

Watford Housing Strategy 2015-2020 – Summary

1. The role of a Housing Strategy in Watford

“The purpose of a housing strategy is to guide local action – to assess the current and future balance of housing supply and demand, the working of the market, the impact of local conditions on people’s lives, and on the achievement of social goals – and to plan effective intervention.”

(Goss and Blackaby, 1998)

Watford is a very dynamic borough. It has seen big demographic, economic and tenure-related changes since the beginning of the millennium. The town offers high achieving schools, a wide range of job opportunities, attractive leisure activities and diverse cultural facilities. Consequently it is an increasingly popular place to live and there is high demand for all types of housing in the borough. Watford is also a town of big ambitions and potential to grow further in terms of population and employment.

With the borough’s very small size, high population density and urbanised built environment, the task of maintaining an excellent housing offer to support sustainable growth and to maintain high quality of life in the town is a formidable challenge. The market alone cannot meet housing needs; therefore, a planned and interventionist approach is required. It is the role of a housing strategy to identify the following:

- Housing related needs and aspirations
- The housing-related interventions that should have high priority in improving the Housing Offer to meet needs and aspirations.
- The resources available to implement those housing-related interventions.
- Partnerships which will achieve successful outcomes.

Reasons why Watford needs a strategic approach to housing through the Local Plan and housing-related strategies and policies

- i) To ensure a co-ordinated approach to housing activity in Watford and a coherent suite of policies and strategies to deliver the council’s ambitions.
- ii) To balance the housing agenda and other agendas such as sustainable economic growth.
- iii) To promote housing’s role in delivering the corporate agenda and wider objectives including health and wellbeing.

iv) To ensure Housing retains a high corporate profile and contributes to the council's status of being well positioned to influence and deliver.

v) To maximise opportunities and resources to meet housing needs and aspirations, using Council assets and external or partnership funding opportunities.

vi) To maximise out-of-borough and cross-boundary development opportunities in partnership with neighbouring authorities.

vii) To prevent and tackle issues which lead to poor housing conditions, such as overcrowding and poor condition privately owned housing.

viii) To support economic growth in Watford, with employers able to recruit staff and retain skilled employees.

The Watford Borough Council Housing Strategy will support the delivery of the Local Plan and will form the overarching direction for the following housing-related strategies, policies and plans:-

- The Watford Borough Council Nominations Policy
- The Watford Borough Council Tenancy Strategy
- The Watford Borough Council Homelessness Review, Strategy and Action Plan
- The Watford Borough Council Private Sector Housing Renewal Policy.

The Housing Strategy will complement the following corporate plans, policies and projects which are being carried out by other council teams:

- Watford's Local Plan Part 1 – Core Strategy 2006-2031
- Watford's Local Plan Part 2 – Sites Allocations and Development Management
- The Duty to Co-operate
- The review of the Council's property and assets.
- The Watford Borough Corporate Plan 2014-2018
- The introduction of the Community Infrastructure Levy
- The Residential Design Guide
- The Infrastructure Delivery Plan
- The Watford Council Economic Development Strategy.

2. Diagnosis of need and Guiding Policy

The Diagnosis of need

Watford's housing need can be summarised as consisting of the following:-

- i) Demand for housing greatly exceeds supply.
- ii) Housing for market sale or market rent is mostly unaffordable to people on low to medium incomes.
- iii) The delivery of affordable housing is becoming more challenging.
- iv) Watford is a small borough and there are competing demands for development on its land.
- v) Watford's existing housing stock requires a range of improvements to ensure it continues to offer suitable, safe, warm and healthy homes.

Selected policy options for the Housing Strategy:-

The Housing Strategy will adopt a whole housing market approach, and will not focus just on housing for those in highest housing need.

The Housing Strategy will be open to the merits of introducing a range of new tenures, and will not focus on just the limited number of traditional tenures.

The Housing Strategy will focus on both optimising the supply of new housing and improving the condition of existing housing, not just on the issue of a new supply of housing.

The Housing Strategy will aim to empower property owners and tenants to take action to improve their housing circumstances, helping them to make informed choices and raising aspirations.

Guiding principles for the Strategy

1. Evidence-based
2. Agile and adding value, with an annual review of performance indicators and priorities.
3. Bold prioritisation
4. Recognition that we are working in a changing environment.
5. Promotion of support and self-reliance
6. An emphasis on communication and engagement with the community.
7. A clear understanding of where the council can intervene and where it can influence.
8. To empower residents and property owners to improve their housing circumstances.

