

# Go for Gold! –

## A fresh start for Watford with the Liberal Democrats

We cannot offer a magic wand, but a fresh start means working to improve the services people get from the town hall and to involve people in putting things right. The Liberal Democrats offer the only opportunity for change at the town hall.

If elected to form the administration at the town hall, Dorothy Thornhill and Liberal Democrat councillors will work from Day 1 to make a visible and immediate difference to the town.

Our vision of Watford is as a thriving and prosperous town, a good place to live and work, with first-rate public services and a high-quality local environment. In large part, Watford's success as a town is due to the efforts and achievements of its citizens, businesses and voluntary organisations. But the council clearly has a major part to play in creating a successful town.

At the moment there is a perception that the council is failing to deliver its key services or to deliver sound financial management and value for money. These perceptions are borne out by official reports from the Audit Commission and the District Auditor. Under Labour the council has concentrated too much on grandiose and trendy projects at the expense of its basic service to the citizens of Watford.

Our priorities are better services for the public and sorting out the mess in the council's finances. Let's get the basics right first. This manifesto is practical and realistic: aimed at getting a better deal for Watford's Council taxpayers.

We are not making any empty promises of pie in the sky projects that the council is unlikely to be able to deliver. Let's concentrate first on getting the key business of the council right: things like streetcare, litter and graffiti control, sound financial management, efficient planning and environmental

services, tougher enforcement against anti-social behaviour and better management of our parks and open spaces.

Democracy means **involving people**. We will make the Council more open and welcoming to the public and we will devolve real powers to the neighbourhood level, because **you pay and you matter**.

Over the past few months Dorothy Thornhill and the Liberal Democrats have carried out a survey of all 33,000 homes in Watford on borough council and other public services. More than 1,300 people returned our questionnaire, a higher response than to most official council surveys.

We are confident, therefore, that the Liberal Democrat priorities outlined in this manifesto are shared by the people of Watford.

## **First things first...**

From Day 1 we will begin a programme to deliver:

- ✓ **Cleaner and brighter streets and public spaces.**
- ✓ **Increased doorstep recycling collections.**
- ✓ **Better financial management.**
- ✓ **Rapid progress on providing new leisure facilities.**
- ✓ **Local schemes to tackle traffic congestion**
- ✓ **Protecting open space and withdrawing support for Park and Ride on Green Belt land.**

## **A fresh start for Watford**

Thereafter we will set new priorities for Watford:

- ✓ **A new focus on high quality services, not on gimmicks and spin.**
- ✓ **Financial competence and value for money.**
- ✓ **Tackling traffic congestion and improving public transport.**
- ✓ **Devolving responsibilities for purely local decisions to area committees.**
- ✓ **A full range of leisure facilities in locations accessible through public transport, walking and cycling as well as by car.**

- ✓ **Promote affordable housing and carry out planned repairs and maintenance to existing council stock.**
- ✓ **A stronger emphasis on the environment, local and global.**
- ✓ **Concentrate on providing real information to the people of Watford, not Labour-style propaganda.**

## **A new direction for Watford**

**Even with finances that are inevitably limited by the need to keep increases in council tax to a minimum, we can set new priorities for Watford.** Your involvement will help us make sound choices.

**We believe that providing first-rate key services is the key job of the Council.** This has to be the top priority. Under Labour the council has too often neglected these in order to take part in more ‘trendy’ government pilot projects or partnership schemes. While we want the council to be innovative and work co-operatively with other agencies, this should not be at the expense of attention to key services.

By shifting resources and priorities away from gimmick policies and unnecessary bureaucracy into the front line, we will deliver much needed action.

## **Action on streetcare**

**The environment around where we live, where we work, where we spend our leisure time is an important part of how we perceive our town.** We aim to achieve very high standards of cleansing of public space, in particular by:

- ✓ **Tougher use of existing enforcement powers to deal with a wide range of problems including fly-tipping, abandoned vehicles, shopping trolleys etc.**
- ✓ **Wider community involvement including volunteer ‘litter wardens’ to identify problems and ‘grot spots’, as has been done by other Liberal Democrat councils.**
- ✓ **Council-run skip schemes and estate clean-ups to deal with bulky items and combat fly-tipping.**
- ✓ **A rapid response to remove graffiti.**
- ✓ **Tackling the abandoned car problem by creating cheap facilities for getting rid of cars that have come to the end of their lives.**

- ✓ **The new team of locality managers to be responsible for monitoring litter and other streetcare issues in their area, maintaining standards and involving the community in caring for the neighbourhood.**
- ✓ **Maintain the surface and verges of footpaths and cycle paths to high standards.**

## **Better management of public money**

**Labour's management of council finances over the past decade has been disastrous.** During the 1990s there were losses of more than £2 million by the Council's Direct Service Organisations. There were years where the council cut back on services only to find it had a budget surplus at the end of the year.

