

## Part A

**Report to:** Overview and Scrutiny Committee

**Date of meeting:** Thursday, 21 October 2020

**Report author:** Head of Enterprise Programme Management Office

**Title:** Covid-19 – Our Road to Renewal

### 1.0 Summary

- 1.1 Covid-19 and the subsequent lockdown has had a significant impact across the town and council. Watford Borough Council were one of the first in the country to launch a Renewal Plan as part of our new Strategic Framework in July of last year. The plan set out how we could support our community, businesses and our own staff as the first wave of the pandemic subsided. The plan has provided a clear focus for the council and allowed the realignment of resources as the focus changed from the initial incident response to helping our community, businesses and staff to recover.
- 1.2 Much has been achieved since last July when the Road to Renewal Plan was first published. Unprecedented support has been provided to businesses across the town with a significant number of grants issued, business engagement enhanced and a number of specific support initiatives progressed, including the Wenta business recovery scheme, the launch of WhatsApp for business and the development of our key accounts scheme. Similarly, we have continued to provide support to some of the most vulnerable in our community, have successfully bid for a number of central funds to contribute towards our target of achieving zero rough sleepers and raised nearly £180,000 for local voluntary organisations. The council made a conscious decision to focus on 'renewal', rather than 'recovery', using the council response to Covid-19 as a springboard to fundamentally change how we work with our local businesses, engage with our community and how we deliver our services internally.
- 1.3 Progress on the Road to Renewal plan has been reported to Cabinet and Overview and Scrutiny Committee on a quarterly basis with the most recent report having been noted by Cabinet on 7 June 2021. Internally, a weekly Renewal Coordination Board, chaired by the Managing Director, has overseen delivery.
- 1.4 However, the delivery of the plan has not been without challenge. Whilst our planning ensured that we were prepared for a second wave of the virus and were able to maintain services throughout the subsequent lockdowns, there has been a need for the plan to remain agile, adapting in line with the circumstances and government guidelines as they responded to the changing nature of the pandemic.

As a result, some activities, particularly in relation to reopening and activities post-lockdown, have needed to be undertaken on multiple occasions. Similarly, other activities, such as events bringing the community together, have not been possible in light of ongoing government guidance.

- 1.5 Whilst the government has announced plans to manage Covid-19 over the Autumn and Winter months, the vaccine roll out is progressing well and so it is a good opportunity to review our Road to Renewal plan to ensure that it continues to best meet the needs of our local community. At the time our existing plan was developed, we did not know how long the restrictions would be in force for and could not have foreseen additional lockdowns in November and at the beginning of this year, considerably impacting our community, businesses and staff. Nevertheless, robust service and business continuity planning as part of our original Road to Renewal plan meant that the organisation was prepared for these eventualities and was subsequently able to respond appropriately with minimal impact on the delivery of our front line services.
- 1.6 Furthermore, the council has continued to work closely with the County Council, our neighbouring authorities and partners to ensure that we achieve a holistic recovery and can benefit from strategic alignment across Hertfordshire. The council's Managing Director has remained the chair of the county-wide Recovery Coordinating Group, made up of representatives from Hertfordshire County Council, Hertfordshire District and Borough Councils, the police, the NHS, Hertfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership and Hertfordshire Growth Board, ensuring that the council continues to play a key role within the county. There remains a strong appetite amongst partners to continue working collaboratively to maximise the impact of recovery and there has been agreement to enter into a statement of intent to that effect. Refreshing our own Road to Renewal plan at this time provides an opportunity to ensure that our plans align to the strategic recovery across the County, even as we continue to input and influence those plans.
- 1.7 Our refreshed Road to Renewal plan, shown as Appendix 1 to this report , details the specific activity to be undertaken by the council in order to lead the renewal work over the next 12 months. As well as alignment with the Council Plan, it builds upon both the positives, such as the overwhelming community-spirited reaction to the crisis, and the lessons learnt from the council's initial response.
- 1.8 It should be noted that recovery from Covid-19 is expected to take much longer than just 12 months but, given the announcement from Central Government on the plans for managing the virus over the Autumn and Winter of 2021/22, the future impact of the pandemic remains uncertain and so an opportunity to pause and review the plan and our ongoing response to support residents and businesses during 2022 will be beneficial. This will also then align with the publication of our new Corporate Delivery Plan, replacing the existing Delivery Plan which runs until 2022. Given the far-reaching impact of Covid-19, it is anticipated that this will

provide an opportunity to review the council's strategic direction through the lens of renewal and ensure that renewal becomes embedded in our business as usual activity. A review in 12 months time will provide us with the opportunity to assess this position.

