

Community Engagement and Participation Strategy 2023-26

Executive Summary – The Elected Mayor

Short introduction/overview by the Elected Mayor

Setting the scene – who we are in Watford

Watford Borough Council's (Watford BC) Community Engagement and Participation Strategy 2023-2026 celebrates the contribution of the town's diverse and vibrant voluntary and community sector (VCS). Having recognised, and experienced, the outstanding impact our community makes to Watford and the lives of local people, it opens up a meaningful, two-way conversation on how the council can support a strong and resilient community. This is grounded in trust and appreciation of the power of people coming together to act collectively where people's voices are heard and individuals, groups and organisations feel valued, inspired and empowered by our town.

Connecting and transforming

We recognise the success of this strategy will be demonstrated across all we do and will underpin how we work with our community to shape and influence what happens to the town. Starting with the commitments set out in our Council Plan 2022-26 and associated Delivery Plan, the strategy will act as a golden thread running through our key strategies and into delivery. It will connect our commitment to work alongside our community to find the right ways to reach net carbon zero with our Environmental Strategy and how we seek to engage with people to understand their barriers, what is important to them, and what opportunities we have to facilitate change. It will support our dialogue as we review the Voluntary Sector Commissioning Framework, develop our strategy for community assets, our Communications Strategy and deliver our Customer Experience Strategy to help us deliver upon our commitments to celebrate and promote our town's rich and diverse culture and creativity, to support improved health and wellbeing across the town, and to listen to and hear the diverse voices of Watford.

Our community

Watford is a wonderfully rich and diverse place, recognised as a 'rainbow town', which celebrates the benefits people from different backgrounds, their experiences and cultures bring. We value our diverse communities but also see the town as 'one community', which, together, builds a strong, supportive and successful place to live, work and enjoy.

A strategy to build and strengthen relationships

A vital part of the town's fabric is our voluntary and community organisations, including those of faith, who support and deliver for local people. Through this strategy we want to strengthen our relationships, building the links to the Watford community through current and emerging groups and organisations.

Understanding Watford

Unprecedented times and rising to the challenge

Watford is a town with a growing, relatively young population made up of a wide range of communities and cultures. Our strength lies in our ability to join together and help one another through times of need, harnessing the enthusiasm and commitment across the town to support each other and step in where needed. There is no question that the last few years have presented challenges that we could never have anticipated and have transformed how we live and see the world.

The Covid-19 pandemic has had far reaching impacts upon our physical and mental health, as well as fundamental changes to how we live and work. The war in Europe has seen our community pivot to help people seeking safety, helping to house refugees arriving from the Ukraine, with other areas of the world continuing to face disturbance and displacement. We now face the impacts of the cost of living crisis, which is hitting our more vulnerable residents particularly hard.

For our VCS, this state of permacrisis has meant a rising level of demand for services, against a backdrop of increasing competition for funding, a changing landscape around volunteering, and increasingly constrained resources.

A vibrant and engaged voluntary and community sector

Throughout these crises, we have seen our community step up, without hesitation, to channel their insights and energy for Watford in its time of need. Our voluntary and community organisations came forward to help one another to keep delivering by sharing assets, ideas and resources, and local people also took responsibility in playing a part. The council took this opportunity to build on our already mature relationships with the VCS, with whom we convene regularly, initiating forums such as the Cost of Living Crisis Group to help lever collaboration and offer our support. There is even greater potential to join together and strengthen activity already taking place, recognising our communities as contributors and establishing a long term, collaborative relationship that is inclusive of all and allows all to flourish. At the same time, we want to enable new and emerging communities to access support and resources and build for themselves a fulfilling and thriving role within the life of Watford.

This opportunity to connect the layers of help and support already so well established in Watford under a unifying vision and clear outcomes, underpins this strategy and approach.

Role of our Elected Mayor and Councillors

Part of the strength of our vibrant town, is the role the Elected Mayor and councillors play in engaging in conversations and dialogue across the community. They have strong relationships with, and knowledge of, our communities, and continuously seek to broaden their engagement with a range of local voices. This gives them the insight and opportunity to understand the views, needs and challenges of the VCS and encourage further collaboration and participation.

Taking Watford to the next level for our community

An engaged community can drive real change and make it happen

We are an ambitious town and community. This strategy matches this ambition, seeking to implement tangible changes, resulting in a more collaborative relationship with a truly engaged, well-represented and empowered community.

We have taken a strategic review of how we as a council engage with the community, the challenges and opportunities this brings, and worked to define our emerging vision for engagement and participation. We have outlined four key themes, accompanied by a delivery plan which sets out how we can implement this vision.

We fully appreciate that this is about 'us' as the community of Watford. We want to move to the next level of community engagement and participation and vital to this is to continue to hear from, and listen, to the community. This strategy is underpinned by your input, dialogue and ideas, which will continue to shape the themes and priority areas for action. It is not an end of discovery and learning but the beginning!

We believe in the value of a collaborative community where everyone is involved

Community engagement is a fundamental part of who we are as a council. It is vital in our decision-making and plays a key role in how we listen to and deliver for our residents and voluntary and community groups and organisations.

The strategy will deliver an approach that opens up opportunities for all of Watford's communities to be heard, to participate in, and shape council decisions, to understand how feedback influences and evolves our approach, and to be empowered to reach their full potential. Our aim is for everyone to feel motivated to participate and collaborate with the council and one another because they recognise their voices are heard and make a difference, in order to reach our aspirations for and commitments to the town.

Our vision for working with you

There is a real partnership between council and community, which unlocks the experiences, imagination and resources of local people who collaborate to help build a more diverse, happy and healthy, greener Watford.

