



**Watford Borough Council's  
Communications and Conversations Strategy  
2023-2026**



## 1. Foreword by our Elected Mayor Peter Taylor

### PUTTING OUR RESIDENTS AT THE HEART

In Watford, we believe in the art of the possible. As a town and as a council we are ambitious to achieve more and do things better for our people, which is clearly expressed in our Council Plan and Delivery Plan. What these plans also highlight is that the people of Watford – the community and businesses we serve – are always at the heart of everything we do. These principles are woven throughout the Communications and Conversations Strategy.

Excellent and effective communication is pivotal in both achieving the bold goals we have for Watford and ensuring the community remains the driving force behind all our activities. As an Elected Mayor, the people of Watford have voted for me directly and I represent the whole of the town. This means I am visible and accessible to the community in a way that traditional council leaders aren't. This has fostered a culture of candid and engaging communications in Watford, which is highlighted in the strategy.

Good communication goes far beyond just talking to and updating people. It's about empowering our communities by equipping them with tools, knowledge and information to improve their everyday lives. It's about hearing people, discovering their stories, insights and experiences and in so doing, continuing to deliver excellence across all our services. Most importantly it's about uniting people. This comes through strongly in our Communications and Conversations Strategy, along with the need to reflect everyone who makes our town what it is.

Peter Taylor  
Elected Mayor of Watford

## 2. DRIVING COMMUNICATIONS AND CONVERSATIONS EXCELLENCE FOR WATFORD

Watford is a town that is known for its ambition, entrepreneurial spirit and creativity, which makes it an exciting place to live, visit, work and to do business. We are forward-looking and have a 'can do', welcoming and caring spirit that makes great things happen.

The council reflects the drive of our town, embracing innovation, seizing opportunities and harnessing our collective energy to achieve more for Watford, our residents and our community. Our Council Plan 2022-26 sets out how, together, we will achieve our vision and ambitions. Through this Communications and Conversations Strategy, we will align our voice to amplify our messages and enhance the profile of our council, our services and all that we do to make Watford so special.

We have included conversations in our strategy to reflect the importance of talking, listening and having a discussion or just a chat – whether online or in person.

**con-ver-sa-tions (noun):** talks, especially informal ones, between two or more people, in which thoughts, feelings and ideas are expressed, questions are asked and answered, with news and information exchanged.

**Through this strategy we will take our communications and conversations to the next level by:**

- Encouraging everyone to share their stories to promote what we do.
- Exploring different and innovative ways of communicating, particularly in light of budget constraints.

- Making our communications more meaningful, relevant and accessible for our diverse audiences.
- Making the best use of our resources by consistently using our Champion, Core, Classic model to prioritise council communications.
- Carrying out robust evaluation to understand what works for our community and how we can improve our communications and engagement.
- Ensuring we work to the principles of the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity so that that all communications activity is:
  - lawful
  - cost effective
  - objective
  - even-handed
  - appropriate
  - aware of equality and diversity
  - issued with care during periods of heightened sensitivity, such as before elections

## **Stepping up to support the Council Plan**

### **Our communications and conversation themes**

We will support the successful delivery of the Council Plan and raise how we deliver communications and conversations by:

**Theme 1** – Promoting what is important to our town and community, as a trusted leader of Watford, through a shared and coordinated programme of activity

**Theme 2** - Recognising the different ways people from our diverse community choose to hear from us and communicate with us, targeting their needs and preferences

**Theme 3** – Amplifying our voice to highlight our achievements and successes within Watford and beyond

**Theme 4** – Building resilience so we can pivot effectively to respond to new opportunities

## **3. UNDERSTANDING THE PEOPLE WHO MAKE OUR TOWN**

We are committed to a people first approach, so having a comprehensive understanding of our residents and businesses is the bedrock of all our communications and determines:

- the most effective platforms for each communication/project
- other methods and channels we can use
- timing of communications activities
- tone of voice

The best conversations flow two-ways. We don't just want to throw information out and talk at people. To succeed in ensuring Watford continues to thrive and prosper we need people to be interested in what we have to say and invested enough to talk back and pitch in.

This can only happen if we have a true sense of who our residents, businesses and communities are. They need to know that we get them and from there we can create trust, build on relationships, cultivate community cohesion and hit the apex of working with, not just for, the people and businesses we are here to support.