## 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)
Our Road to Renewal Plan does not align with the Council Plan and wider council ambitions	Council priorities are unclear or conflicting leading to an ineffective response by the council in relation to renewal	Council Plan, Delivery Plan and Road to Renewal Plan were developed in conjunction with one another and form a comprehensive package of activities designed to support the post-Covid renewal across the town and within the council whilst aligning to the longer term strategic direction of the organisation. Clear objectives have been identified within the refreshed Road to Renewal Plan which support the delivery of Council Plan themes and commitments and the proposed 12-month time period for the refreshed plan will allow this to align with the development of the new Delivery Plan in 2022.	Treat	4
Our Road to Renewal Plan is not adopted by the council	No clear direction for the council to support renewal in the town and the agility needed to ensure that the plan continues to serve the needs of the community	The Road to Renewal Plan is refreshed and approved by Cabinet, allowing the council's focus to best reflect the current reality and impact of the pandemic.	Treat	4
Our Road to Renewal Plan is adopted but cannot be delivered	Town and council do not deliver the renewal as effectively as they could. Perceived lack of leadership and support	An appraisal of resourcing requirements has been undertaken in relation to the activities identified within the Road to Renewal Plan. This has included specific project management resource to drive forward and deliver the plan. This has been aligned to the corporate budget position prior to approval. A robust governance and reporting structure has also been established to ensure ongoing momentum and appropriate levels of scrutiny	Treat	8
Our Road to Renewal Plan does not allow for an agile response	Council's support for renewal is not as effective as it could be	It is acknowledged that the Road to Renewal Plan details key activities for the delivery of the objectives but there may be need to accelerate, amend or stop these plans in light of the fast changing external	Treat	8

to the changing external environment		environment. The governance structure in place allows for a formal change control process so that decisions to deviate from the Road to Renewal Plan are not made in isolation and with full overview of the Renewal Co-ordination Board. The approval of an updated plan provides an opportunity to pause and reset the plan so that it best serves the needs of the community given the current reality.		
The council's own ambitions in relation to renewal do not align with county-wide plans	Renewal is not as effective as it could be and opportunities to align renewal at a strategic level are not utilised	Statement of Intent in relation to ongoing collaborative working across Hertfordshire has been agreed, along with key areas of cooperation. The council will continue to play a key role in inputting and influencing the county-wide approach, working closely with our partners at county and district level, as well as the Hertfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership, Hertfordshire Growth Board, Hertfordshire Constabulary, the NHS and our active voluntary sector,	Treat	6

### 3.0 Recommendations

3.1 It is recommended that:

- The Road to Renewal Plan work stream objectives outlined in this report are noted by Overview and Scrutiny Committee
- The Road to Renewal delivery actions (Appendix 1) are noted by Overview and Scrutiny Committee
- Progress on delivering the Road to Renewal delivery actions will continue to be reported on a quarterly basis to Cabinet and Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Overview and Scrutiny Committee should also note that the actions outlined in this report will continue to contribute to the delivery of the Council Plan 2020-2024.

**Further information:**

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**Report approved by: Donna Nolan, Managing Director**

### 4.0 Context – Renewal

The renewal phase is an integral phase of the Watford's response to Covid-19 and can be defined as:

*“The process of rebuilding, restoring and rehabilitating the community following an emergency”*

4.1 To be successful, our renewal process will have certain key focus points and features:

- Co-ordination – it should act in line with an agreed aim and objectives, and be managed in line with accepted governance, co-ordination and decision making processes. This includes at a local, regional and national level.
- Focus points – renewal should support the restoration of emotional, social, economic and physical wellbeing. A key point, which is pertinent in these circumstances particularly, is that the process of restoration may reflect a ‘new normality’ as for many, life may never be the same again.

