

STRATEGIC APPROACH: TOWN CENTRE USES

Overview

This Town Centre Land Use Strategy links closely with the Town Centre Character and Townscape Strategy as the Character Areas set out in the latter define and frame locations for future uses across the Town Centre.

At a high level, this strategy focuses on maintaining High Street North, High Street Centre and High Street South as the retail and leisure heart of the town, but supporting them to adapt to rapidly changing consumer and macro-economic trends. This will be achieved by better catering to and encouraging the presence of independent businesses (e.g. via smaller units, incubator units and meanwhile uses) and supporting a more varied leisure, culture and food and beverage (F&B) offer throughout. Atria has a key role to play in this as it offers opportunities to meet demand for 'new leisure' activities (e.g. Virtual Reality, Gaming, Urban Mini Golf and Escape Rooms).

Employment and business space will continue to be focused along Clarendon Road which will cater for established and growing businesses, primarily in future growth sectors such as Professional, Scientific & Technical Activities and Information & Communication Services. It is important that Clarendon Road is maintained as area of important economic activity, even as new investment and development is delivered. The commercial space offer will adapt to meet changing occupier expectations in a post-COVID world (e.g. related to flexibility, quality and amenities) and it will become a more attractive and cohesive business cluster.

The introduction of business space into the core Town Centre (e.g. High Street North and High Street Centre) will also be encouraged to help diversify the offer, break down siloed land use patterns and increase vibrancy in the core. This space will focus on smaller and start-up businesses to help boost innovation and entrepreneurialism locally. As these businesses grow, scale and diversify suitable growth on space will be available on a strengthened and diversified Clarendon Road.

New residential development will also be encouraged across the centre to provide much-needed accommodation and to create a new hyper-local catchment to increase spending power. Much of

this will be on the edge of the centre, but there are large-scale opportunity sites in the Town Hall Quarter, High Street North and around Market Street. A diverse range of housing will be provided to cater for the growing number of people aged 65+; the high concentration of young, educated renters; the strong private rental market; working age families that underpin the local labour market and economy; and, deprived people currently living in and around the centre.

Key moves underpinning this strategy are:

- Focus retail, leisure, F&B and cultural uses in the core Town Centre (i.e. High Street North, High Street Centre and High Street South);
- Diversify the Town Centre offer by catering to independents and growing the leisure, culture and F&B offer;
- Consider re-purposing, re-developing or re-configuring Atria to better meet changing patterns of demand (e.g. related to 'New Leisure' and other town centre uses);
- Target F&B investment in High Street North, Watford Market and around Market Street given their potential for al fresco activity and existing strengths;
- Maintain Clarendon Road as a prominent business district by protecting commercial floorspace and adapting it to meet changing occupier expectations;
- Provide new ground floor and residential uses on Clarendon Road to increase its vibrancy and attractiveness to future occupiers;
- Introduce workspace into the core Town Centre (i.e. High Street North and High Street Centre) catering to small and new business;
- Encourage new residential uses in the core and periphery of the Town Centre to build a new hyper-local catchment and ensure that the residential mix is sufficiently varied to support a sustainable housing market and community; and,
- Tackle barriers to housing and community services by increasing provision in accessible areas of the Town Centre.



Core town centre activity
High Street North

Retail & Leisure

Watford has a successful and well-used Town Centre. It is, however, highly vulnerable as it is dominated by comparison chain retailers. There is therefore a need to diversify the offer to reduce the town's reliance on these businesses and to capitalise on changing consumer trends (e.g. increasing expenditure on personal services/experiences, rising demand for leisure activities, increasing consumer conscientiousness and higher demand for independents).

Moving forward it will be important to attract and support independents to the core of the Town Centre (i.e. High Street North, High Street Centre and High Street South) to take advantage of growing consumer demand, and to enhance and diversify the leisure, culture and F&B offer. This should improve resilience and attract a broader and more varied demographic to visit the town centre.