Guiding principles for Action Plan

1. Bold prioritisation
2. Realistic and resourced
3. Identification of who is best placed to deliver: assets, skills, time, resources
4. Open to new partnerships
5. Strong scoping and management of projects
6. Celebrating achievements.

3. The vision for the Housing Strategy

Following extensive consultation, the following vision for Watford's Housing Strategy has been devised:

A Housing Strategy that will improve the well-being of local people by making Watford a better place to live, with sustainable and healthy homes, and a balanced, vibrant community.

4. The Structure of the Housing Strategy

The Watford Housing Strategy shall consider Watford's housing needs and appropriate interventions to meet these challenges on four levels:-

AIMS



THEMES



PRIORITIES



TASKS

Aims set the overall direction in which the housing strategy will develop.

Themes identify particular areas of activity in which housing-related interventions will take place. The housing strategy is structured around six themes.

Priorities will identify the activities within the themes which are likely to produce the most beneficial impact if they receive resources and are the focus for activity. The priorities will guide the development of the action plan.

Tasks are the translation of the priorities into action which will implement housing-related interventions. The tasks will be specific, measurable, resourced and timetabled.

Aims:-

Aim 1: To provide an overarching direction for housing activity in Watford that supports the long-term sustainable growth of Watford and its economy.

Aim 2: To support delivery of the Watford Borough Council vision: *a successful town in which people are proud to live* and to identify interventions in the whole housing market.

Aim 3: To maximise achievements by managing competing demands, including:-

- Single person households vs Family households
- Offices/commercial vs Residential
- Investors vs Occupiers
- The influences of the areas surrounding Watford.
- Watford as a whole vs Ward/Area based actions.

Aim 4: To ensure that housing-related activity and interventions contribute to the well-being of residents and the prosperity of Watford.

Aim 5: To support long-term sustainable economic growth and environments in Watford.

Aim 6: To predict and respond to change and future trends

Aim 7. To seek out and attract housing-related investment by having clear strategy and by creating conditions which are conducive to strategic and operational investment.

Themes:-

Theme 1: Improving the supply of housing

Theme 2: Improving the condition and management of housing

Theme 3: Support to specific client groups where intervention is required.

Theme 4: Key locations

Theme 5: Well-being, Economy and Health

Theme 6: Communication

Priorities within the themes:-

Theme 1: Improving the supply of housing

Priorities:-

- Priority 1:- To influence the type of new housing that is provided by inputting into the Planning process and working with private sector providers and registered providers
- Priority 2:- Work with registered providers to achieve a balance between traditional social rented properties and new business which enables them to develop other types of homes, such as affordable rent, market rent, homes for sale.
- Priority 3:- To contribute to the implementation of the council's forthcoming Asset Management strategy.

Tasks:-

- Task 1 – Developing, testing and publicising annual dataset with conclusions to inform the housing mix.
- Task 2 – Participate in the production of a Strategic Housing Market Assessment in partnership with neighbouring boroughs.
- Task 3 – To establish and maintain frameworks for engagement with registered provider partners, private developers and property owners. This will include information sharing, accessing funding and development opportunities, and local marketing initiatives.
- Task 4 – Annual review of the Tenancy Strategy.

- Task 5 – Tasks to be defined pending Property Review

Theme 2: Improving the condition and management of housing

Priorities:

- Priority 1:- To revise the Private Sector Renewal Policy (includes grant and loans assistance) to make homes decent and adapt them for disabled access.
- Priority 2:- Increase the awareness of letting agents, private landlords and tenants regarding acceptable standards, responsibilities and remedies in order to empower them to make informed choices.
- Priority 3:- To improve the condition of the housing stock to enable the provision of safe, sustainable, healthy and well-maintained homes.
- Priority 4:- Renew cross service procedures to improve the customer experience and effectiveness of casework on overcrowding and illegal/retaliatory eviction and harassment.
- Priority 5:- Renew evidence base through an assessment of Watford's housing stock which samples a range of homes and indicates the issues with stock which we need to address e.g. energy efficiency.