Watford's Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) is informed, involved, engaged and can influence the decisions which affect them and they are empowered to join in and contribute to the life of the town

Themes

Theme 1 – We will improve how we engage with Watford's communities

We want to have inclusive, open dialogue, with opportunities to hear from and recognise our new and emerging communities as well as those that are more established.

We will:

- Work with our key partners to connect and build relationships with a broader section of the Watford community
- Further engage the new and emergent voices in our town
- Understand and grow relationships and networks to enable more two-way conversations
- Maximise opportunities to share information and break down barriers

We will do this by:

- ✓ Building upon our key partnerships across core areas including leisure, business, arts and culture to deliver stronger relationships, links into and collaboration with community organisations
- ✓ Implementing strategic priorities in the next iteration of our Voluntary Sector Commissioning Framework that enable strategic stakeholders across key interest groups to identify and connect with groups within our community who are not yet known to us
- ✓ Implementing and delivering a biannual Community Network event to enable organisations to network, collaborate with one another and the council, and facilitate long term connections
- ✓ Continuing to deliver our effective and timely engagement with the VCS across areas including health inequalities, arts development and broader consultations and engagement initiatives
- ✓ Supporting the strategic role of the VCS in our response to the health agenda, setting commissioning priorities that encourage and enable engagement and partnership working so that the VCS can represent the views of communities experiencing the greatest health inequalities and help to deliver services that address health and wellbeing needs
- ✓ Continuing to utilise the contacts, skills and experience of councillors and to explore opportunities and challenges raised to them
- ✓ Building best practice approaches into how we design, carry out and report back on consultation and engagement activities
- ✓ Developing a clear forward plan so that communities can be kept informed of upcoming activities

Theme 2 – We will address barriers to and encourage broader participation

We want to make it easier to participate in and influence areas that affect our community

We will:

- Enable our communities to help shape decisions that drive positive change
- Identify and take action to address barriers to participation, taking guidance from our residents and community on what works for them
- Improve how we let people know about what we do and the benefits to them of sharing feedback

We will do this by:

- ✓ Testing and learning from best practice approaches to remove barriers and encourage participation, including exploring new digital approaches as well as more traditional methods
- ✓ Trialling new participation initiatives such as a People's Panel, to provide opportunities for local people to take part and be directly involved in decision making and linking to engagement with the VCS
- ✓ Commissioning projects and organisations via existing funding streams that seek to broaden engagement and improve participation
- ✓ Promoting opportunities to take part in democratic processes, such as observing council meetings and committees
- ✓ Improving the quality of our consultations to make them interesting, easy and accessible
- ✓ Creating a forum for officers and members to exchange ideas and engagement skills that encourage participation
- ✓ Delivering a digital engagement hub to share information in one place, in a format that makes it easier to participate

Theme 3 – We will improve how we demonstrate that we listen and respond to views that you share

We want to be more transparent about feedback received and highlight the value of contributing to consultations and engagement.

We will:

- Demonstrate that the council listens to, and acts upon, feedback
- Deliver greater transparency and encourage further participation

We will do this by:

- ✓ Committing to publishing how feedback will and has shaped what we do and embedding this in the consultations toolkit
- ✓ Establishing an internal officer forum to improve how we share best practices and outcomes within the council, including regular updates/milestones on projects after the consultation stage
- ✓ Working more closely to share feedback with strategic partners in the community, delivering regular updates at key forums

Theme 4 – We will empower our communities, enabling opportunities to network and share information, resources, assets and services so that all can flourish

We want to identify and build upon what is strong in our community, facilitating further collaboration so that everyone can benefit from the assets and opportunities in our community

We will:

- Empower local organisations to connect and work together to achieve shared goals
- Enable an environment with opportunities for all to grow and flourish
- Help the VCS to meet the rising needs and challenges of the people they support

We will do this by:

- ✓ Recognising the strength of our local assets (including skills, knowledge, resources and volunteers) and using our leadership role to facilitate better connections between our communities and allow everyone to benefit from these shared opportunities

- ✓ Empowering our commissioned organisations through the Voluntary Sector Commissioning Framework to enable delivery across the wider VCS
- ✓ Implementing a new approach to community assets, improving our policy and processes so that communities can make the most of council assets
- ✓ Establishing a space in the Town Hall for VCS organisations to collaborate and network in a vibrant co-working environment
- ✓ Through Community Wealth Building, empower our business community and voluntary sector to work in partnership and build strong, local networks of support
- ✓ Exploring the creation of Community Network in Watford, reviewing existing forums and facilitating a centralised forum which enables opportunities for direct dialogue across groups, at regular events with a focus on the key priorities of the town
- ✓ Continuing to engage with the voluntary and community sector in the design of key strategies, initiatives and place based projects such as the Town Hall Quarter, that create opportunities for them

Keeping you informed

A detailed delivery plan will accompany the finalised strategy, setting out how and when we will deliver against the commitments within each priority outcome.

Progress will be reviewed on a quarterly basis, with reports to Cabinet and a midway update and review as part of our commitment to keep the community informed of progress.

At the end of the term of the strategy, we will review next steps to further our progress in improving Community Engagement and Participation in Watford.

How we will measure success

We will continually check back and discuss the progress of this strategy but will also:

- Support a biannual survey of Watford's voluntary and community organisations
- Use opportunities, such as the People's Panel and the council's Big Watford Conversation survey to find out local people's views on Watford and their local community

Alternative versions

We want everyone in our community to be able to understand, and benefit from, this strategy. We can provide a large print version or can translate into other languages where there is a community need – contact enquiries@watford.gov.uk

Appendix

1. Community Engagement and Participation Strategy Delivery Plan
2. Our layers of support for thriving communities
3. Levels of engagement
4. Equalities Impact Assessment