

Conservation Areas Draft Management Plan



Action Plan 2023-26

For Adoption
July 2023



WATFORD
BOROUGH
COUNCIL

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SECTION 1

Introduction

- 1.1 The legal definition of a conservation area comes from the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990. They are:
“areas of special architectural or historic interest the character or appearance of which it is desirable to preserve or enhance.”
- 1.2 Conservation areas are not designated to stop any development or change, but to help minimise any negative effects on what makes the area special and worthy of protection in the first place.
- 1.3 Section 71 of the 1990 Act places a duty on local planning authorities to draw up and publish proposals for the preservation and enhancement of conservation areas in their districts. The aim of this draft management plan is to set out how Watford Borough Council will undertake this.
- 1.4 The Management Plan provides a programme of actions for the period 2023-2026 and will be reviewed in line with the Council’s overall delivery plan review timetable. The actions proposed are derived from the engagement process and have been prioritised based on the frequency of the issue being raised and the ability in terms of resources to deliver that action.
- 1.5 Within the Borough of Watford there are ten areas which have been designated as conservation areas, as they are considered to have a special architectural or historic interest, the character or appearance of which it is desirable to preserve or enhance:

Conservation Area	Designated	Additional Information
Grove Mill Lane	1973	Partly within Three Rivers District.
St Mary’s	1975	
Watford Heath	2001	Extended in 2008.
Civic Core	2001	
Nascot	2001	Extended in 2001.
Estcourt	2001	Extended in 2010.
The Square	2001	
High Street / King Street	2006	
Macdonnell Gardens	2011	
Oxhey	2013	

Background, Scope and Structure

- 1.6 The Council considers that historic areas make a significant contribution towards the urban fabric of the Borough. This is reflected in themes 3 and 4 of the 2022-2026 Council Plan, where it is recognised that heritage has a key part to play in what makes Watford a special place. The delivery of conservation area management plans is also an action within the 2022-2024 delivery plan. These historic areas are important to the town’s cultural inheritance, economic well-being and quality of life. However, it is important to recognise that these areas have always been subject to change and that is part of what makes them special. Therefore, the key objective of the Management Plan is to ensure that change is managed in a way that maintains and enhances the special qualities of the conservation areas. The document sets

out actions that will result in a better understanding of how changes to existing properties can be managed in a way that will achieve this.

- 1.7 This document sits alongside the existing character appraisals for the ten conservation areas in Watford. The character appraisal documents provide detailed analysis of what is positive and negative in each area, identify opportunities for beneficial change, or the need for additional protection.
- 1.8 This management plan takes forward the actions developed following a combination of public outreach and the assessment of Council records, such as the planning applications submitted within Watford's conservation areas. The document is structured to provide coverage of issues that are evident across the ten conservation areas in the Borough, before providing dedicated coverage of area specific issues and setting out a monitoring regime.

Planning Policy Background

National Policy

- 1.9 The 2021 National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) details the importance of identifying and managing heritage assets. It details that local planning authorities should set out a strategy for the conservation and enjoyment of the historic environment, including heritage assets most at risk through neglect, decay or other threats. In developing this strategy, local planning authorities should take into account:

- The desirability of sustaining and enhancing the significance of heritage assets;
- The wider social, cultural, economic and environmental benefits that conservation of the historic environment can bring;
- The desirability of new development making a positive contribution to local character and distinctiveness; and
- Opportunities to draw on the contribution made by the historic environment to the character of a place.

- 1.10 Section 71 of the Planning (Listed Building and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 details that:

- It shall be the duty of a local planning authority from time to time to formulate and publish proposals for the preservation and enhancement of any parts of their area which are conservation areas.
- Proposals under this section shall be submitted for consideration to a public meeting in the area to which they relate.
- The local planning authority shall have regard to any views concerning the proposals expressed by persons attending the meeting.

Local Policy

- 1.11 Watford Local Plan was adopted in October 2022 and sets out the Council's local policies in relation to the Historic Environment in chapter 7. Conservation areas are one of three types of designated heritage assets (the others being statutorily listed buildings, such as St Mary's Church and registered parks, such as Cassiobury Park). The policies:

- Seek to retain the distinctive character and appearance of the conservation areas.

- Require development to be of appropriate scale and materiality.
- Seek to enhance existing features and structures that contribute to the significance of the conservation areas.

