

Part A

Report to: Cabinet

Date of meeting: 6 February 2023

Report author: Ellen Higginson

Title: Watford Town Centre Strategic Framework

1.0 Summary

1.1 Watford Borough Council has adopted a new Local Plan which sets out a vision and strategy for Watford to 2038. Watford Town Centre is one of three Strategic Development Areas allocated in the Plan where significant revitalisation and transformative change are expected to bring new investment into the town. The development process and output of the framework is intended to herald the change and continue the process of establishing support for change, whilst shaping the change in ways that residents and stakeholders want.

1.2 The Town Centre is a thriving retail and leisure destination with an established character and there are a number of redevelopment opportunities identified in the Local Plan, which reflect the evolving nature of the area. As the town centre has such importance to the borough economically, socially, and culturally, the Council has prepared a Watford Town Centre Strategic Framework building upon the Local Plan, to;

- i. provide an agreed view as to what Watford town centre would be,
- ii. identify guiding principles and opportunities to shape its future,
- iii. reinforce the character of the town by guiding development and interventions in character areas.

1.3 The Framework was prepared in two stages:

- 1) Identification of themes, priorities, and principles for development, through economic and land use analysis, and in-depth engagement with stakeholders, the Watford community and a range of special interest groups including schools, West Herts college and Young Entrepreneurs.
- 2) Development of a draft framework for further engagement, testing the themes, priorities, and principles from stage 1 and subsequent refinement. Following engagement focussed on discussions with stakeholders, members and then a second full resident and business consultation.

1.4 A comprehensive consultation programme has been undertaken at each stage. A combination of digital and face to face methods were used, to maximise breadth and depth of inquiry across as wide a range of groups and individuals as possible. The aim of this engagement was to inform the document and gain stakeholder and community support for the Framework.

1.5 The Framework sets out more detailed principles and design parameters for development, to:

- Guide new mixed-use residential-led development in and around the town centre.
- Provide retail, commercial and other uses, with flexibility to respond to changing economic climate and other circumstances.
- Seek accessibility improvements for pedestrians and cyclists, and better legibility of the town centre as a whole.
- improve public spaces and green infrastructure, linking the town centre to strategic green assets such as Cassiobury Park and the Colne River.

- Interpret the policies of the Local Plan to articulate clear principles and design parameters for assessing different types of development in the town centre.
- Identify ways to enable flexibility of uses, to maximise economic opportunities and support the post Covid town centre recovery.
- Recognise and embed the role of heritage, arts and culture in supporting the town centre's economy and promoting social cohesion.
- Set out how enabling infrastructure, including transport and green spaces, will support future development.

1.6 Consultation on the draft Framework document was largely supportive, more detail is set out in section 4 of this report.

1.7 This framework will guide the council's approach to the town centre, support investment in the town and support other strategies and the council's Delivery Plan projects in the area. Following Cabinet approval, it is intended to develop formal Planning Guidance to build on the Local Plan and Town Centre Strategic Framework. This guidance will steer development whilst enabling flexibility of uses in the town centre – to be able to accommodate economic change and to make the town centre a place for everyone. It will also provide additional guidance on things such as sustainability, biodiversity, servicing, massing, amenity space and balconies, character areas, movement, and public realm in the town centre providing certainty for future development.

2.0 Risks

Nature of Risk	Consequence	Suggested Control Measures	Response (treat, tolerate, terminate or transfer)	Risk Rating (combination of severity and likelihood)
The strategic nature of the document means it is not a requirement for development and does not have significant weight for decision making.	Negotiation through planning application	Progress principles into a Supplementary Planning Document.	Treat	Likelihood = 2 Severity = 2 Risk rating = 4
Framework produces unrealistic expectations. Significant time and resource will be necessary to deliver some of the more ambitious projects.	Reputational harm	Using the long-term ambitions of this document when undertaking shorter-term projects, already feeding into wayfinding and public art projects. Being clear that some of the ideas are very long term (for example the ring road)	Treat	Likelihood = 2 Severity = 2 Risk rating = 4
Lack of support for change in Watford.	Continual 'battles' with developer	Continue to engage with the public and residents etc. Produce	Treat	Likelihood = 4 Severity = 2 Risk rating = 8