Tasks:-

- Task 1- Revise the Private Sector Housing Renewal Policy.
- Task 2 – Initiatives promoted in revised Private Sector Housing Renewal Policy.
- Task 3 – Production of a suite of advice and information material which covers the full range of services available.
- Task 4 – Publication of the above through website, leaflet, roadshows, social media, advertising through lettings agents.

- Task 5 – Introduce a framework to enforce the Redress scheme and include compliance across council private sector access schemes.
- Task 6 – Review Care and Repair Provision
- Task 7 – Review the current scope and effectiveness of casework on overcrowding.
- Task 8 – Implement action plan to develop our strategic and operational response to overcrowding.
- Task 9 – Investigate the need for a service to respond to illegal/retaliatory eviction and harassment.
- Task 10 – Implement action plan to develop our strategic and operational response to illegal/retaliatory eviction and harassment in order to minimise housing need.
- Task 11 – Commission a private sector stock condition survey/model.
- Task 12 – Develop policy responses from the stock condition survey to inform appropriate policies, strategies and procedures.
- Task 13 – Undertake Home Energy Efficiency publicity campaigns to raise awareness of the options which are available, and deliver improvements as recommended in local Home Energy Conservation Act 1995 (HECA) reports.

Theme 3: Support to specific client groups where intervention is needed.

Priorities:

- Priority 1:- To carry out an annual review of the Homelessness Strategy and Action Plan.
- Priority 2:- To implement and monitor a revised Housing Nomination Policy and a Private Sector Discharge Policy including management of customer expectations.
- Priority 3:- To engage with private landlords with the aim of increasing the availability of privately rented homes for households in housing need.

- Priority 4:- To devise plans to increase the supply of wheelchair accessible temporary accommodation for homeless households.
- Priority 5:- Older people – support activity to improve registered provider sheltered housing to become flexicare accommodation which will meet the current and future needs of Watford residents.

Tasks:-

- Task 1 – Review and publish an annual update of the Homelessness Strategy Action Plan.
- Task 2 – Implementation of the revised Homelessness Strategy Action Plan.
- Task 3 – Implementation of the Housing Nominations Policy.
- Task 4 – Development and implementation of the Private Sector Housing Discharge Policy.
- Task 5 – Increase the supply of wheelchair accessible temporary housing.
- Task 6 – Older people: agree decant protocol and associated allocation policies and criteria.

Theme 4: Key locations

Priorities:-

- Priority 1:- To support the delivery of affordable housing within the Special Policy Areas.
- Priority 2:- To implement targeted initiatives such as Street Improvement Projects which tackle a range of issues in specific areas, such as property conditions, the environment and community safety concerns, through a multi-agency approach.

Tasks:-

- Task 1 – Work with Local Asset Based Vehicle (LABV) to procure a registered provider for the Health Campus.
- Task 2 – Implement a pilot Street Improvement Project for a clearly defined neighbourhood in the borough.

Theme 5: Well-being, economy and health

Priorities-

- Priority 1:- Undertake housing related activity in line with health and well-being priorities for the borough, such as achieving “safe and healthy homes”. This will be consistent with the new Code for Sustainable Homes whose nine measures of sustainability include Health and Well-being.
- Priority 2 - Undertake housing related activity to support economic growth in Watford in consultation with Watford’s business community.

Tasks:-

- Task 1 – Undertake assessment of Watford’s housing stock to better understand the housing conditions in Watford, and to ensure that health related data identified in the house condition survey.
- Task 2 – Undertake housing related activity in line with health priorities for the borough, such as achieving “safe and health homes”, as informed by the above survey result.
- Task 3 – Support emerging initiatives in the council’s forthcoming economic development strategy by researching housing-related situations and potential interventions.

Theme 6: A Communications Strategy for housing

Priorities

- Priority 1:- To develop a co-ordinated communications strategy for housing-related issues in Watford to achieve the following:-
 - Convey a range of messages, such as expectations on the availability of affordable housing for rent, on a range of housing options, on sources of housing-related assistance, on the availability of support services, and to improve perceptions of a range of housing options.
 - To communicate information to meet the requirements, expectations and aspirations of a range of ages and demographic groups, and to communicate with more “difficult to reach” groups such as young people, vulnerable people.
 - To communicate how space can best be used in current accommodation.
 - To be receptive to existing and new technological options for communications
- Priority 2:- To devise an approach to community engagement on housing growth issues, in partnership with registered providers

Tasks:

- Task 1 – to develop the Communications Strategy for housing.
- Task 2 – to implement the Communications Strategy for housing.
- Task 3 – to devise an approach to community engagement on housing growth issues, in partnership with registered providers.

