

Issues with Watford Town Centre that can be responded to through the framework

ISSUE 1: VULNERABILITY TO CHANGE

The town centre is functioning relatively well but needs to improve resilience in relations to macro-economic changes

A key vulnerability is the over-representation of chain retail at expense of independents of chain retail versus independents, services and leisure uses.

Strategic & policy context

Policy implications of structural changes in retail industry are to encourage diversity of uses, with less reliance on chain retail.

National policy allows more flexibility in change of use.

The new Local Plan supports increased leisure, and food and beverage provision.

Engagement results

On average, people feel that the Town Centre serves them fairly well (3.3/5). They are generally satisfied with the range of commercial, retail, leisure and food and beverage options available, but more independent shops would increase the attractiveness of the Town Centre.

The current location of the Market is not ideal, but the food stalls are popular. People felt that the Market could be enlivened by providing a greater variety of stalls, and more events, with opportunities to showcase local talent.

ISSUE 2: BUILDING FORM AND CHARACTER

The domestic scale of the High Street is part of Watford's character and is worth protecting – Watford Place Shaping Panel

Heritage assets sit in compromised settings and could be made more visible Many assets are in need of attention or repair to fully reach their potential.

Strategic & policy context

The new Local Plan contains relevant policies for the Town Centre:

- Sensitively located and designed residential development
- Active frontages on the ground floor
- Base building height of five storeys; justification to be provided for higher buildings
- Protection of heritage assets

Engagement results

There were a number of comments from the social media survey regarding the loss of the town's heritage and replacement of historic/character buildings with modern high rise. Comments also included requests for the town's historic character to be recognised.

ISSUE 3: MOVEMENT

Ring road is a barrier. Watford is dominated by cars and vehicles and their infrastructure, compromising the use of other modes and creating hostile & unattractive environments. There is an under provision of active travel infrastructure, discouraging its use, with poor connectivity of cycling infrastructure

Strategic & policy context

The new Local Plan encourages development proposals that will reduce the dominance of vehicles on the ring road, provide active frontages to the road, and encourage active travel.

The 'Transforming Travel in Watford' strategy proposes:

- Making it easier to get across the ring road by improving existing pedestrian and cycle crossings, and creating new ones
- providing provision for buses and cycling on the ring road
- exploring the creation of a sustainable transport hub in the Town Centre, which will make it easier to switch between bus, cycling and pedestrian travel.

The Local Walking and Cycling Improvement Plan (LCWIP) includes a number of proposals to extend and improve walking and cycling routes around the town centre.

Engagement results

More than 80% of respondents to Watford's Transforming Travel in Watford survey believed it was important that we change our transport network to help combat climate change.

Many people commented negatively on the ring road, and noted challenges for pedestrians and cyclists at existing crossing points, e.g. at Albert Street, Beechen Grove, St Albans Rd and Rickmansworth Road. Disability groups find crossing the ring road particularly challenging.

Landowners/investors see it as a barrier to access for pedestrians.

Respondents to the social media survey felt that the Town Centre is too 'traffic heavy' with a real feeling of lack of appropriate accessible and reliable alternative means of transport to access the town centre.

One respondent commented that the traffic lights at the blue pyramid building are dangerous for pedestrians.

Improved public transport links was the third highest priority for improvement that Commonplace respondents said would encourage them to use the town centre more.

'Getting around' was the fifth highest priority for social media survey respondents. Comments included requests to improve cycling and walking access.

ISSUE 4: PUBLIC SPACES

Poor quality spaces and perceptions of spaces that could better relate to adjacent buildings. Limited spaces to dwell and for public arts and events. Pedestrian space and route legibility is compromised, such as along pavements and back streets at Wellstones and Gaumont. There is a lack of greening in the town centre, and a lack of usable and attractive green space, such as around Church Street

Strategic & policy context

The new Local Plan encourages development proposals that will improve the public realm, contribute to clear and co-ordinated way finding, and enhance linkages to key green spaces such as Cassiobury Park and the proposed Colne River linear park.

The Green Infrastructure Plan proposes the following projects for the Town Centre:

- Improve green access links from Town Centre to key assets, such as Oxhey Park, Cassiobury Park and the Colne River Valley
- Enhance functionality and adaptation to climate change of incidental green spaces such as St Mary's Churchyard and Watford Fields
- Additional tree planting to create a green spine, linking to Cassiobury Park and the Colne River Valley
- Ensure green links to major development sites such as Watford Junction
- Create small scale community-led green space initiatives
- Local play provision – natural play

Engagement results

Along the High Street, Commonplace respondents were broadly complimentary about the public realm amenity, although public space in the north of the High Street was in need of a greater number and range of public events to help enliven these spaces. Public realm at the south end of the high street was perceived to be of poorer quality.