More recently, the council has had a succession of damning reports on its financial management from the District Auditor. Many of the comments have echoed the warnings of the Liberal Democrats over the years. In particular, we have pointed out.

- the need for regular budget information to councillors
- the need to find proper itemised budget savings
- the dangers in the way the council has kept changing its management structures.

We believe that many of the problems stem from Labour's obsession with taking part in government pilot projects which, however laudable in themselves, have led the organisation to forget about getting the basics right.

Under Labour, Watford Council has the highest council tax in Hertfordshire, although services are no better than average, sometimes much worse. At the same time it spends more than neighbouring councils on corporate management and on spin and publicity.

The Liberal Democrats are committed to good financial management. Unlike Labour, we never forget that it is your money and that we should be answerable to you for how it is managed.

A Liberal Democrat administration will:

- ✓ **Restore confidence in the council's finances by implementing the District Auditor's recommendations as quickly as possible.**

- ✓ **Ensure that there are regular budget monitoring reports to the Executive and Scrutiny Committees, with the opportunity for full debate.**
- ✓ **As soon as possible carry out a series of base budget reviews to identify savings, cut out waste and ensure that key services get the highest priority.**
- ✓ **Reduce the amount of money spent on corporate management.**
- ✓ **Cut spending on spin and publicity.**
- ✓ **Only increase Watford's share of the council tax if it is necessary to maintain services and once options for savings have been explored. We will aim to keep increases as low as possible.**
- ✓ **In the long term, aim to bring Watford's Council tax (currently the highest in Hertfordshire) into line with the county average.**

## **Action on transport**

**Traffic congestion is so bad in and around Watford that it is essential to provide realistic alternatives to the private car.** Our approach is to work for improvements in all these alternative methods of transport – buses, trains, taxis, cycling, and walking, so that people will need to make fewer journeys by car. Likewise, we need policies that bring fewer large lorries into the town and especially keeps them away from residential areas. Our strategy will be in line with this approach.

We will judge any proposals for major traffic schemes on the basis of whether they will relieve traffic congestion and improve alternatives to the private car or whether they will make things worse. We will oppose all schemes that would encourage extra traffic on our roads. Our record in this area is strong: we successfully opposed the Wiggshall Link Road through Oxhey Park, which in the end all parties had to agree would make traffic congestion worse.

We will:

- ✓ **Support the proposed Croxley Rail Link, which would connect Watford Junction with the Metropolitan Line and provide a local train service for West Watford.**

- ✓ **Withdraw Council support for Park and Ride at Stephenson Way as this will mean more traffic on local roads in North Watford, destruction of Green Belt land and increased traffic in the heavily-congested town centre.**
- ✓ **Work with the county council to get Arriva to improve their performance in providing local bus services. Enforce standards in routes that are subsidised by the council.**
- ✓ **Continue to provide free bus travel for old age pensioners and seek to expand the range of journeys covered by this, as resources allow.**
- ✓ **Subsidise further bus routes where there is a proven need, but only if we can be guaranteed that the bus company will provide a reliable service**
- ✓ **Encourage walking and cycling as safe, environmentally-friendly alternatives to the private car.**
- ✓ **Continue to develop a network of cycle routes so that all journeys within the borough are capable of being made safely and legally by bicycle. Provide more secure parking facilities for cyclists.**
- ✓ **Make rapid progress on implementing the pedestrian strategy so that people feel safe to make journeys on foot throughout the town.**
- ✓ **Improve pavements and provide better crossing facilities, including, wherever possible, replacing subways with surface crossings.**
- ✓ **Introduce an environmentally-friendly passenger transport scheme for Watford High Street to make journeys within the town centre easier.**
- ✓ **Implement bans on lorries using residential roads, where there is public demand; work with the county council and haulage companies etc to develop guidance for lorry drivers to use appropriate roads when making deliveries in Watford.**
- ✓ **Work with the county council to develop further home zones and green zones to provide a safe and pleasant residential environment, free from speeding and rat-running traffic.**

