

## Watford Housing Strategy

### CONTEXTS – LOCAL

The Council is working on a number of projects which relate to the strategic housing direction for Watford. Below is a summary of these policies and projects:

#### Planning Policies

#### **The Watford Borough Council Corporate Plan 2014-2018: Investing in our town**

##### Corporate Priority 1: Making Watford a better place to live in

- Delivering new homes – a target of 260 new dwellings per annum.
- Identifying and managing ways to tackle homelessness and the demand and supply while improving conditions through the revised Housing Strategy, Homelessness Strategy and Private Sector Renewal Policy.
- Implementing measures to maintain and improve conditions in homes to ensure they are suitable for use and promote the health, safety and welfare of residents through the revised Private Sector Housing Renewal Policy.
- Working with registered providers, including Watford Community Housing Trust, on affordable housing solutions.
- Delivering Local Plan Part 2 – Site Allocations, Development Management Policies, Town Centre policies.
- Implementing the Green Deal programme as a member of the Green Deal Together Community Interest Company to deliver energy efficiency solutions to businesses and residents to reduce ill health due to excess cold and to address fuel poverty.

##### *Measures of success:*

- New homes delivered each year, including a number of affordable new homes.
- Households supported to find solutions to their housing needs.
- Number of homes improved to remove hazards to residents' health, safety and welfare.
- Take up of Green Deal installations by those eligible.

## **Watford's Local Plan**

### **Part 1 – Core Strategy 2006-2031**

The Local Plan Core Strategy was adopted on 30 January 2013. This means that the Core Strategy now forms part of the development plan and will be used in determining planning applications.

Watford Borough Council's Core Strategy sets out the key elements of the council's planning vision and spatial strategy for the borough. The Core Strategy is the central part of the Local Plan and establishes the direction for other documents that will set out the planning strategy and policies in more detail. All other Local Plan documents must be consistent with the Core Strategy.

#### Overall vision for Watford

- Watford town centre will have a series of sectors where commercial, shopping, leisure, recreation and cultural activities support each other in well designed surroundings. Further high quality town centre housing will be developed, providing safe and attractive accommodation of various types, including family units, in good proximity to the railway stations at Watford Junction and Watford High Street.
- Watford's existing local centres will be improved to provide our communities with strong neighbourhood centres with a wide range of services, including schools and retail facilities with good access to public transport. There will be an appropriate mix of housing for all, including affordable housing. The new housing will lead the way in sustainable construction and technology.

#### The Housing Vision for Watford

- It is important that the council identifies an adequate and continuous supply of land for housing to meet Watford's housing growth requirements in sustainable locations. It is also important that the council encourages a range of housing types and sizes, including affordable housing, to meet the requirements of all sectors of the community. New residential development, whether through new build or extensions and alterations to existing homes, should be designed appropriately for its location.
- Taking various evidence into consideration, including population projections, the council considers that a minimum total target of 6,500 homes from 2006 to 2031, an average delivery rate of 260 dwellings per annum, is suitable for the borough.
- Specific sites will be identified and allocated through the site allocations document. Identification will be in accordance with the Core Strategy and will be informed by the evidence base and results of the consultation.
- In allocating sites for residential development, priority will be given to sites which will best contribute to building sustainable communities and support the

town's regeneration initiatives, taking into account the Special Policy Areas of the spatial strategy.

- Factors that will support the residential allocation in the site allocations document will include:
  - Consistency with the spatial strategy
  - Previously developed land
  - Proximity to neighbourhood centres
  - Close to public transport, walking and cycling network routes
  - Location within the town centre or at other strategically located sites.
  
- Factors that will go against residential allocation will include:
  - Not previously developed land
  - Land at risk of flooding
  - Existing employment land, open space or other community facilities for which there is still an identified need.
  - Land with high biodiversity, landscape or cultural heritage significance.
  - No access to reliable public transport links.
  
- The general approach is that the type/size and density of developments will be informed by the design guidelines in the Residential Design Guide Supplementary Planning Document which will be used to ensure that development are appropriate to the surrounding context, infrastructure capacity and character of the area.
  