+The proposed strategy for retail and leisure is to:

- Provide smaller and more flexible units that appeal to independents and more resilient local chains and/or where possible break up/subdivide existing units to meet this market opportunity;
- Introduce low-cost retail incubator units that allow independent entrepreneurs to test and scale new high street concepts (e.g. within Council assets or new developments), either as formal developments or within meanwhile/temporary space;
- Activate meanwhile opportunities (including sites awaiting redevelopment) that allow independent businesses to test market demand for different products and services;
- Support innovative business models that are more sustainable for local independents (e.g. co-location of different businesses in one unit);
- Cluster F&B opportunities around High Street North, Watford Market and Market Street to take advantage of opportunities for al fresco activity and to build on existing strengths;
- Encourage independent F&B to complement the strong chain offer (e.g. with the existing offer including Nando's, Bills, Tortilla, Pizza Express, The Florist etc);
- Support re-purposing and/or re-configuration of Atria to become a major 'new leisure' destination for the sub-region;
- Explore opportunities to create a food incubator with local colleges to help develop the restaurateurs of tomorrow, and 'seed and feed' meanwhile and start-up space;
- Nurture existing cultural facilities and provide space for them to expand in the Town Centre; and,
- Introduce new cultural facilities throughout the core Town Centre to vary the mix and encourage linked trips (current gaps include art galleries, independent cinemas, artisan theatre houses, comedy clubs, intimate music venues).

+There are also opportunities to introduce non-physical interventions to support the Town Centre evolve. Examples that could be explored include:

- **Place branding and marketing** - Following the introduction of new types of town centre businesses and uses, use the Visit Watford platform to develop and launch a place branding and marketing campaign to attract different types of people to visit the revitalised Town Centre;
- **Retail innovation grants/loans** - Provide small capital grants and loans to support independent retailers looking to evolve their business model to better meet consumer needs (e.g. by physically adapting their units and purchasing any necessary equipment/technology);
- **Retail entrepreneur grants/loans** - Provide small capital grants and loans to support retail entrepreneurs with innovative ideas that will enhance the Town Centre offer to activate and upgrade retail units to meet their requirements;
- **Retail business support programme** - Procure a retail expert to provide intensive 1-1 support for independent high street businesses to help them adapt their offering and increase revenue, particularly those that are important to the Town Centre's diversity; and,
- **Public sector asset strategy** - Use public sector assets to test new concepts and ideas to support the Town Centre's evolution (e.g. enhance the F&B offer in Watford Market).



Small, flexible independent business spaces within a historic character setting Pavilion Road, Chelsea

Economy & Business Space

Watford Town Centre, incorporating Clarendon Road, plays an important role in the borough's economy and has strong and unique sector specialisms in Professional, Scientific & Technical Activities and Information & Communication Services.

Employment has, however, fallen over the last five years which is thought to reflect the high levels of office re-development on Clarendon Road and the loss of office space above retail units in the core. While economic performance is expected to recover once re-development has finished, these trends demonstrate the vulnerability of the local economy and its dependence on the provision of high-quality employment space.

The borough's economy is also not as entrepreneurial as it could be which may link to the fact there are few facilities that provide low-cost space and wraparound business support for entrepreneurs. Office rental rates are also increasing and becoming more unaffordable for new businesses and entrepreneurs.

Moving forward it will therefore be important to (a) protect existing business space and (b) diversify the commercial offer to suit businesses of different sizes and types. The future offer will need to cater for businesses in the borough's growth sectors, which are projected to be in higher-value office-based industries (particularly Professional Services), public services (particularly Health) and the Creative, Cultural and Digital industries.

It is also important to recognise that the nature of demand for business space is shifting towards flexible space that enables collaboration, supports wellbeing and fosters learning between employees that are increasingly adopting hybrid working patterns. A 'race for quality' has also begun with most occupiers looking for higher quality space that better caters for the needs of hybrid workers that will be in the office less regularly.

