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Watford Borough Council
Community Asset Strategy

2023

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Introduction

This Community Asset Strategy (CAS) document sets out Watford Borough Council (Watford BC's) overarching strategy for making the best use of its land and community property portfolio to support the town's community and voluntary sector organisations. This involves ensuring the council achieves the best financial and community benefits from these assets to support the delivery of the council's objectives set out in the Council Plan 2022-26.

Background

What is a community asset

A community asset is a building and/or land that has a community use and from which a community-based activity or service to the community is, or could be, delivered.

Our community assets

Watford BC owns 47 sites (including 12 allotment sites) across the town, which can be classed as community assets. We define these as community assets because they are used, primarily, by third parties for community activities rather than by the council itself to deliver council services, such as the Cassiobury Park Hub. Most of these sites are managed and used by voluntary and community organisations.

Current situation

It should be noted we currently have very little vacant space available for community use in the community asset portfolio we manage directly. The largest properties are currently occupied by the community centres on long leases and are the major source of accommodation for organisations and individuals seeking temporary/permanent space. Attached as Appendix 2 are the contact details for these centres.

Current arrangements

There are a variety of lease arrangements in place for these community assets, reflecting the wide range of uses with legal commitments ranging from 1 to 250 years. 14 of these 47 assets have been transferred on long leases (over 25 years), passing the responsibilities and financial benefits to the lessee, while 20 have been let on shorter leases or licences, resulting in an element of control and responsibility falling to the tenant and rental income falling to the council. The balance, mainly the allotments, are on ongoing agreements but some are also vacant, or are under refurbishment. In respect of the allotments all but one of these sites is managed on the council's behalf by Veolia, the other is self-managed by the allotment holders.

We recognise it is important to maintain some flexibility in the agreement of lease terms. However, through this strategy we are looking to standardise our approach, which will

provide greater clarity on the responsibilities of those using the asset and the council in relation to the management and maintenance of the property.

Links to our strategic approach

Watford has a vibrant and active voluntary and community sector, which makes a vital contribution to the town and the wider community, supporting local people and providing a range of important facilities, services, and activities. Our Voluntary Community Framework sets out key principles and the approach to commissioning services, which support a broad range of community, socio-economic and cultural benefits delivered by Voluntary and Community Sector organisations on behalf of Watford Borough Council (WBC). Within this, we recognise that the use of community assets is part of our commissioning, and this CAS seeks to make sure the resources and assets are available to support their work and are used as effectively as possible.

Our financial context

Watford, along with all councils, is facing severe budget pressures and has a financial duty to ensure it is realising Best Value from all its assets, including those that are used for community purposes. A key challenge for this strategy is to ensure that the social and wider economic value provided by community assets is properly considered, whilst maximising their contribution towards the council's budget.

Focus of the strategy

This CAS focuses on the 47 properties from our overall asset portfolio that are used primarily for community purposes. These are listed in Appendix 1. It defines the 'in scope' assets as being council owned land and buildings that:

- Are used for social, recreational or leisure purposes by residents of and visitors to Watford.
- are occupied by a variety of organisations ranging from charitable and voluntary groups to leisure organisations.

Historically this list included the four premises occupied by the three cafes in our parks (Cassiobury Park x 2 and Oxhey Activity Park x 1) and West Herts Golf Club. However, as these are run mainly to provide a service and to maximise income and are now tenanted by commercial enterprises, they have been excluded. In summary, the assets in scope include:

- 12 allotment sites (included as community assets but managed by a separate policy)
- 17 sports facilities
- 7 community centres
- 11 miscellaneous sites including theatres, offices and the Town Hall (first floor only).

This makes up our **Community Estate** as used in this strategy.

We do hold other assets under our own management that can be multi-purpose e.g., Town Hall complex (which includes the community space on the first floor which forms a part of the community estate). It also has a commercial portfolio of assets that are outside the remit of this strategy.

Principles of the Community Asset Strategy

We recognise the importance of ensuring the community estate is fit for purpose, maintained to an acceptable standard, is compliant in all respects with statutory/regulatory requirements and flexible enough to meet the needs of local communities, whilst supporting the council to meet our commitments.