- The council will seek to reduce inequalities, create socially mixed communities with greater choice and a mix in size, types and location of housing to meet the needs of the whole of Watford's community, The Local Plan will assist in supporting Watford's Housing Strategy in this aim. The council will seek the provision of a mix of housing types, sizes and tenures at a local level to meet the requirements of all sections of the community. This includes the provision of:
  - Family sized units
  - Smaller housing units
  - Provision for those unable to compete financially in the housing market sector.
  - Those with special needs as informed by local evidence.
  
- Higher density developments, mainly including flats, will be focused around the town centre and key strategic sites such as the Watford Junction and Health Campus Special Policy Areas, and to a limited extent around the area at the proposed station at Ascot Road. Medium density developments such as flats and houses may be appropriate close to neighbourhood centres where they are well served by transport links. Low density family houses with gardens will be sought in more suburban areas.
  
- A rate of 35% affordable housing will be sought on major applications of ten residential units and above or sites or more than 0.5 hectare. Only in

exceptional circumstances will the council consider a lower level of affordable housing provision, where the developer can demonstrate exceptional planning, or other constraints on the development of the site through the submission of a development viability assessment. The affordable housing provision shall be:-

- Social Rent 20%
- Affordable Rent 65%
- Intermediate affordable housing (low cost home ownership) 15%.

## **Watford's Local Plan Part 2 – Site Allocations and Development Management**

This part of the Local Plan will provide more detailed policies for considering applications for planning permission and identify specific sites for development and the type of development that would be appropriate. It will set out policies for the town centre.

Part 2 will include development management policies which will support the Core Strategy by setting out additional planning policies that the council will use when making decisions on applications for planning permission. There will be more detail on site specific matters and sites will be allocated for different land uses.

## **The Community Infrastructure Levy**

The Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) is a new charge which will allow the council to raise funds from new developments for use on infrastructure to support the growth of the borough.

The money collected from the levy will be used to support development by funding infrastructure which the council and the community need. It will come into force from April 2015. The levy will apply to most new buildings. Charges will be based on the size, type and location of the new development and will be set out in a charging schedule.

## **Residential Design Guide, July 2014**

The Residential Design Guide (RDG) for Watford provides detail on designing new residential development in the borough, in relation to both extensions to existing buildings and larger scale development of new residential units.

A revised version of the Residential Design Guide has been produced by the Council and was subject to public consultation. The revised document was adopted on 23 July 2014.

## **The Infrastructure Delivery Plan**

The Infrastructure Delivery Plan (IDP) provides an assessment of the infrastructure necessary to support the existing and planned increase in new homes and jobs within the borough up to 2031. It takes account of the projected population growth in the borough and the need to encourage sustainable development and mitigate climate change. The assessment includes a review of the existing provision, an analysis of the required future provision and, where known, its location, when it will be provided, how it will be funded and who will be responsible for delivery.

The IDP has been informed by information from a range of service providers: County and District Council services (such as education, libraries and highways), the Local Strategic Partnership, and infrastructure providers external to the Council (such as health services, emergency services and utility companies). It focuses on key infrastructure needs derived from various plans and strategies of each of these partners.

## **The Watford Borough Council Property Review**

The Watford Borough Council Property Review has been set up to assess the current use of Watford Council's assets. The Review is due to report in Autumn 2014. The brief for the review includes Council assets which are residential, commercial, leisure facilities and land.

## **The Watford Borough Council Economic Development Strategy**

The Watford Borough Council Economic Development Strategy will set out the following:

- How we will achieve economic growth in Watford.
- An assessment of the economic impact of major schemes.
- How we can make Watford attractive for business
- How we can ensure that we have the skilled workforce required in the borough
- The implications for housing.

## **The Watford Developers' Forum**

The Watford Developers' Forum will meet twice a year. It is a networking forum with the development sector in Watford. The aims of the forum are:

- To provide an arena in which the private sector – developers, property professionals and registered providers – is able to voice their views and concerns, offer practical advice and influence how Watford Borough Council can achieve its strategic development aims.

- To gain a deeper understanding of the key development issues in Watford, focusing on identifying practical action that would improve the development climate and support investment and sustainable growth.
- To help shape the Council's vision for growth and development of the town and to gain a deeper understanding of the changing property market.
- To promote Watford's major mixed use regeneration schemes and other investment opportunities.
- To share learning on removing barriers to development and to promote high quality schemes.