## **Building community spirit**

Our diverse and vibrant community is central to what gives Watford its spark and energy. We are proud to have been recognised as a 'rainbow town' that has welcomed people from many different backgrounds and experiences to enjoy all that Watford has to offer.

Communications, and the conversations it encourages, play a vital role in building community spirit and a sense of pride, and reaching as many groups as possible. Our communications need to reflect, and be led by, our community so that it includes and involves everyone. This in turn helps in overcoming barriers and being a trusted voice for Watford, for our community and also for our staff through linking to our Customer Experience Strategy, Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy and our Community Engagement and Participation Strategy.

### **We will:**

- ensure our communications and conversations reflect the full diversity of Watford
- work with our Elected Mayor, councillors, community leaders and groups to better understand our residents and how they want to hear from, and talk to, us
- ensure content (videos, online content, website forms, printed materials, advertising) meet accessibility standards and use images and photos that truly reflect the people of Watford
- use the data we have about our audiences to shape our communications and target resource towards the most impactful channels
- help to ensure equality of access to our services

## **4. SETTING OUR FUTURE DIRECTION**

### **Our culture shaping our communications**

It is vital the way we communicate reflects our values of integrity, trust and respect – who we are - along with our values of bold, together and agile - how we work. This underpins our aspiration to use communications and conversations to improve the lives of our residents and help keep Watford an outstanding place to live, work and do business.

As the country moves through this period of economic uncertainty, it is essential that we remain mindful of the financial pressures facing both the council and the community when planning and delivering communications. We must be sensitive to the changing economic climate and what this means for our communities, and practical in terms of what we can deliver.

We will achieve this through this strategy and its delivery plan, and by embracing these core principles of work:

- **People first** – the people we are talking to and working for are always our starting point. This includes proactively responding to particular issues and concerns raised by our community.
- **Never stand still** – explore new technologies and techniques which are always emerging to ensure effective use of resource and to best serve our town and community.
- **Evaluate, question and learn** – take the time to assess if communications are landing and why, exploring alternatives and challenging ourselves to apply what we've learned.

## **5. REFLECTING OUR LOCAL CHARACTER AND IDENTITY**

A consistently applied and authentic council brand, including our tone of voice, use of language and imagery is essential in telling Watford's story and generating key conversations. Our brand is more than

just a logo, it's a window into the lives of our community, our personality and our ambitions, giving us visibility across the town and credibility when communicating with residents and businesses. If we use our brand well, we can successfully continue to communicate our vision for Watford's future.

### **Amplifying Watford's place brand and narrative**

Watford's place brand and narrative showcases Watford as a dynamic, vibrant and bold town, highlighting all that makes it such an attractive and unique destination to live, visit and work.

We will champion the place brand and model how it should be used, encouraging others to embrace what it can achieve for the town, its profile and reputation. The council brand will reflect and complement the place brand, helping to embed it across Watford and beyond, building its presence and impact.

To maintain our strong branding presence and to make sure it works successfully with the town's place brand we will:

- align with Watford's place brand and use it where appropriate
- model the use of the place brand and champion it to local partners and key organisations
- apply the council brand consistently across all our services, channels and communications materials
- ensure agreements are in place with partners on collaborative projects on how to use both our brand and place brand (where appropriate)

#### **Our reputation is underpinned by**

- ✓ what we say about ourselves
- ✓ what people say about us
- ✓ doing what we say we will do

### **Our tone of voice**

We are shaped by the people around us. So, as a proud Watford organisation that's here to serve the people and businesses of this town, it makes sense to talk like Watford. The language we choose to use is important because it allows our personality to shine and lets our residents and businesses know that we get them.

- **Bold** – keep it short and to the point to maximise impact and show that we are honest and straight-talking.
- **Friendly** – chatty language is clearer for people to understand, indicating we are open and tying in with our commitment to make Watford a welcoming place for all.
- **Approachable** – avoid technical language to get people engaged with our communications and to kick-start conversations.

## **6. HOW WE COMMUNICATE**

### **6.1 Our focus**

Following the cuts to local authority funding, the unprecedented fallout of the Covid-19 pandemic, high inflation and the cost of living crisis, we continue to operate in the midst of a perfect storm. Two-way

council communications are increasingly essential for our community while resources, including budget, are decreasing.