4.2 In respect of the current pandemic, the County Council established a Hertfordshire

wide Recovery Coordinating Group last year. The Managing Director represents the council on this group and has a lead role. The Hertfordshire Recovery Coordination Group is continuing to lead on Covid-19 activity at a County-Level and all Districts are feeding into a Herts-wide plan where benefit can be achieved through collaborative and cross-county working.

- 4.3 To support this work, the county council, as well as all districts, and key partners such as the Hertfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP), the NHS, Hertfordshire Constabulary and Hertfordshire Growth Board, have agreed to enter into a shared statement of intent, emphasising a determination to continue working collaboratively in the interests of residents, businesses and communities across Hertfordshire. As such, the council's own Road to Renewal plan closely reflects the identified thematic areas proposed at a county-wide level; community, economy, health and wellbeing and public sector service delivery.
- 4.4 This work does not detract from the activities outlined in our Road to Renewal plan, but rather complement and support them. As such, it is important that the council retains a suitable framework enabling it to link in to county-wide structures, whilst leading a co-ordinated effort in respect of the local community. Whilst local renewal efforts should be tied in with the county-wide work, it is important that these are nuanced to suit the needs of individual localities.
- 4.5 In July of last year the council therefore established its own Renewal Co-ordination Board, chaired by the Managing Director and attended by the Shared Director of Finance, Group Heads of Transformation, Place Shaping and Community and Environmental Services, the Executive Head of Strategy and Communications and the Head of the Enterprise Programme Management Office. This group has been responsible for leading the renewal work streams and ensuring the ongoing management of dependencies, risks and issues. The Managing Director has reported to the Elected Mayor on a regular basis and, as part of the Strategic Framework Quarterly Progress Report to Cabinet and Overview and Scrutiny Committee, an update on progress of relevant renewal activity has been provided throughout the last 12 months and this will continue.

## **5.0 Background and Focus**

- 5.1 There is little doubt that Covid-19 has had a significant impact across the country. This applies not only to the ongoing response to the pandemic which remains subject to Central Government announcements, but also in relation to the future and the inevitable renewal required. There should also be little doubt that Covid-19 renewal will require significant focus over the coming years; the impact of the pandemic is not going to be something that can be resolved in a matter of months.
- 5.2 Whilst the economic impact of Covid-19 is clearly significant, the Road to Renewal Plan is not restricted to a focus solely on economic renewal. To ensure that

appropriate focus and resource is committed to supporting a holistic renewal of the town and council, three work streams have been established which closely align to those proposed at a county-wide level:

- Community
- Business and Economy
- Organisational Renewal

These work streams are also consistent with the themes of the Council Plan to create a 'thriving, creative and diverse town', a 'healthy and happy town' and a council that 'serves our residents'. However, the plan should not be read in isolation. It is also closely aligned to the council's Organisational Development Strategy which recognises the significant effort and input from staff in delivering the council's response to the pandemic and the need for their support as we progress our plans for renewal. Following an enhanced focus on our strategic direction, our Road to Renewal plan similarly supports the delivery of a number of corporate strategies including our Cultural Strategy and Voluntary Sector Strategy. It will also support the development of our Sustainable Transport Strategy, Town Centre Framework, our Place Based Narrative and key programmes, such as the Town Hall Quarter. Specifically, the 'Business and Economy' work stream will also link in directly with the recently approved Economic Growth Strategy, representing the on-the-ground delivery of our support for businesses and the local economy.

- 5.3 Each work stream will be led by a Group Head of Service reporting directly into the council's Renewal Co-ordination Board. In line with the council's standard programme management methodology, progress will be closely monitored and risks, issues and dependencies actively managed. Monthly update reports will be submitted to Tactical Portfolio Holder meetings so that members remain equally informed.

## **6.0 Work Streams**

- 6.1 Each of the established renewal work streams has a specific focus underpinned by a list of clear objectives. These are linked directly to specific activities within the Road to Renewal Plan. Each activity simultaneously supports a key Council Plan commitment, ensuring necessary alignment across the scope of activity being undertaken by the council over the next 12 months. This will ensure that the council is clear about its priorities and enable the response to be as effective as possible.