## Housing-related policies

These housing-related policies link directly to the Housing Strategy but deal with very specific areas of housing activity.

### The Watford Borough Council Nominations Policy

A nominations policy specifies the criteria under which households are eligible for social housing, and how priority to be allocated social housing will be awarded.

In accordance with the Localism Act 2011, a new nominations policy has been devised for the allocation of social housing in Watford and how applications for social housing will be prioritised. The main changes which are proposed are:-

- i) Band E is the lowest priority band on the housing register. Band E applicants will be removed from the housing register and new applicants who would have been Band E will not be able to register. The exceptions are:
  - Social housing tenants where Watford Borough Council would have nominations to the resulting vacancy.
  - Home seekers aged over 60 for designated older persons' accommodation only.
- ii) Residency connection – In order to join the housing register applicants must be living in Watford now and have lived here for five out of the last six years. This is a tightening from the previous three out of the last five years or six out of the last twelve months. Employment in Watford or close relatives living in the borough will not now constitute a local connection. Exceptions will include members of the armed forces and tenants of housing associations in Watford.
- iii) Priority for statutory homeless people – Statutory homeless people will now be placed in Band C rather than Band B. This change is part of a plan

to prevent homelessness. There will be a reduction in the priority inequality of housing register applicants in overcrowded situations who are sharing with friends or family, and households applying for accommodation under homelessness legislation.

### **The Watford Borough Council Tenancy Strategy 2012-2015**

Tenancy strategies were introduced by the Localism Act 2011 for local authorities to use in making best use of affordable housing stock and to improve partnership working with registered providers. Guidance is provided to registered providers on the following:

- Rent levels for general and special needs housing, and for existing and new affordable housing.
- Flexible and Lifetime tenancies
- How to assist households who are under-occupying their homes.
- Homelessness and the use of the private rented sector.
- Local lettings plans and special housing plans.

The first Tenancy Strategy was produced in December 2012. In light of the allocation of social housing since that time, including the allocation of new homes at affordable rent level and the conversion of some social rented homes to affordable rent upon reletting, an interim Tenancy Strategy will be revised by December 2014.

### **The Homelessness Review, Strategy and Action Plan 2014-2015**

Under the Homelessness Act 2002 each local authority is required to produce a review of homelessness in its area and a strategy for preventing and tackling homelessness at least once every five years. The latest homelessness review, strategy and action plan for Watford was produced in 2013, with an undertaking to review the action plan on an annual basis. The 2014-2015 revised action plan will be produced by October 2014. The action plan will contain the following tasks:-

- i) Understanding and improving methods of preventing illegal and retaliatory eviction in the private rented sector.
- ii) Reviewing our housing advice offer with customer services.
- iii) Investigating options to expand the portfolio of temporary accommodation.
- iv) Implementing the new Nominations Policy.
- v) Implementing the new Private Sector Discharge Policy.
- vi) Introducing a new Communications Strategy in conjunction with the Housing Strategy, to tackle high expectations and high rates of refusals, and to manage demand.
- vii) Contribute towards a corporate Domestic Violence Policy.
- viii) Monitoring the number of evictions from social housing and the number of Discretionary Housing Payments which are ending.
- ix) Ending of funding for the Transitions Service managed by New Hope (providing short-term direct access accommodation to help homeless

- people to manage the “transition” from homelessness to settled accommodation) in March 2015 – minimising the impact.
- x) Review of Council funding to prevent and tackle homelessness.

### **The Private Sector Housing Renewal Policy**

The Private Sector Housing Renewal Policy guides the development of Watford Council’s service to owners and tenants of privately owned residential property in the borough, setting priorities and allocating resources within each of the following areas of activity:

- Promoting and Enabling
- Direct Financial Assistance
- Enforcement

Subject to an analysis of available data and good practice, the priorities which may be considered for the inclusion in this policy include issues such as poor housing conditions which present a risk to health, home energy conservation, overcrowding, assistance to vulnerable people living in privately owned homes, the private rented sector, houses in multiple occupation, and health and well-being. The private sector housing renewal policy will be a priority in the main housing strategy action plan.

