



# Peer challenge position statement

October 2023



**WATFORD**  
BOROUGH  
COUNCIL

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# 1

# Welcome to Watford



**On behalf of the councillors and staff at Watford Borough Council, we warmly welcome the LGA peer challenge team to our borough at what we believe is an important point in our continuous evolution journey.**

Our borough motto is 'be bold' and this has driven our determination to build on our learning from our last peer challenge six years ago. We have delivered on the recommendations, grasping our opportunities and harnessing our collective energy, not just internally but now with a refreshed focus on our place and our role within the wider system and our local government family. Through this commitment, directed by the Mayoral Manifesto and set out in our Council Plan, we continue to deliver positive outcomes for Watford we know are important to our diverse and vibrant community.

For us, being bold means being prepared to think differently, never settling for 'more of the same', challenging the accepted way of doing things and working with our partners across the public and private sector who have recognised our greater outward focus and eagerness to work alongside them on the critical issues for Watford.

We are not immune to the very real and deep-rooted pressures local government faces, after an unprecedented few years where we have had to pivot in response to COVID-19 and the cost of living crisis. We have drawn on our experiences and we are ready to respond to our big challenges, which undoubtedly includes our budget and protecting the services we know are valued by our residents and businesses.

We pride ourselves on Watford being 'no ordinary town'. We hope this position statement shows why we think we are a special place, which, through our vision and commitment to invest in the borough's future means we are still well-placed to continue to thrive and grow, even given the wider economic environment. We recognise we have both a great opportunity but also a significant responsibility as place makers. We are creating new communities that will bring thousands of new people to Watford over the next 20 years and our decisions today are part of the legacy we will pass to future generations who will live, work in and visit, our borough.

We do not underestimate the challenges of our ambitious agenda for Watford and welcome the peer challenge as an opportunity to reflect on our progress and to provide a springboard for ensuring we are well-placed for what lies ahead.



*Peter Taylor*

**Peter Taylor**  
Elected Mayor of Watford



*Donna Nolan*

**Donna Nolan**  
Chief Executive

## 2 Our story of evolving improvement and collective determination

The landscape in Watford has changed significantly since our last peer challenge in 2017. At this time, the team recognised that, whilst the council had achieved a lot for the borough and had made significant progress as an organisation, there were challenges ahead, particularly whether we could sustain the trajectory of our improvement journey, and if the right building blocks and relationships were in place to drive momentum and seize the opportunities ahead.

The council was also preparing for a major change in political leadership, with the election of a new Mayor, after 16 years, less than a year away. The ambition was clear, but there was work to do.

As we entered the COVID-19 pandemic, we welcomed a new Chief Executive, signalling a fresh direction and perspective for the council. Despite the rigours and demands of the pandemic, she set about creating the conditions for change, recognising that we needed new approaches, more collaboration, an outward focus and a collective determination for continuous challenge and improvement. This impetus has cut across everything we do, strengthening our governance, reinvigorating our culture and building productive networks and relationships throughout our organisation and across our partnerships.

Our approach has not been guided by a one-off transformation programme. We have embedded an ethos of evolving improvement, applying rigour and challenge to how we work, empowering our people to lead and drive new ways of working and shining a light on every part of the organisation. We have learned from each other, but have also been inspired by what is happening beyond our organisation, taking the best from both the public

and private sector where it spurs us to think differently and aligns with our aspirations and goals. Harnessing a greater outward-facing energy, which has reached out to our community, partners and our wider system, has been a defining feature of our step change, reflected in our achievements and in the positive difference for the community we serve.

We are a council that never settles, and we recognise the need to balance our determination and drive with time to review and learn. Evolving improvement is underpinned by self-awareness, and we know there are areas where there is more to do and changes still to be made; these are highlighted throughout this position statement and are integral to our future thinking.



## 3 Knowing our place

### Our place

Watford is a vibrant and diverse borough, located in the south-west of Hertfordshire. One of 10 districts within the county, it is known as a major regional centre, located just within the M25. It is Hertfordshire's most significant town and plays a vital role in its economic prosperity as a successful business and commercial hub and is a desirable place in which to live, work, study and to visit.

Watford has a strong local, regional and national profile, although it covers an area of just 8.3 square miles - so it packs a lot of activity within a relatively small footprint. Whilst it does not have a common boundary with London, in terms of its reputation and its young and diverse population, the borough has much in common with the energy and dynamism of the capital. However, one of Watford's key strengths is that it retains its own strong identity, with a long and varied history as an evolving market town and as a home to a wealth of anchor organisations, including a much-loved football team, acute hospital and regional shopping centre, which add to its draw for surrounding areas. This unique character has underpinned Watford's place brand narrative, giving a consistent voice and identity to the borough and positioning its offer to a range of audiences.

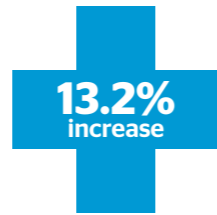
Last year, Watford achieved the third highest place in Lambert Smith Hampton's Vitality Index. The index assesses the 100 largest towns and cities outside London to identify the best places to live and do business and which areas also have the strongest growth prospects. This ranking is a huge endorsement for the borough, reinforcing its strengths across three major quality of life factors: economy and business, living and health and environment, with Watford the only place in the 100 to feature in the top 10 for each of these.







Population  
(Census 2011)



Population  
**102,200**  
(Census 2021)

## Our population

**Watford is predominantly an urban borough with a population of 102,200 (Census 2021). Our population grew by 13.2% between Census 2011 and 2021, higher than East of England (8.3%) and England overall (6.6%) and an indication of the borough's ongoing popularity as a place to live. Given the area of the borough, this size of population means it is the most densely populated district authority area within England.**

The profile of our population differs significantly from the rest of Hertfordshire. We are highly diverse and, more in line with London authority areas, saw a substantial increase in diversity between Census 2011 and 2021, when the non-White British population rose from 38% to 54%. We continue to welcome people from across the globe, and a united and cohesive community remains one of our key strengths, with new arrivals successfully establishing themselves alongside longer-standing communities. We were delighted to be recognised in recent research as one of England's "rainbow" towns, places where 'ethnic diversity is on the rise and segregation is on the wane'. This is very much our experience of our place and the tolerance and understanding demonstrated across our community.

For 20% of our residents, English is not their main language. We know from Census 2021 and school census data that well over 100 languages are spoken in homes across Watford and this diversity

is also reflected in National Insurance registrations to adult overseas nationals (Department of Work and Pensions statistics), which consistently show new arrivals to Watford remain high, with the greatest number of people currently coming from Eastern Europe and the Asian sub-continent.

We are also a young borough. As in most areas, our residents are living longer but, unlike the rest of Hertfordshire and the majority of the Eastern region, we have a high birth rate and continue to be a place that is predominantly made up of younger families and households. Watford has the fourth highest percentage population of 0-4 year olds in the Eastern region and the sixth highest 0-14 year olds. In comparison, Watford has the third lowest percentage population of 65+ in the region, which contributes to a median age of 36, below the national and regional average.

Whilst we are generally a healthy borough, life expectancy is lower than Hertfordshire overall, reflecting potential health inequalities across the town, with a 10-year difference for men and a seven-year difference for women in life expectancy between different parts of the borough. We also use MOSAIC profiling to enhance our understanding of our population and it provides valuable context for our future plans and decision-making. Watford's MOSAIC profile reinforces our understanding of the diversity of our population, its overall youth and also reflects the significance of the private rental sector in our housing market.



Watford has experienced a substantial rise in house prices and costs over the last 10 years (currently average prices are around £521,200, almost twice as high as the UK overall average of £287,000 and significantly above the East of England average of around £345,000; average rental costs are £2,320pcm compared to £1,170 for the East of England - [home.co.uk](https://www.home.co.uk) figures - September 2023), making it an extremely attractive area for investment. This has impacted on housing affordability (the median annual salary for Watford residents is around £38,300), which is a key issue for the borough, and, in combination with our increasing population, has led to considerable and growing pressure for new housing development.

ONS data shows, in terms of the ratio of income to house prices, Watford has the 26th highest unaffordability. Challenging house price affordability has also resulted in a sharp rise in the number of our residents living in private sector rental accommodation, which is shown by our MOSAIC profile, where our top type is characterised by living in rental properties. Census 2021 also showed Watford had England's second-largest percentage-point rise in the proportion of privately rented homes (from 20.1% in 2011 to 28.2% in 2021).

Whilst Watford is a prosperous place to live and do business, there remain small pockets across the borough where we know our residents are finding it harder to thrive. In national terms, our areas of deprivation are not comparable to many similar urban areas but we recognise the challenge of

ensuring that Watford's prosperity does offer better economic opportunities for all our residents as well as our wider economic area. Our approach to economic development identifies this as a priority. We are gearing our community wealth building to harness greater benefit for our residents, boosting local supply chains, scaling up skills development and increasing volunteering and charity support.

Building on our COVID-19 response, we convened a Cost of Living Forum, chaired by our Elected Mayor. This brings together those groups and organisations (including the county council) that provide support and services for our most vulnerable residents, embracing what local people tell us about the value of galvanising our collective response. This has included funding local 'Welcoming Spaces' through our [Watford Community Fund](#), our local borough charity, and creating links that have really helped build understanding of the extent of the impact on our town.

We continue to commission free Easter and summer [playschemes](#) for local children aged 5-15 years, releasing bookings to our more vulnerable families first. For Easter 2023, 35 free and inclusive sessions were delivered, with over 2,500 young people attending a range of activities, including gaming and coding, adventure play and science lab. We undertake satisfaction surveys to understand the value of this investment, the extent of the take-up and the profile of the children attending to ensure we are reaching families across our diverse borough.





**83,000**  
jobs in the borough

## Our economy

We are currently home to around 6,000 active businesses with a good mix of company size and sector, with many international HQs and a higher than average start-up success rate, and a range of businesses in between. There is representation from financial and professional services sectors, pharmaceutical, health sciences, creative media, manufacturing and retail and leisure industries, amongst many others.

The number of jobs in the borough is 83,000. A third of these (33%) are part-time, which reflects the quantum of jobs within the borough in the retail, restaurant and bar and support services sectors. The borough also has a higher proportion of professional/technical professions than seen at a regional and national level. Overall, the borough's

job density (jobs per head of population aged 16-64) is very high at 1.22 compared with 0.84 for the Eastern region and 0.85 for Great Britain. The Job Seekers Allowance and benefit claimant rates are relatively low - 1.0% and 6.0% respectively. (Data from NOMIS).

A key driver for our economy is to retain employment opportunities within our economic area and to provide the flexible developments that meet the needs of current and future Watford businesses. At the same time, we know access to the right workforce is critical for business success so we want our employment areas to be connected to good quality housing or linked through well-planned infrastructure and transport links.

## What our local people say

Over the summer, we asked local people for their views on the council and our area. The Big Watford Conversation asked for people to consider a range of areas and issues about life in the borough, including what makes somewhere a good place to live and what they see as the priorities for Watford's future.

The top five factors for making somewhere a good place to live for our residents were: a good quality hospital and health services, feelings of safety at home and the local area, well-maintained parks and open spaces, clean and tidy spaces and good waste and recycling services. For the future, people

are keen for Watford to: remain a well-connected town with the links that make it easy to travel and get around and connect with each other, have a thriving economy that offers a range of jobs and opportunities for local people, protect and improve our parks and open spaces and benefit from good local services, such as health and care services, that help people live their lives well.

Our community has great aspirations for Watford and we acknowledge our responsibility in understanding and embracing what local people tell us and bringing our collective purpose to delivering for our borough.

# 4 Local priorities and outcomes

We have a good understanding of our place and diverse community, based on our comprehensive evidence, local intelligence and conversation with our community, which are used to inform how we set our direction and decision-making. This is articulated through our Council Plan, which drives our direction, priorities and investment decisions steering our delivery and outcomes.

## Our strategic framework

**Underpinning everything we do is a robust and aligned approach that links our ambitions and commitments to delivery, performance, resources and continuous improvement. We have refined this through the development of our strategic framework, which highlights the value of collective ownership and understanding to delivery and outcomes.**

Over the last three years we have had a clear focus on resetting our strategic framework, including reviewing, refreshing or releasing our current suite of strategies that support our Council Plan.

The framework has driven and supported the council's track record for delivery and shaped and strengthened service planning and budget management across our teams, setting out how our ambitions, commitments and values are woven into the fabric of the organisation.

The Chief Executive instigated a fortnightly Strategic Group meeting to support and drive our strategic framework. This provides early sight of key emerging areas of work, linking to the framework and providing check and challenge for strategies, policies and initiatives at the right stage. This has accelerated delivery by providing clear direction and purpose.



# Our Council Plan 2022-26 and Delivery Plan 2022-24:

Watford Together. United by possibility.


We are ambitious for Watford, our residents and our businesses, and we want to see them flourish. Our [Council Plan](#) sets out our aspirations for both the council and the borough we serve. It is forward-looking, high level and outward facing, with an emphasis on ambition and outcome-focused commitments. The plan demonstrates our role as leader of place and our determination to continue to build on strategic and operational excellence. As our future roadmap, it informs our budget setting, is an essential tool for the planning and delivery of services, and helps our staff understand how the work they do makes a real difference to the people of Watford.

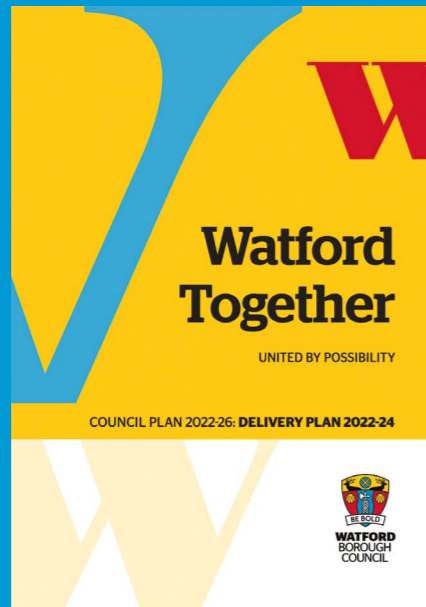
## Our Council Plan themes:

 A council working for our community and serving our residents

 A greener, brighter future

 An inspiring, thriving and creative town

 A diverse, happy and healthy town



Our [Delivery Plan 2022-24](#) sets out how we focus our work to bring the Council Plan to life, making sure we deliver what we said we would and being open and transparent about our progress.

Under each theme and commitment, we set out our key priority areas of actions. 19 specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and timely (SMART) commitments cut across and support the delivery of our themes, linking together to shape a bright future for Watford.