- ✓ **Management of car traffic, for example through ‘green commuter plans’.**
- ✓ **Oppose the threat to the fast train service at Bushey Station arising from the West Coast mainline upgrade and use our influence to get improvements to local rail services.**

## **Action on the environment**

**Apart from action on transport and key services, we are determined to protect and enhance the environment of our town into the future.**

Liberal Democrat councils are known for their strong commitment to the environment and Watford under Liberal Democrat control would be no exception. We would hope to emulate the strong environmental record of Liberal Democrat-controlled Three Rivers Council.

We will continue to use the planning system to secure environmental improvements through Section 106 agreements. Whereas Labour have allowed such ‘planning gain’ monies to go unspent, sometimes for several years, we will make sure that developer contributions really do benefit the local environment.

We will:

- ✓ **Expand recycling: working through the Hertfordshire Waste Strategy involving all 11 councils in Herts, we would recycle more – increasing doorstep collections of recyclables such as cans and plastics and compostables. We fully support the aim of 50 per cent recycling by 2012 and would seek to introduce doorstep glass collection once markets can be found.**
- ✓ **Increase investment in energy conservation and energy efficiency schemes, to save energy and save money.**
- ✓ **Encourage waste minimisation (e.g. composting).**
- ✓ **Reduce clutter from road signs.**
- ✓ **Wherever possible protect Watford’s Green Belt land and green, open spaces.**
- ✓ **Implement local schemes to improve the environment; maintain and expand the**

**environmental grants scheme to encourage community action.**

- ✓ **Continue to seek developer contributions for environmental schemes made necessary by new developments and make sure that the ‘planning gain’ money is spent promptly and to the benefit of those affected.**
- ✓ **Encourage a range of activities in the town centre, including shopping, housing, leisure, tourism etc.**
- ✓ **Take action against insensitive behaviour by utility companies digging up roads by seeking powers to make companies pay for overrunning works and by lobbying central government for a change in utility company powers.**
- ✓ **Insist that reinstatement of roads and pavements after utility works are finished is carried out to a high standard.**
- ✓ **We will make those who damage, or in any way adversely affect Watford’s environment bear the cost of cleaning up.**

## **Action for our communities**

**As Liberal Democrats we are fundamentally committed to the needs and aspirations of local communities. We want people to feel in control of their community life, so that they are encouraged to be active and responsible citizens.**

The Council’s job is to provide the wherewithal, not to interfere with the choices of local communities, and our policies will reflect this.

The Liberal Democrats have always believed that community action goes beyond what the council can do. We support the work of the many voluntary and community groups in the town. Often they can achieve things through community spirit that the council simply could not do.

We have encouraged and supported initiative such as the community management of Attenborough’s Fields in Oxhey by the Friends of Attenborough’s Fields, where a local group is responsible for management of a large area of public open space. We would like to see similar schemes elsewhere in Watford.

Working with the police, the youth service and other agencies, the council has an important role to play in tackling crime and

making sure that people feel safe in the town. A Liberal Democrat-led council will play a full part in the battle against crime, working in partnership and consultation with the police, listening to and following their recommendations and using council resources to complement their work.

Watford has low unemployment and many major businesses have relocated here. The role of the mayor is to listen to the business community and work collaboratively to meet their aspirations, but remembering that there needs to be a balance between their needs and those of our residents.

Business thrives if there is a high quality environment and our attention to improving key services will benefit the economic prosperity of the town.

We also recognise that there are areas where more needs to be done to promote the prosperity of local businesses. For example, we wish to see the regeneration of the St Albans Road retail area and will work with local businesses to achieve this.

We take pride in Watford being a multi-racial community and in the way that cultural diversity enriches the town. We believe that relations between our different communities have largely been harmonious. We will oppose racism and intolerance in all its forms and work to combat racial abuse and harassment.

We value all Watford's citizens and will do all we can to ensure that there is real equality of opportunity and that everyone gets fair and equal treatment from the council, regardless of race, age, gender, sexuality or disability.