Objectives for the strategy

Through this strategy, we will:

- use our community assets to support the needs of the local voluntary and community sector, having regard to the location, size, and costs of upkeep of the community asset.
- use our community assets to empower our communities, enabling them to respond to the needs of local people and their local area.
- review our community assets to ensure they are of a sufficient lettable standard and that it makes financial sense to keep them. Where they are deemed to be too expensive to maintain to a suitable lettable standard, we will look to dispose of them making sure we obtain best consideration.
- recognise the council's ambition to achieve Carbon Net Zero by 2030, investing in our built estate to improve energy efficiency through reducing the use of fossil-based fuels, subject to our overall budget envelope as set out above.

To achieve these objectives, we will adopt the following principles.

We will:

- regularly review the condition of the community asset estate seek to maximise the use of buildings and identify opportunities for organisations to share and co-locate.
- take a positive approach to the transfer of assets, through sale or a community asset transfer to the voluntary and community sector where this can be demonstrated to be of benefit to the wider community and deliver our objectives.
- ensure the use of community buildings and land meets the identified needs of our local community.

Delivering our strategy

Through the delivery of this strategy, we will:

- Create an asset management plan (that in turn addresses the climate emergency) for each asset.
- Ensure the right leases are in place and appropriate for the user, maximising usage of each asset by use of sublease, sharing (with group companies), licence or room hire.
- Ensure our Community Assets are fit for purpose and compliant in all respects.
- Ensure our retained Community Assets are financially sustainable.
- Use an effective method of reletting when a Community Asset becomes vacant.
- Consider transferring an asset to the community or voluntary sector where appropriate.
- Consider regeneration/redevelopment potential for those assets where there is no strong community need or they could be re-provided within a redevelopment.
- Have consistency in the financial support available to those utilising our community assets.

Community Asset Management Plan

We will create a separate Community Asset Management Plan, setting out the approach for each council owned property over the next five to ten years. This plan will consider the age, condition, carbon footprint, lifetime costs of repair/maintenance and likely usage/revenue generation for community use and, therefore, whether in the medium to long term the council should retain the asset for its intended purpose or consider alternative options including regeneration.

Reviewing our community assets

In parallel with the CAS, we are working on reviewing the legal and financial obligations of each property to ensure the right balance of landlord and tenant responsibilities. This is to ensure that properties are maintained to statutory health and safety standards.

Taking forward a vacant asset

At the time when a community asset that falls within the scope of this strategy becomes vacant, the council will have several options open to it in securing either future occupancy of the asset or for an alternative use through sale/redevelopment.

The approach can be through several routes. Initially, we will consider leasing, licence and hire of assets to community organisations as set out below:

Licence - The grant of a short-term occupational licence that allows both parties the flexibility to withdraw from the agreement at short notice.

Lease – The grant of a legal agreement to occupy for a fixed term with agreed terms specifying a rent (if required) payment of rates, repairs, and insurance responsibilities use of the property etc.

Hire –The temporary use of a property or a part of a property (but with no legal interest being granted over it) for an agreed hourly/daily payment.

However, there are other approaches open including.

Community Asset Transfer (CAT) – CAT is the transfer of the management or ownership of public land and buildings from the local authority to a community organisation. This could be a charitable organisation, a Community Interest Company, or social enterprise. The local authority may agree to transfer the asset at less than the market rate/cost if the transfer is proven to be in the best interests of all parties. The role of CAT *“The overriding goal is community empowerment.... In a sense we are moving from an assumption that the state’s role is to try and solve all social problems, to one where the state’s role is to help communities solve their own problems”*.

The council will consider CAT if it is considered appropriate, given the condition of the building, the financial and management capabilities of the intended recipient, the long-term commitment to provide services, and the benefit to the community/

Regeneration – The reuse of the asset through redevelopment of the site to meet the town’s current needs and objectives and which may form part of a wider area identified for regeneration e.g. the Watford Riverwell development

Disposal – A sale of the asset, and where appropriate following the achievement of a planning consent for a more valuable alternative use.

In both disposal or regeneration routes the proposals may still encompass an element of community use e.g. ground floor community facility with residential above.

Co-location

Opportunities may also be identified where there is scope to share the council’s operational buildings with third party organisations (e.g., the Town Hall). Such facilities could become part of the community estate, or the function be co-located in a building with voluntary or community groups or other parties.