Watford’s ambitious Council Plan also means that the breadth of our communications is growing. Although small geographically, we also have a fast-growing and diverse population, with different needs and communications preferences.

This strategy looks at how we can maximise the resource we have, and communicate and engage effectively with our community by:

- shaping our communications around our community’s preferences
- consistently using the **Champion, Core, Classic** model to focus resource

## 6.2 Pivoting our planning and resource

Watford’s big, bold agenda means we must deliver complex communications with limited resources and diminishing budgets. Using the **Champion, Core** and **Classic** communications model allows us to tier our activities and focus our communications planning.

The objectives of the model are to:

- show our community the scope of Watford’s Council Plan
- enable the best allocation of resource and budget to drive value for money
- allow for proper and effective campaign planning
- encourage conversations with the community, Mayor and councillors, staff, residents and partners
- empower all Watford BC staff to communicate effectively in face-to-face communications, via professional channels liked LinkedIn and building case studies and best practice examples

	Features	Budget	Channels options	Design	Example
<b>Champion</b>	High impact with big audience Ambitious multi-faceted project Council Plan priority Long term	Higher budget	Social media Website Email marketing Print advertising Radio Meetings and events Mayor and councillors Partner channels Explore new opportunities	Unique creative identity	Town Hall Quarter programme Rediscovering the River Colne
<b>Core</b>	Low impact with big audience or high impact with limited audience	Low budget	Social media Website Email Limited print and direct	Standard design work required	EV charger rollout Shopping parade upgrades

	Features	Budget	Channels options	Design	Example
	Contained project or initiative Medium term		engagement options		
<b>Classic</b>	Standard service information sharing and updates Low impact with limited audience Short term	No budget	Website Potentially social media and email marketing	No design required	Temporary bin collection changes

### 6.3 Building our media and public relations profile

As a lively town so close to London and as a Mayoral local authority, Watford attracts significant local, regional and national media attention.

- In line with our commitments to being transparent and promoting our wonderful town, we take a proactive approach to media relations, working to build positive relationships with the media and issuing an average of 800+ press releases and arranging around 20 broadcast interviews a year.
- We also respond to around 200 media enquiries a year, and aim to provide useful briefings and statements swiftly. Not only does this enable us to tell Watford's story but it means we can ensure the information the public are receiving is accurate and balanced.
- With so many ambitious projects in track, trade media is becoming increasingly important in building Watford's reputation as an innovative and dynamic council and we will identify where stories and messages would generate interest beyond our boundaries.

### 6.4 Creating strong social media connections

Unsurprisingly, social media has become critical to all our communications, enabling us to have real conversations with residents, share information and updates quickly and target our messages to keep them relevant – all for free or at minimal cost. As we navigate the financial pressures facing local authorities, digital media will be an increasingly important part of our communications toolkit, giving us bang for our buck. Continuing to grow our social media following and engagement is an ongoing priority.

- We know that people want to engage with us on social media, with almost 60% of those in our top MOSAIC groups<sup>1</sup> having a preference for using it. Over the last two years, our follower numbers have grown significantly, increasing by more than 20% to a total of 65,687. This is partly down to our understanding the distinctions between each platform and its audience, an ongoing piece of work, enabling us to create interesting content which works and gains traction.

<sup>1</sup> Rental hubs 22% of our community, Urban cohesion 19% of our community and Domestic success 16% of our community

- Social media is about having great conversations. It's a window into the life of our community and, in line with our commitment to be open, friendly and approachable, we always try to respond to comments, positive or negative, directly on the platform.
- We challenge ourselves to keep informed of changes, trends and new technologies so that we can keep building relationships with communities. New platforms are always emerging and we will explore and trial these, adopting the right ones to suit both our community and our resource.
- Monitoring what has worked well helps us to shape and evolve our social media approach.
- Our social media guidance for staff and members sets out how we use our platforms and offers advice on using them successfully both at work and home. We encourage all Watford BC colleagues to have great conversations through LinkedIn, which is a great way to celebrate our corporate and individual successes and maximise the council's resource and impact

<b>Facebook:</b>	22,156 followers – primary users 25-34 year olds
<b>Twitter (X):</b>	12,505 followers – primary users 18-29 year olds
<b>Instagram:</b>	5,695 followers – primary users 18- 24 year olds
<b>LinkedIn:</b>	6,583 followers – primary users 30-39 year olds
<b>Nextdoor:</b>	18,748 followers – primary users 55-64 year olds

(As of August 2023)

## 6.5 Enhancing our profile through websites, email and digital

We recognise that the website is a place where people want to get things done and access the information they need quickly.