### **6.2 Work Stream 1 - Community**

- 6.2.1 The community response to Covid-19 across Watford was positive, strong and highlighted the huge number of community, voluntary and charitable groups that exist within the town. Supporting the Council Plan theme to create 'a healthy and happy town' and aligned to the county-wide priorities for community and health and wellbeing, the Community work stream, led by the Group Head of Community



and Environmental Services, seeks to harness this positive aspect of the recent crisis as well as identifying how our community can be supported following the ongoing response to Covid-19 and the subsequent lockdowns. This will include maintaining and utilising the army of volunteers who signed up to help the most vulnerable in our community, ensuring that those who need it continue to be supported, including those with mental health issues and those who are digitally isolated, and celebrating the town's community response to the crisis.

6.2.2 With this in mind, Community work stream will deliver our Delivery Plan commitments to:

- Commemorate Watford's response to Covid-19
- Develop services to support our residents' health and wellbeing, including those with mental health issues
- Support the voluntary sector in Watford to provide positive outcomes for those in need
- Address digital isolation

6.3.3 Specifically aligning with the county-wide activity, the Community work stream will address mental health concerns, feed into the development of a shared health and wellbeing strategy, deliver plans to sustain community activation and contribute, in conjunction with our corporate Delivery Plan 2020-22, to celebrating heritage, culture and leisure, addressing homelessness and housing delivery and protecting our green spaces and environment.

6.2.4 The above objectives will be delivered by a range of specific activities. Full details of the activities planned to meet the council's renewal objectives in relation to the Community work stream can be found within Our Road to Renewal Plan in Appendix 1.

### **6.3 Work Stream 2 - Business and Economy**

6.3.1 The economic consequences of Covid19 are likely to be significant for Watford. With one of the Council Plan's themes being to 'create a thriving, diverse and creative town', this work stream, led by the Group Head of Place Shaping, provides a focus on how the council can not only support the local economy to survive the economic shock of lockdown but also to revive and then thrive.

6.3.2 Significant progress has been made in this area over the past 14 months. We have revolutionised the way in which we engage with our local businesses through a fundamental review and relaunch of our business forums, the introduction of our key accounts programme and the implementation of our business CRM. We have supported the High Street to reopen by launching our Summer of Fun events

programme, continuing to provide public health advice for businesses and facilitating social distancing in the town centre through the use of road closures, signposting, marshalling and planters. We have launched the UK's very first Whatsapp High Street and effectively and efficiently administered a whole range of grants to support businesses impacted by lockdown.

6.3.3 We have also developed our new Economic Growth Strategy and, based on this, a comprehensive programme of activity has been established within the Business and Economy work stream to drive forward the economy of the town supporting the re-opening of the Town Centre, invigorating small and medium businesses and attracting and retaining big businesses. Building upon our recent Levelling Up Fund bid to Central Government, the Business and Economy work stream will therefore focus on the delivery of the following Economic Growth Strategy priorities:

- Develop a thriving and productive Economy
- Support our key sectors
- Create a new economic future for the Town Centre
- Support our communities to access opportunities
- Create the right environment for sustainable growth

6.3.4 To deliver the scale of the council's ambition outlined in the Economic Growth Strategy, the Business and Economy work stream will have the following objectives:

- Maximise the benefits of working across Hertfordshire to help shape our economic future and respond to current challenges
- Support businesses to thrive
- Ensure employment space and Investment opportunities are available
- Support our key sectors
- Create Watford's Place Based Narrative and marketing approach
- Support Town Centre businesses
- Develop a planning framework for Watford town centre to encourage investment and improve accessibility
- Further enhance the marketing and promotion of Watford Town centre
- Ensure Watford residents benefit from economic growth and as a council consider how inclusive our economic decisions are
- Deliver an effective and efficient infrastructure
- Manage environmental impact across the Borough

- 6.3.5 Specifically aligning with the county-wide activity, the Business and Economy work stream will contribute to the Hertfordshire ambition to upskill and reskill residents across the county, improve digital infrastructure, support key sectors, incentivise new and expanding businesses and focus on Town Centre recovery and regeneration.
- 6.3.6 The above objectives will be delivered by a range of specific activities. Full details of the activities planned to meet the council's renewal objectives in relation to the Business and Economy work stream can be found within Our Road to Renewal Plan in Appendix 1.