The proposed strategy for business space is to:

- Maintain Clarendon Road as a prominent business district by protecting commercial floorspace for established businesses and ensuring re-provision within development projects addressing old/outdated or not fit-for-purpose space;
- Ensure Clarendon Road has a diverse mix of business space to attract a range of future occupiers (e.g. serviced office, flexible workspace, co-working space etc), including potential for re-use/reconfiguration of existing space;
- Encourage a more diverse amenity offer on Clarendon Road to make it more varied and attractive to occupiers and employees, without undermining the core of the Town Centre (e.g. cafés, restaurants, homes etc);
- Enhance the branding, public realm, appearance and infrastructure on Clarendon Road to create a more attractive and cohesive business cluster;
- Encourage and support asset owners on Clarendon Road to upgrade and enhance their facilities so they remain attractive to occupiers;
- Introduce flexible workspace and co-working space that caters to micro and small businesses in the core Town Centre (i.e High Street North and High Street Centre) to diversify the offer, generate daytime footfall and increase vibrancy;
- Identify opportunities to provide dedicated incubator/accelerator space with wraparound business support in the core Town Centre to support entrepreneurs to start and scale businesses (including within the Town Hall Quarter); and,
- Work with cultural anchors to identify demand and need for studio, rehearsal and/or maker space to support their operations.

An important component of the land use strategy is to support the delivery of more business space in the town centre to vary the offer, support growth and help build resilience. To break down the current separation and zoning between Clarendon Road and the Town Centre the provision of flexible workspace, co-working space and/or incubator/accelerator space on the south side of the A411 will be important to encourage occupiers into the Town Centre. A major development incorporating business space in this location can act as a gateway into a new diversified Town Centre and act as the 'glue' connecting Watford Junction and Clarendon Road with the core Town Centre.

There are also opportunities to introduce non-physical interventions to support the Town Centre's economy. Many of these are addressed in the Watford Economic Growth Strategy (2021-2025), but other interventions that could be explored include:

- **Inward investment campaign:** Use the Visit Watford brand to launch a concerted inward investment campaign to encourage businesses to take up new space coming forward on Clarendon Road;
- **Clarendon Road BID:** Explore opportunities and appetite for partnerships between business and property owners focused on Clarendon Road;
- **Business accelerator programme:** Create or commission an accelerator programme to support promising businesses in new workspaces to rapidly scale-up, grow and create new employment opportunities for local people;
- **Business bootstrap programme:** Create or commission a programme to help entrepreneurs to set up new businesses and identify local workspace to support their needs; and,
- **Business support programme:** Create or commission a programme to help existing small and medium sized enterprises grow and become more efficient, particularly in sectors that the Town Centre needs retain (e.g. Professional, Scientific and Technical Activities).

Residential Space

There is high demand for and limited supply of residential accommodation across Watford and its Town Centre. This is reflected in the new Watford Local Plan (2020–2036) which identifies a need to provide almost 15,000 new homes over the plan period. The Town Centre, captured within the borough's 'Core Development Area' within the Local Plan, is identified as a priority area for higher density development:

"Within the Core Development Area higher density development of at least 95 dwellings per hectare is expected. Higher-density development will be particularly supported in areas where there is good access to Mass Rapid Transport, such as at Watford Junction" (Policy HO3.2, Pg 43).

This is significant because the Town Centre currently has comparatively little residential accommodation as the borough's current 'zoning' of uses means most housing is located outside of the ring road.

Moving forward it will be important to provide homes in the Town Centre that cater for the current and future population. This will help to create new vibrant and hyper-local catchment to support the Town Centre during daytimes and evenings. Key groups identified through research include:

- **The growing number of people aged 65+:** The Office for National Statistics (ONS) project that future population growth is going to be highest among people aged 65+;
- **The high concentration of young, educated renters:** Experian Mosaic data shows that the local and wider catchment has a strong representation of people classified as 'Rental Hubs' (educated young renters);
- **The strong private rental market:** Around a third of homes in the Town Centre are rented which is well above national and county-level averages;
- **Working age families that underpin the local labour market and economy:** Watford's local catchment is currently dominated by working age people; and,
- **Deprived people currently living in and around the centre:** There are pockets of deprivation to the south and east of the centre.

Given the diversity of these groups, a wide range of dwelling types (i.e. flats and houses), typologies (i.e. build to rent, private sale, extra care, residential care, co-living etc) and tenures (i.e. social rent, market rent, affordable sale, market sale etc) will be needed to be provided across the Town Centre to meet demand. This is reflected in the new Local Plan which has specific policies for Affordable Housing (Policy HO3.3), Built to Rent Homes (Policy HO3.4), Specialist Housing and Care Homes (Policy HO3.5) and Student, Co-Living and Non-Self-Contained Accommodation (Policy HO3.6).