The Church of St. Marys Square received a number of comments that, while generally negative, were focussed on perceptions of use of this space for antisocial behaviour, and there was an identification of this space as an asset to the Town Centre that would benefit from improvement as a peaceful contrast to the adjacent High Street.

Comments from social media survey:

“The town centre should be a place to meet with family/friends in a clean, pleasant environment with a spot of shopping with maybe a coffee and cake”

“Making Watford a green, safe, comfortable place to be with good access, places to sit, places to meet with friends”

All groups interviewed suggested more places to sit and dwell, perhaps with some covered areas, and more activities. Young people, in particular, were keen to see the Market and the Colosseum as venues to showcase local art and performance talent

ISSUE 5: ENVIRONMENTAL

Noisy and aggressive conditions along busy roads. Watford is not yet zero-carbon. The town centre does not yet fully capitalise on the potential of biodiversity enhancement and SuDS

Strategic & policy context

Watford Borough Council declared a climate emergency in 2019, with a commitment to become a net carbon neutral borough by 2030.

The Local Plan encourages development that:

- contributes to achieving the net zero target
- is energy and water efficient
- uses sustainable construction and low carbon/renewable energy technologies
- achieves relevant BREEAM standards (non-residential development)
- requires less car parking and provides EV and cycle infrastructure
- achieves a minimum 10% biodiversity net gain
- incorporates Sustainable Urban Drainage Systems (SUDS).

Note: SUDS can help to achieve the 10% biodiversity net gain requirement

Engagement results

This was not included as a specific question in the Commonplace survey, but some respondents commented, e.g.

“Reducing traffic in Watford would be an important contribution to combating climate change”

“Watford needs to contribute to being greener and sustainability”

“Nature connection is fundamental to our wellbeing”

“Community makes Watford special, it would be wonderful for the residents and the planet if it was more green/eco”

“The most important thing is to make us more sustainable”

Suggestions from face to face engagement included:

- incorporation of sustainable features, such as solar panels and wind turbines.
- a community garden to increase biodiversity
- places for re-wilding

A suggestion from the business stakeholder workshop was to consider the introduction of a low emission zone.

ISSUE 6: SOCIAL

Underrepresentation of people aged 20–30 which limits the vibrancy of the centre and the strength of the labour market. Pockets of high deprivation, driven by barriers to housing/services, liveability and crime. Safety concerns for pedestrians in areas lacking in passive surveillance, such as underpasses. No consensus on future of night-time economy.

Strategic & policy context

The Council Plan aims to achieve ‘prosperity with purpose’.

The National Planning Policy Framework includes a social objective to support strong, vibrant and healthy communities, by ensuring that a sufficient number and range of homes can be providedwith accessible services and open spaces that reflect current and future needs and support communities’ health, social and cultural wellbeing.

Engagement results

Comment from social media survey:

- “Town centre is for younger people, 50 plus not catered for”
- There were some comments on community and diversity, such as:
- “we need to unite our diverse, vibrant community more than ever to represent modern Watford”
- “The town centre is important not only financially but as a centre of community”
- “Watford belongs to all of us, it needs to be inclusive”
- “There’s not much to do beyond eating and clubbing so need options for all ages”

Feedback from face to face meetings suggested that Watford needs to embrace its culture more, with a greater variety of small festivals

ISSUE 7: ECONOMY

Watford town centre plays an important role in the borough’s economy and has strong and unique specialisms in Professional, Scientific & Technical Activities and Information & Communications Services. Employment in the town centre has, however, fallen in the last five years which is thought to reflect the high levels of re-development on Clarendon Road and the loss of above retail office space in the core town centre - this demonstrates the dependence of the local economy on its business space. There are also relatively low levels of entrepreneurialism which may link to a general lack of dedicated workspace for entrepreneurs and start up businesses.

Strategic & policy context

Watford’s Cultural Strategy (2019) highlights the need to improve the range of facilities for creative industries, which could strengthen Watford’s cultural offer. This could include the provision of exhibition or studio space on the ground floor of new developments or in stand-alone spaces.

The Local Plan recognises Clarendon Rd as the primary office location and also seeks to protect employment uses in the Town Centre.

Appendix 4 to the Local Plan sets out the marketing requirements for change of use.

Engagement results

The Local Plan consultation identified the need for provision of more flexible workspace in the Borough. This was echoed by the comments from face to face engagement:

- physical space for exchange and learning for start-ups, including digital start-ups, would be an important attractor for young, innovative businesses.
- there is a lack of affordable creative space
- business stakeholders agreed there is a need for an artisan offer, and to encourage more independents and creatives, with a greater availability of start-up space.

Landowners and investors felt that there should be a clear brand and identity for Clarendon Rd, but there should also be an opportunity to diversify the offer to include some residential and smaller office floor plates.

Numerous comments from the Framework engagement about the lack of visibility of the Market but many positive suggestions to improve it, with more events and opportunities to showcase local artists and performers.