5. Housing Strategy Position Statements

Housing Growth

Watford has continued to experience high housing delivery rates and has a five year land supply as required by the National Planning Policy Framework.

The council’s core strategy puts forward our ambitions for the borough which involve significant economic and housing growth. The site allocation process

will recognise the importance of safeguarding commercial sites in order to ensure employment opportunities, while planning for housing growth to support this agenda and protecting our open spaces. The council will encourage innovation such as mixed use schemes in order to balance competing demands on well positioned sites. While much of the growth activity is focused around our major sites (see p. xxx), the council will continue to encourage good quality, sustainable development on smaller sites where opportunities arise. Our Residential Design Guide sets out our expectations regarding high quality design.

The council continues its commitment to ensuring affordable housing is provided as part of residential developments and working with registered provider partners to maximise their opportunities for developing homes in our borough. This will include taking a more active role in ensuring partners are aware and have access to government and other funding or site opportunities at the earliest stage possible.

The council acknowledges the role which housing growth can play in promoting sustainable economic growth in Watford. The two most outstanding issues which link housing growth and economic growth are:-

- i) Seeking a co-ordinated approach to meet the needs of both sustainable economic and housing growth in Watford, reflected in the designation of sites for particular types of development. .
- ii) Facilitating the development of housing options for Watford employees in receipt of a particular range of incomes e.g. employees of the various parts of the service sector. The aim of this approach is increase the supply of skilled employees in Watford and reduce difficulties in recruitment for certain employment sectors.

When examining the possibilities of residential development in the town centre, the council will encourage housing developers to optimise the quality of design to encourage that the housing options are sustainable for this particular environment. Developers will be encouraged to consult the council's design guide and noise policy in order to ensure suitable design and residential development in suitable locations.

Relevant Themes

- Improving the supply of housing
- Key locations (wards and neighbourhoods)
- Well-being, Economy and Health
- Communication

Balancing residential and commercial growth

There is considerable pressure for sites to be released for residential development, which risks undermining the council's ambition for economic growth in the longer term. The council is seeking a co-ordinated approach which will meet the needs of both economic and housing growth in Watford. This will be achieved by safeguarding certain sites for commercial use while acknowledging that some sites previously designated for employment use are no longer viable for this purpose and could more appropriately be redesignated as residential sites.

Specific sites are to be identified and designated for different uses such as residential, commercial and open space.

The council acknowledges the link between housing provision and the ability of employers to recruit and retain their staff, as well as the impact on business relocation decisions. The Housing Strategy has identified the theme of communication as key priority. Part of our strategic approach will be to develop a whole market approach to housing options advice, including proactive work with employers to signpost employees to appropriate accommodation opportunities.

Relevant Themes

- Improving the supply of housing
- Key locations (wards and neighbourhoods)
- Well-being, Economy and Health
- Communication

Community engagement

The council recognises that economic and housing growth can be controversial within local neighbourhoods. There are opportunities to improve the way in which we communicate the benefits of growth and consult our residents about their concerns. We recognise that the expertise in this field may lie within partner organisations such as registered providers and will seek to work in partnership with them in order to refine our approach to engaging with members of the community.

Relevant Themes

- Improving the supply of housing
- Key locations (wards and neighbourhoods)
- Well-being, Economy and Health
- Communication

Housing mix

The council will seek the provision of a mix of housing types, sizes and tenures to meet the requirements of all sections of the community. The existing stock profile across Watford varies quite considerably from ward to ward. As Watford is a small borough, the council takes a whole borough approach to achieving its required mix rather than attempting to balance the stock on a ward by ward basis. The areas most suited to higher density development are identified within our Local Plan. In order to retain a balanced profile, lower density family houses with gardens will be sought in more suburban areas.

The council wishes to encourage a good quality, well managed private rented sector and will encourage proposals for new development within this tenure, although this will remain distinct from the affordable housing requirements within our planning policy.