We [report our progress](#) every quarter, including our new [suite of KPIs](#), to our Corporate Management Board, Elected Mayor, Cabinet, and Overview & Scrutiny Committee. We are already shaping the next phase of delivery, assessing what we have achieved so far and what needs to be captured in our next delivery plan from summer 2024. This has included creative scenario planning sessions with our Cabinet and senior management, building shared understanding of our changing local and national context and exploring how we will set our agenda and planning to flex and respond.

## Our focus on place shaping

We are proud of our enviable reputation as a great place to live, do business and visit, but we know this current success has required a strong vision, decisive action and targeted investment, which, as we shape Watford for the future, will need to continue.

We understand our goal for proactive place shaping comes with significant challenges, particularly because we have such limited land but a very high demand for residential, business and retail space. However, we believe we have a very attractive offer for investors and a willingness to engage and understand how we can work together to open up outstanding opportunities for the borough.

## Our Local Plan

Our [Local Plan](#) was adopted in October 2022 and sets the blueprint for growth and improvement for the local economy, housing, transport systems and environment until 2038, including the delivery of 14,000 new homes. The plan sets out policies that will allow Watford to insist new homes are designed to the highest standards, be more environmentally friendly, and, importantly, affordable for local people. It also introduces better controls around good design and building height, which is a key issue for local people.

We were delighted to be recognised for our dedicated and innovative approach to developing our Local Plan as winners of the 'Best Plan' category at the RTPI East of England Awards for Planning Excellence.



**SWHERTS**  
Joint Strategic Plan

## Planning for a successful South West Hertfordshire

We have united with the four other South West Hertfordshire councils and the county council to plan for the future, acknowledging that this puts us in a stronger position to deliver, and secure funding for the homes, essential transport links, green spaces, health services, educational facilities and employment we know are so important to local people. Together, we can access opportunities that might not be open to us as individual local authorities. The South West Hertfordshire Joint Strategic Plan (JSP) has developed a shared vision, setting out the infrastructure and economic priorities for the area, ensuring transport, education, healthcare and infrastructure are coordinated and provided to support the sustainable growth of new jobs and homes in the right places.

Following endorsement of the JSP vision this autumn, the partnership will be consulting on options for the scale and pattern of growth within the region.



## Refocusing economic growth within our wider system

Our [Economic Growth Strategy 2021-25](#) provides a framework for our ambitions for our economy and how we can strengthen Watford's pivotal role in South West Hertfordshire and within the wider economic system, particularly our position as a premier sub-regional office location. It sets out our focus on four key sectors that we have identified as critical to our future success and areas where we can drive prosperity through investment, job creation and skills: creative, digital media and screen industries, professional and business services, retail and hospitality and construction services.

By resetting our economic development direction, including recruiting a refreshed team who are having an outstanding impact on our relationship with our business community and fostering stronger connections across the county and neighbouring authorities, we are well placed as active participants and contributors to the [Hertfordshire Growth Board](#), which is currently refining its vision and missions for the county, and [Hertfordshire Infrastructure and Development Board](#).



## Valuing our green, open spaces

We know our 203 hectares of parks and open spaces, including the nationally renowned [Cassiobury Park](#), which is regularly in the top 10 best loved parks in the country, are such a strong part of the Watford identity and extremely important to our community as, with our housing mix, not all residents have access to outdoor space. Parks and open spaces consistently achieve high satisfaction rating and this year we have celebrated achieving [17 green flag awards](#) for the third year running. This includes a green flag for one of our allotment sites, which is one of only four in the country and the only one in the Eastern region. It is also the highest number of green flag awards in Hertfordshire, which is a real achievement for the most urban district in the county. Since opening in 2020, [Oxhey Activity Park](#) has become firmly established on the national skateboarding map, with some fantastic reviews from visitors across the country, but it retains a real local pull, quickly establishing itself as somewhere our community meet, keep active and try something new.

This year, we have launched our project to transform a historically important natural habitat by restoring the [watercress beds](#) in Cassiobury

Park Nature Reserve. Joining forces with our very active Friends of Cassiobury Park group and the Herts and Middlesex Wildlife Trust, the restoration is improving biodiversity, enhancing water quality, and preserving the flood plain within the watercress bed area, protecting other parts of the park. It is also making a vital contribution to the aims of our Environmental Strategy. We are delighted to have received funding to support the work from Grundon Waste Management Ltd via the Landfill Communities Fund and to see this vitally important wildlife sanctuary complete with ponds, reeds and scrape infused with new life.

We have made a commitment to increase our tree canopy from 18.2% to 20% by 2027 and 25% by 2030. Over the last two years, we have given away 23,000 trees and have planted 400 trees in our parks and open spaces. We are about to receive £76k from the Forestry Commission Local Authority Treescapes Fund 2 for further tree planting, helping us reach our targets.

We are about to review our [Green Spaces Strategy](#) to determine the course for the next phase of our parks and open spaces improvement programme.



## The Town Hall Quarter Programme – a vibrant hub in the heart of our town

Our ambitious and transformational Town Hall Quarter programme will deliver a vibrant and thriving hub in the heart of the town, creating exciting new opportunities for our residents, businesses and community.



The Town Hall Quarter, our most significant and high-profile place shaping and cultural programme, exemplifies how we seize opportunities that deliver for our borough and community, bringing together eight projects that each demonstrate outstanding outcomes that, combined, will achieve even more. It is a £200m highly complex 10-year programme, aligning to our Council Plan commitments and the ambitions set out in our strategic framework, that will regenerate and transform the northern end of Watford High Street, which is vastly underutilised but home to two beautiful, art-deco, Grade II listed council buildings.

At the heart of the programme, and providing the catalyst for change, is the Town Hall, a beacon in the borough for civil life and our democratic function, but now hugely underused following the move to agile working and more digital service delivery for customers. The project to refurbish and repurpose this building and give it new life for the future has generated a once in a lifetime opportunity to create something really special, opening up the potential for culture, heritage and the arts, improved public space, new homes and places for our community and businesses.

Through the programme we are strengthening Watford's regional role as a centre for culture and the arts, opening up more creative avenues for Watford Colosseum. A tribute to Watford's national

reputation for entertainment, performances and arts is that we have secured a world class operator for the Colosseum – AEG Presents. We will be joining AEG's global network of more than 350 owned, operated and affiliated venues when the Colosseum reopens in 2024, following our substantial investment in improvements and design to the building. AEG has promised a thrilling programme of world class artists performing live music dance and comedy to complement the broad cultural offer already in the town, most noticeably by the Watford Palace Theatre, Rifco, Tiata Fahodzi (all Arts Council England NPO organisations), Pumphouse and our numerous community groups.

The programme also recognises our borough's diverse culture and heritage, connecting Watford's rich history with that of our Town Hall by creating an innovative new home for our museum, celebrating the town's history and the stories of our diverse and vibrant community through a new, transformed museum and an inclusive and engaging heritage service. We have achieved initial National Lottery Heritage funding to help cover the cost of the discovery stage of the project. Following our ongoing discussions with the National Lottery Heritage Fund, we are looking to submit an application for further funding that will make a significant contribution to the cost of the project.



By anchoring the north of the town centre, we are linking to our aims for a new generation high street in Watford, driving greater footfall and activity as more people live, work and visit the area through our 'new neighbourhood' project. This will create an attractive and active town square and deliver around 400 sustainable homes (with around 75% of the private homes build to rent) a hotel and offices. Whilst we're at an early stage with these redevelopment plans, we have secured Mace Development as a preferred private-sector development partner to work with us on creating this new neighbourhood.

We are currently in dialogue with Homes England on the potential delivery of the homes (with an application to the Homes England Brownfield, Infrastructure and Land Fund), and with our health partners, as our new neighbourhood plan has the potential to provide a catalyst for a new health services model, located within the town centre, in the heart of the community. Due to the current external climate we are not committing capital investment at this point, but are utilising officer and Mace capacity to better understand infrastructure costs/challenges. This is within our overall budget context and prudent decision making, where we are assessing our exposure to risk in what are very volatile economic times for both local authorities and developers. We know Homes England is prioritising projects for funding where monies can be spent by March 2026 and so, in advance of any decision, we are working closely with Mace to prepare a with-funding programme, setting out key milestones and expenditure to meet this deadline.

The importance we place on driving better sustainability and social value outcomes is threaded through this programme, with initial improvement work to the Town Hall and Colosseum already achieving some early success and community impact. Connecting to our sustainability ambitions and targets, we are making a 66-tonne annual saving in carbon through installing LED lights, roof insulation and cavity wall insulation. This is also delivering a 30% saving in our gas bills. The creative approach we took to tackling the 1930s windows in both buildings has resulted in a 75% decrease in the rate of heat transfer through the windows and retained their historic significance. Additionally, 99% of all waste on site was diverted from landfill. Linking to our economic growth ambitions, the programme has achieved 3,200 hours of new employment, 110 weeks of apprenticeships, 54 charitable hours donated, 10 STEM engagements and benefited both artisan trades and SMEs.

Looking forward we have already identified 30 volunteer opportunities in the relaunched Colosseum and new Watford Museum, which will also include a community gallery, and the potential for a social enterprise café in the Town Hall.





## Watford Riverwell – positive change in a new neighbourhood

Our [largest regeneration project](#) is now well into delivery phase and a great example of a dynamic joint venture partnership. Through this 20-year scheme, a £350m, 50/50 joint venture with Kier Property, we're transforming 70 acres of land south of Watford General Hospital and Watford Football Club, delivering an exciting destination, offering residential, office, retail, leisure, industrial and community space. When we entered into the JV agreement in 2013, it was uncharted territory for us and the private sector – with the potential inclusion of West Hertfordshire Hospitals NHS Trust as a third party in the partnership making it the first agreement of its kind. The Trust, whilst not part of the JV, continues to work closely with us and Kier to improve health facilities in Watford.

The JV represented a huge leap of faith in Watford at a time when markets were depressed, and developers were nervous about making long-term commitments. Using our land, rather than releasing it directly for development, assured Kier of our

commitment and willingness to work with the private sector. This joint venture allowed us to unlock the potential of underused, highly contaminated land, with Kier matching the value with equity. Through the partnership, we have retained influence in shaping Riverwell, supporting Kier as our development partner, whilst also receiving a revenue return and future revenue stream.

Now at around the half-way mark, Riverwell has already delivered: over 550 new homes (both apartments and housing, including around 30% affordable homes), with 700 to follow; a new hospital access road, which has also opened up the site for regeneration; 86,000ft<sup>2</sup> of industrial space; a 1,450-space multi-storey car park for the hospital; and new green, open space for the community. Through commercial deals with other developers, the LABV has accelerated development of two areas of the Riverwell site, one delivering a new style retirement village, the first of its kind in the country for the developer.

# WATFORD RIVERWELL

## Watford Gateway – unlocking potential

With around 9 million people travelling through our town every year, Watford Junction is Hertfordshire's busiest station and a major gateway to our local area. Currently, this is an area with massive potential, given its fantastic travel links. Through our Watford Gateway regeneration scheme, £1.6 billion worth of investment will be leveraged over the next 10 to 15 years, which will create 3,500 new homes, new jobs, significantly improved services, transport infrastructure and leisure facilities, 75,000m<sup>2</sup> commercial space, 65,000m<sup>2</sup> retail space and a new primary school.

We're already working alongside partners Halkin, Network Rail, London North Western Railways and Hertfordshire County Council to navigate this complex, yet exciting, scheme, with a range of land ownership and are delighted that Berkeley Homes is delivering the first phase of these ambitious and transformational plans through its Eight Gardens development of 1,266 new homes, which includes affordable homes. We've worked closely with Berkeley in the planning stage so that Eight Gardens is an exemplar for town living, benefitting from art installations, landscaped gardens and water features, providing quiet spaces to relax.

## Watford Business Park – creating a modern, leading-edge home for business

Located next to Croxley Park, our [30 hectare Business Park](#) is home to over 100 business employing more than 1,000 people. We recognised the value of the park to our economy and local jobs, complementing the business profile found at Croxley and many of the pre-existing buildings were old and not geared to the current needs of businesses. We are undertaking a £20m major redevelopment project, supported by £5m of funding from Hertfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP), via the Local Growth Fund. Inspire is creating 6,010sqm of commercial premises and hosts four large double unit

warehouse buildings, one quadruple unit building, one smaller pavilion building and a café creating the right kind of high-quality spaces and conditions for local businesses so that they can flourish. The 14 new units feature modern, flexible business units for small and medium sized businesses, with potential occupiers including businesses in the film, TV, life sciences and manufacturing sectors. It increases the Business Park's employment capacity, with the potential to create an additional 180 jobs in the town, whilst providing impetus and an incentive to other owners to regenerate and modernise their holdings across the park.



## Rediscovering the River Colne

Our ground breaking initiative to [restore the Watford stretch of the River Colne](#) links our environmental, biodiversity, health and community aspirations for Watford and is backed by the enthusiasm of local people. The drive to improve the health of the river for plants and wildlife came from the community and the value of reconnecting residents with this locally, and nationally, important natural and cultural asset has been recognised by funding from Affinity Water and National Lottery Heritage Fund. We have galvanised a wealth of partners to bring the project to life – Groundwork (East and South), Environment Agency, Colne Valley Fisheries Consultative, Affinity Water,

Thames Water, Hertfordshire University, Surrey Space Satellite Technology/Airbus, West Herts College, Community Connections CIC Ltd, Watford Green Gym, Herts and Middlesex Wildlife Trust and Veolia. National Lottery Heritage funding is supporting the 3-year 'Tales of the River' community engagement programme covering: 45 wild play sessions, a 12-week programme to train people in green/environmental skills, 18 river ambles, 12 podcasts, 50 Travelling Tales events and two intern placements; a great example of the council leveraging physical improvements as an impetus to drive community engagement.





## Transforming Travel in Watford

Our [Transforming Travel in Watford](#) strategy sets out our 20-year commitment to making changes to how we travel to, from and around Watford, supporting our carbon reduction challenges and housing and employment growth. We have partnered closely with Hertfordshire County Council, as the highways authority, to develop how we can make it easier and greener for people to travel, particularly by walking, cycling and using public transport. This includes oversight and direction from a joint council member steering committee. We recognise the challenge of changing people's relationship with the car and moving to more active travel, particularly given the current national context in relation to sustainable travel, but we are keen to move forward, learning from others and, joining forces with our county council colleagues, teaming up with our community on solutions that work for Watford.