Certain services are more likely to be well-suited to this approach than others, where:

- services where community participation, volunteering, and co-production with community members are seen as significant opportunities.
- projects which benefit from opportunities to integrate different services around a particular place or community. For example, a youth catering training scheme, in which a breakfast club could be provided for schoolchildren.
- services with a commissioning model which focuses on community activity.

Some buildings currently leased out by the council solely for commercial purposes also have the potential to move in and out of the community estate – for example, council

owned shops which fall into disuse could be leased by a community occupier, subject to internal council approval and any necessary planning consent.

Level of Financial Support

The use of a community asset can be a form of financial council support, depending on the terms of a lease. There is a need to be consistent and transparent about when we support VCS groups and organisations through our community assets, the level of support we give, and what the council expects in return in terms of meeting our ambitions and priorities. This is particularly important in the current challenging economic and financial climate.

To achieve an open, fair and transparent process, the following criteria will be taken into account.

Criteria 1- The type of service the group or organisation provides, including:

- contribution to one or more of the council's strategic priorities.
- the work of the group or organisation is meeting identified, local need.
- the work of the organisation is delivered in a way which provides additional value, such as the use of apprenticeships or volunteering opportunities.
- the group or organisation is open to and respectful of the needs of all the community.

Criteria 2 – The extent to which the group or organisation and its use of the asset supports community participation and involvement, including equality, diversity and inclusion.

- the organisation commits to on-going engagement, consultation, and involvement of the community, particularly around managing the asset.
- the local community helps shape the design and/or delivery the groups or organisation's activities.
- the group or organisation supports the local community to take action to address issues which matter to them.
- the organisation encourages entrepreneurialism and social enterprise.

Criteria 3 – The robustness and sustainability of the group or organisation,

- if the group or organisation is already receiving support from the council, it is performing well against agreed measures.
- the group or organisation is viable and sustainable and passes an accredited vetting process for community organisations.
- The group or organisation has capacity to raise additional funds or bring in external investment.

Criteria 4 – Effective use and management of the asset

- the building is fully utilised by one or more community groups to ensure maximum benefit is being derived from the asset and where appropriate sharing of facilities is used to maximise community delivery.
- the building is managed effectively and meets all statutory compliance requirements.
- that where possible and appropriate all repairing responsibilities are passed to the tenant. Where this is not appropriate, the tenant will take responsibility for internal repairs and the council will levy a service charge or additional rent for the repairs the council takes on the responsibility to undertake.

These criteria will be used to assess the proposals made by various groups to occupy community assets and to decide upon the most advantageous in terms of overall benefits arising from applications to use the asset in question. The Community Lettings Policy will articulate these details and, via a scoring matrix, fairly and reasonably assess applications to use vacant assets. This process will also assess the appropriate level of rent subsidy and any other support which can be allocated to the organisation.

Governance Arrangements

It is essential that the management of community assets is governed according to a set of clear and consistent principles, to ensure there is fair and common treatment for different groups who wish to use them. To achieve this, the following governance principles will be adopted.

We will:

1. Consider the relationship between financial value obtained from the community asset and the social or community benefit delivered by its occupier.
2. Have a consistent approach to the rent charged on community assets and arrangements for determining any subsidy.
3. Have a consistent approach to lease and licence arrangements.
4. Apply our approach as to whether to lease or look to one of the other approaches as set out in the **Taking forward a vacant asset** section above.

Community benefit metrics

The council will agree a level of social or community benefit to be delivered by groups or organisations making use of its community assets by negotiating a Service Level Agreement (SLA), in the case of directly commissioned services, or a Community Use Agreement (CUA), in the case of non-commissioned services with the voluntary sector, to include metrics which identify:

- the provision of additional activities or opportunities such as volunteering or apprenticeships in delivering services

- co-ordination with other council strategies and policies
- full utilisation of the asset as far as is practicable.
- value for money
- the financial sustainability of the group or organisation using the asset.
- ensuring a compliant building is maintained.

Rental value and subsidy

We operate a standard policy in which the rental value of each of our community assets is assessed at a full market rental value for community use. Where the occupier is deemed to be contributing to local priorities and fulfilling other criteria for support, the council may choose to grant financial assistance in the form of a rebate at a level which reflects the community benefit the group or organisation is providing to Watford.