Residents, members, stakeholders not sharing a suitable vision for Watford.	proposals and the council in the middle	supplementary planning document with clear expectations.		
Lack of impact of the framework	Proposals don't have intended impact and business as usual continues.	Develop SPD. Embed framework in projects such as St Mary's churchyard, Public Art, Wayfinding. Continue to engage with stakeholders. Use Framework and successful engagement to influence future policies and strategies.	Treat	Likelihood = 4 Severity = 2 Risk rating = 8

3.0 Recommendations

3.1 That Cabinet adopt the Town Centre Strategic Framework.

Report approved by:

Tom Dobrashian
Executive Director of Place

4.0 Report

- 4.1 The first round of engagement to develop a Town Centre Framework was designed to reach as many groups and individuals as possible. The council and its advisors wanted to understand how people use the town centre and what they like or think could be improved. The engagement activities targeted Watford residents, visitors, businesses, landowners and investors, multicultural and faith groups, schools, West Herts college, and local youth groups.
- 4.2 The Council used the Commonplace digital platform to provide an opportunity for anyone to comment on the town centre. The website included a 'heatmap', for people to leave comments about how they feel about particular locations, and a survey to find out preferences for activities in the town centre, and suggestions for improvement. This was promoted through a social media campaign and short survey.
- 4.3 To support the digital engagement, the council wanted to create a welcoming space where people of all ages and backgrounds could comment on, and debate, the future of the town centre, and contribute their own design ideas in person. Working with West Herts College students and New Practice consultants, the council created Watford's first 'Urban Room'. An Urban Room is a space where people can come together to design their local area. Watford's Urban Room was launched on 3rd March 2022 and has been used to exhibit the West Herts College photography project, and four school projects, as well as a venue for a range of discussions with different interest groups, some of which included an experienced panel.

4.4 1,500 people took part in the stage one engagement programme by online survey, social media, in person focus groups, events and meetings. The online engagement at stage 1 received 246 comments and 42 likes. The success of the consultation should be measured by the quality and detail of responses, as well as the variety and diversity of stakeholder groups represented within them. Officers consider the engagement programme was very successful in engaging with a wide range of groups, particularly younger people, and exploring their views in more detail.

4.5 Phase one engagement identified the following issues:

Issue	Analysis	Comments
Vulnerability to change	The town centre is functioning relatively well but needs to improve resilience in relation to macro-economic changes. A key vulnerability is the over-representation of chain retail at expense of independents	People generally felt that there are a good range of commercial retail and food and beverage options available in the town centre, but there were a number of comments about the lack of independent shops.
Building form and character	“The domestic scale of the High Street is part of Watford’s character and is worth protecting” (Watford Place Shaping Panel). Heritage assets sit in compromised settings and could be made more visible Many assets are in need of attention or repair to fully reach their potential.	People tend to value the historic character of the Town Centre and would like it to be recognised.
Movement	Ring road is a barrier. Watford is dominated by cars and vehicles and their infrastructure, compromising the use of other modes and creating hostile & unattractive environments. There is an under provision of active travel infrastructure, discouraging its use, with poor connectivity of cycling infrastructure.	People commented negatively on the ring road, and how it was difficult to cross, even at designated crossings, particularly Beechen Grove, St Albans Rd, the blue pyramid building and Vicarage Rd. People felt that the Town Centre is too ‘traffic heavy’ with a lack of appropriate accessible and reliable alternative means of transport to access the town centre. Improved public transport links was the third highest priority for improvement that Commonplace respondents said would encourage them to use the town centre more. ‘Getting around’ was the fifth highest priority for social media survey respondents. Comments included requests to improve cycling and walking access.
Public spaces	Poor quality spaces and perceptions of spaces that could better relate to adjacent buildings. Limited spaces to dwell and for public arts and events. Pedestrian space and route legibility is compromised, such as along pavements and back streets at Wellstones and Gaumont. There is a lack of greening in the town centre, and a lack of usable and	People feel that the public space at the top end of the High St is of good quality (although could do with more events), but that the southern end is of poorer quality. All groups interviewed suggested more places to sit and dwell, perhaps with some covered areas, and more activities. Young people, in particular, were keen to see the Market and the Colosseum as venues to