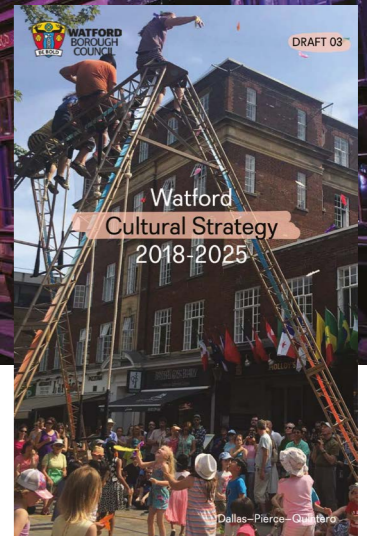
### Key initiatives in our strategy include:

#### Beryl Bikes

We have been at the vanguard of introducing a bike hire scheme, partnering with [Beryl Bikes](#) to offer both electric and traditional bikes across the town. Riders have clocked up one million kilometres since the scheme was first launched in March 2020 - the equivalent of almost 25 journeys around the Earth. Feedback from users shows that, on average, nearly a fifth of the 347,000 bike, and e-bike journeys made in Watford have replaced road transport journeys - including driving a car/van, being a passenger in a car/van, using a taxi or riding a motorbike or moped. According to industry calculations, this equates to over 43 tonnes of carbon dioxide emissions saved - the equivalent of more than 19,000 litres of petrol. Our experience has inspired neighbouring authorities and we are currently in discussions with them about expanding the scheme into both Three Rivers and Hertsmere.

#### Watford to Croxley Link

We have pushed forward with plans to explore options to re-open the disused stretch of railway between Watford and Croxley, working with Hertfordshire County Council, Three Rivers District Council and Network Rail on innovative solutions to improve connectivity and forge better travel links across Hertfordshire. The [link](#) would connect Watford town centre, Watford General Hospital, Watford Football Club and Croxley Park with Croxley Green and Watford Junction, as well as the wider network. Atkins, is currently developing plans to make the most of this valuable route, opening the door to new ways of using the link and, with transport technology moving forward at pace, there could be some exciting and groundbreaking ideas coming forward. A successful scheme will form a key part of the county's overall strategic travel planning, uniting the ambitions of the Watford Croxley Link with HERT ([Hertfordshire Essex Rapid Transit](#)), which will create an east-west transport corridor that runs from Watford and Hemel Hempstead in the west to Harlow (Essex) in the east.



#### Renewal through culture

Our decision to put Watford's culture offer at the heart of our place-shaping reflects the value of the town's creative drive, underpinned by our [Cultural Strategy](#) and reflected across our priorities and strategies including our Council Plan, Economic Development Strategy, Voluntary and Commissioning Framework and emerging Public Arts Strategy, and our major programmes and projects, including the Town Hall Quarter programme. We recognise the economic and social benefits a vibrant cultural sector offers, extending beyond our boundaries and contributing to the wider economy and community wellbeing. By building on our cultural assets, and the wealth of associated talent within Watford, we are encouraging growth, not just in the creative sector but also in associated businesses, such as hospitality. Bringing together the town's key cultural players in our Cultural Leaders' Forum has given direction to the sector, steering it through the difficult days of lockdown and, subsequently, to renewal. We are looking forward to our new cultural partner, AEG Presents, joining the forum and providing further creative insight and experience to our collective approach.

Our enthusiasm for cultural renewal and making the most of the breadth of benefits it can deliver is mirrored across the county, with [Hertfordshire LEP](#) and the [Hertfordshire Growth Board](#) championing

the film and TV production sector as pivotal for the county, with 4,000 local jobs associated with the sector, the majority of which are in South West Hertfordshire (2022). Recent news of [Warner Bros expansion](#) plans at Leavesden Studios is a good indication of the value and importance of the creative industries to our area and the wider economy. It puts us firmly on the global map for film production, with 4,000 new jobs and delivering a huge boost to the local economy, which aligns with Watford's own economic growth priority to nurture the creative, digital media and screen industry sectors.

[Warner Bros](#) is part of the wider film studio investments in the area with Sky Studios at Elstree and Sunset Studios near Broxbourne. This shows a massive vote of confidence and major private sector investment in Hertfordshire's role as a premiere location for film and TV production in the UK. We are actively engaged in this dynamic ecosystem, forging strong relationships with Warner Bros and, at county level, our Elected Mayor is on the Creative and Screen Industries Board and our Chief Executive is a member of the Creative and Screen Industry Panel. This helps position Watford within the wider creative economy and provides the strategic focus and insight to support our own cultural ambitions.



## Involving and listening to our customers and community

### Communications and Conversations

Our [Communications and Conversations Strategy 2023-26](#) aligns our voice to the Council Plan, amplifying our messages and enhancing the profile of the council, our services and all that we do to support the town, our residents and make Watford so special. It sets out how we will demonstrate the council's commitment to keep local people informed and engaged, looking to do this in a way that is meaningful through two-way conversations and engagement. Through the strategy, we have the ambition to take our communications to the next level, learning from others and seeking innovation and new ways of working. We have built a strong communications platform on which to deliver the Communications and Conversations Strategy 2023-26, with high levels of engagement through social media and good reach across the Watford community and

beyond. Our social media figures are comparable to much larger areas, which allows us to deliver cost effective, immediate messaging and build different communities of interest. We know digital communications is not everyone's preference. Our 'About Watford' magazine is delivered to every home in the borough twice a year and we include an overview of our budget, services and achievements against our priorities in our annual council tax leaflet. Like the Council Plan, the Communications and Conversations Strategy and Delivery Plan are outward facing. A separate internal communications strategy for staff is being developed, which will complement the Communications and Conversations Strategy, recognising it is a shared responsibility, and everyone has a part to play in supporting and delivering good communications for the council.

### Customer Experience and Digital Inclusion

We have refocused how we deliver excellent customer experience, recognising that people's needs continue to change with digital and technological innovation and the impact of the pandemic, the cost of living crisis and inflationary pressures. Whilst our [Customer Experience Strategy 2022-2026](#) focuses on designing services to empower customers to help themselves through new and efficient ways and 'digital by design', we also know there are customers who might not be able to access our services digitally either by choice, or lack of funds. We are committed to delivering our services so they are accessible, including for those who prefer telephone or face-to-face services. By enabling those customers who prefer online, we can focus on the most vulnerable residents or those who need the most support. This is underpinned by our culture, values and behaviours, through which customer experience straddles all that we do and the way we work and by a refreshed suite of customer service standards.

We have championed the 'Staying Connected' project across Hertfordshire as the lead district, working with our partners, Watford and Three Rivers Trust (W3RT), to connect those facing digital isolation with digital champions to either improve their skills or provide access to technology.



# 5 Place leadership



**We recognise that we work within a complex landscape of public and private sector organisations and have a strong track record of collaborative leadership that achieves improved outcomes for the town and community. However, we also know from experience through COVID-19 and areas such as the emerging new health agenda, we need to remain agile to respond and influence change. Our role continues to evolve and we must be alive to this in order to take advantage of the opportunities.**

**Over the last three years, we have fundamentally reset our external relationships to build even stronger and outward looking alliances. Partnership working is critical in developing a collective understanding of place, co-creating solutions and jointly delivering where it makes sense and works for Watford and contributes to the wider system.**

### Our leadership

Since 2018, the council has experienced significant changes in both its political and officer leadership. The retirement of the previous Liberal Democrat directly elected mayor in 2018 after 16 years in office and the Managing Director in 2020 after 11 years could have signalled a period of uncertainty for the council and the town. However, the council recognised that this was the right time to seize the opportunity to build on what had been achieved and to drive forward with a renewed focus and energy.

[Peter Taylor](#) was elected as Mayor in 2018 and re-elected in 2022 for a further four years on a refreshed and ambitious [manifesto](#) for Watford. We are now just one of two district councils in the country to have the elected mayoral system. For Watford, this political leadership continues to be the driving force behind the council's achievements, providing strong community leadership, clear direction on what needs to be done and offering our residents an important democratic link to the council. It is a strong voice for the town, advocating for Watford, our residents, businesses and community. This is demonstrated in areas such as the need for government funding for South West Hertfordshire's acute hospital provision, issues like the national housing crisis and planning framework and representing

Watford in both public and private sector strategic partnerships, including Hertfordshire Growth Board and Hertfordshire Infrastructure and Development Board.

The [Mayor and Cabinet](#) model provides an effective and productive framework for member/officer working relationships at Watford; the clear lines of decision-making and accountability have been critical to the council's achievements. Currently, the Mayor is supported by a Cabinet of seven portfolio holders who work closely with the Corporate Management Team to develop and deliver the council's agenda. This Cabinet has evolved to support succession planning, with new members appointed following the Mayoral election in 2022, providing a strong balance between experience and new talent. This has included one of our councillors, who was elected last year, stepping up this autumn to provide cover for our Portfolio Holder for Neighbourhood Services who is currently facing a period of medical treatment.

The council has [36 councillors](#) representing [12 wards](#). Councillors each serve for four years. One third of the council is elected each year over three years, followed by one year without election. Following the May 2023 election, the council has 27 Liberal Democrat councillors and nine Labour.



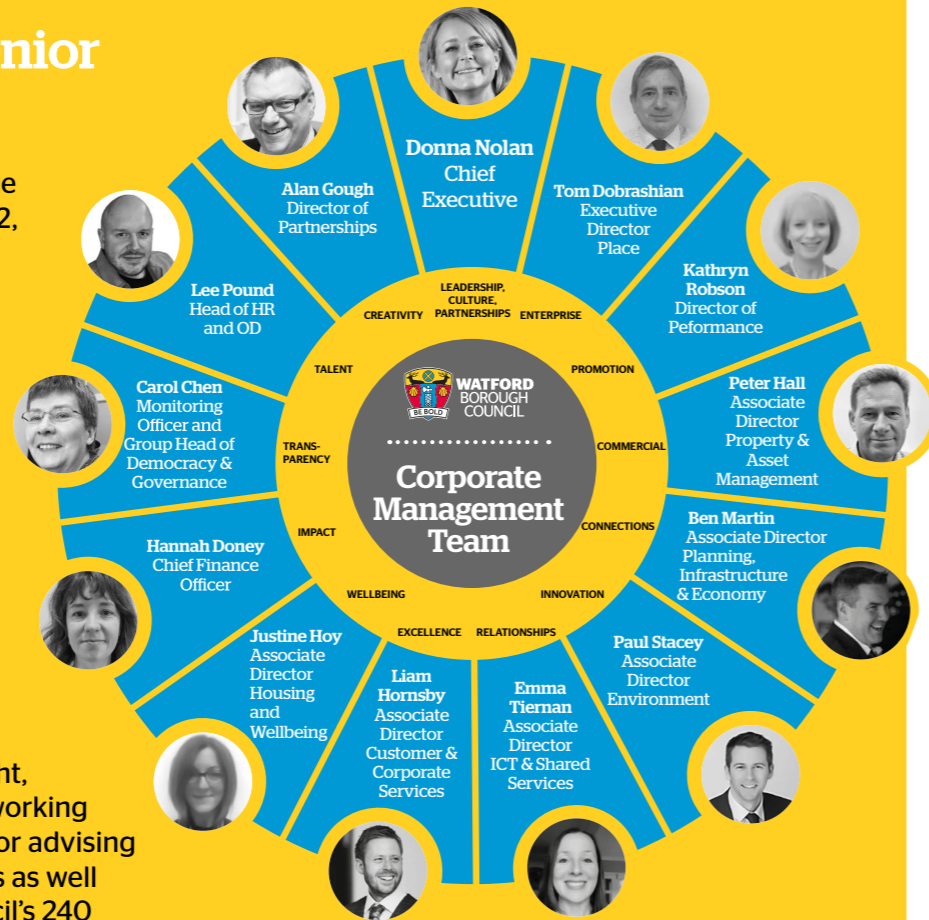
Our current Chief Executive, Donna Nolan, joined the council in February 2020, just weeks before the COVID-19 pandemic hit and, like all local authorities, we were thrown into pivoting our resources and ways of working to support our residents and businesses manage, survive and, ultimately, thrive through the global crisis. However, under our new leadership, the council took the bold decision to push forward with an ambitious programme of internal improvement, strong delivery and raising the council's profile beyond our boundaries, taking to heart the recommendations of our last Peer Challenge (2017). This has been a massive factor in our refreshed approach to place leadership.

## Focused and clear Senior Management

Spearheaded by the Chief Executive, the senior management restructure in 2022, created a new corporate management team (CMT) that recognised the outstanding talent within the council and opened up opportunities for progression and for our rising stars to broaden their remit and experience. A critical success factor for the restructure was that all posts were filled internally and the impact has been seen in the significant progress in delivery over the last year and the retention of key people in key posts. The arrangements have been in place for just over a year and we have benefited from the capacity and focus the new structure has brought, championing innovation, partnership working and collaboration. CMT is responsible for advising Cabinet and implementing its decisions as well as providing management to the council's 240 members of staff.

CMT comprises 13 senior managers: Chief Executive, Executive Director (Place), two Directors (Partnerships and Performance), Group Head of Democracy and Governance, Executive Head of Human Resources and Organisational Development, Chief Finance Officer and six Associate Directors - ICT and Shared Services, Health and Wellbeing, Customer and Corporate Services, Planning, Infrastructure and Economy, Environment and Property and Asset Management.

Since forming, CMT has invested in a leadership development programme. This has built understanding of their team dynamic, cementing trust and productive working relationships to set the culture for forward-looking scenario planning, creative horizon scanning and tackling issues together, like the budget.



We know any organisational structure needs to respond and flex to match the council and our community's changing needs. Reviewing our CMT structure is included within our budget considerations.

The Chief Executive has also convened further key groups and forums to steer and direct the organisation. Through the statutory officers group, she meets directly with the Group Head of Democracy and Governance and Chief Finance Officer and our internal auditors to undertake a more forensic analysis of key governance issues and to provide additional assurance to members. The Chief Executive led Strategic Group meets to support and drive our strategic framework, including emerging strategies, policies and initiatives. She has also established regular meetings with the council's auditors and with external audit, which have been welcomed.

## Partnership Framework – linking to the wider system

A major growth for us over the last three years is a much more concentrated focus on building the systems, relationships and partnerships where we can make an effective contribution and which, in turn, deliver benefits to Watford, our residents, businesses and community. Through place leadership, we provide the catalyst for bringing together key partners who, through their combined expertise, energy and commitment, can support our ambitions for the town. They are often in a better position than us to exert the right levels of influence across their chosen sector and can also help unlock funding where this is appropriate.

## Forging stronger links across Hertfordshire

Hertfordshire  
Local Enterprise  
Partnership



HGB Hertfordshire  
Growth Board



We have looked outward to build stronger relationships with our local government partners, including Hertfordshire County Council and Hertfordshire districts. We were invited by the County Council earlier this year to present on Watford, the council and our agenda for our place, which was well received and has led to deeper understanding of how we can mutually support each other and create even stronger links across the county. Our Chief Executive has built effective networks across the county and is an engaged and active member of the Chief Executive Coordinating Group.