The benefits of this approach are that it:

- Allows a clear assessment of the value of the support the occupier will receive from the council.
- Allows support to be set in relation to the benefit provided by the group or organisation.
- Enables asset-related support to be weighed up against other kinds of support.

This approach will be used to determine support when working with current occupants of community assets to determine lease arrangements (as they are reviewed as part of this strategy or come up for renewal).

The intention is that it will assist the community group or organisation to.

- Become more independent and resilient, by encouraging a move towards meeting any rental obligations, potentially through a phased withdrawal of any current subsidy.
- Fully utilise the asset, by allowing other groups to share the space.

Strategy implementation

To implement the strategy an Individual Asset Management Plan will be created for each property which will collate all of the information about the asset and create a blueprint for its future use, including any investment required. The details to be established are shown in Appendix 3 attached. Existing resources within the Property and Community teams will be used to complete the Asset Management Plans.

To make best use of limited resources the priority will be to concentrate initially on those assets where the lease expires soonest together with those where information from the Community team indicates that there is unfulfilled demands for services or underutilisation of the asset. Following the first tranche the balance of the assets will be assessed over the next 6-12 months.

Implementation of the Asset Management Plans will take place when the property becomes vacant, an existing lease is to be renewed, or where the property has reached the end of its useful life.

Appendix 1 - Community Asset list			
Property Address	Postcode	Name	Tenant
1 Watford House Lane, WD17 1BJ	WD17 1BJ	The Barn	Presence Retail Limited Surity by named parties (Watford and Three Rivers Trust)
15 Harwoods Road, WD18 7RB	WD18 7RB	West Watford Community Centre	West Watford Community Association
167 North Western Ave, WD25 0AQ	WD25 0AQ	North Watford Mosque	Watford Mosque and Welfare Association for the Muslim Community
20 Clarendon Road, WD17 1JZ	WD17 1JZ	Palace theatre	Palace Theatre Watford Limited
36 Rickmansworth Road, WD18 7JA	WD18 7JA	Homeless Link	The Group for the Rootless of Watford
48 The Brow, WD25 7ET (Phase 2)	WD25 7ET	WoodsideCommunity Centre	Trustees of the Woodside Community Association
54 Nascot Wood Road, WD17 4SL	WD17 4SL	Cheslyn House	WBC
5-6 Local Board Road, WD17 2PJ	WD17 2PJ	The Pump House Theater	The Pump House Theater and Arts Trust Limited
60 Rickmansworth Road, WD18 7JA	WD18 7JA	Hightown HA	Hightown Housing Association
64 Rickmansworth Road, WD18 7JA	WD18 7JA	New Hope Community Home	Watford New Hope Trust
Briar Road, WD25 0HL	WD25 0HL	Allotments	
Brightwell Road, WD18 6AF	WD18 6AF	Allotments	
Brightwells Gravel Pit, Vicarage Road, WD18 9QA	WD18 9QA	Brightwells Rifle Club	Watford Rifle Club
Callowland Recreation Ground, 140 Gammons Lane, WD24 5HY	WD24 5HY	North Watford Bowls	
Callowland Recreation Ground, 140 Gammons Lane, WD24 5HY	WD24 5HY	Sports pavilion and changing rooms	
Cassiobury Park, Shepherds Road, WD18 7HY	WD18 7HY	Watford bowls club	The Trustees of the Watford Bowls Club
Cassiobury Park, Shepherds Road, WD18 7HY	WD18 7HY	Tennis Club	The Trustees of the Grosvenor Tennis Club
Cassiobury Park, Shepherds Road, WD18 7HY	WD18 7HY	Croquet Club	The Trustees of the Watford Croquet Club
Century Retail Park, Dalton Way Central, WD17 2SF	WD17 2SF	Century Workshop	Watford Sheltered Workshop Limited
Chaffinch Lane, WD18 9QD	WD18 9QD	Holywell Community Centre	Watford and Three Rivers Trust
Chaffinch Lane, WD18 9QD	WD18 9QD	King George Playing Fields Pavilion (KGPF Changing rooms)	Veolia
Cherry Tree Road, WD24 6RY	WD24 6RY	Allotments	
Chester Road, WD18 0RE	WD18 0RE	Allotments	
Clarke Way, WD25 0BS	WD25 0BS	Leavesden Green Community Centre	WCHT
East Drive, WD25 0AH	WD25 0AH	6th North Watford Scouts	
Gammons Lane, WD24 6BT	WD24 6BT	Callowland Allotments	
Garsmouth Way, WD25 9ET	WD25 9ET	Meriden Community Centre	Watford FC's Community Sports and Education Trust
Garston Manor, WD25 7JB	WD25 7JB	Allotments	
Garston Park Recreation Ground, St Albans Road, WD25 9NS	WD25 9RL	Garston Park Changing Rooms	Veolia
Haines Way, Woodside, WD25 7QU (Phase 2)	WD25 7QU	Orbital Community Centre	Watford and District YMCA
Harebreaks Recreation Ground, Leggatts Way, WD24 5TD	WD24 5TD	Heron FC Pavilion	The Trustees of The Hearons Youth Football Club
Knutsford Playing Fields, Radlett Road, WD24 4LL	WD24 4LL	Watford RUFC Pavilion	Watford RFC Ltd
Lea Farm Recreation Ground, First Ave	WD25 9PS	Garston Bowls Club	
Long Croft, WD18 0AL	WD18 0AL	Wiggenhall Allotments	
Oxhey Grange Playing Fields, Watford Heath, WD19 43U	WD19 43U	Oxhey Bowl's Club	Trustees of the Oxhey Bowling Club
Oxhey Grange, Oxhey Avenue, WD19 4HF	WD19 4HF	Allotments	
Paddock Road, Bushey, WD19 4AU	WD19 4AU	Allotments	
Radlett Road Playing Fields, WD24 4LL	WD24 4LL	Gaelic Football Club	Glen Rovers Hurling and Football Club Limited
Radlett Road, WD24 4LP	WD24 4LP	Timberlake Allotments	
Scammell Way, WD18 6AF	WD18 6AF	Holywell Allotments	
St Marys Churchyard, High Street , WD17 2BE	WD17 2BE	St Marys Advice Centre	Citizens Advice Centre
Tavistock Road, WD24 4HL	WD24 4HL	Allotments	
The Square, WD24 6NJ	WD24 6NJ	Harebreaks Community Hub	WCHT
Woodside Playing Fields, Horseshoe Lane, WD25 7HH	WD25 7HH	Harriers Athletics Club Pavilion	The Trustees of The Watford Harriers
Woodside Playing Fields, Horseshoe Lane, WD25 7HH	WD25 7HH	Owl's Bowl's Club	Vacant
Woodside Playing Fields, Horseshoe Lane, WD25 7HH	WD25 7HH	Watford Town Cricket Club Woodside Playing Fields Horseshoe Lane	John Ilott, Arthur Bedford, Richard Bayless as Trustees
Woodside Playing Fields, Horseshoe Lane, WD25 7HH	WD25 7HH	Woodside Indoor Bowl's Club	Watford Indoor Bowls Club Trustees Limited