- We are committed to ensuring web content is easy to understand, accessible for those who are sight impaired and that it is translatable.
- Detailed information about the council's key programmes, which are complex, multifaceted and have a big impact will be delivered via microsites, including watfordtownhallquarter.com, rivercolnewatford.org. These sites have a shelf life and aim to provide the community with a full overview of major projects in a simple and accessible way. They help people to see the bigger picture for our town and capture the long-term vision, so that people feel properly informed.

Email also continues to play a role in our communications toolkit.

- We have a weekly resident newsletter providing regular updates on events, useful information and campaigns straight to inboxes.
- With around 7,000 people signed up, this is an area of growth for the council, with a sign-up campaign underway along with a review of how and where we give people the opportunity to subscribe to newsletters.
- Email also gives us a way to update specific groups, forums and communities about things they are interested in, including our sustainability group and people registered for housing updates.

Digital publications are available to anyone with online access and are a cost effective way to distribute publications and information

- We already make our twice yearly About Watford magazine available online and will continue to promote this to our community. We support this by working with the local Talking Newspapers group to have the publication recorded and provided digitally to their subscribers



## 6.6 Targeting traditional media

There can still be a place for traditional, printed (and then published online) media.

- It has a broad reach, is very visible and helps us get messages out to those who aren't active online or on social media.
- But it can be expensive and there is an environmental impact, so using our communications model we can decide if it's right for the project and our audience.
- We always look to cross promote where possible and maximise the use of traditional print media when we do use it, by adding inserts to dedicated mailings, and posting long-term campaigns on our poster sites to minimise cost.

Media	Timing	Reach
16 town centre digital boards	Continuous, 10 seconds per minute	Around 1million visitors a month to town centre
131 bus shelter poster sites, 6sheet and 14 underpass poster sites	Continuous, option to change every two weeks	1million+ a month
Dedicated council mailings, including council tax and elections	Twice a year	Every eligible resident/household
Flyers	As needed	Limited for targeted audiences

## 7. DELIVERING OUR STRATEGY

Our strategy will be translated into action through a detailed Delivery Plan (2023-26).

We will rigorously monitor this plan and measure how well we are doing through our council commitment to continuous improvement and reporting back to our residents and community. As we deliver, we will review this strategy, also providing the opportunity to refresh with new ideas, innovation and best practice.

*Our communications strategy is integrated into our strategic fabric*

## 8. OUR PEOPLE

### WE ALL TELL OUR STORY

Our people are our best ambassadors. Through our Communications and Conversations Strategy, we are harnessing our collective voice to tell our story with confidence and pride, both within Watford and beyond, letting others know about all the fantastic work we do, the decisions we take and the difference we are making.

### OUR PEOPLE AT OUR HEART – INVOLVING AND INSPIRING

We recognise and appreciate the importance of our people across everything we do. Just as with our outward facing communications, our people communications go beyond informing and consulting to really involving, collaborating and empowering to create greater belonging and deeper engagement.

We have a People Communications Strategy that ensures everyone feels informed, engaged and inspired, which is key to who we are and our success. The strategy works alongside our shared values and behaviours and our revitalised People Strategy and Equality, Diversity and Inclusion policy.

Championed by our Chief Executive, we have a strong framework of communications and engagement that underpins our People Communications Strategy, which encourages people to share, learn from others and celebrate what they do, including:

**How we inform, consult, involve, collaborate and empower**

In Touch	<i>updates from the Chief Executive and celebrating our successes</i>
TeamTalk	<i>news from CMT, written each fortnight by a member of CMT</i>
Staff Ambassadors Group	<i>an empowered staff group, supporting the Chief Executive by testing new ideas and shaping how we work</i>
Pathfinders	<i>an enthusiastic team who pioneer initiatives and show how it is done</i>
Conversations	<i>an opportunity to spend some time with the Chief Executive, sharing day-to-day work experiences</i>
Team Watford pulse surveys	<i>checking-in to create a greater people experience</i>

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