We recognise the changing landscape at county level, which is influencing the drive for uniting behind a shared ambition in terms of successful growth and economic prosperity as well as gearing Hertfordshire up for a county deal and greater devolution.

We have always been proactively involved with Hertfordshire LEP at both the political and officer level. The Elected Mayor has been on the LEP Board since 2020 as a local authority representative and Watford has benefited from both important strategic and financial support for a number of our key development projects, including Watford Business Park, Riverwell and Clarendon Road.

The LEP has shown the value of bringing together the county's collective energy and insight and the success of joining forces behind a common

purpose. We are keen to maintain this impetus and are actively engaged with Hertfordshire Growth Board and Hertfordshire Infrastructure and Delivery Board, which the Elected Mayor chairs. He has also recently become chair of the Digital Connectivity Board and co-chairs the Re-invigorating High Street group. Both the Mayor and the Chief Executive regularly present at the Growth Board and the Infrastructure and Delivery Board to highlight Watford's contribution to the Hertfordshire economy and to champion the benefits of collaborative problem solving and long-term visioning. For Watford, we see this as a mutually beneficial dynamic for us and the county as there is strong synergy between our aspirations and mission for the borough and the wider county goals for growth and prosperity.

The momentum for greater devolution of powers and funding is gaining pace in Hertfordshire. Following previous considerations in 2020, where we joined with our district partners to set out potential unitary options for Hertfordshire, taking account of population size and distribution, strategic geographies and financial costs and benefits, we are aware a level 2 county deal is now on the table. If the conditions are right for Hertfordshire, the deal could be accelerated within the period of this government (by the end of 2024). We don't underestimate the impact, looking at the models and experiences from other parts of the country, but are keen to engage with the county to understand its appetite for involving districts as the deal evolves.

## Our shared services

We have a good record of exploring ways we can share services that both guarantee the quality of services and have the potential to generate real cost savings. We were at the forefront of the shared service model, partnering with neighbouring Three Rivers District Council for IT, HR, Finance and Revenues and Benefits from 2009 and for Procurement since 2014. This brought a combined savings of £1.5million per annum to both authorities and, as the model matured, it has evolved to 'lead authority', providing clearer leadership and direction for potential future expansion. A joint management board between Three Rivers and Watford oversees these shared services.

We have taken our learning and experience into our recent shared services partnership with St Albans City and District Council (SADC) for the delivery of Planning Enforcement, Building Control and Legal Services. Both authorities recognised that entering into a shared service would ensure more resilience in these key service areas through increased capacity of the staff and their greater breadth of knowledge. The new arrangements, with Watford the lead authority for Planning Enforcement and Building Control (launched in 2022) and St Albans for Legal Services (launched this year) are already seeing enhanced quality services with better opportunities for staff and skills development.

### Our co-designed shared services vision:



**Resilience** - build additional resilience to manage workload peaks and periods of annual leave, sickness and other absence



**Service improvement/enhancement** - transformed, digitally enabled, proactive, solution focused and cost-effective services that deliver a better customer experience and value for money



**Staff development opportunities** - greater opportunity for career progression, skills transfer and job satisfaction, support recruitment and retention



**Customer service improvements** - ensure customer complaints are dealt with efficiently and effectively



**Financials** - cost of future shared services must not cost more than it currently does. As such, there is a need to balance the ambition of the shared service and the other drivers with the ongoing cost

The relationship with St Albans continues to flourish and our Mayor and Leader of SADC have indicated that other opportunities should be pursued where they offer benefits to both councils and align to their priorities. Currently, this includes HR and OD services, which potentially would extend our arrangements to other Hertfordshire councils. Local Partnerships (a joint venture between the Local Government Association, HM Treasury and the Welsh Government) has secured Local Government Association (LGA) funding on our behalf to support the work on the HR and OD shared service business case. This provides the chance to strengthen and enhance the current shared service model and identify how the changing needs of current and

prospective partners can be accommodated by the model. Using the funding we will work with Local Partnerships to develop a methodology and tools that can help other councils understand the potential resource implications of merging transactional services.

Our political leaders meet to oversee the governance of the current shared services and to explore emerging opportunities, strengthening the synergies and understanding that underpins our approach. We recently convened a meeting of all South West Hertfordshire leaders and chief executives to promote political dialogue and direction, greater joint working and to really understand and assess future opportunities.

## Building relationships with the wider local government community

We have proactively taken opportunities to engage with the wider local government community, sharing our experiences and learning with others. We were thrilled to be chosen to be part of the Innovation Zone at this year's LGA conference with two of our Associate Directors presenting on how we have embraced agile and new ways of working.

Our Chief Executive is keen for Watford to contribute to key strategic debates for local government, speaking at a range of conferences and events including on health (Local Government ICS Workshop), place making (LGC Future Places and Excellence in local government) and leadership (Solace Springboard event and Solace Total Leadership). On a national level, she has developed good working relationships with DLUH, allowing her to be a voice for districts at government level.

She has also taken her experience as a District Council Network (DCN) and Solace mentor to encourage other officers to be involved in creating deeper links across our networks. Our Executive Director is now an LGA peer and one of our Associate Directors is now also a DCN mentor.

Our Elected Mayor has been a member of the LGA's Improvement and Innovation Board since 2021. He is an LGA peer mentor and has helped facilitate LGA training courses for new portfolio holders.

Over the last two years, we have partnered with other Hertfordshire districts (Dacorum and Stevenage) at The UK's Real Estate Investment and Infrastructure Forum and are pleased that this will be extended to a county presence in 2024.

## Watford 2040 - a revitalised place board to steer Watford's big vision and missions

Watford 2040 is a great example of our improved understanding and commitment to positioning the council and all that we do within the wider context of the county, region and national agenda. During 2023, the council, partners and residents have co-created a vision for Watford's future, grounded in understanding of the town's strengths, opportunities and challenges and shaped by community consultation so that it is authentic and reflects people's experience of Watford as a place. Drawing on the commitment and enthusiasm of our 'One Watford' strategic partners and the views of people who live and work in, and visit the town, our 2040 vision and missions sets the roadmap for Watford's future. As a vision it challenges us as a town to harness our combined drive and resources to take the steps that are needed now, and in the coming years, to achieve this future. We recognise that we are still at the early stages of our journey to Watford 2040 but have been inspired by the enthusiasm and commitment of our key

partners and anchor organisations to embrace this shared direction for Watford. Through our refreshed and renewed One Watford Place Board, which is chaired by the Elected Mayor, we are now bringing together how our vision will translate into action and will consistently test the impact and outcomes we achieve through Watford 2040, including through a suite of place-based indicators. While we are currently inviting new partners to join the Board, partners already participating include West Hertfordshire Hospitals NHS Trust, Watford Community Housing, West Herts College, W3RT, Watford Police, Watford BID and Hertfordshire County Council.

As well as resetting One Watford, we have established or refocused a range of networks across the town that are enabling key organisations and those within them who offer leverage and influence to play a part in Watford's ambitions and success.





## Leadership through collaboration

### Case study: Assembling for the cost of living emergency



Our Elected Mayor was quick to understand the life changing impact the cost of living crisis that hit in 2022 would have on our more vulnerable residents and that a coordinated borough response would help concentrate our efforts and provide support for those tackling issues at the frontline. He convened a Forum that brought together schools, voluntary groups and charities, mental health services and the county council to map the support available in Watford, identify gaps and actions that we could take collectively.

From this, the Forum established a network of 'Welcoming Spaces', testing the concept across the borough and understanding the impact. These were supported through the Watford Community Fund the Mayor established during the COVID-19 pandemic, creating a local charity fund that can flex to support our residents as needs emerge. Feedback from the Forum has been extremely positive, with attendees appreciating the chance to share experiences and ideas and build connections.

### Case study: Convening health for better outcomes



Health remains a major determinant of so many quality of life factors and one of the biggest challenges of our generation, with physical and mental health outcomes influencing every part of our lives from cradle to grave. The recent complex and inter-related changes to the delivery of health and care services are far from an easy agenda for district councils to navigate.

We took the decision, informed and inspired by the King's Fund research *Driving better health outcomes through integrated care systems: The role of district council* and the DCN's research into the role of districts in health outcomes, that to achieve the best for our residents, early engagement and understanding of the new health environment would create the best platform for the Hertfordshire and West Essex Integrated Care System (ICS) that serves Watford to flourish.

We tested our views with our health partners and, based on their positive feedback, we convened an engaging and interactive workshop, cutting across primary and secondary health care delivery, local government and the voluntary and community sector. This has sparked critical conversations and helped build a collective understanding of how we can work together to identify and tackle Watford's health challenges and opportunities, recognising that healthier places are not about structures but the combined determination and commitment of those who contribute.

Our partners have endorsed the value of our proactive approach and are keen to continue for Watford to be seen as an exemplar of what can be achieved. Our Chief Executive is continuing to help drive the future direction of the ICS, particularly in light of collective devolution discussions, sharing Watford's experience with the wider health community across Hertfordshire and West Essex.

### Case study: Building Watford's business voice



We know the last three years have been difficult for our business and developer community as they have faced the unprecedented impacts of COVID-19, the cost of living crisis and the highest rates of inflation and interest rates in 40 years. Whilst we had good connections, we saw that these needed to be raised a level, opening up opportunities to our businesses to network with us, and each other, and engaging beyond the town so Watford is represented in county, regional and national debates on economic growth and investment. We introduced a 'key business' approach so that we initially build a one-to-one relationship with businesses and developers, introducing them to Watford's vibrant business community and the networking opportunities available. This has opened a number of doors, which we see as being of mutual benefit, strengthening our business networks and encouraging companies and businesses to be part of place shaping and the wider life of the town.

Our Developers Forum is an opportunity for investors to come together to share experiences and to better understand how their input is contributing to the bigger picture in Watford. We have also used it as an opportunity to consult them on some key areas for their

business needs, such as local planning policy and how this impacts their investment plans.

Our Business Connect forum is open to all businesses in the borough, including our large number of smaller enterprises. These meetings are a way of learning what attracts and keeps businesses in the town, offering or signposting support and building shared understanding and links across sectors.

A tangible example of the impact our Economic Development's reenergised approach was our recent 'Meet the Buyer' event (September 2023), where we convened over 100 local suppliers to meet some key 'buyers' as part of our commitment to keep spend in our local economy and help our smaller businesses thrive. Representing the 'buyers' were Berkely Homes, Bugler Group, Morgan Sindall, Veolia, PWC and the NHS Herts & West Essex ICS, as well as ourselves as a buyer. The event, part of UKSPF funded Watford Fit-to-Bid project, generated a great buzz amongst the attendees and we had fantastic feedback that some really useful connections were made, which will hopefully go on to become new supply relationships.





## Watford Actually - our place brand and narrative

Strengthening our alliances with local businesses has built opportunities to engage with them on their experience and aspirations for Watford, taking a longer-term, bigger picture view of place. Working with key businesses and anchor organisations, we have developed our place brand strategy, supported by an authentic brand narrative and identity. Through these we have distilled our unique strategic positioning and differentiating characteristics that articulate and forge our sense of place creating alignment between the messages and stories created for, and by, business, community and visitors. Our brand is grounded in a firm understanding of our place, moving beyond the 'hardware' - the buildings, travel connections, facilities and services - to what makes us 'Watford', focusing on the 'software' - the

experiences, culture and people, the attributes they bring and how all these make you feel and respond. So our brand recognises our enviable location, our position as a renowned business hub and our outstanding amenities, facilities and services as well as our character, full of energy and always ready to challenge pre-conceptions and the accepted way of doing things: we are a place that thinks and behaves differently.

Our place brand belongs to Watford, it has been shaped and refined through conversations and, taking it forward, we have brought together a 'place brand coordinating group' to continue to advise and drive strategy, maintaining the momentum, keeping the brand strong and authentic and pivoting to new opportunities.

## Case study: Boosting the voice of our voluntary and community sector



### To listen to, and hear, the diverse voices of Watford

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, safe, happy and healthy, greener Watford.

Watford has a highly motivated and effective voluntary and community sector that reflects our diversity and delivers a range of invaluable services and activities to local people, particularly those who are more vulnerable and facing need. Through our new Community

Engagement and Participation Strategy, which has been formed through discussions with the sector, we have set out the foundations for consolidating and strengthening our relationship with our voluntary and community sector. This includes through a new Community Network, which brings us together to harness our shared purpose. The inaugural Community Network was well attended (40 plus organisations). It received extremely positive feedback from the voluntary and community sector and fostered a willingness to share the commitments and actions in our Community and Engagement Participation Strategy delivery plan.

## Case study: Multi-agency approach to tackle ASB



As a major regional centre and with our transport links with London, Watford experiences a range of community safety challenges not experienced elsewhere in Hertfordshire. Of our police comparison areas, five of the 14 areas are London boroughs and also cities like Southampton, Oxford and Milton Keynes. As well as the thousands of people who visit the borough each week, we also experience community safety issues faced by areas across the country, including the impact of people suffering from mental health problems and other vulnerability issues.

Our multi-agency response brings together a range of partners through our Community Protection Group whose input is essential in tackling issues and working proactively to deliver solutions. Partners, alongside the council and the police, include mental health services, housing providers, the local college and third sector homeless organisations based in the town. This work has recently been recognised by Hertfordshire Police and Crime Commissioner's anti-social behaviour case review, which highlighted Watford's proactive model for ASB case reviews that empower victims to make their voices heard if they feel more needs to be done to support them as an exemplar.



## Conversations with our community

Our members and staff engage with our residents and businesses every day and these interactions provide a great deal of insight into what our community is thinking, the issues they are facing and our local strengths and challenges. We value opportunities to hear from our community and encourage local people to share their views about important decisions for the town and are taking this beyond the traditional resident survey and

focus group approach. We are resetting how we engage with our community, driving more meaningful engagement by working with local people to shape the future direction of the town. Part of this will be opening up wider opportunities to share ideas and initiatives as they are emerging, taking soundings and feedback at a point where they can make a meaningful contribution.