Adoption

- 1.12 This document is intended for adoption as an Action Plan for delivery between 2023 and 2026 at the Watford Borough Council cabinet meeting in June 2023.

Local Consultation

- 1.13 There is a requirement under Section 71 of the Planning (Listed Building and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 for the local authority to consult the local community on any management proposals for conservation areas.
- 1.14 Two stages of public engagement were used to inform the actions proposed in this management plan. The first was an informal style of engagement that took place over the summer of 2022 (July – September). It invited residents to provide their views on what they liked and didn't like about the conservation areas in Watford. The engagement took the form of an online survey, discussions with school groups, a small exhibition with drop-in sessions and walking tour meetings with groups of residents. The comments collected during the engagement were used to develop the actions proposed. The suggestions were prioritised by the frequency with which they were made and the ability of the Council to deliver them within the life of this management plan.
- 1.15 The second phase of the engagement involved public meetings that were held within, or as close to the conservation areas as possible, so that residents could attend. Letters were sent to every property within the 10 conservation areas setting out the details of the meetings and how residents could submit comments through an online survey, by e mail or by letter. This engagement focussed on the actions proposed and asked residents for their views on these actions. The responses received to this stage have helped inform the content of the management plan.

Nationally and Locally Listed Buildings

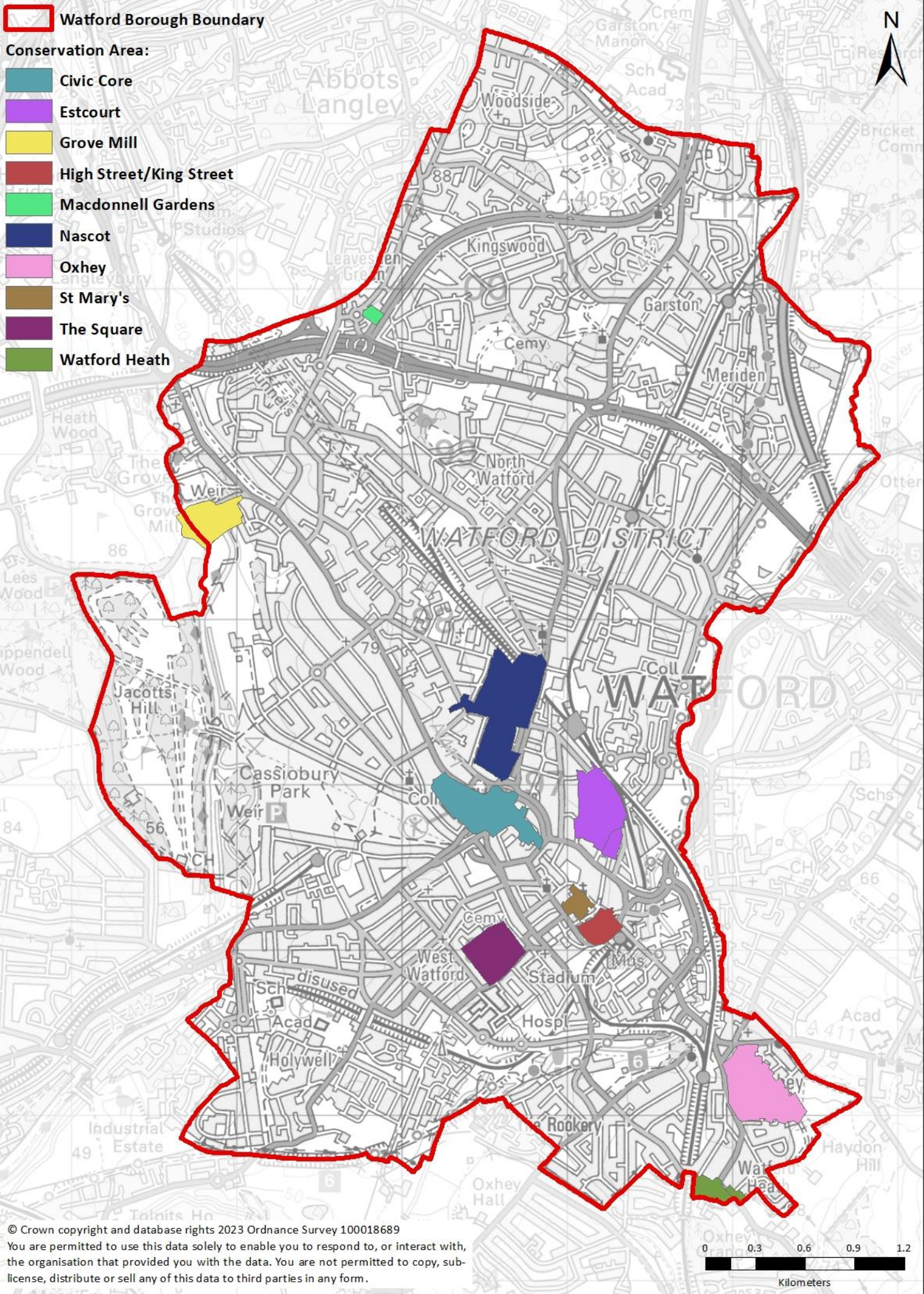
- 1.16 Additional information on all the locally and nationally listed buildings in the Borough is contained in dedicated documents. These can be downloaded from: www.watford.gov.uk/apply-planning-permission/conservation-areas-listed-buildings/3