	attractive green space, such as around Church Street	showcase local art and performance talent.
Environmental	Noisy and aggressive conditions along busy roads. Watford is not yet zero-carbon. The town centre does not yet fully capitalise on the potential of biodiversity enhancement and SuDS.	Support for Watford becoming greener and reducing traffic. Greening and sustainability measures are important for wellbeing and a sense of community.
Social	Underrepresentation of people aged 20-30 which limits the vibrancy of the centre and the strength of the labour market. Pockets of high deprivation, driven by barriers to housing/services, liveability and crime. Safety concerns for pedestrians in areas lacking in passive surveillance, such as underpasses. No consensus on future of night-time economy.	There is a perception that the night-time economy caters primarily for young people, although there are a number of boutique bars and microbreweries that people in their 20s and 30s enjoy going to. People would like to see improvements in St Mary's Churchyard, Victoria Passage and the quality of underpasses. Young people suggested that Watford needs to embrace its culture more, with a greater variety of small festivals.
Economy	Economy has not grown as rapidly as comparator locations. Lack of workspace in core town centre, with a contraction of town centre employment, notably in Professional, Scientific and Technical Activities and Information and Communications Economic mix not as diverse as it could be. Relatively low levels of entrepreneurialism, with a lack of dedicated space for entrepreneurs and start-ups. Need for higher-quality and more diverse office stock. Lack of business identity. Clarendon Road lacks brand, identity and attractive business environment.	Young Entrepreneurs considered that physical space for exchange and learning for start-ups, including digital start-ups, would be an important attractor for young, innovative businesses. Business stakeholders agreed there is a need for an artisan offer, and to encourage more independents and creatives: redesigning how we do business. They advocated greater availability of start-up space and suggested that Clarendon Rd develop a more distinctive brand and identity.

4.6 Following the first round of public engagement, a draft framework was created, this built on the issues raised through the engagement and the analysis undertaken including ideas such as more focus on pedestrians, better accessibility, more independent retailers, and encouraging sustainable modes of transport.

4.7 The draft sets out a key message that defines the Framework, sets its trajectory, responds to the analysis, and acts as an emerging vision for the town centre:

WATFORD TOWN CENTRE WILL BE:

- At the centre of Watford's ambition to be the economic and cultural heart of the sub-region
- A place where there is something for everyone, truly accessible to all, celebrating a diversity of uses and activities
- A leader in sustainable and high-quality development that is green, clean and safe
- A place to live, work and invest in

- A desirable destination for visitors
- A place with first-class active travel and low-carbon infrastructure

4.8 Elaborating on the key messages, a series of guiding principles set out what the development in the town centre will need to respond to.

4.9 The framework identifies seven character areas within the town centre, these areas will help to direct area-specific enhancements, outlining a different offer for each and responding to their unique characteristics.

4.10 A summary of the Framework is attached at Appendix A, in addition, a link to the full document is provided. In summary, the document covers the following:

- Strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats analysis, including economic baseline analysis.
- Identified issues for the town centre that should be addressed to improve its performance and offer.
- Analysis of the capacity for change.
- Strategic approaches to town centre uses, public realm, and movement.
- The divisions of the town into Character areas, identifying challenges, aspirations, and potential interventions in those areas.