#### **6.4 Work Stream 3 - Organisational Renewal**

- 6.4.1 The council has operated very effectively throughout the pandemic and continues to do so with service and project delivery having continued with relatively limited impact to customers and good levels of performance maintained throughout. Linking in with the Council Plan ambition to create 'a council that serves its residents', the Organisational Renewal work stream, led by the Group Head of Transformation, has focused on the activity needed to respond to the impact of the pandemic on the organisation and our staff.
- 6.4.2 Since approval of the Road to Renewal plan in July 2020, we have worked to address any backlog caused by Covid-19, have put in place a number of Covid-19 safety measures for our staff and customers, supported the opening of a vaccination centre at the Town Hall, undertaken risk assessments across the organisation and launched new service plans organisation-wide to ensure collective delivery of our Council Plan. We have also updated our policies and processes, increased the ability for our customers to transact with us online and introduced a whole range of support measures for staff, including a specific focus on health and wellbeing and mental health.
- 6.4.3 The immediate future, however, remains uncertain. Central government has suggested that restrictions may return over the winter months if Covid-19 and other seasonal viruses place pressure upon the NHS and it is therefore important that the council is in a position to positively react to these changes, ensuring that service delivery can be maintained and we are able to respond to any new challenges.
- 6.4.4 With this in mind, the Organisational Renewal work stream will deliver our Delivery Plan objectives to:
- Manage our organisational renewal post Covid-19
  - Ensure that the council's future office accommodation is fit for purpose
  - Embed resilience across the organisation

- Deliver the council's financial recovery

6.4.5 Specifically aligning with the county-wide activity, the Organisational Renewal work stream will address public sector resilience and preparedness, building upon the work which allowed us to continue successfully operating in challenging circumstances through the second and third national lockdowns.

6.4.6 The above objectives will be delivered by a range of specific activities. Full details of the activities planned to meet the council's renewal objectives in relation to the Organisational Renewal work stream can be found within Our Road to Renewal Plan in Appendix 1.

6.4.7 Our Organisational Renewal work stream will also be delivered in the context of our Reimagining Watford project, as part of the Town Hall Quarter programme. The positive way in which our staff have responded to the pandemic and the impact on their ways of working over the past 16 months has enabled us to continue consistent service delivery. However, engagement with our staff has also indicated that they have enjoyed the greater flexibility of working from home and in a more agile way, although the lack of face to face contact has made collaboration challenging. Reimagining Watford seeks to harness some of the benefits gained from this agile way of working, such as a better work/life balance, decreased costs for accommodation and less vehicles on our roads, whilst addressing the desire for increased collaboration and networking. The Organisation Renewal work stream will be a key strand in the delivery of this vision by overseeing the introduction of hybrid technology, supporting our staff to enable them to work in a new and flexible way and linking in with the Town Hall Quarter programme ambition to create modern, fit for purpose, sustainable and value for money officers for our staff to collaborate in.

## **7.0 The need for agility**

7.1 The ongoing uncertainties associated with the pandemic are likely to continue with the long term impact to the local, regional, national and global economy making it almost impossible to look further ahead at this juncture. This has been confirmed by the government's recent announcement relating to the plans for Autumn and Winter 2021/22 in which the high degree of uncertainty which surrounds the pandemic and the national reaction to the virus was emphasised.

7.2 In light of this, the Road to Renewal plan governance has been designed to ensure that the council can continue to react in as agile a way as possible in delivering the Plan, whilst maintaining clear decision-making and accountability. A robust change control process will be applied so any deviation from the approved Road to Renewal plan can be assessed and formally approved with appropriate oversight and an understanding of the impact on deliverables elsewhere within the programme of

works. The established reporting lines to the Renewal Coordination Board, who will meet on at least a fortnightly basis, will ensure ongoing oversight of any changes.

