

## Part A

**Report to:** Cabinet

**Date of meeting:** Monday, 5 June 2023

**Report author:** Urban Design and Conservation Manager

**Title:** Conservation Areas Management Plan - Actions 2023-26

### 1.0 Summary

1.1 Local Authorities have a statutory obligation to produce and regularly review management plans for those areas that have been designated as conservation areas (Section 71 Planning (Listed Building and Conservation Areas) Act 1990). The last management plan was adopted by the Council in 2013 and suggested a review period of 5 years; this was delayed due to other priorities within the team. This document is the first review of the 2013 Management Plan. The timing of the review allows the revised plan to reflect the Council's Delivery Plan and the new Local Plan adopted in October 2022.

1.2 The plan is presented as an Action Plan rather than a policy document which more accurately reflects the nature of the proposed actions. The actions were developed following an informal engagement stage in the summer of 2022, some detailed analysis of application received during 2013-2022 in conservation areas and internal consultation. Following this, the actions were discussed with Portfolio Holders and Corporate Management Board prior to a formal public consultation in February/March 2023 which included several public meetings to allow face to face discussion with residents from each of the conservation areas as required in the 1990 Act. The finalised set of Actions is recommended for adoption by Cabinet as an Action Plan for 2023-2026.

The actions proposed are those which were most frequently suggested by consultees and which could be delivered within the timeframe 2023-2026 (set to align with the Council Delivery Plans).

### 2.0 Risks

#### 2.1

<b>Nature of risk</b>	<b>Consequence</b>	<b>Suggested Control Measures</b>	<b>Response</b> (treat, tolerate, terminate or transfer)	<b>Risk Rating</b> (combination of severity and likelihood)
Key Actions not taken	Residents remain unclear regarding	Ensure that the key actions are given	Treat	S=2 and L=3 so

forwards due to sufficient resources not being available.	changes which need planning permission and what would be acceptable and continue to submit inappropriate proposals or undertake work without consent	priority within the planning teams work programme		combined score is 6
Residents do not support the delivery outcomes	Residents are unhappy with changes in their area. We would have to review the result and adjust the delivery approach of similar future projects.	The level of support for the proposed actions suggests that this outcome is unlikely. Any concerns raised should be discussed with team delivering a specific project to avoid problems arising	Treat	S=2 and L=2 so combined score is 4
Stakeholders do not engage to deliver actions	The actions have limited impact and no real improvement occurs	Early engagement and a collaborative approach are used to bring stakeholders on board. In some cases, the Council may have powers which can be used to ensure some changes and works are done and the use of such powers will be considered where relevant.	Treat	S=2 and L=3 so combined score is 6

### 3.0 Recommendations

- 3.1 That Cabinet adopts the Conservation Area Management Plan – Actions 2023-2026 as an action plan for 2023-26 as attached at Appendix 1.

**Further information:**

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**Report approved by: Donna Nolan, Chief Executive**

**4.0 Detailed proposal**

- 4.1 Local authorities are required under the provisions of Section 71 of the 1990 Planning (Listed Building and Conservation Areas) Act to draw up and publish proposals for the preservation and enhancement of the conservation areas in their districts. The revised Management Plan sets out actions which will contribute to this objective for the period 2023-26 for all the conservation areas in Watford.
- 4.2 The Management Plan should be considered and used alongside the Conservation Area Appraisals for each of the conservation areas. The actions set out in this Management Plan are designed to be delivered over a three-year period and to align with the Council's Delivery Plan. The plan sets out a series of actions rather than policies or guidance and is considered to be an Action Plan rather than a Supplementary Planning Document.
- 4.3 The Plan includes actions which apply to all conservation areas and some which apply to specific conservation areas. The actions proposed have been prioritised based on the suggestions which were most frequently made and those which the Council has the resource to deliver over the three-year life of the action plan.
- 4.4 The actions proposed are set out in detail at Appendix 1 and summarised here in relation to key commitments:
- **Commitment 1: Improve access to relevant information through:**
    - improving the quality and range of the information available to residents.
    - better promotion regarding where to find relevant planning information.
    - Expanding the number of events and diversifying the audience for education events
  - **Commitment 2: Provide planning guidance for residents and businesses with shopfronts:**
    - Householder guidance for residents in conservation areas covering minor development setting out what needs planning permission as a result of Article 4 Directions; what is likely to be acceptable; and will include energy efficiency advice for older properties.