## Watford People's Panel

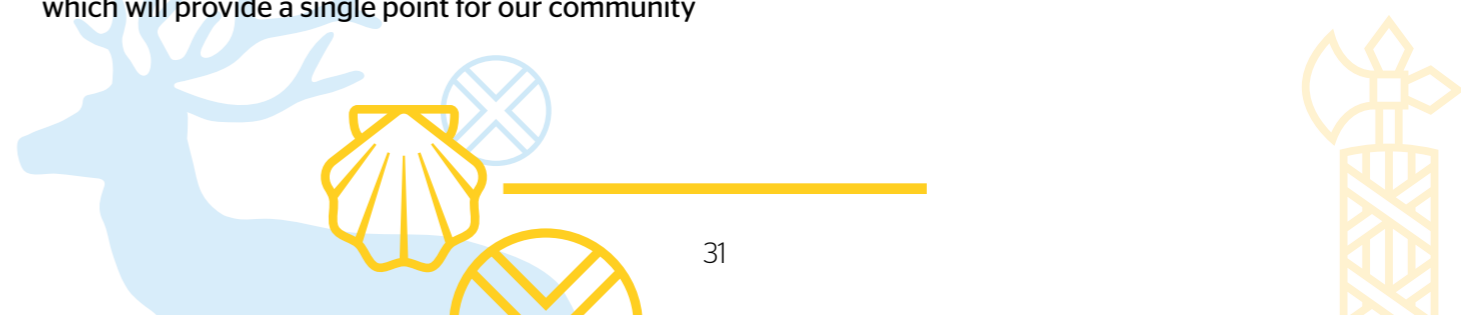
Our People's Panel brings together a committed and interested group of residents who are working with us on a range of issues of importance to the borough and council. This is an opportunity to learn from our residents and test ideas with them,

including our approach to budget challenges, taking them through the journey of how council finances work to what they see as the solutions to what we are facing in terms of savings.

## The Big Watford Conversation

We launched our Big Watford Conversation in 2023 as the start of our ongoing conversation with our community about the town and the council. It will be underpinned by a new consultation portal, which will provide a single point for our community

to access all our conversations and consultations. Our Big Watford Conversation is testing local people's views about their aspirations for the future and informing our wider conversations on place.





# 6 Governance and culture

Over the last three years we have strenuously reviewed the building blocks that underpin our delivery, securing change and assurance where it supports our ambitions. Having the right capacity in the right places is critical for us to continue to evolve and achieve what we have set out to do, including retaining and attracting the best talent for Watford and building a culture that amplifies our commitment to innovation and working in new ways. We are investing in our staff, recognising the council continues to evolve; the skills and approach we need to succeed will adapt and flex as we grasp our future, looking at developing even greater collaboration and alliances.

## Working effectively together

We have very open, effective and mutually respectful relationships between our members and officers, which underpins how we work and the conversations we have, including where we need to build shared understanding and tackle some of our more pivotal issues.

The Chief Executive has introduced new steps to ensure members are fully informed and engaged at the right time in decision making and as new initiatives emerge. She has introduced monthly briefings with the Labour group and strategic briefings with the Elected Mayor. The monthly meetings between portfolio holders and senior management make sure members and officers are working together strategically on policy development and emerging initiatives at an early stage and that there is collective understanding of council progress and performance. She meets

once a month, and as required, with Watford's MP - Dean Russell - to discuss emerging issues and matters relating to the council and the borough, particularly where there is an overlap with national agendas. Directors and Associate Directors also meet regularly with their relative Portfolio Holders, including formal monthly meetings, with agendas reflecting progress against Council Plan priorities and any key areas that need to be raised. Where urgent issues arise, we have developed an effective culture for ad hoc informal discussions so that matters are dealt with swiftly and collectively.

The Mayor and Chief Executive established joint member briefings during COVID-19, sending regular emails to inform and update our members through a very fast evolving situation. These have continued post the pandemic, keeping councillors abreast of areas where we recognise they will want to be up-to-date and engaged.

## Shaping how we work

To continue to build productive and forward focused relationships between Cabinet and senior management, we regularly hold joint awaydays, convening not just to discuss current council business but to lay the groundwork for future thinking. These provide extremely useful windows in people's busy agendas allowing space to reflect

and to explore evolving situations and unfolding events. We have even taken the time to build greater understanding of how we work, sharing both CMT and Cabinet MS Team Management Profiles, which were undertaken as part of our personal and team development programmes.

## Strengthening scrutiny to provide insight and challenge

We recognise the importance, and value, of an engaged and effective scrutiny function to reinforce the transparency of our decision-making and collective examination of areas of importance to our borough and community. Over the last three years, we have implemented a programme of improvement across our scrutiny functions, actively encouraging our scrutiny members to examine key areas of council work and build greater understanding of the town's critical issues. Our refreshed 'task and finish' approach has strengthened how backbench members can provide their insight and experience as we develop policy or challenge performance and has supported far more focused and challenging scrutiny, which is welcomed as an effective check and balance. We have appointed a member of CMT to champion scrutiny and to work alongside members and Democratic Services, giving it a more robust level of advocacy at senior management level. This year we have moved

our improvement journey further forward by developing an Executive / Scrutiny protocol to solidify the commitment to a successful and vigorous scrutiny function.

A reflection of the council's politically inclusive approach is that Finance Scrutiny is chaired by a member of the opposition and Call-In is also chaired by an opposition member (the Vice Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee). The Chairs and Vice Chairs of our Scrutiny Committees are fully involved in shaping the committees' work programme each year. Our 'questions to the Mayor' at Council are open and transparent with opposition members able to raise issues without prior notice and there are some very positive examples of our members uniting behind motions to Council, which are of significant importance to our town and residents such as the cost of living crisis and violence against women and girls.

## Strategic risk management

Whilst we are a council that is ambitious for our town and community, we grasp new opportunities and embrace new challenges but we do this grounded in strong governance, including a robust and open approach to how we manage risk. Recent examples of local authorities where disproportionate risk has led to significant issues have been a timely reminder of the importance of our Risk Management Strategy, which embeds risk management activity into how we work and take decisions. The Strategy provides defined criteria for the analysis of risk and gives guidance on risk appetite and tolerance. This is supported by our approach to performance and project management, where delivery and financial risks are a key part of reporting and assurance. This is brought together through our EPMO Assurance Group, which, through monthly meetings and revolving membership is building organisational understanding and capacity on risk.

Our Corporate Risk Register sets out the council's key risks to the successful delivery of the Council Plan and also how we mitigate and reduce major operational risks or maximise opportunities. Based on quarterly reviews of service risk registers and regular focused sessions on risks within our project framework, this is reviewed regularly by CMT and Audit Committee.








Clear and effective decision-making is supported by our well-established comprehensive [Constitution](#), which sets out how the council operates, how decisions are made and the procedures that are followed to ensure they are efficient, transparent and accountable to local people and includes [member/officer relationships](#). It is reviewed as required by our cross party Constitution Working Party, which considers suggestions for any change made by members or officers. The working party will then make recommendations to Council.



## Annual Governance Statement

We have approved and adopted a code of corporate governance that is consistent with the principles of the CIPFA/Solace Framework 'Delivering Good Governance in Local Government'. Our governance framework is set out in detail in our [Annual Governance Statement](#), which also provides assurance that these controls are operating effectively across the council. Our Audit Committee is a key component of the council's Corporate Governance arrangements. It provides independent assurance to the council on the adequacy of the council's governance, risk management and control frameworks. It also maintains oversight of internal audit and external audit functions.

At their meetings, the Committee considers a number of key reports:

-  External auditors update
-  Freedom of Information requests
-  Progress on the council's annual audit plan
-  Statement of accounts
-  Annual risk management review
-  Annual assurance statement
-  Annual fraud statement

## Audit challenges

As part of our Annual Governance Statement, we undertake a self-assessment against the CIPFA Financial Management Code of Practice (FM Code), the 'gold standard' for financial management arrangements in local government. Last year, of the 17 Financial Management Standards, we assessed as 'green' against 16, with 'amber' for the standard relating to the delay in finalising the statement of accounts.

Like many local authorities we have experienced significant audit delays in our end of year accounts. At the time of this position statement our 2020/21 accounts had not been signed off by our previous external auditors (EY). We have new external

auditors from 2023/24 (Azets Audit Services Ltd). However, we have been advised (September 2023) that subject to concluding the outstanding matters identified, EY expects an unqualified audit opinion on the financial statements. They also have no matters to report on our arrangements to secure economy, efficiency and effectiveness in our use of resources.

Whilst we understand the factors that are contributing to this nationally, we also know that improving our internal processes and approach is now a top priority. This forms part of our overall focus on reinvigorating our financial management arrangements.

## Conversations with our people

Since arriving in 2020, our Chief Executive has steered a more inclusive, open and honest culture, taking positive steps in how we listen to, and learn from, our people so they feel respected and motivated.

Leading from the front, she has put in place a range of ways staff can get involved in shaping the council and what we do in a meaningful way that they can see is genuine and valued.

## Staff Ambassadors Group

Our Staff Ambassadors Group is a highly motivated and engaged group of staff who meet regularly with the Chief Executive to offer insight and share their views. Their role has evolved over the last three years in response to their enthusiasm and willingness to take on an earlier role in strategic planning and thinking, providing valuable feedback on issues ranging from the council's budget, our Equalities, Diversity and Inclusion policy to our new behavioural framework and key strategies.

## Health and Wellbeing Group

We have a dedicated team, supported by our Executive Head of Human Resources and Organisational Development, who champion our health and wellbeing and arrange dedicated opportunities for our people to focus on keeping well, including 'connecting' sessions, yoga and volunteering. Many of this group have also embraced the role of Mental Health Champions and are on hand for anyone needing someone to talk to or a bit of extra support.

## UNISON

We have effective working relationships with our recognised trade union - UNISON and the Chief Executive and Executive Head of Human Resources and Organisational Development meet with Watford UNISON representatives on a monthly basis.

## Conversations

Our people are extremely proud of what they do. We know their work matters to them and each day they go above and beyond for our community. Conversations are a way for staff to showcase what they do and to spend some time with the Chief Executive so that she can experience their day-to-day roles, consider their challenges and celebrate their successes with them.

## Ask Donna

'Ask Donna' is a way staff can ask the Chief Executive any questions they want relating to the council and its work. They can do this anonymously if they wish but all questions receive responses that are shared with staff. Recently, the 'Ask Donna' approach has been extended to seeking ideas from our people on ways to save money or raise income.

## All staff briefings

The Chief Executive regularly holds briefings for all staff to share key messages and important council news and progress. Aligning with our agile culture, these briefings are videoed to share with any member of staff unable to be there in person.

## In Touch

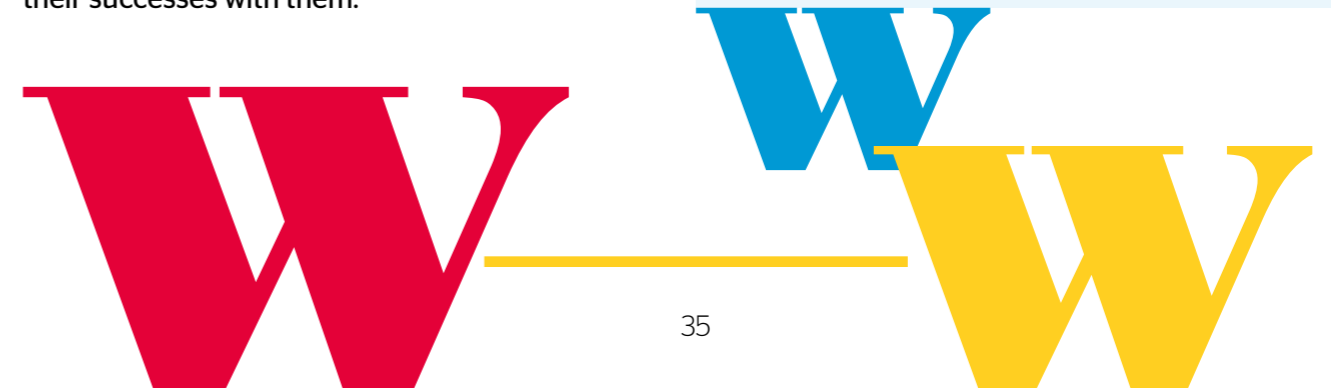
These are regular updates from the Chief Executive with personal updates and a focus on key strategic areas for staff.

## Team Talk

Team Talk features updates from CMT on its latest meeting. Each member of CMT takes turn in writing the update so they can also make contributions from their area, including examples of the council's values in action.

## Staff sharing sessions

Our staff came forward to set up 'staff sharing sessions', which they lead. These give people a platform to raise the profile of the good work they are doing. So far, the following services have been shared: economic development, women in planning, communications and engagement, neighbourhood CIL, conservation management and project and programme management.





# Financial planning and management



Whilst we have a proven record of good financial stewardship, delivering a balanced budget and securing benefits for local people and the borough and making year on year savings since 2018, we know we are now in a very different world. We are facing the most challenging environment for council finances for over a decade and our priority is to secure the council's long-term financial sustainability, challenging everything we do and working alongside our residents to deliver solutions that are right for Watford.

## Our Budget 2023/24

Our [Medium Term Financial Strategy](#) (MTFS) agreed at Council on 31 January 2023 set out an original revenue budget for 2023/24 of £14.962m and Capital Investment Programme of £45.369m, now agreed at £58.441m, including £9.672m carried forward from 2022/23 and additional approved budget changes of £2.400m. Following a review of the profile of expenditure for 2023/24, the forecast year end position is £47.421m with the majority of the underspend of £11.020m required in future years.

## Reinforcing our financial management

We have a proven history of delivering a balanced budget year on year but the last 12 months have presented unprecedented challenges for our finances, which has coincided with our drive to reset how we manage and scrutinise our budgets. The fast-changing risks in our financial environment, precipitated by the highest inflation and interest rates for decades, escalating costs and the change to local authority borrowing, accelerated our impetus to apply our continuous improvement approach to our financial management, ensuring we made a step change to our collective grip on our budget. We were clear our past approach was not fit for our future challenges. We knew we needed to take decisive action to understand our risks, make sure our financial plans are sustainable and resilient and maintain effective and transparent financial stewardship.

Underpinning all our financial planning and decision making has been robust and positive political engagement, including working with our Mayor and Cabinet on our agreed [Budget Principles](#). Key to these is our shared determination to protect our Council Plan commitments and the services that our community value.

We have coalesced as a senior management team to develop a robust and focused savings plan to address our current budget issues. We have examined every part of our expenditure, focusing on generating sufficient savings or income to bridge our budget gap. Simultaneously, we are undertaking a comprehensive review of our capital programme to understand how this could be profiled over the medium term, enabling us to continue to deliver our ambitions but with an eye to prioritising and phasing delivery whilst keeping borrowing costs to a minimum.

The Mayor and Portfolio Holders agreed it was appropriate for us to develop proposals based on a 'mid case scenario' in which key budget pressures have been forecast across our Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS), although we have also planned for the worst case scenario. Our savings plan and forecast incorporate what we know of our budget pressures (arising from contract and pay inflation, interest rate rises, and increases in demand for services) and allows for an element of further financial risk across the MTFS. However, the current economic environment and resulting uncertainty means that other financial risks and issues may emerge, resulting in a worsening of the our financial position. If this does arise, we are ready to identify additional savings across the MTFS.