- ✓ **Develop and expand the park ranger scheme; give the locality managers a responsibility for combatting vandalism and graffiti.**
- ✓ **Accelerate progress on 'gating' schemes to prevent burglary and clean up back alleys.**
- ✓ **Work with the police and other agencies to combat crime, for example by encouraging Neighbourhood Watch schemes and by 'designing-out crime' on council-owned estates and public spaces.**
- ✓ **Support the work of residents and tenants associations and other community groups in working for their local community and improving their local environment.**

- ✓ **Play a full part in the Watford Town Centre Partnership and work with local businesses and their representatives to encourage economic prosperity in the town.**
- ✓ **Promote the regeneration of the St Albans Road shopping area in partnership with local retailers and residents.**
- ✓ **Encourage local groups to take on responsibility for managing community facilities (such as open space) with support from the council.**
- ✓ **Work in partnership with voluntary and community groups to raise their profile in the town and awareness of the work they do.**
- ✓ **Make the grants system open, transparent and dependent on mutually-agreed service level agreements which should improve the partnership between voluntary groups and the council.**
- ✓ **Support voluntary groups in getting access to other sources of funding and in developing their own fundraising capacity.**
- ✓ **Take pride in the multicultural nature of Watford; recognise how this enriches our community and work to tackle racism and intolerance.**
- ✓ **Support equality of opportunity in both recruitment and provision of services and monitor the council's performance in both areas.**
- ✓ **We are committed to the idea of building communities that are cohesive, where people are happy to live and work comfortably together. We will work with partner bodies in our existing communities to make Watford a flagship for this approach.**

## **Action on housing**

**Since privately owned or rented homes are beyond the reach of many people in Watford, the Council plays a crucial role in providing affordable homes, both directly and through working with housing associations. Everyone should have a right to a decent home and we will work towards making that a reality in Watford.**

We will:

- ✓ **Make the best use of planning agreements to provide as much social housing as possible, including provision of affordable homes for ‘key workers’.**
- ✓ **Oppose any transfer of housing stock unless this is at the request of and has clear support from the tenants concerned.**
- ✓ **Give tenants the power to decide what is best for their communities, by giving increased responsibilities to tenants and residents associations for the management of their estates.**
- ✓ **Consider sympathetically any proposals for tenants organisations to take on a greater role in the management of estates.**
- ✓ **Encourage more housing in the town centre, including ‘flats above shops’ to provide homes that are close to facilities. This should include affordable housing.**
- ✓ **Support ‘mixed-use’ development so that retail and employment schemes include a residential component.**
- ✓ **Work to combat homelessness and rough sleeping, working in partnership with other agencies such as Watford New Hope Trust.**
- ✓ **Encourage the use of employment land, of which there is an overprovision, for housing.**

## **Action for better town planning**

**Change is inevitable and welcome if it is well planned and managed.** But Watford has many great qualities, which we are determined to see preserved for future generations. Our policies will be shaped by this approach. **Full public involvement in this process will be a central principle.**

We need to use the planning process to ensure both a thriving town and a decent environment for people to live and work in. We need to maintain a balanced range of activities in the town centre: we have plenty of shops and nightclubs, but we need more facilities for families, homes for people who want to live close to facilities which people can enjoy.

The council needs to take the initiative in the planning process not just react to what developers suggest. In particular it should act to bring ‘difficult to develop’ derelict sites back into use. We deplore the way that council intransigence has left the former Sun Printers derelict since 1992, because of its insistence on employment uses for the land.

We will also take a positive and dynamic approach to achieving council objectives, such as mixed-use residential and employment schemes that reduce the need to travel. Planning policies may not always coincide with what developers want and the council must take an active approach to attracting the right kind of development.

We will preserve and enhance the town’s six conservation areas and consider designating further ones if a case can be made. We would also look to designate further wildlife corridors to give greater protection to green space, whether in public or private ownership.

Current studies suggest that across Hertfordshire there is an overprovision of employment land, while at the same time there is pressure for housing development on inappropriate infill sites. Where appropriate, we will re-designate employment land for residential use to provide homes for local people.