Appendix 2

Community Centre Contact List

Meriden Community Centre 01923 894862	office@watfordfc.com
Orbital Community Centre 01923 894444	OrbitalHUB@oneymca.org
West Watford Community Centre 01923 235488	office@westwatford.org.uk
Holywell Community Centre 01923 216950	venues@w3rt.org
Leavesden Green Community Centre 01923 679664	communityhubs@wcht.org.uk
Harebreaks Community Hub 01923 679664	communityhubs@wcht.org.uk
Luther Blissett Community Hub 01923 679664	communityhubs@wcht.org.uk

Appendix 3 – Asset Management Plan Template

Asset Management Plan for (address)					
Details					
Description - building type, construction, age etc					
Size		sq metres			
Layout plan					
Tenancy details					
CUA/SLA in place?					
Planning					
Is the building listed?					
Planning use					
Planning policy					
Strategic or action area?					
Financials					
Rental value					
Capital value					
Any rental discounts					
Other Council support (grants etc)					
Condition					
Maintenance needs					
Maintenance responsibilities					
EPC and potential improvements					
Carbon neutral requirements/sustainability					
Community					
Community demand					
Adherence to CUA/SLA					
Permitted to sub-let or limited to hire					
Development (if appropriate)					
Alternative uses					
Option appraisal					
Matrix High/Low Demand and Use					