### **The Climate Change Strategy 2015-2020**

The Watford Borough Council Climate Change Strategy for 2015 to 2020 will represent the council’s broad vision regarding climate change. Its aim is to “make Watford a borough that acknowledges Climate Change, maximises its opportunities and minimises its threats to increase the wellbeing of the community.”

### **Impact of National Legislation**

#### **The Welfare Reform Act 2012**

Watford Community Housing Trust is the largest registered provider in Watford and owns the majority of larger social rented housing in the borough. Therefore, it is likely to have the largest number of tenant households who are affected by the changes to Spare Room Subsidy. As in July 2014, the position was as follows:

- The number of tenant households in April 2013 who were affected by the Spare Room Subsidy changes was 312. By contrast, by the end of July 2014 the number of Watford Community Housing Trust tenant households affected by the Spare Room Subsidy changes was 252.



- Most affected tenants had decided to “stay and pay” which is consistent with the national trend.
- Watford Community Housing Trust employed a dedicated worker from November 2012 to work with households who would be affected by the Spare Room Subsidy changes. This officer has helped 80 tenant households affected by the Spare Room Subsidy changes to downsize, either by transfer or by mutual exchange.
- By July 2014 two households who were affected by the Spare Room Subsidy changes from April 2013 had been evicted by Watford Community Housing Trust. Neither of the evictions were due solely to the Spare Room Subsidy changes – both households were already in rent arrears before the Spare Room Subsidy changes was implemented in April 2013.

## Partnerships

Watford Council is a member of a number of multi-authority and multi-agency forum which focus on various types of housing activities. The main forums, of which Watford Council is a member, are:-

- a) HARI Board – meeting quarterly, a forum for Watford Council, its neighbour Three Rivers Council, and the registered providers who work in one or both local authority areas.
- b) HARI Management Group – meeting quarterly, the HARI group which focuses on housing management activities.
- c) HARI Affordable Housing Group – meeting quarterly, the HARI group which focuses on affordable housing development activities.
- d) Herts Choice Homes Board – meeting quarterly, the group which oversees the operation of the Herts Choice Homes Consortium which controlled the Choice-Based lettings system for Watford, Hertsmere, Three Rivers St Albans and Welwyn Hatfield councils.
- e) Herts Heads of Housing Group – meeting quarterly, heads of housing within each local authority area meet to discuss housing issues and share good practice.
- f) Prevention of Single Homelessness Group (PoSH) – meeting once every two to three months, a multi-agency forum consisting of members of organisations who work with single homeless people in Watford and Three Rivers.
- g) Herts and Beds Housing Group – meeting quarterly, a group of housing and environmental health officers who work on improving housing conditions.

- h) Accommodation Solutions Group – meeting once every four to six months, this group is convened by Hertfordshire County Council. It allows the Hertfordshire County Council and district councils to discuss the accommodation needs of special needs groups across the county.
- i) Child Poverty Strategic Objectives Group – meeting quarterly, this group is convened by Hertfordshire County Council. It devises and implements the action plan for reducing child poverty in Hertfordshire. The action plan includes housing-related objectives.
- j) Housing Strategy and Developers Liaison Group – meeting quarterly, this group consists of strategy and development officers from across Hertfordshire. The group meets to share good practice and receive information from external organisations.
- k) Housing Liaison Group – This group consists of officers from across Hertfordshire who award Disabled Facilities Grants and install adaptations.

## **Resources**

The following resources may fund the projects that compose the Homelessness Strategy Action Plan:-

### **Internal resources**

- Homelessness Grant allocated by the Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG).
- Watford Council capital programme
- Capital budgets for temporary accommodation
- Private Sector Housing Funding including Decent Homes Assistance
- Assets – land and property.
- Watford Borough Council community grants.
- Discretionary Housing Payments

### **External resources**

- Local Enterprise Partnership Funding.
- Homes and Communities Agency Affordable Housing Programme

- Registered Provider funding
- Land Backed Asset Vehicle (LABV)
- External energy efficiency budgets
- Better Care Fund (including funding for Disabled Facilities Grants)
- Health-related funding.
- Housing related support funding.