In terms of advising on the council's preferred housing mix within schemes, a services of datasets will be analysed on an annual basis and agreed corporately to inform the council's approach to proposed schemes. The data sets will be agreed annually. At the time of publication they are anticipated to include:-

Whole housing market information template

- i) Net housing completions
- ii) Projects completions
- iii) Gross affordable housing completions mix provided
- iv) Number of affordable homes provided 2012/2013 and percentage of gross housing completions on qualifying sites.
- v) Gross housing completions by size
- vi) Gross housing completions by type
- vii) Average house prices in Watford
- viii) Market snapshot of homes for sale priced at £300,000 or less
- ix) Market snapshot of homes for private rented whose rent levels is at or below the national maximum Local Housing Allowance level.

Affordable housing supply template

- i) Affordable housing stock profile (bedrooms and bedspaces, flats vs houses)
- ii) Affordable delivery during the previous financial year.
- iii) Affordable lettings during the previous financial year.
- iv) Affordable pipeline
- v) Household types and projections
- vi) Temporary accommodation profile (bedroom requirement and bedspaces)
- vii) Housing register home seekers A-D (bedroom requirement and bedspaces).
- viii) Housing register transfers A-D (bedroom requirements and bedspaces)

- ix) Housing register E or equivalent (bedroom requirement and bedspaces)
- x) Affordability including Local Housing Allowance rates
- xi) Comments e.g. nomination policy changes.

These datasets will be completed and reviewed annually to ensure that they continue to be fit for purpose and responsive to changing needs.

The council acknowledges the funding requirements placed on registered providers in order to bring forward new affordable housing. Our Tenancy Strategy sets our expectations regarding conversions from social to affordable rent and the affordability considerations we anticipate registered providers will apply.

Where registered providers have the opportunity to purchase a whole site and can therefore enhance the affordable housing offer beyond the requirements of the section 106 agreement, the council will be open to negotiation on a case by case basis to set the appropriate housing mix of tenure and property type.

The council is monitoring the demand for a new type of housing for employees of Watford. This consists of short-term managed accommodation which is sometimes self-contained and sometimes has shared facilities. This accommodation can be created from buildings which have been used for other purposes e.g. hotel accommodation. If demand grows for this type of accommodation and tenure a new position statement will be devised.

Relevant Themes

- Improving the supply of housing
- Key locations (wards and neighbourhoods)
- Communication

Shared accommodation

There is considerable demand for housing of all types in Watford. This includes shared accommodation which can offer a more affordable and flexible option for many residents, from professionals working locally or commuting, to those on lower incomes or who are reliant on housing benefit. Watford has some high quality shared housing. The council recognises the interest in property conversions to meet this need and will continue to monitor the impact on residents and businesses.

While it is anticipated that the need for well managed shared accommodation will increase, there is a corresponding pressure on family sized accommodation in Watford. Local Plan II Policy HS5 aims to safeguard family housing by ensuring that any subsequent conversion of a House in Multiple Occupation (HMO) to flats cannot automatically proceed on the grounds of already being an HMO, and will be subject to strict criteria. This is to retain the potential for HMOs to be converted back to family housing which is less easily achieved where conversion to flats has occurred.

The council has considered whether it would be appropriate to apply for an article 4 directive for the borough. This would require planning permission to be applied for, where there was a proposal to convert a property into a House in Multiple Occupation for between 3 to 6 occupants. This is not being pursued at the current time due to the low proportion of HMOs within the borough and the findings that these properties were not causing detriment which would justify additional measures being put in place.

Similarly, the Council has considered whether additional licensing should be introduced to include premises outside the statutory HMO licensing requirement. However, there is no evidence to indicate that this measure is required locally, and there is information to demonstrate that other activities would prove more effective.

The council continues to provide a range of advice and enforcement activity regarding HMOs and the launch of the Street Improvement Project will address issues within priority localities which residents associate with higher density living.

Relevant Themes

- Improving the supply of housing
- Key locations (wards and neighbourhoods)
- Communication

Self build

The National Planning Policy Framework sets out the government's intention to promote self build as another option for housing development. Local authorities are required to plan for a range of needs, including self-build. At the current time, there is a very low level of interest in self-build, and the proposal is to continue monitoring the situation for future consideration if appropriate. The register will be retained within the Planning Policy Department and evidence of national policy development and more localised good practice will be updated on an annual basis within the Housing Service to determine whether further action is required.