Archaeology

- 1.17 Information on archaeology in Watford is contained within the document: Hunns (2000) 'Watford: Extensive Urban Survey Project Assessment Report' and the County Council's Historic Environment Record (HER), accessible at www.heritagegateway.org.uk. There is also some additional commentary in the various conservation area character appraisal documents.

Acknowledgments

- 1.18 The assistance provided by the staff of Watford Museum and the Council's Communications Team in the development of this project is gratefully acknowledged.



Conservation Areas in Watford

SECTION 2

Actions Applying to all Conservation Areas in Watford

- 2.1 Many suggestions were made during the informal engagement, which took place in summer 2022. These included a number of actions that could be applied to all conservation areas within the Borough. The actions included in this document were developed through the engagement process and the review of best practice guidance from bodies such as Historic England.
- 2.2 The actions can be grouped into three key themes:
- Improve access to information.
 - Provide guidance for residents and businesses in conservation areas on what is likely to be acceptable in terms of minor changes to homes and business premises.
 - Review how works to the public realm in conservation areas can be better managed to improve their appearance. This includes additional street trees.
- 2.3 The Council is committed to delivering improvements to all three of these themes using the actions described below.

Commitment – To provide better access to information relating to conservation areas on the Council’s website.

- 2.4 During both consultation phases residents stated that they found it hard to find the information they wanted to access on the Council’s website, as well as having difficulty accessing it in other ways. A number of factors have contributed to this, ranging from lack of awareness that the information exists, difficulties in locating relevant information and, in part, due to information not being available on the website. Residents wanted to be able to find more information about conservation areas, about how the planning process worked and how the Council managed planning enforcement cases.
- 2.5 Issues such as a high turnover of property owners in some conservation areas, a lack of regular reminders from the Council about where the conservation areas are and the lack of any physical identification in the conservation areas to identify them as such have contributed to this lack of knowledge and understanding about conservation areas in Watford. In addition, many residents are unclear about how the Article 4 Directions work and what they mean in practical terms.
- 2.6 Within this theme we have identified three broad actions which will contribute to improving this:

Action 1 - Improve access to information.

To provide better information on subjects such as conservation areas, Article 4 Directions, the planning process and decision making, how to contact the Council on conservation matters related to planning, how fees are set, pre-application process and how the enforcement process works in relation to heritage.

2.7 We will review how we can best provide a simple and clear service for residents and businesses in conservation areas. We will provide easy access on the website to information including:

- Conservation areas – where they are and what is important about them.
- Article 4 Directions - what they mean in non-technical language.
- The planning process in relation to decision making on planning applications.
- Ensure that information about planning fees is clearer in relation to householder development and article 4 related applications.
- How the householder pre-application advice process works.
- How the planning enforcement process works in relation to heritage matters.
- Making general information and advice accessible through our website with links to other relevant websites and downloadable PDFs.
- How to contact the council on conservation- related planning matters.

Action 2 – Use a range of platforms to promote where to find relevant information on the Council’s website.

To promote how to find information and guidance related to conservation areas on the Council’s website through social media, the “About Watford” newsletter, local notice boards and Facebook groups.