This savings plan as well as our new Capital Strategy and Treasury Management Strategy are works in progress. They have all been shaped to align with our present situation and will be available to the team during the onsite visit.

In parallel, we are examining all our contracts forensically. One of the benefits of our senior management restructure is that it has brought fresh perspective to our major contracts and unearthed some long-standing matters, which we are now addressing, but which have added to our challenges this year.

A good indication of the impetus we have given to improving our financial management following learning from previous years is that we had very early warning of our budget pressures, generated by the increased rigour by which we monitor and report service budgets during key periods. This has given us the time to plan and to implement some early interventions, including:

- Recommendations to [Cabinet on fees and charges](#), agreed in October 2023
- Recruitment freeze (exceptions process in place for key posts)
- Minimising use of agency staff, interim posts and consultancy
- Minimising overtime
- Delivering contract procurements within existing budgets
- Identifying opportunities to stop or pause activities and initiatives to reduce spend on non-essential matters

## Our balances and reserves

Our General Balances are forecast to be £1.5m at the end of the financial year. This would be £0.5m below the risk assessed level after we have utilised the full balance of our Economic Impact Reserve during 2023/24. Therefore, General Balances will need to be returned to the risk assessed level as a priority to ensure that the council is able to manage financial risks as they emerge.

If additional one-off government funding is announced in the Local Government Finance Settlement, this may enable a one-off contribution to General Balances to return them to the risk assessed level. If this does not materialise, a robust plan will need to be put in place to achieve this, resulting in an additional savings requirement across the MTFS to ensure financial sustainability.





## Taking others on our financial journey

We know that our budget pressures not only affect us but will have ripples across our community. We strongly believe transparency and clear messaging is vital during times of uncertainty and change and have invested in early communications with both staff and partners, sharing the information we can openly and honestly.

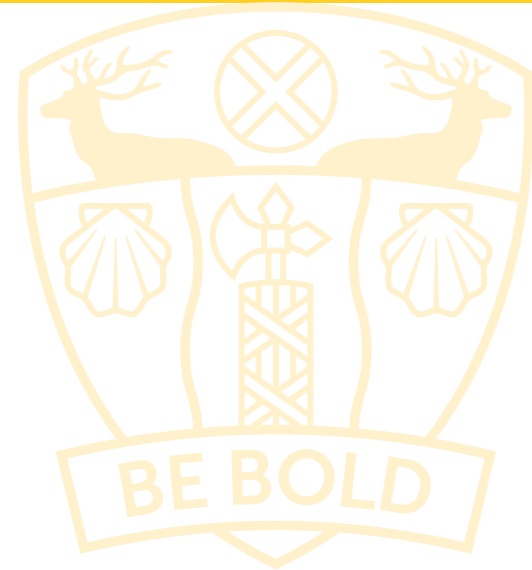
The Chief Executive held face to face staff briefings in the summer to introduce our financial position and open up opportunities for our people to share their thoughts on ways to save money or raise income. Further in person briefings will take place this autumn, building on the regular messages from the Chief Executive in her 'In Touch' communications. All staff can speak with her directly if they wish, with this open-door policy mirrored across CMT.

We have also been candid with key commissioned organisations both those who deliver services for us and those we support through grant funding. This reflects the maturity that we have achieved in these relationships, where we share mutual respect and trust that enables difficult conversations when needed.

Another critical part of our financial journey, is building the resilience of our shared finance team, acknowledging they are an integral part of our goal

for continuous improvement and responding to the changing needs we have as an organisation. Our managers are empowered to manage their budgets and are responsible for monitoring and reporting but we rely on our shared finance service to provide effective strategic support, steering us through our budget challenges and opportunities. When the new Head of Finance joined the service two years ago, it marked a transition for the service, allowing for a different model, based on finance business partnering. This coincided with Watford's need for more strategic finance advice and has offered us scope to jointly work on a proposal that has restructured the shared service, giving Watford a dedicated S151 officer for four days a week. This provides capacity to drive our rigorous examination of our budgets, working closely with our Chief Executive and, as a member of our CMT, with our senior management, Cabinet and members.

Our Finance Scrutiny Committee and Cabinet receive regular and [detailed budget monitoring](#) information throughout the financial year, so the key variances and trends are transparent and well documented. The latest forecast outturn and supporting narrative is summarised in our budget working papers and our budget setting programme.



### Our financial stewardship

## Property Investment Board

Through our Property Investment Board (PIB), which is supported by the market expertise of Lambert Smith Hampton (LSH), we have managed our investments, securing £7.8m annual income through our core investment portfolio by taking prudent decisions on our capital assets, reducing gearing in retail to a more mixed portfolio. The Board comprises members and officers, as well as representatives from LSH and is chaired by our Portfolio Holder for Property, Resources and Customer Service. Through the Board the council balances its target for investment revenue with managing risks and our policy on rent reviews, yields, capital values and the cost of holding assets.

## Shareholder Board

We have extended our governance model to making sure we have the right oversight of the companies where we are shareholders through our Shareholder Board. This oversees the running of the companies from a council perspective ensuring that our objectives as a shareholder/member are met. The board is not decision making but makes recommendations to Cabinet and holds the companies to account to ensure our interests are met and that there are appropriate controls in place for good governance and risk management.

## Croxley Park - a case study

Through PIB, we acquired a 40-year lease over [Croxley Park](#) in 2019, a 70 acre leading M25 business park with fast-growing strategic and regional importance, with over 500,000 sq ft of offices and 190,000 sq ft of industrial units. This was a major decision for the council and one where rigorous testing and due diligence were imperative to protecting our interests, ensuring that the deal on offer did not place us under undue risk and would achieve sufficient returns.

We have a 40-year lease on the park, with the option to acquire the freehold for £10 at the end of year 40. We pay an annual rent (as of July 2022) of £10.14m subject to the cap and collar on RPI of 0-5%. We also received a payment of £92m to cover rent top up and planned preventative maintenance (£24m rent top up and £68m for planned preventative maintenance). In addition, the previous owners, Columbia Threadneedle, constructed a new 85,000 sq ft office building at their own expense. Four years on, the Park continues to contribute £1.75m to the revenue budget.





## Hart Homes - a case study

In January 2017, we formed a ground-breaking joint venture (Hart Homes Watford Limited and Hart Homes Watford Development LLP) in partnership with Watford Community Housing Trust to help tackle the borough's housing crisis by developing much-needed homes, including affordable homes. As one of the first such joint ventures between a local authority and a housing association, this was a pioneering approach to addressing housing need. By working in partnership, the two organisations are able to access additional sources of funding for new homes and make more effective use of their land.

The first Hart Homes development involved a transfer of council land to Hart Homes Watford Limited, delivering a 40-bedroomed temporary accommodation facility alongside 36 flats for affordable rent. Since then, a range of new homes have come forward, including 86 apartments at Croxley View, with 15 available for shared ownership and eight for affordable rent.

Hart Homes (Watford) Development LLP is the first project the council has taken forward under our trading company Watford Commercial Services Limited, which has a 50% interest in the LLP.

The council has senior officers on the boards of both these joint venture companies.



## Commissioner of services - environment and leisure

As a council, we have moved from being a direct deliverer, to a commissioner of services, embracing the private sector where it makes sense financially and delivers quality services. Our relationship with our environmental partner, Veolia, has been in place for over 10 years, with the current contract running to 2028. This has achieved good recycling rates for an urban authority, with a major service change in 2020 when we introduced a separate food waste collection, an annual subscription for garden waste and moved to fortnightly residual waste collection. We still collect recycling on a

weekly basis. SLM/Everyone Active has managed our two council owned leisure centres since 2008, having been awarded a second, 15 year contract term in 2018. The COVID-19 pandemic hit the leisure industry hard and we moved from a positive management fee of £740,176 in 2019/20 to stepping in to allow time for the centres to regroup and rebuild customer activity. Despite this, [Watford Leisure Centre - Woodside](#) and [Watford Leisure Centre - Central](#) retained an 'outstanding' rating by Sport England's leading national quality scheme, Quest.



## 8

# Capacity to deliver

**Having the right capacity in the right places is critical for us to continue to evolve and achieve what we have set out to do. We are confident that our financial planning is putting our budget on a sound footing but we also recognise we need to reflect this across all areas, including retaining and attracting the best talent for Watford and building a culture that amplifies our commitment to innovation and working in new ways. We have delivered a step change in how we build our capacity. We are investing in our staff, recognising the council continues to evolve; the skills and approach we need to succeed will adapt and flex as we grasp our future, looking at developing even greater collaboration and alliances.**

**Our people capacity has nearly halved in the last 10 years (from 460 to 240 headcount), but our ambition has remained. This has meant we have had to flex over the years, facing the tough conversations needed to reduce the size of our workforce but without limiting our aspirations or attracting and retaining our exceptional people. Our experience has certainly seen some long term experience lost but replaced with people taking on greater scans of control, building resilience through the willingness to embrace a wider portfolio of responsibilities and continuing to adapt.**

## Liberating our workforce

**We have steered a massive cultural step change over the last three years, focusing on 'accountable freedom', which has empowered our people, the engine of the organisation, to drive change by trusting them to make choices about where, when and how they work. The COVID-19 pandemic became a catalyst for revolutionising the workplace and offered an opportunity for deep change that has transformed our culture setting a new benchmark for agile working and propelling us forward. We also harnessed our staff's enthusiasm and commitment to underpin our refreshed values and behaviours, with everyone invited to share their views and shape the new Watford culture, which has had a cascading positive effect on our service delivery.**

to a team of enthusiastic, creative and visionary staff meant we have pushed the boundaries and were really challenged to think differently. Our 'pathfinders' worked across the organisation with every team to develop 'Agile Charters', each team's response to agile working, taking into account our agile principles but interpreting them to ensure service delivery within our new ways of working.

The benefits of 'Reimagining Watford' continue. Staff saw they could really influence and take the lead, which has meant not just high levels of satisfaction and motivation, but a renewed willingness to get involved and share ideas of how we can do things differently and better. It has also been a significant factor in attracting new talent to 'team Watford'.

## Reimagining Watford

Our 'Reimagining Watford' project, championed by our Chief Executive, has been recognised for how we have elevated whole organisation cultural change, going beyond a standard approach to agile and new ways of working. Handing ownership

Our work on agile has earned us the iESE 2023 Public Sector Transformation Award for People, Value and Culture, shortlisting in the LGC Workforce - Best Innovation in Smart Working and a session at the LGA Innovation Zone, where two of our Associate Directors presented on how Reimagining Watford has delivered better health and wellbeing outcomes for staff and communities.



## Values and behaviours

Our values and behaviours set out our shared principles and unshakeable beliefs behind which we unite as an organisation. Embarking on redefining our new values and behaviours we committed the time and resource (including external expertise to lead and shape our staff engagement) to deliver a collaborative and shared approach, co-designing them, with all staff invited to be part of their creation and development. This was important given the positive outcome of harnessing our ideas through Reimagining Watford, and our people responded with an authentic and firmly rooted set of values that steered our new behavioural framework.

This will be embedded through a new, more flexible and agile approach to performance reviews, clearly signposting who we are as an organisation and what it means to be part of 'team Watford'. A dedicated team from across the organisation has championed the development of the values and behaviours and are now stepping up to launch and lead implementation.

## People first

We know that in planning for our future, we need to be both stable (resilient, reliable and efficient) and agile (flexible, nimble and adaptable). Our people need to reflect this approach, firmly grounded in robust governance and processes but also inspired to explore and adapt to new opportunities and challenges.

Our new People Strategy - a future focused workforce - sets out how we drive people engagement, success, and the retention of our high-performing people and future employees. The strategy spans everything we do, helping us navigate new and emerging requirements, by ensuring our workforce has the skills they

need, feels empowered and valued for what they do. It also covers how we set in motion ways to attract, develop, retain, and motivate our people. At its core, the strategy is designed to inspire and achieve council wide alignment to our operational and strategic goals and is clearly aligned with our Council Plan.

The strategy has been developed with the support and input of our staff, particularly our Staff Ambassadors Group and Service Delivery Leads, setting a collective platform for our culture, linking to our values and behaviours and leading our goal to be 'an employer of choice'.

## Opportunities for our talent to shine - succession planning

Across the organisation, we have outstanding, committed and talented staff and we want them to achieve their potential and strive to achieve even more. We recognise retaining talent is as vital to our future success as attracting the best new talent; recognising and rewarding our rising stars is embedded in our DNA. We have purposefully identified new avenues for our people to grow and flourish. Over the last year, 15% of our staff have progressed to new opportunities within the council and our turnover is at an all-time low, having reduced by 10%.



## Group Head Assistants

In advance of the Chief Executive's senior management restructure, we established an opportunity for heads of service to experience the next level of management, becoming active members of the senior management team and taking on a discreet piece of work, not associated

with their area of responsibility. We established a robust and stretching recruitment process for Group Head Assistants roles and were delighted that four of our six Associate Director posts were filled by people who had seized this opportunity.

## Service Delivery Leads

Following the senior management restructure last year, our Associate Directors collectively established a new 'tier 4' level of managers across the organisation. Our self-named 'Service Delivery Leads' (SDLs) are the 'engine' of the organisation, providing a wide range of technical expertise as well as management and strategic input. All those currently in post have been appointed internally. The Chief Executive, supported by the Executive Head of HR and Organisational Development, has initiated a series of sessions, which brings the tier together to hear directly from her about the council's direction and to give them an opportunity to provide their views and insight directly to her. Through these, the tier is forming cross cutting links that are strengthening their collective

contribution to the organisation and providing the opportunities that supports the council's approach to recognising talent and succession planning. All the SDLs have received targeted training to support them in their roles and to spur them on to their next career steps, potentially as future Associate Directors.

With their levels of professional and technical knowledge and span of management, we are keen for our SDLs to engage beyond their teams to share their experience and priorities for their areas. Together they have created a programme of engagement sessions 'floor presentations', which they will now lead as a cohort.

## Strategic Initiatives Officers

Our Strategic Initiatives Officers have played a pivotal role in accelerating the achievement of the first year of our Council Plan Delivery Plan 2022-24. Two of the roles have been filled on a secondment basis which have allowed people to continue to push forward with their main professional career whilst working on a part time basis on delivering on some key strategic areas such as Equalities,

Diversity and Inclusion, building understanding of the emerging new health agenda and an ageing well town. The skills and experience achieved in these roles certainly opens up potential different career paths and is evidence that our people can successfully flex beyond their given posts, which is a model we know we can adapt for future organisational needs.





## Monitoring Officer

We have put in place succession planning for our Monitoring Officer role, with two Associate Directors undertaking training to act as Deputy Monitoring Officers, with scope to step up if needed in future.