Relevant Themes

- Improving the supply of housing

Empty homes

Watford is a high demand area and there is not a large amount of empty residential property in the borough. Current analysis shows that those properties that have been unoccupied for 12 months or more are relatively evenly distributed throughout the borough, without a prominent concentration in one area. The council has previously dedicated resources to bringing empty residential properties into use. This activity is labour intensive and costly to

the council and brought a low level of return. The decision to discontinue empty homes work in this form remains an appropriate position for the council.

A range of activity continues regarding any nuisance issues generated by empty properties. The council also has the opportunity to engage with the PLACE (Private Leasing Agreements Converting Empties) scheme where funding is available for property owners to bring their homes into use either for sale or to rent to clients nominated by the council. Negotiations are continuing regarding the terms of the scheme and whether this is a viable option for the council to pursue.

The council will still deal with empty homes on an individual basis when the empty home is having a negative impact on the neighbourhood in which it is located.

Relevant Themes

- Improving the supply of housing
- Improving the condition and management of housing
- Key locations (wards and neighbourhoods)

Supported Housing

In Watford there is a range of supported housing provision for a number of client groups including young people, those with mental health issues, experiencing substance misuse, with learning disabilities and experiencing domestic violence. Funding for the support element is provided through Housing Related Support which is commissioned by Herts County Council.

The council will seek active involvement in these commissioning decisions through Herts Heads of Housing and the Strategic Partnership Accommodation Board.

Due to reductions in the revenue funding available, it is not viable at the current time for the council to seek the development of new dedicated supported housing schemes for particular client groups. The council will continue to support our partners where they have viable proposals for such schemes either within new build accommodation or through private sector leasing, where they can demonstrate the needs of a certain client group over and above other potential uses. This will be informed by the market position statements on different client groups being produced by Herts CC which are due to be published in November 2014.

The use of council property assets to host supported housing schemes which are managed by the voluntary sector and registered providers will be reviewed under the WBC Property Review 2014 (see below). This will determine the extent to which WBC can continue to offer the accommodation element to supported housing schemes. The priority will be those schemes which serve Watford residents although an appropriate balance will be sought where WBC benefits from reciprocal arrangements with other boroughs.

Relevant Themes

- Improving the supply of housing
- Support to specific client groups where intervention is required.

Council property assets – capital, revenue and land

The council has a small number of sites which could potentially be released for residential development. There are also properties currently used for temporary accommodation and commercial premises which could be put to alternative use. The Property Review 2014 will take into account competing demands for these assets and the potential for re-provision into more suitable or cost effective accommodation. The benefits of disposal will also be considered.

Depending on the outcome of the review, there may be opportunities for increasing and improving housing supply and condition. The council will develop an asset management strategy which will set out how council assets will be deployed in the future.

Relevant Themes

- Improving the supply of housing
- Improving the condition and management of housing.
- Support to specific client groups where intervention is required.

The Private Rented sector

The council recognises the opportunities and the challenges of having a large private rented sector in the borough, which is likely to expand further during the lifetime of the Housing Strategy. The aim is to promote good quality, well managed private rented housing which will contribute positively to the health and wellbeing of our residents, and that acceptable standards are in place irrespective of the amount of rent paid by the occupants.

Our activity will be informed by a revised Private Sector Renewal Policy which will set out our approach to both owner occupied and rented housing and the advice, assistance and enforcement activity that will take place in the borough. Evidence of conditions in the private rented sector will be gained through an assessment of Watford's housing stock which will examine issues including energy efficiency and the presence of hazards in the home, with an understanding of the profile of the stock and the residents so that targeted intervention can be planned.

The council will work proactively with landlords and tenants in order to ensure that the expected standards and responsibilities are well publicised and understood by both parties and appropriate action is taken to prevent issues from arising. Examples of required standards: elimination of category 1 hazards, complete compliance with the energy efficiency standards

introduced under the Energy Act 2011. Areas for priority action have been identified relating to illegal and retaliatory eviction and overcrowding and the council is seeking to improve cross departmental working to ensure the best outcomes can be achieved for tenants and their landlords.

There are no plans to introduce an Accreditation scheme for privately rented accommodation. Research carried out across Hertfordshire has determined that this would not achieve effective outcomes in comparison with the level of resources required.

The council is developing a Private Sector Discharge Policy which will result in homeless applicants being re-housed in the private sector where the council has a duty to accommodate them. Activity to enable access to private sector tenancies as a homelessness prevention measure will also continue. In order to achieve these objectives, the council will seek increased partnership working with landlords and encourage the participation of the voluntary sector and registered providers in securing and managing homes for private rent which will meet the statutory requirements for private sector discharge of duty.