2.8 We will review how we provide information, signposting residents and businesses to the appropriate sections of the website. We will also provide links to other platforms that contain relevant information. We will ensure that information is provided regularly and in an inclusive way:

- Making better use of social media platforms.
- Placing regular features in the WBC newsletter which is delivered to every household.
- Working with local community groups to highlight the availability of information, as well as locating neighbourhood noticeboards we can also use for this reason.
- Using community social media groups to signpost to where information is available.

Action 3 – Education events

To hold education events about local heritage with schools and other community groups.

- 2.9 We will help improve awareness and understanding of local heritage matters, including conservation areas, by working with local groups. We will build on the existing events we have held and work with partners across the council and the wider community to develop and expand this programme.

Commitment – To provide better guidance for residents and businesses in conservation areas

- 2.10 During both consultation stages, the most frequently received comments related to the need for provision of clear guidance on what requires planning permission in conservation areas and what would be acceptable to the Council in terms of minor householder changes. In particular, guidance was requested in relation to Article 4 Directions and how they restrict development, as well as on improving the energy efficiency of older properties.
- 2.11 There is still general support for the use of Article 4 Directions and an understanding of why these are used in the conservation areas in Watford. However, residents found it quite challenging to understand what they should be doing when they wish to make improvements to their homes.
- 2.12 The proposed action to provide guidance on subjects such as those above was well supported in the formal engagement period. Comments received during both the formal and informal engagement periods, as well as the discussions held during the public meetings and drop in session, will inform the details of the guidance going forwards.

Action 4 - Provide planning guidance on householder development in conservation areas.

To provide guidance for residents wishing to make changes to their homes, on subjects such as what may and may not need planning permission, household maintenance, energy efficiency, renewable energy installations including solar panels and EV charging points.

- 2.13 We will provide clear and accessible guidance for householders regarding changes they may wish to make to their properties:
- Produce householder guidance on development in conservation areas relating to those permitted development rights that have been withdrawn through the use of Article 4 Directions.
 - To produce advice for all owners of older properties regarding improving the energy efficiency of their homes using appropriate methods.

Action 5 - Provide planning guidance for owners of properties with shopfronts.

To provide guidance for businesses on how to make minor changes to their properties in a way that helps enhance conservation areas.

2.14 We will review and update the existing shopfront design guide to help businesses in conservation areas to make appropriate decisions when they need to make alterations to their properties.

Commitment – To encourage conservation led enhancements to the public realm in conservation areas

2.15 The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) states that local Planning Authorities should seek opportunities within conservation areas “to enhance or better reveal their significance”. Conservation areas can be experienced and enjoyed by all, not just their residents, so improvements can have a wide-reaching impact on public perception of the town.

2.16 The following sections include actions that apply to all conservation areas in the Borough, as well as several that are area specific.

Action 6 – Public realm management

To review how we manage the public spaces in conservation areas, to ensure an appropriate and consistent approach.

2.17 We will review how public spaces within conservation areas are managed to clarify who will carry out any works required and ensure that appropriate materials and methods are used.

2.18 We will engage with partners internally and externally who undertake works in conservation areas and work with them to ensure a consistent and agreed approach to the works the undertake in the town.

Action 7 – Street trees

To identify suitable sites within conservation areas for the planting of new street trees.

2.19 We will identify suitable sites within conservation areas for new trees. Trees have an array of benefits including reducing surface water flooding and “heat island” effect, increasing biodiversity and helping improve air quality.

2.20 This action will help support the Council’s objective to plant 20,000 trees over the next four years, whilst ensuring that any sites selected within conservation areas are appropriate. Historic photographs show that Watford used to have many more tree-lined streets, so this will be an opportunity to enhance conservation areas through their reintroduction. Care will be needed to ensure that appropriate species are planted, as they will need to be able to cope with the effects of climate change.

Area-Specific Actions

2.21 Many of the comments received during the public engagement related to specific conservation areas, or sites within them. This section sets out the actions that could be taken forward and includes some issues prompted by wider Council targets.

Action 8 - Enhance St Mary's churchyard.

To support the Council's project to help deliver enhancements to St Mary's churchyard, in particular the condition and maintenance of the heritage assets.

2.22 The Council delivery plan includes a commitment to improve St Mary's Churchyard. This provides an opportunity to enhance the setting of the church and surrounding buildings, creating a tranquil space in the town centre to complement this sensitive heritage asset. This project is specified in the Council's delivery plan and involves some of the most sensitive heritage assets in the town.