## Apprenticeships

We are committed to opening up opportunities for careers in local government and enrich the skills of our staff so they are poised for future career advancement as well as appointing 'corporate apprentices' who have worked across the organisation to build their skills and provide additional capacity. We are also

leveraging the apprentice levy for nine of our staff to enhance their professional skills across areas, including construction site management, project management, chartered surveying, digital user experience, environmental health, historic environment advice and HR.

## Member development

Member training starts with a full induction programme led by the Chief Executive. This provides the foundation of knowledge and information needed by all councillors, with specific training for those taking up specific roles and seats on committees (planning, licensing and scrutiny). Our cross-party member development group sets training priorities and emerging training needs

for the year ahead and our Cabinet members have access to LGA peer support to help build their capacity, skills and experience. Changes to our Cabinet since 2018 show that we have sound succession planning, opening up opportunities in key portfolio holders and creating resilience for the future.

## Driving improvement through everything we do

We recognise that keeping on track and making sure we deliver on our promises is critical to the council's reputation and to ensuring we are not slipping on budgets or milestones.

Reflecting our more robust approach to how we set, monitor and report on our Council Plan, we have refocused our service plans, reflecting our commitment to delivery and setting out how each member of 'team Watford' contributes - strengthening the links across our strategic framework.

## A strategic approach to managing performance and continuous evolution

We are a council that is constantly striving to achieve more and we are driven by a commitment to challenge how we do things, be open to different ways of delivering services and consistently seek best value for money, which is so important at a time of pressure on budgets. Our continuous improvement framework was developed in consultation with our staff, including our Service Delivery Leads and Staff Ambassadors Group and we are now sharing our more robust approach through a series of workshops with teams across the organisation. For us, continuous improvement is not a process but a way of working and another aspect of our agile and forward looking mindset,

constantly looking for opportunities to work smartly, reflect and learn.

Our strategies are supported by delivery plans, outlining the activities and actions we are committed to achieving over the lifetime of the plan. We recognise that we need to do more than just have these in place. We need to deliver. As part of our ongoing approach to improving how we monitor and report how we are performing, from 2023/24 we are now reporting specifically on a suite of key strategies as part of our quarterly reports to Overview and Scrutiny and Cabinet.



## Investing in real time reporting to track performance

Over the last four years, we have achieved a major step up in how we manage and utilise business intelligence, understanding the value of the right data, information and corporate knowledge this can achieve, driving better performance and strengthening governance. Framing our work, is our Information and Insight Strategy, which sets out our approach and how we are using our corporate reporting tool (Qlik Sense) as an enabler for an information-rich organisation, which, through real-time dashboards can:

- Pro-actively and rapidly respond to emerging demand/concerns
- Facilitate rapid, evidence-based decision-making
- Drive a robust, data-driven performance management culture
- Allow consistent delivery of more informed communications

To date, Qlik Sense has 67 reports grouped into 15 apps. The data for these reports comes from 18 separate data sources, some of which have a fully

automated data transfer process in place. Our key reports to date are focussed on deriving maximum value from the insight provided and so include customer experience, monitoring projects and programmes, complaints, freedom of information requests and the Planning/Building Control service. However, the real value is leveraged in how this information is used; to inform decision-making, manage performance and identify challenges. During 2023, we have also undertaken a fundamental review of our suite of internal and external key performance indicators. All services were asked to review their KPIs and assess if they were measuring the right things, if we were setting targets that challenged us to achieve more and how this contributed to our wider focus on continuous improvement. In agreement with our Portfolio Holders and with input from Overview and Scrutiny Committee, we have created a new way of processing and presenting KPI results based on our Qlik Sense platform, which allows services to make real-time decisions based on insight and significantly increases the efficiency of this process.

## Improvement in action: strengthening our housing service

Our housing service achieved some remarkable outcomes during the COVID-19 pandemic, tackling some of our more resistant rough sleepers through a Single Homeless Pathway and sustaining a responsive and effective homelessness service, particularly in relation to single homeless people and driving down the numbers in temporary accommodation and households placed outside Watford. However, we knew the service had to change to rise to future challenges, creating a much stronger team better equipped to focus on preventing homelessness.

We recognised we needed a catalyst for change and commissioned EELGA to deliver a peer review, which crystallised our thinking and provided a road map for service transformation. The exciting element for us was that our housing team itself led and drove the change, embracing the opportunity it presented and offering a great example of how we trust our people. Through in-depth engagement across the team, with our members and housing clients a robust and focused new structure has been developed, building on the skills and experience of team members and providing opportunities to grow our talent.



## The EPMO - a step change in project and programme management

Our EPMO is a significant driver of improvement and innovation and an example of how forging stronger project and programme management strengthens accountability and transparency. It has been instrumental in steering our focus on delivery and better outcomes, whether supporting major transformational programmes like the Town Hall Quarter or pivoting swiftly in response to agendas like Homes for Ukraine.

Capacity to deliver our projects and programmes and keep on track was highlighted in our last peer challenge, with the foundations for the EPMO based on this insight and learning. We wanted our EPMO to be a centre of excellence that set the standard for the organisation that:

- Ensures a comprehensive view of all our project and programmes through continuous alignment with the Council Plan, while also allowing flexibility around resource in line with changing objectives, priorities and budgets
- Makes sure the Council Plan and other key strategies were effectively and efficiently translated into delivery
- Provides best practice, bringing all services together, creating the environment for working flexibly and delivering the best outcomes and value for money
- Optimises and streamlines programme and project resource within a single service area with an enhanced focus on benefits realisation and risk management
- Drives our commitment to continuous improvement

We have developed a project management framework and guidance, which we tailor so it is proportionate and responsive to our work and drives how we manage our projects and programmes successfully. Evidence of the capacity the EPMO brings to the council is that, currently, it is supporting and monitoring 14 programmes and 81 projects all of which are regularly monitored and reviewed through BRAG rating, risks, issues, budgets and milestones.



## Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

We are proud of serving a welcoming, diverse and inclusive town and our new Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Policy and Delivery Plan set out our commitment to championing and promoting EDI, through our role as an employer, our service delivery and as a convener of place and community leader. The policy takes us beyond our statutory duties and motivates and guides how we will create a culture where diversity is valued, good practices of equality, diversity and inclusion modelled as a service provider, commissioner and employer and celebrates the diversity of our borough across all our communities.

EDI is embedded in our decision making through our commitment to identify and understand the impacts of our strategies and initiatives through a robust programme of Equality Impact Assessments.

We are glad to be a White Ribbon organisation, following unanimous agreement by Council, advocating for women and girl's safety and using our role as community leader to promote across our partnerships.



## Tackling climate change - our Environmental Strategy 2023-30 - addressing the climate and ecological emergency

We are spearheading the borough's response to tackling climate change and commitment to reaching net carbon zero by 2030 through 'Watford's Environmental Strategy: Addressing the Climate and Ecological Emergency'. Through this we set out the steps to making Watford low carbon, nature positive and environmentally sustainable. Our strategy was supported by extensive consultation, which showed 81% of people were in general agreement, with 59% of respondents 'satisfied' or 'happy' and 22% 'neutral' to our sustainability outcomes. We are ambitious, with 66 potential actions in our [delivery plan](#) and 55 targets identified within the strategy, focusing on improved biodiversity, more recycling, cleaner greener travel, reduced water usage and improved energy efficiency. Whilst over 20 projects are in progress and we have invested in resourcing to drive delivery, without additional central funding, we know this agenda will be a challenge.

Our key sustainability targets are:

- Net zero carbon for council emissions (CO<sub>2</sub> equivalent) by the end of 2030
- Council's own waste reduced to near zero by 2030
- 30% by area of our green spaces managed to support nature by 2030
- Do everything in our power to achieve net zero carbon emissions (CO<sub>2</sub>e) for the borough by the end of 2030
- Do everything in our power to reduce borough waste by 50% by 2030, with recycling making up at least 60% of the waste

We are delighted to have an enthusiastic Sustainability Forum, comprising local people with an interest in the green agenda, which meets three times a year. We are also establishing a climate critical friend panel who will help us design some of the changes we need to make together to deliver our sustainability ambitions.

### Watford's Environmental Strategy:

#### Addressing the Climate and Ecological Emergency

2023 - 2030

#### Vision for Watford

A thriving town, respecting people and planet, creating diverse human and natural ecosystems, while ensuring a net zero greenhouse gas future.







## Commissioning to meet the needs of local people

Unlike many district councils, the council has retained a substantial budget for commissioning services from the voluntary and community sector, although we continue to keep this under review given current budget restrictions. This is in recognition of the important role the sector plays in our community and that it is often better placed to deliver services where organisations have more expertise and insight into the needs of service users. Over the last 12 months, we have undertaken a thorough assessment of our commissioning framework, testing the priority areas of need alongside our council ambitions and the links to the services we have identified for support (infrastructure support to the voluntary and community sector, enabling people with physical

mobility problems to access services in the town centre, advice services, including for families, arts and culture, community centres).

We currently commission services from Watford & Three Rivers Trust (W3RT), Shopmobility, Watford Citizens Advice, Watford and Three Rivers Homestart, Watford Palace Theatre, the Pump House and four council owned community centres.

We have involved our commissioned organisations in the review, listening to them and ensuring they are clear of our expectations going forward, including strengthening and evidencing the outcomes they are achieving across our community.

## Dementia Friendly Watford

Driven by the Elected Mayor's manifesto promise to make Watford a 'dementia-friendly town', we brought together a committed network of businesses and organisations who shared our passion to support the 1,200+ people with dementia and their carers in our community. Having launched in 2019, the initiative was grasped by partners, including Watford Football Club and West Herts College, with our dementia friendly town gaining its own momentum within

the community. Whilst we still play an active role, it has been rewarding to see the strength of the community capacity to embrace this important agenda, including running a dementia café, the Forget-me-not restaurant (staffed by our college's students) and an annual Dementia Action Week. [Our approach](#) received recognition at the Local Government Chronicle awards in 2021 when we were shortlisted in the Community Involvement category.



## Watford Fringe

The borough's annual [live arts festival](#) is full of great theatre, music, comedy, dance, magic and family fun-filled shows is run by our cultural partner, the Pump House Theatre, with the council providing venues and communications and marketing support. In 2023, over 75 performances

took place at eight venues across Watford over the Fringe fortnight. The Pump House seized the baton to deliver this borough-wide festival, capitalising on their creative connections and attracting a range of national and home grown talent.

# 9

# Setting our sights on what lies ahead

Through this position statement, we have welcomed the opportunity to present an honest and balanced overview of our council and our place. We believe that as 'team Watford' we have a lot to be proud of. Taking stock of what we have achieved over the last three years has been a powerful reminder of our collective commitment to our borough and our community. It also serves as a valuable prompt for our future trajectory, drawing attention to our challenges and opportunities and precipitating our thinking and planning. In preparing this statement, we have considered where these might arise and the steps needed to address them.

## Capacity - people and finances

We know our capacity to deliver will be one of our major pressures going forward. We are a council that likes to do more; grasping new opportunities and getting involved is part of what makes us 'bold'. Our people and finances are directed to achieving our ambitious Council Plan agenda but we know this is going to be more stretching in a period of tightening resources. We have a wealth of skilled and motivated people who share our ambitions for the council and borough. Through our People Strategy we are continuing to develop and support our staff, empowering them to flex in response to change and new circumstances

and celebrating individual and team successes, supported by good communications and engagement.

We have identified the need for important improvements to our financial stewardship and, whilst we have a plan in place, we know the next 12 months will be critical to embedding our planned improvements - integrating a new S151 officer into the senior management team, addressing how we shape our capital strategy and manage borrowing, whilst still delivering our regeneration ambitions.

## Evolving the way we work

Our continuous improvement culture means we consistently look for areas where we can improve, evolving how we deliver services and seeing where we can drive efficiencies whilst enriching roles and opening up opportunities for staff to develop.





## Housing and homelessness

Our new housing team structure, designed to better address the rising demand for our services and the pressure on the borough's housing supply for those needing affordable homes, will bed in over the next year as we face the ongoing impact of the cost of living crisis. Our team works tirelessly to prevent homelessness but the wave of those seeking help since 2022 has seen a rise in our temporary accommodation figures, following a pre-COVID period of consistently falling numbers. This not only has a human impact but also significant ramifications for our budget, contributing substantially to our budget pressures.

## Taking community participation to the next level

We are pleased with the steps we have taken to fundamentally review and explore how we engage and open up participation and communication with our VCS as well as refreshing our customer experience and wider communications and conversations. We have already seen a change in our relationship with the VCS who welcomed being part of our journey and the chance to build both stronger networks with each other as well as with us. Whilst there was good commitment and response to the initial discussions, we are keen to keep the energy and momentum across our relationships and forums, which will be bolstered by our commitment to delivering what we have promised.

## Health care integration - the district role

We know from our Big Watford conversation results that health services are really important to local people, which provides an additional spur for us to build on our successful initial discussions with partners on the health agenda and health care integration. This is a fast-moving and complex agenda and we are keen to be part of shaping how this will be taken forward our locality, linking to our own findings and that of the King's Fund

the unique and strategic significance of district councils in influencing long-term health outcomes. We have coalesced place based support for Watford engaging in the new health landscape through a rejuvenated strategic partnership, which is refocused on tackling our big challenges, including health care. We recognise this is a new opportunity but are keen to be at the forefront of district engagement and to shape some tangible, collaborative projects that directly deliver for the local integrated care strategy.

## Devolution and county deals

This is an emerging agenda for Hertfordshire but we recognise there is impetus for a county deal, spurred on by the growth agenda and the integration of the LEP into the county council. We appreciate the importance of being a partner at the table during these discussions as the voice of districts on any new arrangements needs to be heard, based on our knowledge and experience of our areas. The Mayor and Chief Executive are both fully engaged in this emerging agenda.

## Preparedness for the unknown

COVID-19 taught us to be ready for the unexpected. We were able to pivot quickly in 2020 but, like all councils, it took a massive amount of energy and resource out of the system that, as the pandemic subsided, quickly got redirected to recovery and a stable state. With capacity and resource pressures, preparing for a similar emergency is a challenge and we need to reflect on our captured lessons learned and the strength we were able to draw from our community and partners.