The principles guiding that should guide residential development proposals in the Town Centre are:

- The domestic scale of the High Street is part of Watford's character. Consideration should be given to creating places with different scales and levels of intricacy, to reflect the urban grain of buildings, streets and open spaces.
- New development should create frontages that engage with the ring road, to improve both character and connectivity.
- The nature and scale of heritage assets, and their social history, should inform the development of character areas, and new developments within them.
- The relationship of new buildings to surrounding open spaces should be considered in new developments, so that the public realm can support different uses, assist with legibility and contribute to defining character areas.

From a location perspective, the strategy for residential uses is:

- To create a new diverse neighbourhood around Market Street and to the west of High Street Central that caters to different types/ages of people. The downgrading of Exchange Road and Upton Road, alongside development sites such as Church Car Park, Exchange House, BT Building, Gade House and Gade Car Park, provide a major opportunity to do this;
- To use opportunity sites to around High Street North to also provide a wide range of housing types and tenures given their strategic Town Centre location and proximity to amenities;
- To provide housing catering to young professionals on Clarendon Road and around the ring road given their proximity to major employers, as well as Watford Junction and the connectivity this provides to Central London and other major cities; and,
- To introduce some housing suitable to older people to developments within the Town Hall Quarter given the local services on offer (i.e. Town Hall, Leisure Centre, Library etc), quieter environment and the proximity of the area to the core Town Centre offer.

Housing affordability is a major concern in Watford and its Town Centre as both rent and sale values are above the national average. New accommodation will need to help address this challenge and actively provide affordable options to help tackle drivers of deprivation. In line with the new Local Plan policy:

"Residential developments, including residential institutions of ten homes or more will be supported where they provide at least 35% affordable housing (by habitable room). Proposals will be required to provide a mix of affordable housing tenures, including a minimum of 60% of new affordable homes as homes for social rent. The homes for social rent should seek to prioritise family-sized (three+ bedrooms) accommodation and reflect the most up-to-date housing strategy" (Policy HO3.3, Pg 44).

Other Uses

There are pockets of deprivation in and around the Town Centre. Evidence illustrates that this is primarily driven by barriers to housing and local community services. Development proposals that can help address these issues will be supported. Local people suggest that, beyond affordable housing, gaps in the local offer include spaces for young people, child friendly spaces and education/health facilities.

Best Practice Plus X, Brighton

A high quality new build innovation hub in Brighton that offers physical and digital maker facilities (including a hardware workshop, podcast studio and photography suite) and a range of supporting business growth and innovation services.



International House, Brixton

A 50,000 sq ft affordable workspace in a former London Borough of Lambeth office, which provides market rate office and co-working space for established businesses which, in turn, cross-subsidises free space for community organisations and social enterprises.



Kingland, Poole

Ten vacant retail units that have been let at no charge by Legal & General to a carefully curated group of independent retailers to help transform Poole Town Centre and drive local footfall and spend.



Gravity, Wandsworth

Former Debenhams store that has been transformed into a three floor, 100,000 sq ft 'new leisure' destination featuring e-karting, bowling, urban golf, e-sports, digital darts and more.



Central Parade, Walthamstow

A unique retail incubator that offers two high street units and several concession spaces that are available to public-facing start-ups to test and trail new ideas in the heart of the Walthamstow Town Centre.



The Collective, Old Oak

High quality co-living accommodation in Old Oak that also offers a gym, co-working, bar, cinema, events and cultural programme.



Modular Housing, Anerley

Modular low-cost housing that was built within six months on a Council-owned site for homeless families on the London Borough of Bromley's housing waiting list.



Snoozebox, Olympic Park

Innovative adults only accommodation in a modular shipping container design that provides 78 en suite rooms for guests, who also have access to a social lounge with 24 hour food and beverage facilities, free WiFi, TV's and rest rooms.



Skip Garden, Kings Cross

A movable vegetable garden that was funded and managed by Argent as a meanwhile project on vacant sites as the Kings Cross regeneration scheme came forward.



Anerley Business Centre

A neighbourhood workspace in the London Borough of Bromley's former Anerley Town Hall that provides managed workspace for small businesses and local charities, where all profit is used by the Crystal Palace Community Trust to run community activities and services targeted at older and younger people.

