and useful for new and emerging groups who need to build their peer support network, but was said to be less useful for groups that have existed for some time and would rather be involved in strategic discussions. The Council are undertaking a review of One Watford in December of this year. It might be worth considering how it complements other networks.

19. Review principles of CVS approach to minimise any possible conflicts of interest

Watford and Three Rivers Trust (W3RT) is funded by WBC to deliver support to other groups in the voluntary and community sector. W3RT has about ninety staff members in total, but very few of these directly support the CVS role. Around 20 support the community centres, around 30 staff look the social prescribing projects, and another 40 are technically employed by other partners. Officers may wish to work with W3RT to review the principles of its CVS approach so as to minimise any possible conflicts of interest between W3RT's support to its members and its role as a service delivery organisation, or where – there is deemed to be none – any perception of any possible conflicts of interest that might deter groups from working with them.

20. Review the CVS staffing role at W3RT

The lead staff member for the CVS is a key one at W3RT, since they gather and share information across Watford's Voluntary and Community Sector. Unfortunately members of staff in this role at W3RT have changed fairly regularly – there have been around 3 in the last 5 years alone. Officers at Watford Borough Council have often expressed that the role is very broad, and could easily be split between two people. Further discussion on this with W3RT staff (past and present) seems to suggest that the role can be challenging in that it bridges both a range of operational and strategic roles. The strategic side, particularly, sometimes overlaps with the role of the Chief Executive, and these may need to be unpicked and clarified.

21. Consider how to support VCS with collection, analysis and data sharing

Organisations in the VCS work directly with residents at 'grassroots' level and so often have a real understanding of the changing needs of their community. However, when asked "If your organisation supports local residents directly, are you currently able to collect information on how their needs are changing?" almost a quarter said "Not really" or "Not at all", another quarter said "Not applicable. That leaves only half of the VCS who responded said "Yes" – and even then 17% said "Yes, but we would benefit from some support on how to do this better". Many comments seemed to indicate that information was not collected systematically as a matter of course if funding was not involved.

22. Consider 'themes' used to categorise VCS organisations to link groups with similar aims

Many new groups have sprung up in recent months in response to the Covid-19 difficulties faced by residents. Some participants – both members of the voluntary sector and those outside of it - spoke about the need to avoid what they termed as 'duplication' between groups. It sometimes caused, they argued, confusion when signposting residents, and also sometimes caused tension in terms of delivery – with vulnerable groups sometimes even being given conflicting advice or support. One way to avoid this would be to create informal groups which organisations could align themselves with. At present, W3RT has 12 'themes' around which it organises the members of its directory. By mapping these against the Charities Act's 'charitable purposes' and themes in the Council's Watford Together Plan one suggestion might be the following 7 groups:

A council that serves people:

1. Inclusion [Using Data For Well-Informed Decisions; Addressing Digital Isolation]
2. Access to Support [Working with partners to ensure availability of Complex Needs support, including Homelessness and Mental Health]

INFORMATION SHARING

A thriving, diverse and creative town

- 3. Economic Prosperity
- 4. A Sustainable Town
- 5. Thriving Neighbourhoods

A healthy and happy town

- 6. Health & Wellbeing
- 7. A Flourishing Creative & Cultural Sector

23. Refresh the CVS' KPIs on actively engaging with business

This section could have fallen under 'Funding' rather than 'Information sharing' but that would defeat the very point businesses have tried to make: they can offer more than money. It was recommended by the Council's Overview and Scrutiny Committee that "W3RT and the business community should strengthen their links." The financial strain which the crisis has put on groups has sometimes revealed underlying problems which already existed. There is no doubt that groups in the voluntary and community sector will need to diversify income streams and businesses know how to do this. Many businesses themselves in Watford, as nationally, are experiencing financial stress as a result of the Covid pandemic. Whilst it therefore might be assumed that many do not want to be involved with charitable ventures because of other priorities, in fact many businesses in Watford have been greatly involved in the response to the crisis.

24. Work with W3RT to create a proactive action plan to better engage with all parts of the Voluntary and Community Sector, particularly those that support underrepresented communities

In response to the question "*Aside from funding and help from volunteers, what else would enable your organisation to support Watford residents better?*" there were 39 responses in total, and of these sixteen of these were suggesting a need for better communication, partnership working or networking.

In the survey the representation of BAME groups was brought up various times. There are around 200 languages spoken in schools across Hertfordshire County. Since much of the networking and communication that happens between W3RT groups is informal, the demographic makeup of staff and volunteers, and equalities training of staff and volunteers, plays a key role in how information is shared – not only between organisations, but also with residents. This is more urgent than ever in light of the Public Health statement stating that there is an association between belonging to some ethnic groups and the likelihood of testing positive and dying with COVID-19. Since reasons for an increased risk for BAME communities are varied and complex, a variety of organisations –both voluntary and statutory – will need to approach these issues from a variety of angles. It is also important that a wide range of staff and volunteers in the VCS from a background of ethnicities and social demographics are able to join both strategic and operational discussions. This point was addressed in a paper by the organisation CharitySoWhite, which includes the recommendation to 'actively value lived experience in order to counterbalance the lack of diversity in the charity sector, give programmes integrity and ensure their success'.