## **8.0 Implications**

### **8.1 Financial**

- 8.1.1 The Shared Director of Finance comments that a renewal budget of £1.2m was approved by Cabinet upon the approval of the original Road to Renewal plan. To date, this budget has funded a number of key initiatives for the town, including the Watford Market Lates event, Watford Outdoor Theatre, development of our voluntary sector strategy, High Street planters to aid social distancing whilst improving the street scene, our business CRM and an enhanced focus on economic development and town centre support. Budget has also been committed to supporting the next phase of the Watford Junction gateway scheme and project resourcing meaning £695,200 of the overall budget remains.
- 8.1.2 As previously, any requested draw down of funds from the Renewal budget will be made via a formal funding request to the Renewal Coordination Board initially with subsequent review by Tactical Portfolio Holders and approval by the Elected Mayor. However, it is recommended that the approval of expenditure of less than £5,000 is delegated to the Managing Director in her capacity as Chair of the Renewal Coordination Board.
- 8.1.3 In terms of the financial recovery of the organisation itself, this will be managed through the Organisational Renewal work stream and will be overseen by the Shared Director of Finance. However, it should be noted that the council's financial position is stronger than many other authorities as a result of our property investment portfolio which continues to be carefully managed and overseen by the Property Investment Board.

### **8.2 Legal Issues (Monitoring Officer)**

- 8.2.1 The Group Head of Democracy and Governance comments that the legal implications are contained within the body of the report.

### **8.3 Equalities, Human Rights and Data Protection**

#### **8.3.1 Equalities Impact Assessment**

Under s149 (1) of the Equality Act 2010 the council must have due regard, in the exercise of its functions, to the need to –

- eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct prohibited by the Act
- advance equality of opportunity between persons who share relevant protected characteristics and persons who do not share them
- foster good relations between persons who share relevant protected characteristics and persons who do not share them.

As the Road to Renewal plan represents a significant package of activities, an equalities impact analysis was undertaken upon development of the original plan. The Equalities Impact Assessment has since been reviewed in line of this refreshed plan and the conclusions of the analysis remain that nothing contained within the Road to Renewal Plan will adversely impact upon a person with protected characteristics.

The Equality Impact Analysis notes that, like all organisations and local authorities, Watford is restricted by the national guidelines relating to social distancing. If these are reintroduced as a result of a localised outbreak, some of the community events planned could not be attended by individuals shielding. However, the council will continue to follow national guidance and should there be a localised outbreak of Covid-19, it is unlikely that any such event would go ahead.

### 8.3.2 Data Protection Impact Assessment

Having had regard to the council's obligations under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) 2018, it is considered that officers are not required to undertake a Data Processing Impact Assessment (DPIA) for this report.

## 8.4 Staffing

8.4.1 It is recognised that Our Road to Renewal represents a significant level of additional activity for the council. However, staffing is anticipated to remain the same as previously approved.

8.4.2 It should also be noted that it has been the resilience and dedication of our staff which has enabled to council to continue operating so effectively throughout the pandemic. Our Organisational Development Strategy, approved as part of the Strategic Framework in July 2020, acknowledged the integral role that staff play in the delivery of services for our residents, businesses and community. Staff have continued to work effectively throughout the pandemic, in many cases and in common with employees across the country, balancing home working with maintaining service delivery in challenging circumstances. Many members of staff were redeployed to other service areas or to directly support our Covid-19 response on the front line. Others were able to continue service delivery whilst working in a completely different way from usual and with reduced resources. A range of support and recognition schemes have been in place and our refreshed Road to

Renewal plan should be read in conjunction with our Organisational Development Strategy and our ongoing efforts to support, invest in and recognise the significant work undertaken by staff from across the council.

## **8.5 Community Safety/Crime and Disorder**

8.5.1 Having reviewed the Road to Renewal Plan in line with section 17 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, it is not considered that any activity provided within the plan would increase crime and disorder in the area.

## **8.6 Sustainability**

8.6.1 The Road to Renewal Plan recognises the opportunity for both the town and council to emerge from the Covid-19 crisis in a sustainable way. The plans for the town under the Business and Economy work stream specifically reference the need to support low carbon businesses and include a whole range of sustainable transport plans, building upon the Sustainable Transport Strategy which is currently out for consultation.

## **Appendices**

- Appendix 1 – Our Road to Renewal plan