Relevant Themes

- Improving the condition and management of housing.
- Support to specific client groups where intervention is required.
- Key locations (wards and neighbourhoods)

New housing for market sale

The council encourages the development of well designed housing for the owner occupied market which will comprise a range of property sizes and types to meet the needs of our diverse community. It has been identified that the transition from a two bed property to a larger property can be problematic for families in terms of availability and affordability. At the same time, the availability of properties which are desirable to people wishing to downsize is also restricted (see section on older people below).

The council's capacity to intervene is limited, however measures have been identified where the council could take a more proactive role. These include engaging with registered providers to explore the potential for market sale in order to meet particular identified needs and ensuring a wider promotion of the opportunities presented by shared ownership and initiatives such as Help to Buy. This will involve a communication strategy which takes account of an audience outside the traditional housing service client group and the media used will need to reflect this wider remit.

Relevant Themes

- Improving the supply of housing
- Support to specific client groups where intervention is required.

Affordable housing

There is considerable pressure on the supply of affordable housing in Watford and the council is taking measures to make most effective use of this scarce resource. Policy changes will encourage a more planned exit from existing accommodation and a corresponding reduction in homelessness as well as promoting the private rented sector as a viable alternative to social housing.

A new Housing Nomination Policy will be introduced in 2015 which will end the practice of holding an open housing register and set more restrictive criteria about which applicants may apply for social housing. This includes the requirement for applicants to be living in Watford and to have done so for five out of the last six years. There are also tighter restrictions regarding those who own properties or have sufficient means to meet their own housing need. Homeless households will have a reduced priority on the register which will align them with overcrowded households who have remained in the parental home. The council will no longer accept applications from those who are adequately housed and a more holistic advice offer will signpost them to alternative housing options.

The council will retain a housing duty towards certain homeless clients who will not meet the criteria to join the housing register. A Private Sector Discharge Policy will be implemented in 2015 to enable the council to offer private rented properties to clients providing that the statutory requirements are met regarding property location, condition and management. This Policy will also apply to applicants on the housing register subject to sufficient supply.

Relevant Themes

- Improving the supply of housing
- Support to specific client groups where intervention is required.

Homelessness prevention

In developing its Homelessness Strategy, the council has committed to maintaining an agile and evidence based approach in reflection of the rapidly changing strategic and operational environment. The council will review its Homelessness Strategy on an annual basis in order to identify whether priorities and actions remain appropriate and deliverable.

The aim of the Strategy is to prevent homelessness wherever possible and to provide support to clients where homelessness does occur. It is not intended to document the vast range of services provided on a day to day basis, but rather outline the key priorities for improving and expanding existing provision.

The council remains committed to client groups outside of its statutory obligations including single homeless people who are not in priority need and those who are sleeping rough. We recognise the key role played by partners in delivering services which extend beyond the expertise and resources of the council and will continue to take an active role in leading the Prevention of

Homelessness Partnership (POsH) and supporting our partners in bidding for external funding. A particular focus is to ensure the provision of services to Watford residents and to ensure that these are prioritised where local resources are being deployed.

Relevant Themes

- Support to specific client groups where intervention is required.

Provision of temporary accommodation

Under Section 188 of the Housing Act 1996 local authorities are obliged to provide temporary accommodation for homeless households who have no other home in which they can reasonably be expected to live.

The council will continue to investigate options to expand the amount and range of temporary accommodation available. Our aim is to accommodate households within the Watford borough where possible unless the household has a stated preference to seek housing in another area in which case assistance will be offered to achieve this in line with our statutory obligations. Where it is necessary to make a placement outside of the borough, the council will undertake to move the household back to Watford at the earliest opportunity. We are mindful of the cost and welfare implications of utilising bed and breakfast accommodation and will seek alternative solutions in order to reduce or eliminate its use in the longer term. It is a priority to the council to adhere to the six week statutory maximum period for bed and breakfast placements where households have children or a pregnant family member.

A particular need for wheelchair accessible housing has been identified to meet the needs of a full range of households in housing need including disabled persons – the council's own units are not wheelchair accessible. Between April 2011 and March 2014 a total of 17 persons whose priority need consisted of a physical disability were accepted for assistance under homelessness legislation.