Action 9 – Grove Mill Lane speed limit

To seek to work with the County Council to assess whether there is a way to reduce traffic speeds on Grove Mill Lane, and then report back to residents.

2.23 Several comments were received relating to highways safety, at Grove Mill Lane. Highway safety is the responsibility of Hertfordshire County Council (HCC). We will seek to engage with colleagues at Three Rivers Council's and HCC to review options to contribute to speed reduction in this area so that the character and appearance of the conservation area is retained as well.

Action 10 – Grove Mill Lane canal bridge

To seek to engage with and support the Canal & River Trust and Hertfordshire County Council in the repair of the canal bridge railings at Grove Mill Lane.

2.24 The canal bridge at Grove Mill Lane was raised as a concern by several residents. The Canal and River Trust and Hertfordshire County Council are the two bodies responsible for the maintenance of this bridge. We will seek to engage with the Canal and Rivers Trust and Hertfordshire County Council to find a way to repair the canal bridge railings.

Action 11 – 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 risk level on the Historic England register.

- 2.25 Little Cassiobury is one of Watford's most significant buildings; one of only a few nationally listed at Grade II* and the only major residential building left of the Cassiobury Estate that belonged to the Earls of Essex.
- 2.26 The current owners, HCC, recently put the building up for sale, but it is in need of significant restoration. We propose to continue supporting the County Council, or any future buyer and other interested parties, in seeking the repair and an appropriate future use for the building.

Action 12 – Cemetery wall at Victoria Passage

To support the council in the ongoing maintenance of the boundary wall of the cemetery and Victoria Passage.

- 2.27 Victoria Passage is a much-used route into town for many residents living in west Watford. The wall of the cemetery runs along the route and marks the boundary of The Square conservation area. The wall has degraded over the years due to buddleia plants that have taken root behind the cemetery hedges, as well as concrete repointing undertaken in the past. We will work with the Environment Team to ensure the proper maintenance and repair of the wall.

Action 13 – Double yellow lines at Watford Heath

To work with Hertfordshire County Council to have conservation area specified "no wait" markings installed around the green at Watford Heath.

- 2.28 We will work with Hertfordshire County Council to ensure that, when the double yellow lines are repainted at Watford Heath, a conservation area-specified paint and line scale are used.

SECTION 3

Monitoring

3.1 The actions outlined in this document will be monitored using the following methods:

Action	Monitoring Method
1 - Improve access to information	1: updated web pages 2: survey and reaction of those using the web pages
2 - Promote where to find information on website	1: regular social media campaigns 2: Annual features in "About Watford" 3: review of local notice boards and how they can be used
3 - Education events	Annual review of events we can arrange
4 - Provide planning guidance for residents	Publication of guidance documents
5 - Provide planning guidance for businesses	Publication of updated Shopfront Design Guide
6 - Public realm management	1: Establishing a contact group to progress with this 2: Agreement regarding approach to design and materials
7 - Street trees	Increase in number of new street trees planted in conservation areas
8 - Enhance St Mary's churchyard	Check with Project group
9 - Grove Mill Lane speed limit	Development of options for review
10 - Grove Mill Lane canal bridge	1: Contact relevant groups 2: Seek agreement on way forwards
11 - Little Cassiobury	1: Seek engagement with new owners
12 - Cemetery wall at Victoria Passage	1: removal of damaging vegetation 2: Appropriate repointing and repair
13 - Double yellow lines at Watford Heath	Seek an agreement with HCC on approach to repainting the lines

Other monitoring options we can use are:

- Regular review and updating of documents such as Conservation Area Appraisals – ideally we would do 5 year reviews
- Photographic Record – this was last done in 2013 when the Article 4 Directions were made
- Heritage at Risk – the number of buildings currently on the local and national at risk register

Contacts and further information

Development Management and conservation – contacts to be added
Three Rivers DC
Hertfordshire
Historic England

Bibliography

- HE Guidance

Useful Websites

- Historic England
- Ancient Monuments society
- Georgian Group
- Society for Protection of Ancient Buildings
- Twentieth Century Society
- Victorian Society
- SAVE Britain's Heritage
- Council for British Archaeology
- Heritage Alliance

Glossary

Appendices

National Policy – link to NPPF

Local Plan Policies