We will:

- ✓ **Insist on residential accommodation being provided in all major re-developments in the town centre (a policy we successfully proposed as part of the district plan process).**
- ✓ **Produce design guidance for conservation areas to ensure new development is in keeping with the special character of these areas.**
- ✓ **Designate additional wildlife corridors to protect green space.**
- ✓ **Play a positive part in influencing planning at national, regional and county level.**
- ✓ **We will oppose town cramming and are concerned that Herts County Council threatens development on inappropriate sites, such as allotments. While we recognise that the County is working within the confines of central government policy, we will not hesitate to defend Watford from intrusive development.**

- ✓ **We will seek to maximise public understanding of the planning and development issues affecting the town, and ensure public involvement in the development control process and planning as a whole.**
- ✓ **Seek to provide better youth facilities for all ages of young people in their own areas.**

## **Action for leisure**

**The council is currently in the process of preparing its leisure strategy. We would like to see a good range of leisure facilities in the town, providing for young and old alike. In particular we would like to see more family leisure provision around the town centre.** We will make sure that major facilities are situated at locations accessible to non-car users as well as car users.

We will promote Watford as a place to visit; in particular we would raise awareness of Watford's heritage and encourage tourism. We would like to see the arts in all their forms thrive in Watford. We are proud of the Palace Theatre and will continue to provide it with financial support. We would like to see cinema provision in the town centre. We will work to improve and modernise the exhibitions at the museum and provide exhibition space for local artists to display their work.

Our recent community survey showed that the quality of our parks and open spaces is a top concern for Watford residents. It is important that our parks provide a safe and pleasant environment for people to enjoy. Under Labour, our parks are neglected: it's hard to get new or replacement play equipment; many parks have derelict toilet blocks that are a real eyesore. Labour's promised 'loos review' to deal with this problem has been repeatedly delayed. We will make sure that our parks have the necessary play equipment, facilities and standard of maintenance to make them an asset to the town.

We will:

- ✓ **Modernise and upgrade the council's leisure facilities as part of its cultural strategy.**
- ✓ **Give priority to investment in high-use family leisure activities in and near Watford town centre.**
- ✓ **Improve provision for swimming in the town.**
- ✓ **Promote improvements to school facilities in return for public access outside school hours.**

- ✓ **Consult with young people about the facilities they want – for example we support the bid for a ‘pod’ facility for the Rookery Estate in Oxhey.**
- ✓ **Ensure that new facilities are provided at locations accessible to all members of the community.**
- ✓ **Promote awareness of Watford’s history and heritage and seek to attract tourists to the town.**
- ✓ **Seek new private sector facilities in the town: for example, a cinema in the town centre.**
- ✓ **Increase investment in parks: especially in new play equipment and in tackling the eyesore toilet blocks that disfigure many of our parks and recreation areas.**
- ✓ **Involve park users in management and maintenance: along the model of ‘Friends of Cassiobury Park’.**
- ✓ **Enhance the services provided by Watford Museum: for example through a ‘virtual tour’ of Cassiobury House and more family-oriented activities.**
- ✓ **Enhance the Colne Valley with new interpretation boards and create continuous footpath alongside the river.**
- ✓ **Explore ways of attracting extra investment in leisure, for example by involving the private sector in management of council facilities; by creating a trust as has been done in London Boroughs or through lottery bids.**
- ✓ **Work with neighbouring boroughs to enhance leisure facilities for all.**

## **Our democracy: open, local and accountable**

The Liberal Democrats are worried about the declining turnout of voters in local elections, and we want to reverse this trend. We believe this has happened because people often feel their opinions are disregarded, they feel powerless to make themselves heard, and they are confused about what goes on in the Council. Sometimes they feel that the Council treats them in a patronising or manipulative way or consults but then

ignores them. As a result they feel frustrated and alienated from the whole local government process.

We want people to have more real power to make decisions: we believe that if people feel part of the decision-making process, they will be more likely to use their votes and get involved in contributing their ideas and their expertise. We aim to make people feel interested, curious, hopeful, confident, excited and determined about what the Council does on their behalf.

We believe that it is the role of the elected mayor and councillors to be the people's representatives at the town hall and to take responsibility for the way things are run. We are shocked at the way the Labour administration has constantly 'passed the buck' when things have gone wrong at the council: denying responsibility and seeking to blame officers.

We value the contribution to our community of those who work at the town hall: councillors take decisions, but staff actually do the work! We want to make Watford Council a good place to work; what council officers do is important for the town and they should be able to take pride in a job well done.