- Provide guidance for businesses with shopfronts on how they can make changes to their properties in a way which enhances the character of the conservation area.
  - **Commitment 3: General enhancements:**
    - Public realm: review how we manage public spaces in conservation areas to ensure an appropriate and consistent approach.
    - Street trees: identify suitable sites within the conservation areas for the planting of new street trees in line with the Council's tree planting programme.
  - **Area Specific Actions:**
    - **Enhance St Mary's Churchyard:** support the Council's project to help deliver enhancements to St Mary's Churchyard, in particular the condition and maintenance of heritage assets.
    - **Grove Mill:** to seek to work with the County Council to assess whether there is way to reduce traffic speeds on Grove Mill Lane and then report back to residents.
    - **Grove Mill:** to seek to engage with and support the Canal and River Trust and Hertfordshire County Council in the repair of the canal bridge railings and Grove Mill Lane.
    - **Little Cassiobury:** to seek to support Hertfordshire County Council and other partners in finding a way to restore Little Cassiobury, which is now at the highest level of risk on the Historic England register.
    - **Cemetery wall at Victoria Passage:** to support the Council in the ongoing maintenance of the boundary wall of the cemetery and Victoria Passage.
    - **Yellow lines at Watford Heath:** to work with Hertfordshire County Council to have conservation area specified no wait markings used when existing ones are to be replaced.
- 4.5 The Plan has been prepared over the last year and has involved two stages of engagement; the first an informal stage to gather views on what the key issues are and ideas regarding how we can work to resolve the issues. The second engagement stage was a more formal stage on the proposals developed after the first stage.
- 4.6 The engagement stages involved an online survey using the Both Commonplace.
- 4.7 **Formal Engagement February-March 2023:**
- 4.8 This stage included engagement events to meet the requirement in the 1990 Act regarding the need to hold public meetings where residents would have an opportunity to discuss the proposed actions and provide their feedback. A total of 5 Public Meetings and one drop-in session were held during the

formal engagement; it was not possible to hold meetings in some of the conservation areas as there were no venues available within the conservation area. Following discussions with the Portfolio holder in January 2023 it was agreed that some of the conservation areas' public meetings could be combined in the venues closest to them the table sets out the events which took place.

Conservation Area	Date and time	Venue	Meeting Format
Civic Core & Nascot	21/02/23 19:00	Annex – 3 <sup>rd</sup> Floor media lounge	Presentation and discussion
Grove Mill Lane & MacDonnell Gardens	23/02/23 19:00	Cheslyn House	Presentation and discussion
Estcourt, St Mary's & High Street/King Street	28/02/03 19:00 Drop-in session held before the main meeting from 17:00- 18:30	The Chamber Hub (Urban Room)	Presentation and discussion
Oxhey & Watford Heath	6/03/23 19:00	Bushey & Oxhey Methodist Church	Presentation and discussion
The Square	08/03/23 19:00	Cornerstone Church	Presentation and discussion

4.9 **Online Consultation:** The online consultation ran on the Commonplace platform from 3 February to 17 March 2023. The letters to conservation area residents started being received slightly earlier than expected, so to allow for all comments received, the following statistics cover the dates 1 February to 19 March 2023. An overview is provided here with the details included at Appendix 2:

- 808 visitors to the site
- 56 contributors
- 103 comments
- 46 news subscribers
- 143 visitors (17.7%) viewed 4 or more pages, so are considered 'informed'.
- The highest number of external referrals to the online consultation were from:
  - Facebook – 295 visitors, of which 22 (7.5%) responded.
  - .gov – 44 visitors, of which 4 (9.1%) responded.
  - Google – 29 visitors, of which 3 (10.3%) responded.

- LinkedIn – 14 visitors, of which 1 (7.1%) responded.
  - Out of 808 visitors to the site, only 56 (6.9%) actually responded; 47 ‘Confirmed’, 7 ‘Pending’ and 2 ‘Anonymous’.
- 4.10 More individuals completed some of the demographics questions during this consultation than during our 2022 informal engagement, but they were not completed fully or consistently enough to produce meaningful statistics. However, partial postcodes were provided by 29 individuals.
- 4.11 With 56 respondents, the maximum amount of possible responses is 728. Of these, no response was given 129 times (17.7%). However, 599 responses did indicate a level of support as follows:
- Strongly Agree – 257
  - Agree – 184
  - Neutral – 101
  - Disagree – 16
  - Strongly Disagree – 41
- 4.12 Of these 599 responses, 441 (73.6%) were positive and only 57 (9.5%) were negative. Even if ‘Neutral’ and no response options are included with the “Disagree” and “Strongly Disagree” comments, giving a total of 287 (39.4%), the majority, 441 (60.6%), are still positive. At this stage of consultation, a lack of response to a specific issue was likely because the respondent was not personally affected by it, rather than necessarily thinking it was unimportant. This is suggested by the lack of responses to area-specific issues, like those at Grove Mill Lane.
- 4.13 **Public meetings and Drop in session**
- 4.14 The public meeting sessions were made as informal and welcoming as possible. The presentation provided a background into what the designation of conservation areas is intended to achieve, as well as explaining concepts they are reliant on, such as ‘character’. The main body of the presentation covered the individual actions, whilst welcoming questions from those attending. When the presentation ended, we welcomed further questions on heritage subjects and occasionally had the opportunity to show how the areas had developed using old maps. Some additional presentations had been prepared on more contentious subjects, such as new build in conservation areas, which were presented and discussed as required.
- 4.15 Each meeting received or exceeded the number of expected attendees, and the events seemed very well received. The actions appeared to be well understood and received support during the both the public meetings and drop-in session; the proposed provision of additional information for householders wishing to undertake minor works was clearly popular.