4.11 To test the principles proposed in the draft framework, given the size of the document and in order to make the engagement accessible and engaging to different groups, the document was broken down into smaller sections to better enable engagement focussing on the analysis, opportunities and character areas. Questions on the key pages of the framework were asked to enable consultees to go straight to the section of interest.

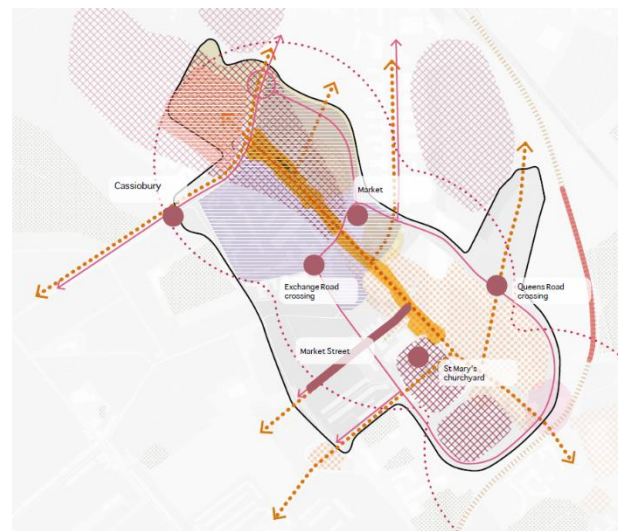
4.12 The focus for stage two engagement was to rigorously test the framework rather than maximise the number of responses, however the online site received 386 comments and 302 likes. Comments were largely supportive and didn't identify new issues, the following table highlights the key points made:

Issue	Comments
Movement	<p>People continued to comment negatively on the ring road, and how it was difficult to cross, particularly at Exchange Road close to Upton Road, and how fast cars travel.</p> <p>There was agreement for greening in principle. However, some said that there was too much focus on pedestrians/cyclists and wanted to see public transport improvements alongside a reduction in car travel.</p> <p>Concern was raised that greening, particularly of the flyover, would result in traffic congestion.</p> <p>Noted that disability access needs to be considered, particularly if it is harder to travel into the town centre by car.</p>

Greener spaces	People liked the idea of more green spaces noting the benefits to mental and physical wellbeing. It was thought that more people would visit a greener town centre. The BID noted that greening would benefit local businesses as well as residents.
Social	Support for a greater range of uses. Continued support for space for pop-up uses and space for start-up companies to move into. Support for enhancing Watford's character.
Economy	Concern was raised about the impact of having new residential development so close to existing evening and night-time uses. There was support for encouraging small and local businesses and providing space for start-ups and pop-ups but noted that the success of the town centre leaves little space for these ad hoc uses.

4.13 During the second engagement and consultation process views were additionally sought on proposed development principles via illustrated examples and precedence. A range of six locations were used to demonstrate this, these were chosen to represent the range of principles and reflect the areas that received most comments on the heatmap at stage one.

4.14 Each included an image of the existing location, a description of the existing condition and challenges, aspirations and potential for the area and some suitable precedents alongside targeted questions. These are described below alongside a summary of the feedback.



Area	Proposed intervention	Comments
Cassiobury Park link	To create a direct connection between Cassiobury Park and the town centre for pedestrians and also cyclists.	It was clear that residents and visitors are not currently aware how close Cassiobury Park is to the town centre. Support for a connection further down Rickmansworth Road and generally better links to Cassiobury Park. Many respondents are happy to use the existing town hall underpass.
Exchange Road link	To create a more attractive street character, with new crossings, creating a more equitable environment for all modes of transport, including pedestrians, cyclists and buses, and improving accessibility to the town centre for pedestrians and cyclists.	Agreed that it is particularly challenging to cross here, support to improve the environment in this area.
Queen's Road link	Create a strong identity for the area and integrate it with the town centre more positively. The area should be seen as a seamless and natural extension to the	More limited support for this proposal. People noted that the subway link to Queen's Road could be improved but it didn't need to become a street level