A Liberal Democrat administration will aim to be truly accountable to the electorate. All local authorities get things wrong sometimes and make mistakes. If we should find we have done so, we will not try to blame others, but will face up to our responsibilities.

We support the recent creation of area committees – Liberal Democrats proposed this in our manifesto as long ago as 1994 – and would devolve local decision-making to these committees so that local decisions are taken as close to the people as possible. Our policies to enhance local democracy in Watford are to:

- ✓ **Answer queries from the public more quickly.**
- ✓ **Make sure that council consultations on both local issues and broader strategies provides a real opportunity to influence and change decisions.**
- ✓ **Take all key decisions or those where there is an element of controversy in an open forum (e.g. executive committee) to allow an opportunity for debate and a formal vote before a decision is taken.**
- ✓ **Devolve responsibility for local decisions to area committees so that they can be made taken at**

**local level: this would include giving area committees responsibility for: streetcare (litter and street cleaning); refuse collection; parks and play areas; management of housing estates; local traffic schemes (working with the county council); highway maintenance and landscaping.**

- ✓ **Ensure that council publicity concentrates on providing information that is of use to our citizens, not on spin and propaganda.**
- ✓ **Work with tenants and residents associations and other local groups to develop an effective system to replace the old advisory committees: enhancing their ability to influence decisions.**

## **Elected mayors**

Elected mayors are a new departure for local government and opinions vary as to whether or not they are a good idea. Just 13 per cent of the electorate voted 'Yes' in the referendum and the low turnout should give us cause for concern.

Despite our scepticism about elected mayors, in a democracy we have to work within the system as it stands. A Liberal Democrat administration will aim to make the mayoral system work as well as possible. However, we think that there should be as early an opportunity for the people to give their verdict on the new system.

One of the main reasons we were concerned about elected mayors is the danger inherent in personal rule, with insufficient checks and balances. A Liberal Democrat mayor will aim to build consensus among the political parties and the citizens of the town, rather than allow the system to become a local dictatorship.

Whereas under Labour Watford has lost out because of its poor relations with the county council, Dorothy Thornhill will work to re-build the relationship and work constructively with the county council and the police authority.

Dorothy will work with partner agencies in the public, private and voluntary sectors to get the best deal for Watford. But she will not be afraid to speak up for the town. She is not handicapped by having to support the national government, as a Labour mayor would be.

If elected as mayor, Dorothy Thornhill will:

- ✓ **Provide a strong voice for our town in working with outside organisations and central government and ‘fighting Watford’s corner’.**
- ✓ **Have an open door policy for public and council staff alike to raise issues with the mayor.**
- ✓ **Attend area committees regularly and hold quarterly public question time sessions to enable people to hold the mayor accountable.**
- ✓ **Use new media to let people talk directly to the mayor, for example ‘live’ question and answer sessions on the web**
- ✓ **Include representatives of opposition groups on the executive and, depending on the political balance on the council, consider offering portfolios to councillors of other parties.**
- ✓ **Avoid using the greater powers of the mayor to override council decisions (these would be used only in exceptional circumstances, for example to avoid breaking an explicit manifesto commitment).**
- ✓ **Hold a referendum to enable the public to have their say on the new mayoral system at the earliest opportunity (ideally this should be before the end of the first mayoral term and we will press the government to allow this to happen).**
- ✓ **In the event of a majority Liberal Democrat administration, to allocate chairs of scrutiny panels to opposition groups in proportion to their strength on the council.**
- ✓ **Mend the council’s current difficult relationship with Herts County Council so that Watford’s citizens get the best possible deal.**
- ✓ **Produce quarterly reports on the mayor’s work to the citizens of Watford, paid for by the Liberal Democrats not by the Council.**

## **Conclusion**

**After 30 years of Labour rule at Watford Town Hall it is time for a change. Only the Liberal Democrats can provide that change.** We have been the official opposition at the town hall for several years and repeatedly poll more votes than the Conservatives in borough council elections.

A Liberal Democrat administration will mean better front line services, better management of public money and a new approach to decision-making that gives people a real say in how their town is run.

We have the vision, energy and commitment to make a real difference.

**Go for Gold: join the Liberal Democrats in giving Watford a fresh start.**