4.16 It should be noted that most of the discussions that took place related to technical issues that would be answered by improved guidance, or specific heritage planning issues outside the scope of this consultation. Detailed comments and issues raised during the public meetings are included at Appendix 3.

4.17 **Key conclusions:**

- The proposed actions were all supported by a clear majority of those who responded. The level of support received, in both the online consultation and public meetings, reinforces that the actions proposed are appropriate for inclusion in a new Conservation Areas Management Plan.
- In the online consultation, positive sentiments (“Agree” and Strongly Agree”) made up less than 50% of the responses received only for those actions proposed at Grove Mill Lane and Watford Heath. However, in these examples, they were outweighed by “neutral” or no response options, rather than negative sentiments. This is almost certainly due to the relatively small populations of those areas, along with their peripheral locations.
- Both the online consultation and the public meetings highlighted the benefit of easier access to information for those living in conservation areas, both through specific requests, but also the misunderstandings present in some comments. Some of the issues raised about consistency in both planning and enforcement would likely be explained, if not outright avoided in the first place, by the proposed provision of clear guidance and explanatory information.
- Concern was raised about the awareness of conservation area status and restrictions by residents new to the areas. The possibility of installing roundels or other signage to identify conservation areas was raised several times. This is an issue that will need further consideration in the future, but the possibility of including links to explanatory information within property search results has already been discussed.
- Comments show that new development and tall buildings continue to be contentious throughout the Borough, particularly where they affect conservation areas; this is very unlikely to change. However, the Council now have additional tools, such as the new Local Plan and Design Review Panel, which should help ensure higher design standards for new properties in the future. Improved guidance on design for new buildings in conservation areas may assist residents,

and designers of new properties, in understanding what could be considered appropriate in such locations.

- Concerns were also raised about the siting, installation and potential maintenance requirements of any new street trees. These are largely technical issues that can be resolved internally, and it should be noted that the addition of new trees was otherwise widely supported.
- Several comments were received relating to issues out of our direct control, but that do affect the character of conservation areas; these were usually highways issues, either with regards to traffic levels or safety. Issues of this nature will be raised with the relevant authority; usually HCC.

One recurring theme in the comments received was that the Council does not appear to value the heritage assets and character of the town. It is hoped that by progressing with the proposed actions we can help show that this is not the case.

The draft Management Plan is attached at Appendix 4

## **5 Implications**

### **5.1 Financial**

5.1.1 The Shared Director of Finance comments that there are no direct financial implications arising from this report. The actions can be delivered within existing staff and budget arrangements.

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

5.2.1 The Group Head of Democracy and Governance comments that there are no direct legal implications from this report. The consultation on the Management Plan Actions has been carried out in accordance with the provisions of the 1990 Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act.

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

5.3.1 The Management Plan applies to all the conservation areas in the town. The actions include providing better access to information about conservation areas, the benefits which accrue from living in a conservation area and any restrictions which may apply along with the provision of householder guidance on what needs planning permission and what is likely to be acceptable. These were requested by many respondents to the two stages of engagement.



The approach to the engagement sought to ensure that all sectors of the community had the opportunity to engage with the formulation of the actions set out in the management plan. We will consider how we consult on further guidance and will take measures to ensure that all sectors of the community are aware of where to find information and help when they need it; internal advice on this will be taken.

#### 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.

#### 5.4 **Staffing**

- 5.4.1 The management plan proposes a number of actions which will require staff resources to deliver. The actions proposed can be delivered within existing staff resources subject to existing staff remaining in post.

#### 5.5 **Accommodation**

- 5.5.1 There are no impacts on accommodation.

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

- 5.6.1 The management plan proposals will not directly impact on community safety or crime and disorder. In developing guidance notes and undertaking projects these matters will be considered on a case by case basis and where appropriate specific guidance on these issues will be included in the documents produced.

#### 5.7 **Sustainability**

- 5.7.1 The management plan proposes to produce guidance for residents regarding minor changes they may wish to make to their properties in conservation areas. Many of these properties were constructed prior to 1900 and use traditional materials and construction methods. One area residents have expressed that they would like clear guidance on is how to improve the energy efficiency of their properties and it is intended to prioritise this guidance note. The guidance produced will set out the benefits of retaining existing fabric where possible and repairing and upgrading it rather than replacing it which in whole carbon lifecycle terms uses the least carbon. The guidance will also recommend ways of upgrading buildings in terms of energy efficiency without losing original fabric.

## **Appendices**

**Appendix 1 Proposed Actions**

**Appendix 2 Levels of Support and Comments**

**Appendix 3 Comments made at Public Meetings**

**Appendix 4 Draft Plan**

## **Background papers**

No papers were used in the preparation of this report.