Relevant Themes

- Support to specific client groups where intervention is required.

Older people

There is a significant amount of designated older person's accommodation in Watford in both the social and private sectors. Some of this stock is now outdated and even contemporary developments can fail to meet the aspirations of older residents who continue to work, drive and have family members to stay in their homes. It is noted that there has been a net outflow of population in the 60-74 age group to other boroughs.

The council will encourage the development of general needs housing which could be occupied by older people in preference to dedicated schemes which

are restricted to older people only, if they are of a type which is already well represented within the housing stock. Applications are encouraged for development types which are currently under represented and are consistent with the Lifetime Home standard. The council has no evidence to suggest that there is a need for further residential care schemes in the borough at the current time and will work with Hertfordshire County Council towards the objective of avoiding the need for costly admissions to hospital and care placements through improved joined up working on prevention measures.

The council's current priority is to support the improvement of schemes which are no longer fit for purpose and ensure the provision of flexi care schemes which enable residents to remain in their home with varying levels of care and support according to their needs over time.

Relevant Themes

- Improving the supply of housing.
- Support to specific client groups where intervention is required.

Disabled adaptations

The council has a statutory duty to administer Disabled Facilities Grants which assist with access to and within people's homes. The council will continue to commit funding from its own resources to complement the grant received via the Better Care Fund in order to meet local needs. In order to maximise resources, the council will encourage registered providers to fund adaptations within their own stock and will engage with the county wide project to examine the potential for joint procurement. It is recognised that the policy and procedures relating to Disabled Facilities Grants can be improved in order to ensure that pressing needs are met most effectively and this review will be undertaken as part of the development of the Private Sector Renewal Policy in 2015.

The council will continue to work closely with registered providers who are advertising adapted properties to let, in order to make best use of existing adaptations and minimise the need either to further adapt or remove adaptations wherever possible.

It is recognised that in some cases it might be more appropriate for a resident to move to other accommodation rather than remain in a home which will be adapted. Watford Council will continue to give consideration to schemes and resources to facilitate this, for example Relocation Grants.

See the Needs Analysis for details of adaptations undertaken between January 2009 and March 2014.

Relevant Themes

- Improving the condition and management of housing.
- Support to specific client groups where intervention is required.

Procurement and commissioning

Subject to funding constraints, the council will continue to commission services from external providers where additional expertise or capacity is required in order to deliver our strategic priorities and service requirements. Examples include the deployment of DCLG homelessness prevention grant to fund work with high needs client groups and single homeless people. This activity will be evidence based and undertaken in accordance with the council's Contract Procedure Rules which incorporate the requirement to assess social value considerations. Social value is the consideration of how procurement might offer social, economic or environmental benefits to the community. The council will enter into contracts or service level agreements as appropriate and will undertake monitoring of performance in order to ensure the desired outcomes are being achieved and value can be demonstrated.

Relevant Themes

- Improving the supply of housing.
- Improving the condition and management of housing.
- Support to specific client groups where intervention is required.

Empowerment of residents

The council is aiming to empower Watford residents to have a greater ability to resolve their own housing issues and make informed decisions.

Relevant Themes

- Improving the supply of housing.
- Improving the condition and management of housing.
- Support to specific client groups where intervention is required.

6. Priorities – Evaluation Criteria

Where an area of activity is defined as being a priority in the Housing Strategy Action Plan, this means that resources, including staffing, project time and funding, will be directed towards achieving the associated objectives. Outcomes will be monitored and evaluated through a suite of indicators designed for this purpose.

The priorities and related tasks in the housing strategy action plan focus on either new schemes or projects or improvements and expansions to existing schemes. They will not focus upon tasks and schemes which are already being implemented on a day-to-day basis.

Because of the discrete level of resources, the housing strategy action plan focuses upon priorities and tasks which have been identified as likely to have the most beneficial impact upon the Watford Housing Offer. The principles upon which high priority for resources and action have been chosen are:

Priority Selection criteria

- a. A high level of recommendation from the evidence base and/or the consultation exercises.
- b. Identified gaps in provision for particular groups.
- c. Identified ability of certain projects/schemes/services to have a high impact in improving Watford's Housing Offer.
- d. The availability of resources to implement the task..

Further information on the reasons why the priorities have been chosen is included in the Needs Analysis section.