**We have commissioned this peer challenge to support us on our journey and are looking forward to bringing this statement to life when the team visits Watford.**

# 10 Case study 01

Date: **October 2023**

Local authority: **Watford Borough Council**

Submitted by: **Jodie Kloss, Strategic Initiatives Officer, Watford Borough Council**

Case study title: **Integrated Care Systems: the role of a district council as a convenor of place**

## Case study synopsis

**As a district council, Watford Borough Council makes a significant contribution to health and wellbeing. The introduction of Integrated Care Systems (ICSs), which place a value on prevention and collaboration, provides an important opportunity to build this upstream role into the system to address health needs and health inequalities. Watford Council is seizing the opportunity to move this developing agenda forward, convening systems partners to understand the issues, making proposals for tangible projects to deliver a sustainable impact on health outcomes and setting out the strategic and practical ways of working to embed this new approach.**

### The challenge:

Health is determined by a complex interaction between individual characteristics, lifestyle and the physical, social and economic environment. 80% of the variation in population health outcomes is attributable to these wider factors.

ICSs represent a fundamental shift in the way the English health and care system is organised. ICSs depend on collaboration and a focus on places and populations as the driving forces for improvement. Their aims include improving outcomes in population health and care, tackling inequalities in outcomes and supporting broader social and economic development.

Around 40% of the population of England live in a district council area which has statutory powers over areas including planning, housing, benefits, and leisure and green spaces. These affect many of the most significant determinants of health. District councils also have advantages in that they are smaller and more agile, reacting quickly, providing democratic community leadership and

working more closely with their communities. But district councils nationally and locally have been the missing partner in ICSs, where there has been minimal understanding of their role, impact and strategic importance.

Watford sits within the Hertfordshire and West Essex ICS, which covers more than 1.5 million people. While Watford is just 8 square miles, there is a ten-year difference for men and a seven-year difference for women in life expectancy between different parts of the borough.

While Watford Council has a strong track record in delivering small, place-based health initiatives, such as a cervical screening project, and as a dementia-friendly community, we had not yet grasped our role as convenor of place. This is a strategic role, with a willingness to accept accountability and responsibility for specific projects with our value embedded and recognised in the system.



## The solution:

Firstly, we undertook an internal mapping exercise to review our reach and impact as a council in affecting our residents' health outcomes. Our conclusions were almost identical to the DCN-commissioned King's Fund Report 2023, which recognised the unique and strategic significance of district councils in influencing long-term health outcomes.

Having recognised our influence in this area, we stepped up to seize the opportunity. The first step has been to convene a discussion. In June 2023, we invited systems partners to come together and consider the role of local government in place-based health. This included representatives of primary care, secondary care, tertiary care, community health, two tiers of local government and the voluntary and community sector. This was a hugely successful event, with invitations sought from organisations beyond the guest list.

The conclusions of the workshop were that: the system must build health and shift the balance towards prevention; the strength of relationships is more important than structures; the new NHS arrangements are evolving fast; and the role of district councils locally has not yet been fully determined. All this creates an opportunity, but we underlined that there is very limited resource and capacity within the council.

At the same time as these discussions about health were ongoing, we were working with partners to create a place board to optimise existing

partnerships and enable stronger engagement on areas that influence the wellbeing and prosperity of place, including health, culture and business. A new place board was developed and has coalesced around a 2040 vision, underpinned by place-based missions and a clear delivery plan is emerging. This will provide systems leadership for the place to deliver sustainable impacts on health outcomes.

We have further harnessed our ambition in this area by setting out proposals to elevate the ambition of some tangible projects where the council could take a lead, or play a key role, to change health outcomes for our communities by maximising collaboration. These include strategic regeneration projects where there is a short window to harness the opportunity to deliver the priorities in the local Integrated Care Strategy, which include to:

- Support our communities and places to be healthy and sustainable; and
- Improve support to those living with life-long conditions, long-term health conditions, physical disabilities, and their families

One of the projects is centred around a fresh approach to the workforce needs of our local NHS services by integrating it into the wider economic development and skills agenda and optimising the opportunities the new medical school at the University of Hertfordshire will bring.



## The impact (including cost savings/ income generated if applicable):

This journey is current and evolving. We are already seeing the benefits in our relationships with partners having taken a convening role and engaging decisively and strategically with a complex problem. We have been recognised for taking the opportunity and being prepared to set a model for district engagement. This approach has fostered more discussion and collaboration across partners.

## How is the new approach being sustained?

This approach is developing with partners and a discussion paper we have developed includes some strategic and practical asks of the system.

Strategic asks include: getting the governance and project structures right; ensuring alignment of values and priorities; embedding the district council in the system leadership at locality and place, and at programme and project level; systems partners spending time together to strengthen relationships and facilitate understanding of differences; and developing system translators who understand different parts of the system.

We are also proposing that we use our place board to build shared purpose and collective accountability and maintain momentum.

The practical asks include: involving the right people in meetings; learning from best practice: understanding pressures: working efficiently, even when it is busy; and ensuring discussions do not become too clinical or top-down. We have also suggested sharing resources, assigning people to the locality to address issues and ensure the right people are engaged.

## Lessons learned:

Through seizing this opportunity, we are learning that we have a hugely important role to play in convening partners around complex issues. Watford has always been ambitious and this work is underlining that complexity should not discourage us from engaging, building relationships, convening and taking a lead.

As a part of our journey, we have learned that there are a number of principles for success - tried and tested elsewhere - which need to be in place in order for us to be successful in our joint endeavour.

We have come to understand that the wider system does not understand the complexity of local government, particularly at a district level. While we deliver a broad range of services and initiatives, as smaller organisations, our financial and people resources are very limited. It is also important for the system to appreciate the important role of political and democratic accountability plays in district councils.

We are also aware, while every place has its own strengths and challenges and that each district will need a place-based approach, there are principles around convening, building relationships and understanding the strategic importance of district councils, which will be important everywhere.

**Contact: Donna Nolan, Chief Executive, Watford Borough Council**

Links to relevant documents:

- Driving better health outcomes through integrated care systems: The role of district councils, The King's Fund and the District Councils' Network
- Dementia Friendly Watford



# 11

## Case study 02



Date: **October 2023**

Local authority: **Watford Borough Council**

Submitted by: **Alistair Napier, EPMO Lead, Watford Borough Council**

Case study title: **Creating an Enterprise Programme Management Office (EPMO) - building a culture of assurance and delivery**

### Case study synopsis

The council recognised that the delivery of its ambitious Council Plan programme needed a revitalised approach to how it managed its project and programmes. Without driving a culture where this was embedded and championed, we recognised there was a potential risk to delivery, which did not align with our commitment to evolving improvement. The EPMO is designed to be a centre of excellence for the delivery of council projects through adopting supportive and proportionate, but robust, programme and project management disciplines, enhancing the organisation's ability to successfully deliver projects to time, cost and quality requirements and realise any anticipated benefits.

### The challenge:

Prior to creation of the EPMO (Enterprise Programme Management Office), there were a number of challenges to the way projects and programmes were delivered across the council:

- More strategic oversight was needed to ensure projects were resourced in priority against the Council Plan, rather than service-level priorities, ensuring best use of resource across the organisation;
- Projects were often resourced by operational staff whose priority was delivering business-as-usual KPIs. We wanted to free up our colleagues' time to focus on their area of expertise, be creative and excel at delivery. The time they could dedicate to projects was also limited, resulting in project time and cost overruns;
- Where operational staff could not resource projects, interims would be recruited for limited periods. As well as having a cost impact, following project closure the project managers would depart, taking their valuable knowledge with them. We were missing out on important learning and development opportunities within the council. This approach also prevented the wider organisation from buying in to the programme and project methodology; and
- There was inconsistent project governance. Those not regularly involved in project management did not have training on best practice in managing projects to time, cost and quality. This sometimes led to scope creep and a lack of corporate oversight.

### The solution:

The council created the EPMO in order to:

- Ensure a holistic view of all council programmes and projects through continuous alignment with the Council Plan, while also allowing flexibility around resource in line with changing objectives, priorities and budgets;
- Ensure that the Council Plan and other key strategies are effectively and efficiently translated into delivery;
- Provide best practice for the council, bringing all services together, creating the environment for working flexibly and delivering the best outcomes and value for money; and
- Optimise and streamline programme and project resource within a single service area with an enhanced focus on benefits realisation and risk management.

The initial impact of the EPMO and its legacy of successful outcomes means the service has developed and grown two-fold in terms of team

size since inception (since 2018) and is now an integral part of council delivery. Team members have been selectively recruited for their wide-ranging project and programme management experience and expertise from both the private and public sector. The EPMO's structure and place within the organisation have been reviewed and optimised to ensure it continues to meet the council's priorities, culminating in the appointments of an Associate Director, who is part of the senior leadership team (Aug 2022), and an EPMO Lead (Feb 2023). The introduction of the council's project management framework, regular reporting and governance model provide robust guidance to the project teams on how to run projects successfully.

In order to give a holistic view of projects and programmes being run by the council and drive continuous improvement, the EPMO introduced a bespoke Business Intelligence reporting tool, providing the council with regular evidence of project KPIs.

### The impact (including cost savings/income generated if applicable):

Delivery of the council's largest transformation programme, the Town Hall Quarter, is evidence of the EPMO in action. The scale of this £200m ten-year programme, consisting of eight projects, is challenging, but the additional expertise and capacity brought in through the EPMO has made it possible:

- The Town Hall Quarter aims to regenerate and transform the northern end of Watford High Street, which is vastly underutilised, but home to two beautiful, art deco, Grade II listed council buildings;
- Watford Town Hall is home to the council's face-to-face customer service centre, staff offices and democratic function, but now hugely underused following the move to agile working and more digital service delivery for customers. The project to refurbish and repurpose this building, and give it new life for a sustainable future, has involved coordinated collaboration between all council services and external partners;
- The programme management team resourced through the EPMO has:
  - Flexed between projects, prioritising resource to ensure milestones are met. Additional project managers and support officers have been brought on to the programme to lead specific work-streams, solving any arising issues;
  - Engaged with staff across all services to design and deliver a new and flexible office that promotes agile working - from July 2022 staff moved into this new office space in the Annex;
  - Engaged closely with the Planning team and Conservation Officer to develop plans that maximise use of the space but respect the heritage of the building; and
  - Worked with senior officers and council members, driving them to think outside the box, in order to maximise what the buildings can deliver for the communities of Watford.



The EPMO is currently monitoring 14 programmes and 81 projects providing regular updates on BRAG rating, risks, issues, budgets and milestones:

- All major council programmes and projects now report into the EPMO and the service is currently monitoring 14 programmes - ten programmes are reporting green (on track) and four are amber (potential risks);
- 65 projects are reporting green, 14 are amber and two are red (delayed / issues);
- Projects and programmes are now directly linked with the Council Plan themes and Delivery Plan commitments, ensuring that these are fulfilled and monitored continuously and feed directly into quarterly reporting to Cabinet and Overview & Scrutiny Committee;
- Project and programme risks are all now tracked and robust risk management ensures that they are identified early before they become significant issues. This enables the council to quickly escalate any potential matters to senior leaders and members

The EPMO-led Town Hall Quarter programme has:

- Demonstrated that 91% of staff from across the organisation are 'satisfied' or 'very satisfied' that the Annexe space supports them and their teams to work in an agile way. The new space has been pivotal in embedding the council's new values and behaviours, and revitalising our culture;
- Embedded agile working and reduced the office footprint in the Town Hall by 74%, therefore maximising space for other uses, e.g. community space;
- Designed a functional and future-proofed customer service centre that is modern but reflects and embraces the listed status of the building;
- Achieved listed building consent for the Town Hall and Colosseum plans, marking a huge milestone in the programme;
- Resulted in a plan to create a new Watford Museum and Heritage service in some of the most beautiful heritage spaces of the Town Hall; and
- Introduced rigorous governance by way of a Programme Board and a Member Steering Group, ensuring transparent decision making.

Beyond the Town Hall Quarter Programme, the EPMO has flexibly delivered projects, such as:

- The decarbonisation of community asset buildings;
- Delivery of Brindle Court supported housing - a dedicated and specialised support unit for vulnerable, single homeless people with high needs;
- Improving quality of life for our residents through the delivery of the multi-award-winning Oxhey Activity Park - a family-focused space for walking, cycling, skateboarding, scooting and play, with the added benefits of a new café with community facilities and accessible toilets;
- Master-planning for Woodside Sports Village - an exciting project to feature a new cricket pavilion and events hall, cricket and football pitches, new changing facilities and a boxing gym;
- Managing delivery of a ten-year project to regenerate Watford's urban river, the Colne. Works include enhancing the river corridor, improving biodiversity and habitats for plants and wildlife;
- Introducing an extremely successful bike-share scheme, Beryl Bikes, which so far has seen more than 300,000 journeys taken and 1 million km travelled<sup>2</sup>;
- Managing the rebuild of Watford Cycle Hub to enable people to travel healthily, quickly and more sustainably within the town; and
- The new state-of-the-art West Herts Crematorium - a five-year capital project jointly funded by five neighbouring local authorities, with Watford leading on the project management because of the capacity and expertise that the EPMO provides.

## How is the new approach being sustained?

The creation of the EPMO was just the first step to changing the way projects and programmes are delivered across the organisation. To bring the rest of the organisation on the journey, embed the change and realise its full potential, the EPMO has:

- Collaboratively enhanced the project-management toolkit and suite of templates to support project managers and sponsors, ensuring a consistent approach;
- Honed a project-management approach that is proportionate, based on the scale of the work being undertaken, recognising that a one-size-fits-all approach does not work for Watford and reassuring those concerned about project governance adding to the workload of already stretched teams;
- Created a quarterly Project Management Forum, bringing all those involved in project management together to share best practice and collectively resolve issues;

- Run engagement events with staff to demystify project management and achieve buy-in for the advocated approach;
- Allowed staff to recognise the value of project management as a professional discipline, essential to the successful delivery of our ambitious programme - 12 colleagues have been supported with bespoke training to successfully achieve Managing Successful Programmes (MSP) Practitioner (re)accreditation; and
- Created the EPMO Assurance Group to ensure appropriate project scrutiny, management, coordination and governance at all levels. It plays a vital role in the overall delivery process, including examination of the project at relevant points in the project life cycle and ensuring the useful and transparent evaluation of projects and programmes' health and direction.

## Lessons learned:

The introduction of the EPMO has been enthusiastically received, as it has brought expertise, structure, vigour and transparency to projects, enabling service areas to focus on excellent delivery and continuous improvement for our communities. Directors and service leads now approach the EPMO directly for project-management resource to support projects and programmes of all varieties, demonstrating

how the approach has been instilled in the culture of the organisation. The EPMO is able to support those initiating projects and provide constructive challenge around corporate priorities where resourcing is limited.

The EPMO was 'Commended' in The MJ Awards 2023 category of 'Workforce Optimisation.'

**Contact: Liam Hornsby, Associate Director Customer and Corporate Services, Watford Borough Council**

<sup>1</sup> As at August 2023. <sup>2</sup> Since March 2020.



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