There are a variety of different types of groups offering support across Watford. Faith groups, for example, have played a key role in providing food not just to residents but even to hospital workers. Alongside charities, participants shared that groups with other forms of governance, such as Community Interest Companies, are not always invited to be part of conversations. It was felt that these groups have much complementary expertise to offer. Many of the mutual aid groups which have sprung up explained that they communicate almost exclusively via social media. There is a need, then, for a social media presence – for both WBC and W3RT - to be a priority. Informal groups – not just Covid-response mutual aids – can sometimes feel side-lined. This was a perception shared by some organisations: "Small groups don't hear things," one participant said. Some participants, although positive about W3RT in some ways, were critical in this area. One said: "They expect groups to go to them, or go to their website. They need to go out into the community more." The Overview and Scrutiny Committee W3RT Task Group included the following recommendation: 'There is a need for W3RT to build more and better partnership working across the local community.'

Voluntary & Community Strategy Recommendations in Full

Post-Covid Recovery and Renewal

1. Review the Watford Helps triage and referral processes, to clarify the complementary roles of all signposting/social prescribing bodies, i.e. Watford Helps, 'HertsHelp', the W3RT Wellbeing Hub, Watford's Healthy Hub, HCNS, Watford Together, Neighbours Together, etc.
2. Ensure that partners at Hertfordshire County Council-commissioned service 'HertsHelp' have accessible local information to support Watford residents effectively, and ease local services.
3. Consider how to work towards a long-term town-wide strategic approach to respond specifically to issues of social isolation and mental health in the community.
4. Build on best practice in the VCS to tackle digital isolation as part of the Council's Road to Renewal plan.
5. Work with W3RT to create and share accessibly a collection of case studies with innovations and best practices, developed in response to Covid-19, from the Voluntary and Community Sector.

Engaging Volunteers

6. Review the Watford Helps volunteer brokerage system, to clarify the complementary roles of all volunteering services which Watford residents might access, including 'TeamHerts Volunteering', do-it.org and W3RT.
7. Ensure that partners at Hertfordshire County Council-commissioned service 'TeamHerts Volunteering' have accessible local information to efficiently help Watford residents, and ease local services.
8. Ensure that there is a formal process for volunteer referrals to organisations to ensure both skills and motivations are considered, and that engagement information is captured.
9. Coordinate approaches for the recognition of volunteers by the Council and other partners in the community.
10. Build on the response to the Covid-19 crisis as a basis to change attitudes to support the most vulnerable in society, by building opportunities for professional development and long-term volunteering such as trusteeship.

Diversifying Funding

11. Review the Watford Helps Community Fund, to clarify its role in relation to similar funds, such as HCF's Coronavirus Relief Fund and WCH's Community Development Fund.
12. Ensure that the administration of a revised Community Fund is done as collaboratively and transparently as possible. Consider support from a range of partners on this such as Hertfordshire Community Foundation.
13. Consider aligning Community Fund grants more closely to strategic priorities.
14. Consider allocating part of the Community Fund to projects lasting more than 12 months.
15. Align reporting schedules of all Watford Borough Council 'Business-As-Usual' expenditure with the Voluntary and Community Sector to ensure strategic priorities are considered.
16. Consider a full-time fundraising post, to support the Community Fund and VCS groups through the CVS.
17. Consider how to explicitly support the Voluntary and Community Sector to build financial resilience and diversify income streams alongside traditional fundraising.

Information Sharing

18. Review the Watford Helps networks, clarifying the roles of groups such as the Mayor's Volunteering Planning Group in line with the One Watford review due in December. Ensure that there is scope across Watford for VCS leaders to input to both operational and strategic discussions and decision-making.
19. Review principles of CVS approach so as to minimise any possible conflicts of interest between W3RT's support to its members and its role as a service delivery organisation.
20. Review the CVS staffing role at W3RT to ensure more WBC input with regards to strategic and operational responsibilities, with the aim to encourage long-term staff who can build up strong local knowledge and relationships.
21. Consider how to support VCS with collection, analysis and data sharing on changing needs across Watford, as part of wider approach by WBC and statutory partners.
22. Consider the groupings and 'themes' used to categorise VCS organisations as a means to link new and emerging groups to those with similar aims.
23. Refresh the CVS' KPIs on actively engaging with business so as to lay out explicit plans on how to share knowledge and skills between local businesses and the VCS.
24. Work with W3RT to create a proactive action plan to better engage with all parts of the Voluntary and Community Sector, particularly those that support underrepresented communities including those from BAME communities and those smaller groups that may not have their own physical spaces.