	<p>town centre with a diverse offer of complementary retail and commercial activity.</p> <p>A surface level crossing could facilitate pedestrian and cycle movement between the Queen's Road shopping precinct and the High St.</p>	<p>crossing. Making the entrance wider and improving planting and spaces to sit (perhaps undercover) would make a difference.</p>
Market	<p>There is potential to celebrate the Market and integrate it more with the High Street in the longer term. There is also the potential to green the flyover and redistribute traffic around the ring road.</p>	<p>Enticing the right stallholders is key, not just the design or location.</p>
St Mary's Churchyard	<p>The churchyard green space offers a unique public space within the town centre and has the potential to become a more significant public space by enhancing the green space; including more formal landscaping with seating space; and enhancing the southern end of the green space to be more organic and park-like. The dominance of Church Street should be reduced, creating a larger green public space. The connection should relate better to the High Street encouraging activity.</p>	<p>Overwhelming support for greening in this area, making it easier to access and dissuading anti-social behaviour. It was noted that this project could provide benefits for residents and businesses. Views on a play space in this area were mixed, some strong support but some wanted the space as a quiet area in the town centre.</p> <p>The idea of having a coffee shop or other kiosk in the areas also received mixed support. Some felt it would make a nice meeting spot to have a coffee, others felt there are sufficient facilities in the surrounding area already.</p>
Market Street	<p>Market Street has the potential to improve its character, strengthen its identity as a local high street and further support the town centre. There is opportunity to transform the currently car dominated space to become a more public and active travel focussed street. This will improve the setting of the historic buildings on the street, make it easier to access on foot and enhance the setting for the commercial activity, with more dedicated space for them to spill put into the public space. The two parts of Market Street can become one continuous space.</p>	<p>Concern about where the cars will go and whether pedestrianisation will have a detrimental impact on businesses by making it harder to pop to the shops here. Support for making it easier to walk and cycle down.</p> <p>Support for improving the environment so that cafes can spill out onto the street. Market Street functions as two separate areas, no need to become one continuous space.</p>

4.15 Overall, the online engagement received 1,231 contributions from 490 respondents and 2,743 visitors to the site. This and the face-to-face engagement undertaken the Framework received significant support, no new issues emerged from stage two of the consultation although feedback on the specific proposals will feed directly into future projects. Following this engagement and the formal consultation process there was only limited need to amend the draft framework as stakeholders were generally supportive, only minor tweaks have been made to the document.

5.0 Next steps

- 5.1 The framework will act as a town centre strategy across the council and as a foundation for further work with our partners. Projects such as Wayfinding and Public Realm are already moving forward in line with recommendations within and building on this framework.
- 5.2 Progress Supplementary Planning Guidance to deliver the framework. This will provide additional planning guidance addressing specific concerns with town centre development such as massing, context, amenity space and balconies, character areas, site development, tree planting, movement, and public realm.

6.0 Implications

6.1 Equalities, Human Rights and Data Protection

An Equalities Impact Assessment has been undertaken. The engagement programme was designed to include as wide a range of groups and individuals as possible, including those with protected characteristics. The final document reflects the issues raised.

6.2 Staffing

Existing internal Project Team to continue to work on the project, this includes officers from Planning Policy and Communications.

6.3 Community Safety/Crime and Disorder

The Framework principles will help to ensure high quality design including designing for safety/designing out crime considerations. These will be reinforced in future guidance.

6.4 Sustainability

The strategic Town Centre Framework sets out development guidance and interventions that will help to achieve the Council's ambition for Watford to be a sustainable town.

6.5 Financial consideration

The Council's capital programme includes budgets for existing projects including wayfinding and public realm works. Where proposals within the framework fall outside of existing budgets business cases will be prepared setting out the benefits and affordability of the projects. These will be considered for approval by Council through the usual budget setting framework.

6.6 Legal Considerations

There are no legal considerations from this report.

7.0 Appendices

- 7.1 Appendix 1: Watford Town Centre Strategic Framework